

ISH AIT HAMOU

HEAVY HEART

Manteau

MONDAY, 2 P.M.

It felt like it was the first time I had ever seen the sun come out. I'm not saying this like it's supposed to be some metaphor for happiness. It really did feel like the first time. I had never felt like this before, like my future could be so exciting and yet so unknown. Where I came from, everybody knows exactly how every day will pass, right from the time they wake up. For every kid my age, it went like this: we'd have breakfast, take the bus to school, enter the doors of the school building *en masse*, sit down on a worn-out desk and be forced to listen to adults telling us, for seven straight hours, things we didn't care much about. At the time, we couldn't have cared less. We were just waiting it out, so we could take that stroll back home again. That walk of freedom. We would get home, slip by our parents without them noticing, and lock ourselves in our rooms. Trying to carve out as much time for ourselves as we could, delaying the next morning's harsh and early wake-up call for school again. But on this day, I woke up not knowing where I would have dinner that night, who my neighbors would be, or how my walk of freedom would go down.

My dad was helping me out with my boxes. My two small boxes and suitcase hardly required more than one pair of hands, but I think my father was more in search of a father-son moment than anything else, wanting to share a last memory with me, instead of actually helping me with my impossible task. My relationship with my father wasn't very strong. I can

barely remember a single fun activity or father-son moment during my final years at home. They say it's in our last moments that we realize we've run out of time. I guess that was his attempt to buy some. My mom, on the other hand, couldn't miss her Oprah episode, not even for her son's departure. I have a hard time now remembering what my mother was really like. Of course, I remember what she did and how she did it, but I can't remember how she felt throughout all those years I spent at home. Her life wasn't what she thought it would be. Getting swept off her feet by a prince wasn't exactly the story she was starring in. I think she met my dad when she was in her early twenties. One summer they fell deeply in love—the irrational type, because soon after that they had their first child, my big brother. And although their eyes when they first met said forever, soon after the birth of my brother they both started to love their moments together less and less and their separate lives more and more. Seems like their love had a nine-month expiration date. My parents were very much old-school type of people. Divorce wasn't really commonplace back then nor was it part of the way they were raised. It would sound crazy today, but despite their unhappiness, they decided to get married and try to offer their child a stable life. The result of this attempt ironically turned out to be the complete opposite. Maybe they were hoping it would get better if they just stuck through it and do things that normal married couples do. Maybe they were just trying to convince themselves that unhappiness was just a normal part of being married. All I know is, it didn't get better.

After ten years unhappily married, they made another big mistake. That would be me. At least that's what my brother used to tell me. It's not like I hold on to everything he has said, but he swore this wasn't to tease me. Then again, I have never heard him say anything nice about my parents. Sometimes I wonder where he is. Whether he is alive or not. I always thought of him as the coolest guy I knew. I remember when we were kids sharing the same room, when I was just about nine. He always used to sneak out at night. He would patiently wait for the last light to be turned off in the house before he got dressed again and snuck out the window. He always wore a black vintage leather jacket. Whether it was a freezing winter night or a melting summer evening, he never left the house without it. In his suit, he looked to me as if he was a really cool superhero, and he had to wear that jacket to save others from a dull night. When I got older, he granted me some responsibility. It was the night of my twelfth birthday. Right before I dozed off, he shook me awake and told me, "Tom, I have a present for you: from today on you will be my sidekick. You will have the huge responsibility of opening the door when I get back tonight." Then he smiled and jumped out the window like Superman. I gazed at him in total admiration, my eyes sparkling and my mouth grinning as widely as it could. He was my brother, the guy I had long dreamed of becoming, making someone's party cool somewhere. I remember not sleeping that night. I was so excited and happy to be my brother's sidekick. I felt important, like we were on the same team and I was needed. After hours of

happily waiting for him, he threw a pebble at the window. I sneaked down to open the door; he walked in. I didn't know it back then, but I now know that what he smelled of was alcohol, and it was very strong. He smiled as he stumbled up each of the stairs, shushing me, though he was the one making the noise. When we got in our room, he threw a candy bar at my face and said, "Eat up, brush your teeth, and go to sleep. It's a schoolday tomorrow!" I followed his orders and went to sleep looking back on what became an unforgettable night for me.

My brother got caught up in some bad things, I'm guessing, for my parents to throw him out of the house. I remember them screaming at each other as if they were all deaf. Words that I would be punished for using were now bouncing off the walls, from everyone's mouths. I think I was the only one hearing what they were actually saying. After that heated screaming match, my brother slammed the door and left. He never came back. As I grew up, I secretly waited for a long time at night for a pebble to hit my window, but it never did. And he never came back. I will never know what his life was really like. I never made it to that age where I could really talk to him. There are a lot of things I will never know, but I wish he could have been there for me. A relationship with a brother is a very special thing, but it was taken away from me. I'm sure he had his reasons. He left and he had his reasons, it's as simple as that. Reasons—aren't those why we all move in a certain way? We sometimes think it's free will that guides us, but I think that even free will answers to its superior: Reason.

To get back to my parents: they raised me well. I mean, I never missed out on anything: I had food and shelter, a cake every birthday, lunch money. I remember coming home one time after marching band practice and seeing my dad sitting on the couch staring at the turned-off TV, while my mom sat by the kitchen table, drinking coffee that had cooled.

I knew then that love had left the house a long time ago. A cold house, but a house it was.

My dad offered to drop me off at the train station, so the only thing left to do was to hug my mom goodbye. I walked into the living room while she was being pulled in by the images on the TV. I followed the show she was watching for around ten seconds before calling out her name. She turned her face towards me an inch though her eyes were still locked on the screen. I looked at her for a long time, with a weird feeling in my stomach that I couldn't understand. Then I hopped between her and the TV set, right in the line of fire. I'd interrupted that connection between her and the world that had pulled her in, and I told her, "I'm leaving, Ma." She looked at me and held my face between her cold, wrinkled hands while giving me a little smile. She only replied, "I know, hon, but you're standing in front of the TV."

I kissed her goodbye and let her get back to her world, quietly closing the door.

My dad, on the other hand, gave me more of his time and attention while we were driving to the train station. I could have made it by myself but he'd insisted on driving me.

It wasn't like I was close to my father either, but I was

definitely closer to him than to my mom. For example, he once came to watch our marching band play, though it was more to see the high school football team in action than it was to see me. But he did come beforehand to watch us march. I've always viewed my dad as a strong person and deep down inside I believe that he loved me, a truth fed by my oldest childhood memories of us together. To live with someone you don't necessarily love or want to stay with, and raise two kids with all the responsibility that comes along with such an undertaking, you need some kind of strength. I have to give that to him. Our drive was pretty silent, he asked me once if I'd forgotten anything and simply requested that I call when I arrived, which I did. I remember the last thing he said to me when we parted, which I thought was cool. He shook my hand firmly, laughed, and said, "Good job, son." I smiled back and headed off, stepped onto the train and started a new page in my book. One that I'm actually still writing.

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