

Time Heals

Hailee Sexton

Honorable Mention—Essay Competition

I come from a broken home of tired arguing and slamming doors while I hold pillows that were never thick enough over my small ears. This is as most do, except for those few that were born lucky. I come from parents who loved each other too much, but still not enough. My dad and I watched my mom give up her family for quick highs and wild nights on the old dirty Biloxi Beach filled with floating trash and crushed beer cans and memories wasted and lost. I find myself, now in my adolescence, regretful that I party on that same beach. I feel a twinge in my heart when a picture is taken of me and I see her face in mine.

On a night when I was too young to know what month or day it was, my dad and I found ourselves staring at the rubble she left, and we made promises that night. We interlocked our pinkies, his dramatically larger than mine, and our hot tears hit the cool concrete. The stars twinkled above us, but we took no notice. She left us alone in that old brown house, and the wood vinyl walls still seem to close in on us as we sleep.

“Hailee, sit up,” my dad would say as he held the same white bucket with little pictures of orange rubber ducks up to my face. I would sit up, vomit, and fall back to sleep. The coughing never disturbed me as I slept anymore, but my dad laid awake all night, listening intently. This was our routine after three-year-old me was diagnosed with severe asthma. He had memorized the high pitch in my cough, as well as the perturbing gag that followed, which signaled him to come running. He cleaned me off and washed my sheets when he couldn’t get there fast enough. He held my long hair in his rough hands as I coughed incessantly and vomited for what seemed like no reason to me at such a young age. He did it all alone, and he built me up into a strong and powerful person, just by trying his best to keep me alive.

“You don’t even need my help,” my dad would say as I sat in the back of his aged blue truck relentlessly practicing counting from one to one hundred on our way to preschool every morning. As I grew into five-year-old

and six-year-old me, this became our new routine. On the way home, I would recite the alphabet. My head would hit the dirt-speckled window of the truck at each bump in the road, and I would make him promise to help me if I forgot the next number or letter in my recitation. He never needed to. As he continued navigating the twisty roads to the ancient, overarching church building where I attended preschool, I would finally make it to “one hundred” and shriek in excitement. When he walked me in, he would hold my delicate face in his hands and remind me of his pride in me. He would remind me of how smart he believed I was, as all parents do, but I now see in retrospect that he was demonstrating relief rather than praise. He was grateful that he was relatively successful in raising a daughter by himself to be something more than her absent and reckless mother. He signed up to be a loving father and a strong partner in the tumultuous world of parenting, but he was instead forced to stretch himself thin trying to play both parts in the leading roles of my life.

“Get up, Hailee. Our Waffle House table waits for no one,” my dad says as he wakes me up on the one Saturday morning a month that I’m able to spend with him. My eyes jolt open, and I see my bedroom. I realize I’m back at home on an extended weekend, and this has become our routine. As adulthood approaches and I develop into eighteen-year-old me, I further recognize these routines we’ve created throughout my life. Every weekend that I am at home, we make our way to Waffle House for breakfast. However, this time I’m the driver. We order our food—the same exact order—and sit at the table with our arms in the same position. I don’t know if he’s ever noticed. I catch him up on my chaotic life at school and my current C in AP Calculus I, and he fills me in on the countless work emails and insufferable coworkers.

“Have you heard from your mom?”

He always eventually asks the same question.

“Nope.”

My answer has never changed. △