



Creative Piece

At Once

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Abstract

We become more anxious as we fabricate environments for ourselves over which we lose control. Landscapes of the familiar, mapped by relations and routines, shift and are unsettled by alterations that we introduce through our own interference. Without seeking to make these changes or their causes explicit, this story tells of lives already irrevocably altered and increasingly consumed by a sense of threat and (environmental, technological and emotional) crisis, and by memories that have thus been buried or wiped.

Each morning, I hang upside-down on a trapeze swing that my father bought for me when I was a small child. Each year, my father shortened its strings, so that I could use it even as I grew taller. Originally, it hung outside, but it is an indoor swing now. My father hung it from the centre of the ceiling in the largest room in the house, where a light had once hung. He had to elongate the strings, because the ceilings are so high. The room looks larger than it is in reality. I think this is because of the mirror that faces me as I swing. It seems as though this mirror is unreachable, as if it can be seen for miles but could only be touched if you were to make your way through a long tunnel that separates you from the mirror. I know, of course, that a tunnel could not actually exist in a room like this. I know that a room like this could not possibly be that long. Anyway, this illusion of distance is countered by the claustrophobic grey walls. It only seems this big because of the lack of furniture, anyway. It is abnormal for something to appear to be so big and so small at the same time. It is probably just the blood going to my head.

We moved to my father's mother's house after she passed away. Her husband died before that. It is just the three of us here: my father, my mother, and me. Every day, my father leaves in the morning and returns in the evening. I do not know where he goes, I have never asked. As for my me and my mother, we never go anywhere. We stay inside.

We are as familiar with our own daily routine as we are unfamiliar with that of my father. We wake early, and the day is long. My swing is intended for exercise. After waking, I hang. My mother prepares food as grey as the walls, as the skin I wash, as the tub I wash in.

After eating, we clean the entire house, although it is rarely dirty. Then, we retire to our designated seats in what I like to call the Old Living Room. It used to be my grandmother's living room, but now there is nothing 'living' about it. The furniture set is old, too. Worn and tattered. An ugly browned-peach colour. I sit on the sofa across from my mother's armchair. My father's armchair, to the left of my mother's, completes the circular set-up. Mostly, we read. I read. My mother sits down holding a book that slowly becomes loose in her hand, which gradually droops with the weight, as she stares vacantly at some fixed point on the wall for hours. Although we are rich in books, she has read each one of them more than once. I am beginning to think I am nearly there. It is getting harder to find a 'new' one when I visit the library. The library is at the front of the house and bookshelves filled with books paint its walls from floor to ceiling. Perhaps I am so used to seeing their spines every day that I mistake this for having read them. I usually have gotten through a minimum of three by the time my father gets home. This may seem excessive and it depends on the number of pages. In all honesty, my definition of 'reading' is now skimming my eyes over the lines, regardless of whether I am taking anything in or not.

Because there is nothing left to talk about, we are more or less silent until my father arrives home. By right, we should have another meal eaten before he comes, but our hunger has left us by now. My father prepares our second meal. For him, we force food and conversation.

Find below an example:

My father: (munching heartily on grey) I have to say that my cooking is getting better by the day! (to me) Whose is better, mine or your mother's?

Me: (feigning contemplation) Hmmmm. *That* is a hard one. I think that maybe *hers* was better yesterday, and *yours* is better today.

My father: (tickled) Well, what can I say? (winking and nudging me theatrically) I'm a natural! (to my mother) I've brought more home, so you have all day tomorrow to practise so that you can beat me next time!

My mother: (beaming) Brilliant, thank you! I'll be able to do lots of practise, so that I can be the winner!

(General laughter and applause)

It does vary from time to time, though. Find below another example:

My father: (chewing grey wholeheartedly) I have to say, my cooking is improving by the day! (to me) What do you think, mine or hers? (gesturing his knife in my mother's direction)

Me: (feigning contemplation) Hmmmm, tricky. I think that maybe *yours* was better yesterday, and *hers* is better today.

My father: (in exaggerated disappointment) Oh, well (using his arms to fake-bow to my mother). I'll have to get more, so that I can be crowned victor!

My mother: (with non-specific wit) Not if I get there first!

(General laughter and applause)

After, we retire to our designated seats and read. Sometimes, if my father isn't too tired, we play cards on the table in the centre before going to bed. Cards are my favourite. Only what needs to be said is said during cards.

