

2015 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Essay Category

Honorable Mention: “The House That Build Me,” by Kerin Tabor

“We just can’t do it anymore,” my parents said, with pitifully sad looks in their eyes. “Don’t we have other options? We could sell things? I’ll save money, I promise!” These things were said and asked by my sister and I over and over again. “No.” was also the response we heard over and over again.

Uneasiness swirled in my stomach and my head was dizzy. It felt like when I was younger and I would come downstairs in the middle of the night, my throat more dry than my Grandma Charolotte’s chocolate chip cookies. I would always think that I had taken the last step when I hadn’t. Every time I would have a mini heart attack where my heart was suddenly in my stomach, and I thought that this was the end. I got this feeling in my gut like I knew what was coming but it was too late for me to do anything to stop it. That was what this feels like. It’s a terrible thing to know that something dreadful is about to happen and all you can do is sit back and let it happen.

I wanted to be angry at my parents for my life being uprooted. Dad had been bringing in money with his boss, Dr. Banner, when they went to do extra autopsies together. Unfortunately Dad could only do the job when his boss was able. Dr. Banner was diagnosed with lymphoma-a brain cancer-and retired immediately. Over time it showed in the amount of food we got, how often we ate out, and our regular expenses. The first thing I noticed was the off-brand foods they would bring home from the store. I also remember the look on their face when I went out somewhere with my friends and needed money. How selfish would I be to get angry because of a man having cancer? So, I didn’t get angry. I was quiet, supportive, and respectful because that’s what they needed me to be.

It was Monica, my sister, who took it the hardest. She had always been the one to react with no emotion hidden. I, on the other hand, always consider how my reaction might make others feel. I remember looking at my dad, tears in his eyes, shame across his face, knowing that he couldn’t keep our childhood house for us. In that moment, I knew. If I showed one ounce of sadness, it would be the most selfish thing I could do to him.

Later that night, I lay awake in bed, processing the life-changing news I recieved that day. I made a promise. I told myself that I was only allowed one day to grieve over the loss of the memories I made here, and it had to be on my own, with no one there to hug me or make me feel guilty for my tears. I didn’t know until much later that that day would be the last time I was in that house.

-1 year later-

It was an empty house now, with empty rooms and empty walls. Every memory I had stored here was now stored in packed up boxes, waiting to be taken to our new house, wherever that was. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, holding back tears. I had never realized until then that the house had always smelled like oranges. Through every season, every holiday, that had been our house’s scent. It wasn’t until a year later that I realized that that is the reason why I would always feel comforted if I smell that citrusy scent whenever I was sick or sad.

I walk around each room, making sure to take in every detail. I see my first room of my very own, where I'd write in my journal or play dress up. I remember when my parents let me pick out the first color in my room. I decided on a vibrant green on one half and a deep pink on the other.

My dad, being the kind man he is, tried to persuade me away from those colors in the gentlest way by saying, "That's gonna be ugly."

I, being a sassy seven-year-old, told him, "I don't care whatcha think, Thomas. Now get to paintin.'" Yes, I realize I sound like a hick, but somewhere along the way I lost my accent. Two days later, when he was nearly done, I decided he was right about the colors and chose to go with a nice yellow color, and the process started all over again. I swear, with how many times we painted that room, it seemed significantly smaller when I left it.

I go past the crack in the wall, where I had thrown my fake microphone because I was frustrated I couldn't sing as well as Hannah Montana. *Click*, I flip the light switch off, saying farewell to the future possibilities that room could've brought.

I descend the stairs that I walked down every Christmas morning since I was born. *Click*, goes the light on another memory. I stand in the kitchen where my dad used to cook us scrambled eggs in the morning before school and put our hair in these terrible slicked back ponytails.

As I near the door, I turn around for one last look at the house that built me. I think about all of the lessons I've learned here, all the opinions I've formed, and memories I've made here. I realize how much this house has molded and shaped the person I am today.

I open the door and the light floods in. I thank God not only for this home my family and I built together, but for this new chapter of my life. I shut off the last light, making the house go dark. *Click*.

JUDGE'S COMMENTS

There's a pleasing contrast in tone in the two halves of this essay. The first half would benefit from more "showing," helping us to experience what it was like as your family's fortunes faded. In the second half, the images are strong. Write about them all in the present tense.

Catherine Frerichs is retired after many years of teaching writing, literature, and other humanities courses at Glen Oaks Community College, Albion College, and, most recently, Grand Valley State University. She is the author of Desires of the Heart: A Daughter Remembers Her Missionary Parents (Cold River Studio, 2010), in which she uses her parents' letters, journals, and other research to write about her parents' 40 years of working in Papua New Guinea and the costs to their children. Currently, she is working on a book that explores her relationship with her three Sudanese children whom she foster-parented for seven years and who have remained her children.