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## Toxicity

It was my 17th birthday, and I just got off work. I walked back to my house, taking in the scenery as I passed. I was working and staying in south Philadelphia for the summer. The streets were littered with people, the buildings turned to haze as I rushed past. The cars raced past me, everyone had somewhere to be. A small twin house set in the center of a nosy neighbor entered my view, the children were loudspeakers as they loitered the block. Hesitantly, I walked up the steps and unlocked my door. My mom sat downstairs at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette. There were bags under her eyes, but I didn't bother to ask why. I knew why, and I don't ask questions that I know the answer to. Her frail frame was developed by the clutter on the table, the small living room made her look like a doll compared to a human. She had lost too much weight in the last couple of months. Her black hair frized by the sides of her cheeks, her eyeliner was smudged, trying to withhold the 24 hour mark, and her false lashes were barely hanging on. No amount of makeup would cover the dark circles under her eyes, or how her face started to show her real age. She took a long drag from her cigarette and let it hang dainty between her fingers, starting up some random small talk.

“How was work?” Her head was still down, but I knew she was talking to me. Her words were slightly slurred.

“Fine” I coughed, smoke getting into my lungs.

There was no need for us to talk, so I went upstairs to change. I looked outside, the once bright sky was beginning to darken and I could hear the chimes ringing from my neighbor's door. The houses were so close together, I could see straight into my neighbor's window, and into their lives. The small white room that had held a sense of comfort, felt unfamiliar. The poster board of memories above my bed was the only indicator of the room's history. The board held; pictures, autographs, theater and concert tickets, ride merchandise, and foreign dollar bills. Time seemed to warp when I went back downstairs, because before I could understand why, my mom and I were fighting again. It was about something small, it's always about something small. It could be that the dishes weren't done, or how the remote was dead. My sister had told me before she left, not to feed into the small things. That the small things were just an excuse for her to take her emotions out on someone, but I couldn't help it. Her mood swings had only gotten worse since my sister left me alone with her in this house. I didn't view her as my mother when she got this way, and I didn't talk to her the way a daughter talks to their mother. My attitude and tone completely changes when she's in her mood swings. My voice becomes sharper, my diction is dramaticated, and sarcasm pours from my lips. I viewed her as a disrespectful stranger, so I treated her that way.

She put her cigarette down in the ashtray, still lit. It must have been hard to scream when smoke was in her lungs. I screamed right back, and I didn't stop until I knew I hurt her. I wanted my words to hurt her the way her recent actions hurt me. I knew what was coming, because our fighting never ended any other way. I left in the middle of our fighting to put my dog in my room so he didn't become afraid of her yelling or get hurt. I grabbed my phone, and wallet off of the small miniature fridge next to my bed. The fighting continued until there was a loud sound

beside me, *smash*. No one screamed or acted shocked, and the world didn't stop turning from her choice of actions. I stepped over the shards, and looked directly at her.

“ Yes because throwing glass at me, and breaking all of our dishes seem to really get your point across!” I heard her lighter click before I opened the door and stomped out. I called two people when I left that house, my sister and my friend Eric. I had made my way to a nearby park, it was getting dark out, and strangely chilly for the beginning of August. However, the fresh air was nice. The park was deserted except for the occasional dog walker that would pass through. The grass was unkempt like the city it was located in. Seated on a dark park bench, my sister answered after several rings.

“ Hey, happy birthday, Mia. You okay?”

“ Thanks, not really no.” Hot tears started to roll down my cheeks, but I tried not to let it change my voice. There was a momentary silence that sat on the line before she answered.

“ It's mommy again, I just don't know what to do. I just want her back, and I don't want to stay here alone.” I tilted my head down, embarrassed by the emotions that lied so openly on my face for anyone to stroll along and witness.

“ I'm sorry Mia, I just couldn't stay. I've been through this once before and I can't let that environment affect me anymore. My advice is to just stay away from her. Stay busy and out of the house as much as possible, when she uses again, her mood swings won't be as bad. Right now the anger is coming from withdrawal.”

It was selfish that I wanted to ask her to come back, so I didnt. I don't ask questions I know the answer to. She continued to speak as though she hadn't given me the same advice countless in the last couple of months.

“ Listen if it gets too bad, you can always come stay here for a while. If you don’t want to because of school, I understand. Do you have any friends you can stay with?”

“ I have Jordan, but I also have work.”

“ Yeah but that job will be over in a week or two right, when everyone goes back to school?”

“ Mhm.”

“ You know i’m always here for you okay Mookie? I love you.”

“ I love you too Tess.”

The phone then went dead. I stared at it for a minute thinking about her last comment. Once August was over, I wouldn’t necessarily need to stay in Philly with my mom, because my summer job in Philly would be over as well. Can I just leave her though? I remembered all of the problems that awaited me back home, and what could happen if I up and left . I dialed my ex boyfriend Eric’s number, yearning to be comforted by someone. The phone answered almost immediately.

“ Hey Marie, it’s been a while.”

After three months of hating him for consistently breaking my heart and emotionally hurting me in our relationship, I poured my soul out to him that afternoon. I had told him everything I was dealing with, I held nothing back. I told him about my mom, my sister leaving, the stress from work, and getting ready for school. He calmed me down, and I let the fresh air crash into my lungs. We talked about our lives, until our conversation drifted onto less important, unrelated topics. We talked until it was becoming too late for me to stay outside, and I had to start walking home.

I told him I would talk to him when I got home. Looked down at my phone, Jordan, my best and only real friend's name was staring through me. Her mom knew about my situation, and had offered to let me live with them in the extra room everytime I came over. Jordan came from the opposite family situation than me. A nuclear family, as an only child, her parents focused all their love and attention on her. As I walked home, I couldn't stop myself from wondering what it would be like if my life was different. I could leave and be apart of their family, the family I had dreamed of. There were so many benefits at that moment, it was hard for me to pull back and think realistically. I could be closer to my school, in a better environment, in a loving, normal household.

I looked up from the distraction of my phone and saw the name of my street. The familiar feeling of anxiety hit me like a brick, and the real question sat in the front of my mind, unwavering. Maybe leaving is best for me, but what about my mom? She had lost my dad and barley was able to pull herself from those ashes. Could she handle losing me? She had told me time and time again about her suicidal thoughts. If I left or cut her out of my life, I knew there was a likely chance that she would purposely overdose, and one of my biggest fears in life is becoming an orphan. I could risk that fear coming true, and no longer be in the abusive, environment I was in, or I could hold on until I leave for college in two years. It was dark outside but I could see clearly. As I walked down my street, I came back to the same scene that was waiting for me earlier that day. A small twin house, with a brown door and white door screen. As I stared at the front door, I realized that even though I had a choice, it was really just a lose lose

situation. I took a deep breath, my feet moving unconsciously as I entered the house. It smelt like smoke, it felt like my home.