

Lost and Found

I liked being a mess. The desk that should have been clear so I could do my homework was always besieged with bowls of cereal and spoiled milk, old magazines, and Post-it notes I had forgotten to remember. My floor was a vacuum in itself, eating anything entering my room. It consumed sweaters, stuffed animals, socks, shoes. When I occasionally did laundry, I would dig up clothes I couldn't even recall purchasing. My shelves overflowed with containers of little odds and ends: hair bands, chapstick, matches, loose mints, coins, earring backings. I couldn't always see these things, but I knew that they were safe, nestled somewhere on a shelf. Like old friends in a phone book, I figured that someday I would find all the loose strings and tie them together.

One lonely day in August when all of my friends had yet to return from camp in Maine, visiting family in Florida, or some community-service trip in Mexico, something inside me began to itch. I tried taking a shower, scrubbing myself with every bodywash and bar of soap I could find. I brushed my hair and my teeth, but didn't feel any cleaner. I checked my e-mail, which was empty. I checked the DVR to see if any new shows had been recorded, but I had already seen everything.

I went downstairs and found my brother playing video games, my mom on the phone, and my dad in his office – everyone in their right place. I told my mom that something didn't feel right, and she suggested that for once I should clean my room. The thought itself made me nauseous. I went upstairs to sulk, feeling so overwhelmed that I might as well have been floundering without a boat in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

When I opened the door to my bedroom, everything was in its usual cluttered arrangement. A plate of half-eaten pancakes sat on my desk, soggy with syrup from the morning. My bikini hung lifelessly from my doorknob, dripping pool water. My heavy covers lay crumpled and cold across my bed, molded by the twists and turns of the previous night. Piles of dirty clothes sat unsorted, collecting dust.

I stood in the middle of the cluttered room, breathing in the filthy air that I had become so used to. In the silence of that moment, I began to hear the clock ticking. I became aware of the moldy smell. I noticed that a spider had spun a shimmering line from my lamp to the top of my mirror. I shivered in disgust. I remembered that winter how my stuffed animal, Vanilla, had fallen behind my dresser and I hadn't

noticed until I caught the repulsive scent of her fur burning against the heater, until it was too late and she was permanently covered in brown spots.

I suddenly felt sympathy for everything in my room that I had buried, never to be seen again. Lost items I had blocked out for years made their way back into my consciousness: my favorite yellow tank top, the picture of my mom and me on that boat in Jamaica, my baseball card collection.

I had an urge to dive under my bed and uncover everything lurking in the murky depths of dust, and to climb up into the highest corners of my closet and rescue items that had been mingling with the spiders. The innocent piles were growing higher and higher until they were looming monsters before my eyes. They were threatening to swallow me whole. I had to get rid of them. And so I started to clean.

In a box buried under old textbooks, I found a letter that my Poppy had written me at camp. I hadn't thought of him since his funeral. I suddenly remembered the thrill of running naked through cold sprinklers with my cousins, the spicy smell of barbecue mixing with the salty air at his beach house, and the distinct feel of his soft sweater rubbing warmly against my cheek each time he enveloped me in a hug. I remembered my dad rocking me to sleep the night Poppy died, and how the tears wouldn't stop.

I sat with his picture, blocking out the rest of the mess around me. I was in the middle of a storm, but I sat there and studied him until I had memorized every line in his face. Tears began to roll down my cheeks again, and the relief was like the sound of heavy rain pounding on a roof at the end of a drought.

In the drawer next to my bed, I found a friendship bracelet my childhood best friend, Aubrey, had given to me before she moved to California. I traced the green and purple pattern with my thumb, realizing that I hadn't spoken to her in years. The next day I called her, and we talked all night, laughing about memories like dressing up as the Spice Girls for Halloween. She reminded me of the time we built a family of snowmen in my backyard and had a funeral for them when they'd melted. I had lost so many precious childhood memories over time, letting them slip away into the tide like grains of sand. It was the kind of conversation you never want to end because for each moment we talked, it felt like a bucket collecting droplets of water from a leak.

Under my bed I even found that picture of my mom and me in Jamaica. I had forgotten how turquoise the water had looked from our ship, but what really caught my attention, though, was my image. I had buck teeth, short hair, and pimples covering my face. I stared at that girl, barely able to recognize this person who had drowned in the mess of my room so many years before. I decided to completely reorganize and revamp my room so that all the books, belts, and baskets were in their right place. It was like finding the missing pieces of the puzzle.

The finishing touch was framing that photo and hanging it high up on my wall. After all, it was me I had been searching for.