It goes on like this until I come across a book in the library that is unlike the others. At first glance, it appears to fit in with the rest of them – a small, yellow hardback with a thin, red spine – nothing unusual about that. I am almost embarrassed to admit it, but I am always drawn to the books with thinner spines. I sometimes like to imagine myself bringing one around with me in my pocket. This one had to be one of the thinnest in the library. No wonder I hadn't noticed it before amongst the larger ones. I absentmindedly flick through it from back to front. The pages are slightly yellowed around the edges and the print is large and bold. In fact, there are only a few words on each page. There are even some illustrations; nearly all of them are of a young boy and girl, both with black hair. When I reach the first page, I stop dead. *Handwriting*. It reads:

*To you on your birthday,
Your first real reading book!
Lots and lots of love from,
Granny and Grandad. XXX*

There are also numbers inscribed on the top right-hand corner of the page. I realise that this is probably the date, but it doesn't mean much to me. I shut the book and drag my index finger across its squeaky, plastic cover. I then hold my left hand facing palm-up, and let the book sit there happily. *So light*. I open it again, read the inscription, and turn the first page slowly. I place my index finger on the first word (something I never do) and –

It hits me more intensely than anything before this ever had. An image of the same book in smaller hands. My hands. Another pair of hands, bigger and belonging to arms that rest lightly on my young shoulders. A larger, older index finger is placed on the same first word and –

Before I can understand what I have seen, it is gone. I try to preserve details as they slip away from me. A woman's hand, I think, with a gold ring on the index finger. *My father's mother*.

I hurriedly stuff the book under my shirt, into the elastic waistline of my trousers. I grab another one from the shelf and turn to leave the room. My mother is standing in the

doorway, watching me. I realise that I must have been gone a while. We exchange a glance for a moment too long, before I walk straight past her, back to the Old Living Room.

I sense a change in my father. At times, it is not as though the change is taking place within him, but as though he is emulating a change that is bigger than he is. He certainly acts differently these days; I cannot tell whether this is good or bad. His mood never settles long enough for me to know. He is manic, frantic almost, full to the brim of an energy that the three of us have not known for a very long time. And even then, it is not *that* sort of energy. It is a pumped up, artificial, HD version. He never tires, he never sleeps anymore. He looks stronger, a strength that is almost too much for his body to contain. I would find it almost ridiculous, laughable even, if it weren't so unsettling.

A change has taken place within me, too, ever since the day in the library. Before, I did not want to know where my father went every day, what he did, and why my mother and I didn't go. Maybe I was afraid to know. The longer something has been left unanswered, the more daunting it becomes, but now, I am hungry. Ravenous, even, to find out.

I hold the book in my hands now. I am sitting on the sofa, staring at my mother, who stares past me. Does she know? Does she know that things can be good *and* bad, big *and* small, old *and* new, happy *and* sad like my memory?

'That book was given to you by my parents', she mutters.

'W-what?' I am shocked that she has spoken.

She nods to the book. Sheepish, I let it fall to my lap. Of course she knows I took it. She knows I was watching her as well – now, and this whole time. She must have been watching me, too.

My face burns with embarrassment. I had replayed the memory in my head again and again, and it wasn't even about the right person. There are so many questions that I want to ask my mother now. Instead, I hear myself telling her that I want to go outside. Hesitantly, she rises from her seat and walks out of the Old Living Room, into the dark hall, towards the front door. Petrified, I follow.

We are outside. Air, fresh air, is sucked through every pore of my skin. It is freezing. It is wonderful. I look to my mother and see that her eyes have begun to well. They harbour a feeling that I have never recognised before this moment. I do a 360-degree turn, slowly taking in my surroundings. Houses, there are so many houses. Rows and rows of houses that seem to go on for miles. I squint to try to make out the smallest house, the one that is furthest away, but it is too dark and I accept that for now the houses will have to fade into nothing instead. There is but one light besides the one in our house, and this comes from the house

directly to the left of ours. A word that I have not uttered, one that has not even crossed my mind for years, spills out of mouth.

‘Neighbours’, I smile.

My mother smiles back and we are laughing. We laugh for a long time. I laugh so much that I have to bend over, clutching my sore stomach with my right hand, holding our garden wall with my left for support. I feel light and carefree, and I know that my mother feels the same. Although out of practice, the ability to share a moment of happiness returns to us like an old friend. This is hastily interrupted by our doubled anxiety. Without either of us saying so, we know that seeing us outside would upset my father. Despite this, we do not go back. Instead, our legs lead us towards the house next door. The light draws us in. It is deliciously tempting. I wonder excitedly what we might find, who we might find. I begin to remember words. They compete for first place in my heart as each one makes it jump and spin more than the last. Girl, boy, friend, enemy, teacher, lover, old friends, best friends, sisters, brothers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles and cousins and babies and dogs and –
Father.

