

● Mommy, I'm Home!

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A perfectly sane, financially stable 42-year-old male does the very thing he has avoided for the past twenty-one years of his life—**spend time with Mom and Dad.** But this was no simple “visit.” No, this was an *experiment*. This was complete and total immersion. Thirty days. With the folks. Just like the old days. Would he survive? Regress? Learn to quilt? Or lose a tiny bit of his mind?



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I'M STANDING WITH my face pressed against the screen door to get a good look inside. This isn't the house I grew up in. Not a home I've ever lived in, actually. But it's a near replica of my parents' last house—the one I moved out of twenty-one years ago. Still, no matter where my parents live, no matter which street or town, I know where everything is. I know that the stools at the kitchen counter have been re-covered in quaint fabric. I know that if something pungent was used while cooking—onion or garlic powder, say—it has been masked with spring-scented aerosol air freshener. I know that in the living room, my mom's crafts peek out from behind houseplants → →

and sit on top of end tables: miniature handmade kittens smiling contentedly, tiny people dressed as woodsmen and villagers eagerly waving hello, a big, very realistic bear sitting next to the wood-burning stove without any visible agenda.

Since the day I moved out, I have visited my parents only on holidays and during the summer, but for no longer than three days at a time. When I do visit, we spend a good portion of those three days enjoying one another's company, but then my parents will, for example, start bickering with each other about some chore left undone; my mom or dad will tell me about how my life is ultimately easier than theirs, because at my age they had kids, which forced them to make sacrifices I could never understand; my mom will remind me how closely they had to watch the household budget (my dad worked for more than forty years as everything from a commercial fisherman to a real estate broker to a mail carrier); or she will casually say some fun nugget about how male writers get published more frequently than female ones; my dad will get philosophical about Sean Hannity and how I should really reconsider what I think of him. And through all this, I'll sit at the kitchen table silently, until the third day, when I just get in my car, drive forty-five minutes to Chico, then three hours to the San Francisco airport, then sit for 2,554 miles on an airplane and take a thirty-five-minute cab ride back to my apartment in downtown New York.

But recently I've found myself thinking more and more about my parents as I go about my life in New York. Sure, I feel guilty that I don't call them every week, and of course I worry about their health as they get older, and I wonder how I'm going to help care for them from the other side of the country. But it's more about me, really, about my being 42 years old without a wife or kids and thinking how weird it is that the two people who are more invested in my life than anyone else on the planet are people whom I haven't spent significant time with for the past twenty years. I understand why some people need to get clear of their parents, how some relationships are too poisoned to ever work. But ours isn't one of those. When it matters, my parents and my older sister, Trish, have never given me anything but love and support and everything else that a good family is supposed to give, and in return I've given them mostly neglect. I'm not sure what started me thinking about all this. Maybe it's something that hits everyone around this time in their lives. I don't know. But when I called my parents and said I wanted to come and stay for thirty days instead of three, they just said of course.

They didn't even hesitate. They're opening their door to me...a door that at present,

as I stand on their front step ready to begin my thirty-day stay, is locked. But they'll open it eventually.

Staring through the screen door, I issue a congenial "Anybody home?"

My dad comes from the kitchen, walking toward me with a hand on his back, which has been increasingly bothering him for the past ten years. He's 70 years old and has broader shoulders and bigger arms than I ever will. He unlatches the little hook on the screen door, then moves the cat's barstool out of the way so there's room for me to walk in. The stool is by the door so that Pippi, the cat, can look out without getting out, even though my parents are fast to praise her for not having any instinct to strike out on her own to kill birds or chase squirrels. *She's great, she wouldn't harm a fly, she's afraid of her own shadow half the time.* Pippi came into the picture long after I had left home and quickly became a full-fledged member of the family. She's not a member of the original family, of course, not the actual, real family.

Mom comes into the living room wearing a big smile and a sweater with a handmade pin on it—a little something she designed to jazz up the sweater. I give her a hug. She squeezes me tightly, then immediately asks if I have eaten and do I want anything to eat. Dad asks if I drove up highway 70 or if I came in on 99. Then he asks if I can hear it.

"Hear what?"

"The stupid-ass neighbor's dog barks at any goddamn thing any time of the day or night," my dad says. "But numb-nuts over there says he needs the dog. Says he needs it for protection. Maybe he should quit hiring prison parolees to work for him, and then he wouldn't need any protection."

Mom ignores Dad and follows Pippi into the kitchen, quietly asking her what she wants in a melodic whisper: "Do you want a snack? No? Well, what, girl? Well, what? What do you want?" Someone is always asking Pippi what she wants. Pippi never answers.

