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## The Ghost of Home: Past and Present

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# *The Ghost of Home: Past and Present*

*By: Veronica Boehm*

**Authors Note:** In WRT 255 with Professor Steve Parks, we spent the semester working in writing groups with residents from the Westside. As a final project, we were asked to explore one of the four major questions. I chose: "What does home mean to you?" My essay explores the reality of living with an alcoholic mother and the liberation of moving on from an abusive environment.

**"Just remember, I'm the adult and you're the child."**

You always said this after two weeks of binge drinking, while I was frantically rummaging through every crevice of our home, finding more bottles of half-tapped wine in your closet, dresser drawers (always in the back stuffed under old sweaters), and behind the toilet. Yes, you were the adult who always picked me up from school an hour late or not at all, and I was the child who cleaned up your messes and made excuses for your insubstantial parenting.

Photo by Chris Jensen  
Design by Troy Solomon

Home was a 2,000 square foot house on Tortoise Island: a gated community where the neighbors probably knew what was going on but never asked questions and never complained. We liked living there because the gate kept a single mother and her only daughter safe from theft and unwanted guests. If only it kept us safe from each other. That was the catch. You said parking our cars in the driveway was safer than in the garage because then it would be obvious we were home. Reading between the lines, what you really said was: "It's easier for me to sneak out when the car's in the driveway instead of having to open the loud garage door." You were always quicker than me, but I quickly caught on to your sneakiness.

I remember one Christmas Eve when you were up late wrapping presents. I was naively excited; I thought this year would be different, but I quickly found the hidden brandy glass of Kahlua behind the silver and gold bows. I made a scene, because this was before I realized you would never change, and forced myself to bed. For me, there was always the struggle between an idealized sense of home and the reality of the broken one we shared.

Another night soon after, I pulled at your car door, almost ripping it off, trying to keep you from zigzagging off to a place I couldn't babysit you. When you finally pulled the door shut, I keyed your car as a sign of my defeat. You repainted the car within a week and within that same week drove off looking for cigarettes and a fresh bottle of wine. It was a never-ending dance that lasted the first 20 years of my life. Whether it was missing out on my 18th birthday because you were locked in your bedroom, chain smoking, binge drinking, and nursing a hangover all at once or spending two nights in jail thanks to a DUI, I never gave up on you thanks to the small speck of hope that lingered somewhere deep inside me.

Then you moved to Boston, and I finally stopped chasing after you. Alcohol poisoning put you in the hospital for ten days, but that wasn't the biggest surprise. The biggest sur-

prise was when, after your father dropped you off from the airport, you came through that Tortoise Island door distinctly buzzed. I couldn't believe it. After all the cease and desist orders the universe gave you regarding your problem, you had the brilliant idea to show up drunk!

Fortunately, I collected enough courage to move in with Dad that January, and things have never been better. I shed all my built up rage against you. The high school graduation, where I recited a speech and you sat in the bleachers intoxicated, and the week you disappeared without notice, were finally forgiven, but never forgotten. Thanks to the home that I always took for granted, I am finally able to breathe and live worry free. We eat home-cooked meals together like a real family should. There's someone to share the ups and downs of life with and to have someone who reciprocates with sage advice instead of brushing me off, knowing I'll figure things out for myself eventually. My new home is a place with structure, expectations, and morals. Before, using the word home at all was a joke, but now I can sincerely say I have a home. A humble home with two bedrooms and two bathrooms that is far from the gated community of Tortoise Island that you loved to brag about. There's no doubt your lackluster parenting changed me for the better, and on some strange level, I thank you for that. At the same time, I can't help but wonder what life would have been like if I lived a stable life from the start. My maturity stripped you of all your aesthetics, and I can see the real you – a woman conning her way through life all because of an addiction. No, we don't share a home anymore, which made it easier for me to give you an ultimatum: sober up or don't attend my college graduation. You made your choice.

Yes, you are the adult and I'm  
the child but you  
always played the child so  
well.