

The Universe in the Kitchen

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I didn't know that everyone doesn't spend their lives waiting for the other shoe to drop until I was well into my thirties. I think it was the look on my friend's face when I said "I'm so nervous things are going well right now. When's it all gonna end?" She couldn't quite understand the palpable, stomach twisting fear I had about the inevitable future. I thought everyone had that certainty. That no matter how long things had been good for, the shit was coming to hit that proverbial fan. Hard. You could bet money on it. Because it was fact. Not speculation. Not paranoia. Fact. The better things were, the longer they stayed that way, the more terrified I'd become about the looming fall out. These fallouts that were slowly shaping who I'd become as an adult. Not that I could see it at the time. Or until five years ago really. Enlightenment by therapy. The fallout was dark and moved with the momentum of a freight train barreling around the bend. An unstoppable blackhole that sucked the life out of everything around it. Just writing this I can feel my face fall. It's visceral. The fallout is far enough away to stop causing damage, but close enough to still make my skin crawl. Not my fallout though. My dad's.

Living with a bipolar parent is like living with the sun. Forever orbiting someone who wields both the power to nourish and love you and the spontaneous drive to destroy who you are at your core. Like termites eating away at your foundation until there's nothing left but anxiety and self doubt. Then they die and you're bestowed the gift of reconstruction. Who will you finally be now that the sun has gone down?

One morning in the nineties I came barreling down the stairs like a kid leaving for Disney World. The house was treading on the thinnest ice sheet of normalcy for a moment and I was cautiously hopeful. Again. A sort of middle ground that only came around when my dad was well medicated. But as I bounced into the kitchen, arms wide and ready to vomit love on anyone I came across, I saw him hunched over in such a way that I knew it was all gone. The air changed. It was thick with tension and smelled of evil enjoying itself just a little too much for 7 am. "Morning dad!!! Sleep ok?" My heart dropped like a ton of bricks at the deafening silence that followed. "Morning..." he said, with the heaviness of someone who'd lost everything and didn't even know it. Fuck, it's gone. It's all gone again. Here we go. Man your stations, war is imminent. Shields up. Head down. Get ready.

...“Did you take my braided belt?”

“Your what?”

“My braided belt. The brown leather one. Did you take it?”

“Nope, didn’t take your belt.”

“Someone god damn took it.”

“No dad, Jesus I didn’t take your belt. Why would I do that?”

“Did one of your friends? They did, didn’t they? Was it Colleen? It was, wasn’t it? Selfish little asshole. You get that back from her. Someone took my god damn belt. Where is it?”

My brain usually fails me when digging through these particular memories. The ones where I meet my other dad. The evil one. “Hello there. You suck so bad. Gotta jet.”

I’m sure I said something for the record books, I just can’t remember exactly what. I have gaping holes in my childhood memories. They come in waves of bad dreams, flashes of screaming a lot and crying until my face was blue, apologizing for something I didn’t do then slamming a door somewhere. Sounds right.

That was only if the sun was pointed at me though. Which I preferred. I knew how to handle it and if for some reason I just couldn’t on that particular occasion, I knew how to live with the constant stomach churning and heartbreak. It was just a regular Tuesday. But to watch the sun shoot flares at my family was like watching our house burn down, helpless to stop it and paralyzed with fear. That barreling train crashed into everyone who loved and supported it and to the untrained eye, it relished in taking as many people down with it as it could.

The sun didn’t always rage and spew flares though. It could be warm. Warm and shiny and really excited about everything in life. And if that warmth was pointed my way, I basked in its glow and relished how lucky I was to know and be loved by someone like that. Someone so bright. So full of life. Someone who convinced me I was incomparable to virtually every other person alive. I was special. To be separated from the pack and nurtured to perfection. Days were full of snowball fights and inappropriate jokes at someone else’s expense, spontaneous road trips, manic fun, 5am tennis practices, and overly eager encouragement to be the best no matter what. At this. At that. And definitely at that. I could always be better. It was an endless merry go round of love and pressure and hurt and betrayal and love and pressure and hurt and betrayal. As the planets circled the sun.