To be fair to Dad, the neighbor's dog is a cagey animal. But Dad is always talking about what is wrong with this town or this country. He blurts out commentaries, rough and urgently. His diatribes kind of sound like old-school British heavy-metal lyrics to me. As Dad talks, I rearrange his sentences into meter in my head.

Parölees

These scumbags

They get out of jail

Come to town up here.

(Mom's backing vocal: *Oh, why focus on the negative?*)

They find some woman with seven kids

Get welfare and all the benefits.

I'm getting so damn sick of it.

I really am. (Repeat x3, then guitar solo.)

AFTER A FEW DAYS, I'm fighting the urge to leave. But I've figured out a way to simply ignore it: I call what I have here a system. I'm asleep by midnight and up around eight or nine each morning. When I wake up, I uncap the release valve on my air mattress and sit next to it while it deflates. The bed is surprisingly comfortable, and there's something about this inflation-deflation process that excites me at age 42, makes me feel like a wise, train-hopping hobo. When the bed is fully deflated, I move it out of the living room and back into my mom's craft room, which will soon be occupied by miniature crowds of Santas made of cinnamon sticks. If my parents get up before me, they quietly read the paper in their bedroom. Sometimes they just stay in bed, eyes wide open, until I've risen. I keep telling them to come out and have breakfast and not worry about waking me, but they don't.

I have oatmeal every morning—I like it with I Can't Believe It's Not Butter! and a little maple syrup. I was ready to hate the fake butter, but it tastes better than butter, and I honestly Can't Believe It's Not. It's so good it should have been called Goddammit, Are You Seriously Going to Look Me in the Fucking Eye and Tell Me This Isn't Butter? I eat my breakfast sitting at the counter in the kitchen while flipping through *Reader's Digest*, which, it occurs to me, my parents have subscribed to since at least 1979.

▶ **A 6'1" Dan Kennedy with Mom and Dad in their home in Paradise, California.**



After breakfast, I'll see if there's anything going on around the house. Mom and Dad are up to something almost all the time. Sometimes the tasks on their to-do lists are intimidating, like sanding down and refinishing the entire deck. Sometimes the tasks are smaller: hose the leaves out of the fishing boat. The easiest task is the one in which I'm only required to stand silently in the driveway while my dad shakes his head in painful disbelief because the garage isn't as organized as he'd like it to be. This particular task has been occurring regularly since about 1980.

At around five, we start thinking about what we'll make for dinner at six. I set the table with an extra fork and napkin because Pippi usually wants a taste of whatever human food everyone is having. Then, later, she'll eat some cat food. Then, after that, some human ice cream. She's smart. She's very intelligent. She almost seems to communicate with humans, I'm told.

After dinner, I work out with my mom at the health club. I've been trying to do that a few times a week, but I haven't been disciplined about it. Mom works out on the elliptical for at least a half hour longer than I do, so we have to take separate cars. When I head back home, I grab my bed, move it back to the living room, unroll it, and quietly wait for it to inflate. Sometimes when Mom and Dad watch me set up the bed, they get a little quiet. I wonder if they're secretly terrified that there is no "writing assignment" and that this is just my creative way of moving in with them indefinitely in the middle of a recession.

"GOT YOUR seat belt on?" Mom asks.

I begrudgingly put it on for the five-minute car ride in which we'll never be pushing more than 35 mph. I could sit on the hood of this thing all the way into town and I'd be fine. Mom keeps her mini SUV in impeccable condition. She doesn't drive it so much as she pilots it, performing this sort of preflight checklist when she gets in: Seat belts on, okay; mirrors adjusted, yep; sticky notes for errands and shopping stuck on the dash, check.

We arrive at Kmart, the same Kmart where, as a high schooler in 1982, I would play Donkey Kong on the Atari 2600 demo unit. My mom's got sales around town pretty dialed, and she's holding the yellow sticky note that reads *Fancy Feast—Kmart* in her perfect handwriting. I follow her into the pet-food aisle, because Pippi is out of food. Mom and I are trying to find a particular flavor, and it doesn't look like there's any left. Grilled Salmon Feast. I think I find it, but nope, turns out to be Grilled Salmon & Shrimp Feast. I say, It's close enough. I say, You know, it's cat food, it's got salmon in it.

"Pippi won't eat that," she says. "We'll go over to Albertsons and just pay full price."



► The writer on his air mattress, flanked by his folks and a bear that his mother made.

