



Tethered

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“I don’t like the ones that are Karen’s,” my eleven-year-old declares. “They have the worst voices.”

“Oh you’re right,” my seventeen-year-old chimes in as they discuss audible books and their narrators.

“I want to watch the next Harry Potter,” my daughter says.

“You should read Da Vinci Code,” my husband, to one of our boys.

“I want to play Valorant,”

“You can’t watch it, you didn’t read the book,”

“In music lab today we had to share and they played mine in front of everyone,” the daughter, sounding exacerbated.

Dinner table conversation is like a ping pong match; the lasagna I made earlier in the afternoon is scraped clean, and within twenty minutes of sitting down everyone in my family scatters off in their own direction. The evening meal occupies so much space in my mind compared to how quickly the actual event evaporates. I light the candles and slice the bread, and before I know it the time has slipped through my fingers; dinner is over.

As the youngest of nine, my childhood dinners were equally chaotic, and I can’t even imagine how my mother managed them. In the afternoons, I’d sit for hours in the kitchen looking out the big window past the creek and the field where the cows grazed, my eye tracing the road as far as I could see to the Eucalyptus grove. I’d wait and wait until I saw her little red VW coming down the hill, navigating through the trees until she turned on the last stretch in front of our hay barns, heading to our house. It seemed she was always working, and I was always waiting for her to come home from work; her white nurse’s uniform pressed against her body as she lifted a brown bag of groceries out of the car; I’d meet her and we’d stand at the counter slicing onions, garlic-ing the bread, talking about dinner or my homework or something mindless, my heart at peace now that she was back in my presence.

Each summer my mother and I would split a plate of spaghetti at the county fair. It would come on a white Styrofoam plate; half Bolognese, half pesto. Standing in line at the booth always seemed to take forever, as did waiting for our number to be called signaling that our order was ready. We’d get a picnic table amidst the crowd and nestle our bodies close so we could share the plate; and then, I’d beg for time to slow down. Each bite carefully spun onto my fork, not wanting to take more than my fair share.

When the plate emptied, my belly would be full but my heart would yearn; more time, it would all be over so quickly, the pasta, the bench, the time sitting there in the late afternoon sunlight with my mother at the picnic tables.

Now, creeping towards fifty, the years passing with urgency and fierce rapidness, my fingers in a fast tempo on the keyboard trying to capture and hold on to the moments of the present: the eleven-year-old boy glued to YouTube videos, his legs grazing the side of his favorite chair; the fourteen-year-old daughter wearing her blue light glasses making lists each night to prepare for the next day, the seventeen-year-old, off, I am unsure where, or when he will come back, a piece of my heart gone with him and the knowing that in just a year's time my identity as his mother will be threatened as he ventures out into the world. What used to be long afternoons at the park with my children are now brief conversations during car drives, moments at the door giving them unnecessary instructions as they pile into my son's truck in the morning, text conversations on the family group chat, and quiet conversations with my daughter before her eyes close at night as she tells me she's too tired to talk so my fingers spin the handle of the music boxes I play for her to fall asleep.

The pandemic of 2020 gives the gift of time with my children; at times chaotic, stressful moments, but I'll take them over the absence my husband and I were feeling by our children's busy lives before Corona struck ... I am acutely aware of the luxury of my son's dirty socks on the living room couch, the way he asks for some sliced apples with a hopeful look in his eye, the tension between the three of them as they try to agree on a show.

What I'd give for a long afternoon waiting for her in front of the window of my childhood home. What I'd give for a plate of pasta, to dip my bread in that intersection where the green pesto meets the red Bolognese, to sit in silence with the woman who brought me into the world. What I'd give to be the tooth fairy just one more time, to stuff the stockings while my husband assembles a dollhouse or a bike or a drum set. Nostalgia for the past threatens, but I resist and sit down on the couch for the sixth Harry Potter movie, because I know one day soon, I may be nostalgic for this moment I'm living right now.

