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HOW A HOMELESS STINT IN HIGH SCHOOL BROUGHT MY FAMILY TOGETHER

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While my friends focused on school crushes and prom dates, my recently evicted family shared a bleak motel room—and finally faced how my mother’s mental illness led us there.

WRITING COLLECTION TOUGH LOVE MEMOIR



Illustrations by Sarah Lammer

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“God, that stinks,” my sister Jamie says when I pull my cup of noodles out of the microwave. “Did you have to get something that would make the whole place smell?”

“I didn’t know it would stink” I reply. “It sounded good.” I set my meal on the nightstand and bounce onto the plain green floral comforter, pulling my legs up under me.

“What are we watching?” I ask our stepfather Russ, who’s sitting on the bed next to ours.

“Not sure yet,” he answers. He flips through the channels, but I can tell he’s not really taking in what he’s seeing.

“Wait, isn’t this that new show I’ve seen all those commercials for?” I ask. Jamie shrugs.

“It’s supposed to be really good. ‘Lost,’ I think? It’s got something to do with a plane crash, and these people get stranded. It’s starting tonight, so we haven’t missed

anything.”

Russ drops the remote onto his own hideous comforter, and we settle in to watch. I’m glad for anything to focus on other than our current situation, anything to not have to talk about it, and I think they are, too.

My family is living together in one rundown motel room. Jamie and I are sharing one bed, while Russ and our mentally ill mother share the other. We aren’t on vacation or driving across the country to see family. We are homeless, and we pretend it’s normal.

It’s not the only time my mother, sister and I have been homeless, but it is the first time homelessness wasn’t the better choice.

The first time was when my mother ran away from my biological father’s violent, sexual, and emotional abuse in Kentucky when I was one and my sister was an infant. She moved us to a women’s shelter in Tennessee, and then on to a government-housing apartment, where she tried to create a normal life for us – until he found us.

My father pointed a gun at my mother’s head in the kitchen of our tiny apartment and threatened all of our lives before loading my sister and me into his car and forcing my mother to follow him back to his home in Kentucky.

It was a few more years of violent torture before she was able to leave again, but she took us and ran away to another women’s shelter, this time in Kentucky. Again we found ourselves in a cheap, subsidized apartment. She filed for divorce, and we were finally out of his grasp.

She met Russ and they were married by the time I was six. Everything should have been fine after that, but it wasn’t. My father’s actions had far-reaching effects, particularly on the escalation of my mother’s mental illness, but we ignored it.

* * *

We knew she had struggled with mental health before. She’d met my biological father in Alcoholics Anonymous and had been hospitalized for a nervous breakdown when I was nine, emerging with diagnoses of depression, PTSD from my father’s abuse, and OCD.

But aside from the brief interruption of our lives for her one-week hospitalization and occasional medicine changes that resulted in mood swings, we were able to pretend nothing was different in our lives.

It was easy to ignore the small comments and actions; if we had paid attention we would have seen the subtle indications that she was breaking.

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Her fervent belief that John Travolta was a clone seemed silly, and we dismissed it as a joke. Throwing rolls at people across the dinner table instead of passing them wasn't inappropriate, because it was just a game. Hitting the mailbox with her car and hiding it in the crawl space below the house, hoping Russ and the mail carrier wouldn't notice, was strange, but maybe she just thought they would be mad and didn't know what to do with it.

But losing our house isn't so easily explainable, and unlike the previous times when running away from home to go to shelters was better than my father's abuse, this time is completely different. It was recklessness, not motherly love or self-preservation, that led to our homelessness.

This time I'm old enough to feel the shame of poverty and instability. I'm taking turns with my sister using the tiny room's microwave to cook sad re-heatable meals we bought earlier tonight at Wal-Mart, planning out which foods could last us a week or

more. A loaf of bread, a jar of peanut butter, a pack of hot dog buns, and cups of ramen noodles fill one drawer of the dresser. A jar of grape jelly, some sodas, a pack of hot dogs, and sandwich meat fill the refrigerator. The random assortment of clothes we could quickly grab when the bank changed the locks on our home and we had to be out by morning fills suitcases and garbage bags in the floorboards of the car.

The door to the room opens and my mom enters smelling of smoke and the outdoors. Her eyes dart nervously from person to person waiting for the pounce, but no one pays her any attention.