Mom then strolls down a new aisle looking at those flowery mesh scrubby things for the shower. She grabs a few, compares the prices and textures and sizes. She holds each one up, slowly feeling it, squeezing it, making a series of mental calculations.

The timer inside me goes off: *Okay, ready to go, ready to go, wanna go, we can go now.* I stare at her intently, trying to push her forward with my mind.

If it were me, I'd just pick a loofah at random and throw it in the cart. But I know that if I cleared my throat and told her to just pick one, she'd inform me, like she always has a way of doing, that she's saving us money by taking her time and that she doesn't want to end up blowing cash on something she can't use or doesn't like. We've been able to afford nice things because she's taken her time with purchases like these. So I don't say anything. I just stand there waiting for the perfectly textured medium-size well-priced magic scrubby thing to make its presence known.

AT LEAST THREE nights a week, Dad grills salmon out in the backyard. He practically eats as much salmon as Pippi does. But there's a small problem: Meat bees—which look like wasps and have an insatiable lust for protein—keep landing on his salmon. So Dad and I spend a not small amount of our days cleaning, rebaiting, and rehangng the meat-bee traps he's set throughout the backyard. There are about six back there. The front yard doesn't have any traps. The front yard is all goodwill. There are bird feeders in the front yard. Mom has even fashioned faux-wooden faces of old people out of craft supplies and affixed them to the trees in the front yard so that it looks like the trees have pensive, aged human faces. The face on the large pine tree is of an old man who still seems very vital and expressive, despite being part of a tree.

Cleaning out meat-bee traps is pretty simple: Dad pops the lid off the top of a trap and hands the trap to me. I turn it upside down to empty it, shaking out the bodies of the enemy into a pile. I bring the empty trap back over to Dad, and he rebaits it with a piece of salmon skin and then gives the trap back to me so I can hang it up in one of the trees in the backyard. My dad is always on task. Always organizing, fixing, thinking. Oddly genius, his habits. Dad's last job, as a mailman, was perfect for him, because he loves to sort, to stay undeterred by emotion. He will organize walnuts by size, for instance: a jar of halves, a jar of quarters, a jar of slivers and odds.

"They've got these frozen mochaccino things at Raley's," my dad says as he cuts off a piece of salmon skin. "I forget what they're called. Mocha-Java Freezes or something. But they get five bucks a pop for them, and if I can find a good deal on a blender, I can probably make them at home for about fifty cents each."

"Don't we have a blender?" I ask.

"I bought one, but your mother made me take it back. She said it was too loud. But maybe Costco has a quiet one on sale."

And from inside the house, after picking up the signal with her bionic ear, my mom says, "You're not getting another blender and starting all of that again."

"Oh, take a pill," Dad responds.

For as long as I can remember, Dad has always used one of two pharmaceutical-based catchphrases when he gets frustrated with my mother: (1) "Oh, take a pill," and (2) "The woman needs a tranquilizer." Bearing witness all these years to the tiny, thin, metallic ribbon of tension that exists between my parents, I never really wanted to get married, never wanted to submit myself to the

pattern that seems to wear couples down to the point of bickering over blenders.

But then, later that night, my dad walks into the craft room to tell my mom, again, that it's high time they got a new blender. There's a pause. He gets quiet, then says something that I can't hear from the living room. Mom then says something back, something muffled and clipped. I sit listening, trying to determine whether the patterns of conversation are those of an argument. Dad pauses, then says one last line, and they both start laughing hard. Minutes later, when I think it has subsided, Mom says something and the laughter builds right back up again.

"I GUESS thousands of people marched on Washington," my mom tells me as she slices an apple. Every time Mom talks politics (a topic we avoid at all costs), she tries to present something divisive in a supposedly low-key, apolitical manner, like a youth pastor who walks up to 17-year-old kids and says something like, "Have you heard about the coolest teen club in town? A great rock band with a real cool message is playing there tonight. I've got free tickets."

I ask Mom if the people marching on Washington were conservatives opposing health care reform. She says that it wasn't about that, really, that it wasn't a partisan thing. She says there were plenty of people from both political parties marching because they were kind of unhappy with a few things in Washington.

I head to the living room to Google "demonstration DC Obama." The Internet is littered with pictures of angry protesters, many of whom are dressed like eighteenth-century townsfolk. They look nothing like what my mom described. Because she's framing the protest in her own undeniably rosy way, I'm getting the distinct feeling that she's ignoring my politics and trying to get me to see things the way she does.