I know all of this because I am one. I’m a planet. And my brother and sister and mom are too. We orbited the sun of our home for half our lives, then from a close distance for the other half. All of us. We orbited and

constructed our lives around the unsettling, unpredictable love of my father. Until we ran away. Or he died. Or both.

I've heard that children of a mentally ill parent tend to be more empathetic, sensitive, intuitive, malleable, loyal and compassionate. Of course we are. We've danced with the sun. Fine tuned the art of tip toeing. We know the delicate ballet of appeasement like we know how to breathe. We can intuit someone's mood like our lives depend on it. Because it did. For however many years we spent reassuring the sun that someone loved it. We do all of this simply by loving an impossible person. Someone who everyone else gives up on or shakes their head in confounding exhaustion at. And we don't often let go of our impossible person. Because everyone else already did. Somewhere in the recesses of our hearts we believe impossible people deserve love too, in spite of not being able to reciprocate it very reliably. Even deeper in our recesses we believe that if we do let go, we'll lose our sun forever. And that's the scariest thing of all. To be abandoned by someone you abandoned first. After all, saving ourselves was never the first priority. It wasn't even the second or the third. Frankly, it never crossed our minds until someone mentioned our well-being one day. We stared at them with a genuinely perplexed look. And they stared back just long enough for something to spark in our chest. A whisper of self preservation. Something niggling in the back of our heads that we deserved a better life than this. Our souls carefully tapping from below, just in case we were listening this time. Just leave, it says. Just leave.

But we've been well trained to know that the sun can't survive without us. It can't survive without its planets and its moon. We're the only ones who understand how it operates. And without us it would be all alone in the inky blackness of its own celestial abyss. And so the dance of codependency forges on, stronger than ever. I've heard that children of a mentally ill parent tend to be more untrusting, desperate for structure, constantly self effacing, full of anxiety and always in search of something more perfect. Of course we are. We've danced with the sun.

Last year I rode out to Fort Tilden to catch the solar eclipse. I was in awe of how many people were in awe of it. Millions of gazers all over the country gathering to watch the sun god be rendered powerless by our little planet and its little moon. Our pale blue dot. Even more astounding was that in the looming countdown to artificial nighttime, the life around us adjusted accordingly. Crickets started chirping, a few bats started flying around disoriented from lack of sleep on a long summer day, the fresh scent of early evening wafting through the breeze. A powerful entity going dark, the life around it adjusting. Surviving. When the sun and the earth and the moon are all perfectly in line.

When we lined up in the kitchen to watch our personal eclipse we also adjusted accordingly. We'd hunker down for dark mode, which could last for weeks depending on the season. We spoke quietly and avoided the sun at all costs, careful not to disturb it. Never complaining if it tucked itself away in its room for days on end. We were safe if it stayed behind closed doors, doing whatever it needed to do to survive the grip. During these times my walk home from school slowed to a crawl. Surely there was a friend's house I should be visiting right now. Maybe Nicole's mom bought fruit roll ups again. I'd drag my feet and trudge home every day, mentally preparing myself to find my dad hanging from the garage rafters. "Would I get there in time? Why am I walking so slow? Feet, fucking move faster. Would I even be able to get him down though? Is there a ladder nearby? Do we even have rafters? I don't think we have rafters." But I could picture it so clearly. Like it had already happened and the universe was trying to warn me. It knew that's how he'd do it. And that he'd make sure I was the one who found him. I was the one he opened up to, after all. I was the one he'd sit down in front of to explain why my mom was so horrible and why he was unfaithful to her for all those years. Why my friend's mom was something he just needed. I knew how the sun operated. I'd surely be the one he'd bestow his suicide on. But I'd never find him hanging in the garage. He was always alive. Hunched over, now keenly aware that he'd surely lost everything. But alive. A sad calm would hang in the room as long as it was silent. Sarcasm and utter despair if we engaged. Spinning around and around, getting lost in the orbit of the sun never knowing which dad we'd land on but always knowing the truly evil one would be back. He always came back. Like a heavy shoe forever hovering above.