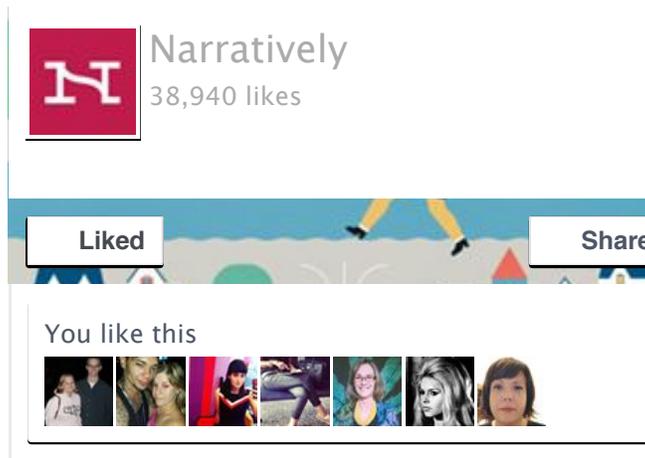
She crosses between the ends of the beds and television on her way to the bathroom, a plausible destination, but we know she's trying to get someone, anyone, to say something, to rage over the home we lost because of her. If we start a conversation about it, she can explain. She can lie. She can defend. In the quiet she is vulnerable.

Mom didn't work because of her mental illness and was on government disability. That should have been a clue to us that she wasn't capable of functioning in a normal capacity, but it hadn't occurred to my family yet that her illness was anything more than a mild inconvenience. She and Russ had divided the responsibility for paying certain bills. She had been responsible for paying the mortgage with the disability checks and the ones the government sent to make up for the child support that my biological father never sent. Instead of paying the bill she'd been drinking the money away and spending it on needless things she hid around the house, or gifts she gave Jamie and me that we didn't understand were bribes to buy our silence.

She hid the answering machine in my room, so no one heard the collection calls. She hid the letters behind the books on my bookshelf, so no one but her saw the final notices, and she did nothing to prevent the foreclosure.

The rest of us didn't understand what had happened until the day the bank came to repossess the property and changed the locks, but by then it was too late to do anything about it. We had to be out of the house by morning.

* * *



She pauses at the bathroom door. I feel her eyes on me and I stare hard at my soggy noodles. I pretend not to notice the interruption, preferring uncomfortable silence to direct confrontation. Jamie and Russ do the same. We are united in our typical ignoring of the facts, and for a moment, it almost feels as if I can excuse myself from an awkward dinner by closing myself in my room and pretending nothing ever happened. But there's no room to go to, and there's no pretending there is.

Russ turns up the volume on the television to drown out of the sound of Mom's rustlings behind the thin wall.

I feel queasy but I don't know if it's the food or the situation. Maybe it's a bit of both. "Ugh. I think I'm having a hot dog." I throw the noodles in the trash.

“So you stunk up the whole room, and you’re not even going to eat it?” Jamie asks.

“I thought it would be like the kind you can make at—”

At home on the stove, I want to say, but I can’t. There is no home.

“I don’t think it should be legal to market this as the same product,” I joke, changing the subject.

“I think they both stink,” Russ adds in his dry humor. The can of cashews on the nightstand rattles as he reaches in for another handful.

“Well, sorry for the inconvenience.” I force a playful smile I definitely don’t feel.

“I don’t think they stink,” Mom says, emerging from the bathroom. She pauses for a moment to see if I will speak to her. The sounds from the television – crashes, crunching metal, and screams – fill the silence.

She walks over to the bed Russ sits on. “Is it any good?” she asks, nodding to the television and looking to me, since I’m standing.

I shrug, retrieving my hot dog from the microwave and biting into it right away. It needs ketchup, but it’s better to keep my mouth full and unable to answer.

We watch the rest of the show in silence punctuated by dramatic music and the sounds of rumbling engines and doors slamming outside the next room.

Loud men’s voices carry through the wall. Russ walks over to the window and peers through a crack behind the curtain. “Bikers,” he says, and pulls the generic pleather chair in front of the door. “Probably drunk.” He grimaces when he hears that forbidden d-word out loud.

Mom’s face reddens.

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“Well, I need sleep,” he says. It’s only nine, but he’s afraid to break the silence.

I’m not tired. I don’t think any of us are, but we’re all together in this room – in this mess – and yet each of us stares into the darkness alone.

Russ falls asleep quickly, and I blame his bear-like snoring for keeping me awake, though I know I can’t sleep anyway. I place my headphones in my ears to drown out the noise with music.

Jamie tosses and kicks, and we fight over the blankets. A single tear wells up at the thought of my own pillow and my own blankets in my empty bed in an empty house. I wipe it away knowing I can’t cry in case they hear.

I realize that it’s just two weeks until my sixteenth birthday, and I might spend it here

in this room with my whole family instead of at a sweet sixteen party with my friends. In retrospect, I will realize this was the least of our worries. But at the time I silently rage at missing such a fundamental part of growing up because of my mother's mistakes.

I'm furious and sad, and I feel small and alone, but I can't ask my family for comfort because my mother caused the problem in the first place.

I finally fall asleep after what feels like hours of wrestling with Jamie over blankets in the cold motel room.

* * *

The buzzing of the motel alarm clock wakes us. Russ gets ready for work, and Jamie and I for school because despite it all, we still have to live like everything is normal. Mom does nothing. She lies there unmoving, anticipating a day with no work or obligations, nothing but the room. She finally gets up and goes outside, probably to get away from the noises of us going on with our lives.