Then again, every time I've hashed out any political issue with her, I've secretly hoped that I would win the argument—and somehow change her. Like she'd wake up one morning and say, "How could I have been so wrong about privatized health care all these years?" Then she'd dive into a debate about the merits of *Rubber Soul* versus *Revolver* and ask if my gay friend Craig could meet us for lunch.

DAD AND I went to Costco today. He loves the big warehouse retailers, and whenever he's inside one, he's like a kid, amazed at the abundance of things on sale. He showed me that they have phones available in packs of six. He showed me the huge stacks of white athletic shoes that cost next to nothing. That said, we are probably the only people in Costco waiting in line to buy a single three-pound bag of walnuts.

TODAY MY MOM gave me a tip on how to incorporate low-fat yogurt into my diet. Then my dad started ripping on the nation's financial crisis. Then they both held a one-way conversation with Pippi to figure out what she wanted for lunch. On certain days like this one, I need to get out, get some fresh air, and talk to people I'm not directly related to. So I call up Paul and Brent, two friends I've had since eighth grade and the only friends of mine who still live here. They have sons who play football, and they invited me to come to the field to watch the kids practice. Paul tells me to bring a lawn chair, so I pick up a blue canvas chair from Kmart for a pretty good price.

I meet up with Paul and Brent in the parking lot of our old high school, and we drag our chairs over to the sideline, right at the edge of the field, to watch the kids run drills. Paul calls out to his son, reminds him to take a break and stay hydrated. Brent points out that his son keeps getting possession of the ball. Two little players crash into each other right next to us at the edge of the field; a violent-sounding crack erupts of heavy plastic helmets and shoulder pads. One of the kids gets up and runs back to line up for another drill. The other takes a minute getting up, and I'm relieved when he finally does. Another boy catches a long pass, and everyone sitting in lawn chairs starts cheering. Watching Paul and Brent with their sons, seeing the parents clapping excitedly for their kids from their lawn chairs, I feel, for the first time in my life, that maybe I've been missing out on something all these years. A simple fact hits me hard: *I am the father of no one.*

As the boys prepare the next play, Paul and Brent talk about these little stolen moments that occur before their kids wake up or after they go to sleep, about how, if Brent and his wife can get them to bed early enough, they can have some time to hang out, just the two of them. Paul says that sometimes he tries to get up an hour earlier than everyone so that he can have a quiet morning. I am quick to chime in that I relate to them, that I know exactly how they feel, even though it's about my 69-year-old mother and 70-year-old father.

IT'S MY LAST night here, and my sister came over to have dinner with us and commemorate the occasion. She's six years older than I am, and although she lives a two-hour drive away from our parents, she still makes it up here to see them every couple of weekends. As we set the table, I notice her staring at me while I zip around the kitchen helping Mom. I tell Trish she looks too thin and needs to be eating more. She says I sound like her mother. Throughout dinner, she talks about her job while Mom listens attentively and Dad pets Pippi, who is now sitting under his chair.



After dinner and dessert are done, after the dishes are put into the dishwasher, after the air freshener is sprayed, and after Mom puts a dollop of ice cream in a bowl for Pippi, my sister heads out. It's weird seeing her drive off at the end of the night. I'm usually in a rental car pulling out right behind her. But tonight I'm standing in the driveway with Mom and Dad, and we're doing that prolonged good-bye that families do. We wait for my sister to get into the front seat, get everything ready, start the car, and drive off so that as she goes by, she can see us waving. And we don't stop until the car is far enough so that we're sure our waves are no longer noticed or needed.

There's nothing left to clean up from dinner. Dad says good night and heads down the hall. I turn the living room lights down and start setting up my bed. Mom follows Dad, with Pippi trailing closely behind her.

As I watch the bed inflate, I sit there thinking about how I'll be the next one driving off. There's a little fact in the back of my head that I've been trying to ignore whenever it has crept up over the last month: That we're all getting older, and this is probably the last chance I'll have to spend this much time at once with my parents again.

Tomorrow it'll be my turn to drive off, and this town will be in the rearview mirror, and this state will be behind the plane all night long. I know that after a few days back in my apartment, I'll slowly forget what it feels like to live at home with my parents. I know that I'll stop thinking about how my dad's meat-bee traps are holding up. I know that I won't worry about whether Mom and Dad are bickering or happy, because I know that I won't remember to. I know that I'll start getting busy and somehow convinced that my life is as it should be, simply because it's something different from what it used to be when I was growing up. And I know that soon I'll be telling myself that I should visit my parents more often. I never call. ❧

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