

# *I Am Not a Home*

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I am from many places, but none of them have ever quite been home. A mint green house where neighbors are always yelling and my dad comes to visit for a few hours every other weekend. A red house tucked away in the woods, set high on a hill, and withdrawn from the rest of the world's prying, perceiving eyes. Then a yellow house, the same color as the lemonade I make with my little brother, a quarter a cup when we set up shop on the corner, but free for our mother who adds in a splash of vodka. A small two-bedroom, where dinner is never quite filling, always pulled from the freezer and ready to eat in under five microwaved minutes because I am in charge while mom takes a nap, and I'm too young to use the oven or stove. A brown townhouse where there's no more mom and no little brother, replaced by a father and stepmother who are rarely home at the same time and often unhappy.

The red house was in New Hampshire, at least a two-hour drive from Rhode Island and my father. As I was starting the first grade, my mother went away to rehab for the first time. Our neighbor, Dawn, would come to get us ready for school in the mornings because my stepfather left too early. She'd get us dressed and make banana pancakes while we watched PBS Kids until it was time to walk to the bus stop. Mom came home quickly, only a week or two after she had left for the facility. Straight back to bed she went. Dawn stopped coming by, so I was back to taking care of myself and my half-brother. I'd make us 'french toast', but not the real kind that you cook on the stove and coat in sweet syrup. It was just a piece of bread, sloppily buttered and coated with too much cinnamon sugar. I was the one to get us dressed, but I didn't have a winter coat, and there were days in November that I showed up to school in shorts, so money must've been tight. Yet the liquor bottles piled up. Third grade was the year they nearly held me back because I missed too many days of school. Nobody was around to make sure I was going.

We were back in Rhode Island by the time I started fourth grade. Custody was split evenly, one week at the yellow house with my mother, stepfather, and brother, and the

other at my father and stepmother's one-bedroom apartment. But the yellow house was short-lived. We were only there a summer, just long enough for my mother and stepfather to announce their divorce and start sleeping in separate rooms. My mother was sobbing when she told us, but I didn't care much. She had already cried at least three times that day, and I had never really liked my stepfather. Soon after that, I started spending more time with my father and stepmother, who moved into a townhouse so that I could have my own room.

Living in the two-bedroom, my mother's drinking got worse. When she hugged me, it was like it was all she could do to stay upright. Her slurred Iloveyou's were endless and annoying. By the time I entered sixth grade, she no longer had custody. She was allowed only public, supervised visits, which I didn't want to attend. On our last visit, she showed up drunk and my stepmother had to take me home early. A few months later, my mother was arrested for a DUI on Thanksgiving Day. She texted me a lot then, asking for forgiveness and claiming she was getting clean. But I was twelve and already so tired. I saw her once more, and only because my grandmother asked me to. After a while, she stopped reaching out so much. Just on birthdays and ironically enough Mother's Days, because I don't wish her a happy one and that makes her upset, and have I forgotten that I have a mother? After a little while longer, I blocked her number. I have not seen or spoken to my mother in seven years.

Permanently living with my father and stepmother in our brown townhouse, it was more of the same, even though the setting had changed. I was a depressed, chronically anxious teen. My parents did not take me to therapy, because I needed to just deal with things and stop being so emotional. Even when they found out I was self-harming in the spring of my freshman year, shorts baring all of the scars from a winter's worth of damage, I was not taken to a doctor. That would make them look like bad parents. When I managed to force their hand in my junior year, things worse than ever, I only went to therapy for a few months. Not because I wanted to stop going, but because I wanted my father to stop sighing and shooting me an annoyed glance each time he had to pay for my session. Along with the gaslighting, my father's hobbies included drinking and cheating.

So, my stepmother left the white house with the green shutters we had all moved into only six months previously. She'd stop by when he wasn't home, but the drop-ins grew more infrequent and didn't make me feel better anyway because she was only there to tell me I needed to clean my room. By senior year I had never felt more alone.

I have seen plenty of what home is not. It is not a mother letting her seven-year-old daughter sip from her cocktail because she wants to see the funny face her child will make. It is not a father who berates his daughter for any reason he can find, starting when she is somewhere around ten and never stopping. It is not a stepmother who moves out because that same father has treated her so badly she now has PTSD, and the fifteen-year-old is left to take the brunt of it on her own. It is not that girl at eighteen years old, now in college, crying when she has to go 'home' for semester breaks. It is not all of these loveless houses and apartments I have known, and I have known them oh-so-well. So I know what home is not.

I'll know home when I've found it. I've caught glimpses of it, in other people's living rooms during family movie night and in their kitchens as they all talk about their days at the dinner table, a home-cooked meal in front of everyone. It's not about how big their home is, or what movie they're watching, or what's on their plates. It's the warmth that radiates from every happy heart, every full belly, every shared laugh, every teary eye that's soothed by a loved one's thumb, every I-love-you that slips out so easily and goes hand-in-hand with each goodbye. Home is hugs, as often as they can be given, and talking just because you want to hear their voice. These little things are what make a home. I'm not sure if these people are aware of just how at home they are, because they're so used to it. But I am not, and so I am painfully aware of each time I encounter home. I will offer to do the dishes, watch the kids, help with anything I can just to bask in that warmth for a few moments longer before I go back to my own 'home'.

Nowadays I am still from that white house with the green shutters. It's just me, my father, and the dog. There is a large backyard, two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, a pantry room, and even a finished basement where my father sleeps in a La Z Boy recliner. The master bedroom is mostly used as closet storage, and it does not contain a bed,

because there is no one to sleep in it. There are no pictures on the walls, and the living room furniture is hardly ever put to use. I stay in my room. My shades remain drawn, and my door is always closed. Even when I am the only one in the house, I walk gingerly throughout, trying to leave as little evidence as possible that I was ever here. I am from this house, but I am not home. □