‘What are you two doing?’

To anyone else, he would have seemed shocked and angry. Perhaps my mother and I are the only two people in the world who immediately recognised his pain and guilt. Neither of us answer. He stands on next door’s front step, we on the path leading up to it.

The light from the house-next-door disappears and with it goes the silence. In its place emerges a loud and aggressive vibration. I am almost grateful for the disruption. My father, as though never before upright, jolts into a stiff and rigid posture. He storms towards us, through us, then past us. We dumbly pace behind him as he runs through our open front door. All the while, he drums his temple repeatedly with his index finger, as if prompting himself. Our house is different now too. It is vibrating, shaking and even swaying slightly. My mother and I are not used to this type of movement, and it takes us much longer than my father to reach the Old Living Room. I am stunned by the sight that awaits. There are two figures lying on the couch. They are not moving. I let out a shriek, but my mother slaps her hand to my mouth.

‘They’re alive’, she whispers through gritted teeth.

She is right. I don’t know how she knows; I don’t know how I know – if they are breathing it is so slight a movement that it is invisible to us—but they are definitely alive. The way their bodies fall over themselves, slumped and hunched over. The way their heads are rested on their own laps assures me that, rather than having been killed, they have been shut down. The curling of their fingers, despite the limpness of their arms and hands –

Her index finger. The gold ring.

Realising who they are, I am filled with a mixture of relief and horror. I look to my father, who is now extremely agitated, spurring gibberish about keeping them in one place.

I am struggling to keep conscious now. I feel my panic rise up from the ground, numbing my legs, bursting in my stomach, the burning remnants creeping up my throat. My body is soaked with perspiration that is both hot and cold. The vein in my head throbs and becomes too huge for the skin that is plastered tightly across my skull to hold. Questions about my father, about my home, about my whole life up to and especially including this point.

Questions about my father.

I am scared to look at him, afraid that his face will bear the answers.

My mother's hand is still pressed to my mouth. I push it away now and run to my grandparents. I spread my arms over them both, in an attempt to hide and protect them. I feel myself shake and roar and spill tears of grief. I look up and see my father's face flash with anger. He paces to the kitchen. Still wailing, I look to my mother, expecting her to echo my distress. Instead, placid as ever, she lowers herself to her armchair and stares back at me. Before I can say anything, my father returns holding a gas canister and a box of matches. I watch in horror as he pours the gas over the table in the middle of the room before asking me to set it alight.

Knowing somehow that to refuse is futile, I ask him if I can walk over to the same side as my mother before I do so. That same flash of anger strikes his face again. No longer needing to wait for a response, I rush to crouch beside my mother. She remains calm as my father sets fire to the table. I realise that she is not even looking at the flames, but beyond them. My gaze follows hers to a fixed point on the wall.

'It's a lovely view, isn't it?' she says, to nobody in particular.

'It really goes on forever, or at least it seems like it from here! I don't know which I prefer, the water or the mountains'.

For a split second, I am rendered mute in confusion. I look to my mother, who throws me a meaningful glance, and then back to the blank point on the wall.

'Y-yes, it really is b-beautiful out there', I try. The flames grow bigger and bigger. My face is hot.

'Don't be ridiculous', spits my father. 'I had the windows knocked out and the holes cemented over years ago, when we moved in. When my mother died'.

'I don't know', my mother responds instantly, 'I just know I'd love a dip in that water, wouldn't you?' she turns to me.

Hopelessly following her lead, I nod. 'Definitely', I say. 'What I could really do with right now is a swim'.

My father stumbles back into his armchair. He is sobbing now. I turn to kneel beside him as the flames encroach. His tears are illuminated by their light.

'Well, I'm staying here', he manages eventually. 'In my home', he adds, 'with my family'.

My horror melts away and I see my father. A man who has loved, and lost, and feared, and gotten all three of these things very muddled. A man who is scared of what might happen, and so will not let anything happen at all.

I look into his eyes. My mother kneels now too.

'Please come with us', I whisper. 'You cannot spend the rest of your life with two sleeping parents'.

He gets closer and closer, further and further away.

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