I can't help but think about what could have stopped the cycle? What could slow the orbit? Something that could have made our universe even marginally more tolerable. Like ketchup on dry eggs. Sometimes I think naming it would have. Just calling it out helps it lose some power. That's what they say, right? The enlighteners? We knew who and what our sun was, but we didn't really talk about it. We blamed the sun over and over and then when that got old we blamed ourselves until the rage came clawing from below. Then we blamed the sun again.

Had my dad really sat us down and named the things he did maybe we'd be better off. Therapy was long and painful and arduous and obnoxiously expensive. And I'm still talking about it, for Christ's sake. He's still a star in my fucking galaxy. I still struggle to understand healthy relationships and have a distorted ideas of authority. I always gravitate towards people I think need to be fixed. However irritatingly subconscious that is. Because it's what I'm uncomfortably comfortable with. Feels like home. Maybe if he'd been able to admit to the things he did I'd be a better version of myself. I don't know the answer to that and I never will. He took his guilt and shame and apologies to the grave with him. If they were ever there in the first place. That's still up

for debate amongst my family members. Did he even know what he did? Did he clock the damage he caused? Probably not.

At one Thanksgiving dinner where we all know family recovery starts and ends, I reminded him of the time my rabbit Poster Nutmeg was found missing his entire body. I found a small pile of him in the neighbor's dilapidated garage where we knew this one evil cat liked to hang out. George, the orange striped serial killer. My dad joined me in the garage to stare down at what used to be my fluffy pet. He stuck his hands in his pockets rocked back on his heels and said 'Hey, at least someone got a good meal.' Then walked back inside. Even as I was recounting the story to him over mashed potatoes and too much wine I could see on his face that nothing was registering. He was incredulous, even. If that wasn't enough to satisfy my curiosity, the roaring belly laughter and: 'I'd never say something like that' that followed certainly drove the point home. Even if he did know what he'd done at one point, he lied to himself until he believed it never happened. Is there really a difference?

My question for fellow lovers of impossible people is... would you change it? If you were the child of a mentally ill parent would you go back and be a different formula blended in a different bowl if you could? Have a different set of genes? My genes terrify me. Bipolar disorder can be incredibly genetic sometimes ripping through generations of family, as it has mine. Its companions are addiction and eating disorders and anxiety. Who's kid will have it? Do I have the gene just hiding away in there somewhere waiting to rear it's ugly head? My own anxiety fuels that fire. But would I be someone else in order to erase all that?

I have family members who suffer on a daily basis. They can be utterly debilitated by the pain their own brain inflicts on them. Would they change that if they could? Would my dad? If he knew what he did to us, would he go back and never get married or have kids? To spare them? I don't have the answer. But sometimes I think about who I'd be if I never lived this life. If I was born with different parents in a different house with stability and safety and normal mornings. Who would I be now?

I can't help but wonder if I wouldn't change it. The more I look into it, the more I look back at the ugly, the more I like myself just exactly this way. If I changed everything, I'd have to change well... everything. I might be less loyal, less empathetic and less intuitive. I might love people less, or want to have conversations about the Kardashians instead of mental health. And then someone who really needed to hear this might never know that someone else grew up orbiting their own personal sun too. And that it all really happened. That someone believes them. I believe them. If the formula changes, so does the product. And if I start to accept that, who

knows what road I might find myself on. Learning to love who I am just exactly as I was made? Preposterous. Right?

Sometimes I wonder if living with an impossible person wasn't the greatest worst thing I've ever done. This is only after years of dissecting the facts of course, or what I remember of them anyway. I know I'll never fix all the things. I don't even think I want to. All the digging around and ripping apart and examining has just made me think... if hurt people hurt people... what do you think healed people can do? And when will the planets finally be healed from years of orbiting the sun so close? Maybe never. Some burns just leave a scar that way. So they heal the best they can and then they look for shade. Hoping to find another planet cooling off under a tree somewhere so they can finally talk about just how bright that sun used to be.