I get my backpack together, and the thought of school turns my stomach because I'll have to see my friends. I feel too ashamed to tell them about what's happened to me, so I know I'm in for a painful day of laughing at their stories and pretending that I'm worried about my research paper on James M. Barrie for English when all I want to do

is scream. But it's still better than staying alone with my mother in this room. I start to cry.

Russ hears my sniffles despite the fact that I'm trying to hold back tears as the horror of what has happened settles in again. "Girls, your mother is sick. Don't be too hard on her. She's scared that we all hate her."

For the first time ever we're talking about it. We are talking about my mother's mental illness instead of pretending it doesn't affect us, and I'm being asked to care about her feelings.

Those known quantities – the depression, PTSD and OCD – we could handle, but we are facing for the first time her relapse into alcoholism, hidden in secret nighttime binges. That and the yet-undiagnosed schizophrenia and borderline personality disorder are beginning to bubble to the surface, where they will slowly overwhelm our lives.

"Why shouldn't we yell at her?" I finally rage. "She isn't sick. She chose to drink. She chose to be irresponsible. She chose to lose our house and do nothing about it. Why aren't you mad at her? You've lost everything, too."

It's quiet. I expect Jamie to join in, but she just looks at us, her discomfort plain on her face.

"It may be crazy, but I love her," he finally answers. He looks like a man heading for the gallows, but he's earnest. She'd done plenty to him over the years – maxing out secret credit cards, running away, separating from him, and somehow it doesn't matter.

I do hate her in this moment. After what she has done to us, what right does she have to be scared, and how could he still love her?

He is quiet for a moment. "Your father did horrible things to her. He abused her."

"I know that, but that isn't an excuse."

But I don't know the extent of the abuse. My parents will protect me from that until I am much older, and I tell him that I don't understand why abuse from a decade before justifies what she's done.

Russ listens to me. He accepts my anger, but he won't accept my denial of her mental illness.

“Sick isn't just about the body being sick,” he says. “Her mind is sick, and that isn't her fault. She may get better, or she may not, but we just have to do our best and learn to support each other.”

That phrase gets stuck in my head. *She may get better, or she may not.* And that's when I realize for the first time that this isn't a one-time thing, a temporary issue. My mother is ill, and probably always will be. All the pretending in the world isn't going to bring her, or my illusion of her as a nurturing caretaker, back to me.

And I break. I am openly crying, but I don't have an answer. I know in my gut that Russ is right, no matter how angry I am in my head and heart about what she's done. I feel betrayed and scared, and I just want to be held by a mother who's nothing but a shattered illusion that I can never put back together. More than the loss of our home, of our possessions, our photos, our childhood memories, the loss of our mother to her condition is an acute pain that Jamie and I both still grieve daily.

He pauses again, staring at the floor. “I know this is hard, but we're going to be ok,” he says, and he walks over to hug me, then Jamie. And I believe him.

* * *

The motel room becomes this dramatic marker in my memory where I have the distinct *before* my family is able to see my mother's mental illness for what it is, and *after*, when we have no choice but to learn to live in the spaces around it.

After a week in the motel we find a house. It's the first one we see, and it isn't perfect, but what choice do we have? I start to hope that our lives are going to be okay, like Russ said in that room, and the homelessness will just be another bad memory. I think maybe this is our “rock bottom” – like addicts talk about in rehab before finding their equilibrium and sobriety. But it isn't.

Her behavior worsens, and our family moves through a bleak series of suicide attempts, arrests and mental-hospital stays punctuated by episodes of emotional abuse and drunk driving that come in the aftermath of that week in the motel room. We can rage and cry and hurt because of the instability and verbal abuse, but only with Russ, not with our mother.

We learn to cohabitate with her illness, and I feel crushed between the weight of it and the desire to have a normal life in which I worry about prom dates and class

projects. There is no room in our house for the daily dramas of two teenage girls, and I learn to stop pretending that my mother will help with school projects or take me to band concerts.

Today, twelve years later, I still wish for a normal relationship with my mother. I wake up every day thinking that maybe I should call her. I imagine we'll talk fondly of our memories for Russ, who died almost two years ago. I imagine that I can ask her about how to make big decisions like a responsible adult or what to put in a family recipe.

I want this relationship even more since she was diagnosed with cancer in November. That ticking clock almost makes me want to try pretending that our painful past and her mental illness don't exist. But the thought only lasts for a moment before the image shatters all over again, and I am reminded that mental illness can't be ignored.

* * *

Peggy Carouthers is a freelance writer and editor based in Knoxville, Tennessee. She is currently writing a memoir about her experiences with mental illness, abuse, and the absurd. Find out more about Peggy on her [website](#) or follow her on Twitter [@peggycarouthers](#).

Sarah Lammer is an artist.

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