

## Empty Chairs by Emma Goldberg

The little dumpling shop on Elm Street had shut down years ago, the two old Chinese men had taken their sizzling pork and miniature painted Buddha figurines and moved out to another generic Connecticut town. But they'd left behind their wooden sign, most of the letters faded so it just read, "Dump" in a chipped rust red.

I liked to tell the cab driver to drop me just outside the dumpling shop so I could walk for a block or two before I reached home, pulling out my iPod earbuds and listening to the screech of cars and the jingling of store windows and the squelching of my suitcase in the snow. As I walked, I looked for the little landmarks I remembered — the canary lamp in Mrs. Feldstein's front window, the mound of cement where Jake Emerson fell off his scooter and chipped his front tooth in 2005.

Several weeks ago, my mother had tried to convince me we should take a trip somewhere this Christmas, as a family. "We could go to Montauk," she tried, "Or maybe Vermont. Just get away for a bit." But I was only half listening, walking to class and thinking of schoolwork and school dances and a maybe-dinner-maybe-date deal I had later that night so I said no, told her I'd rather stay home and see friends over break. Now, walking toward my driveway, I was glad we were staying in Cheshire. I liked the comfort and predictability of it all, the quiet. I pictured mom in the laundry room sorting whites from colored, and dad in the kitchen making her the Earl Grey tea she likes.

But when I got inside the downstairs lights were off. In the kitchen there was a plate fixed up for me that had gone cold. My mother was upstairs reading in bed, but she tossed aside Malcolm Gladwell and sprung up as soon as I came up the steps.

“Jessie,” she cried, kissing me on the forehead.

Then there was this script we had, certain phrases we used out of habit, the kinds that jumble together easily and probably don’t even need to be said. “I missed you” and “I’m so glad you’re home.” They were carry-on words, not the real check-in kind of baggage, the type that don’t carry any real weight so you stow them away in close reach.

“Where’s dad?”

“He’s away for the weekend,” mom said, already starting to grab my scarf and coat, brushing her fingers over the wool and searching for stains. “He was sorry he couldn’t be here right when you got home but he’ll be back soon, he said he might call tonight. Now let me get you some food, you must be starved.”

“I’m actually not —”

Before I could finish she began rattling off the list of items she’d prepared. Chicken — the kind I like, with the apricots, brussel sprouts, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, fruit salad — no citrus, and with fresh berries from the garden — and more but I assured her I was tired and that I’d microwave it all the next day for lunch. Her face fell in a way that made my stomach flop, but she forced a small smile and gave me a kiss goodnight as I headed off to bed.

“I know it’s a little cold,” mom said, “Do you need me to grab you an extra blanket from the linen closet?”

“I’ve got it mom, I’m fine.” Turning for the linen closet, I passed the old guest bedroom that my parents had fixed up as a nursery. It was still untouched and dusty two years since it happened, the thing we don’t like to talk about. The wooden crib sat empty and a mobile with planets and stars hung in the still air. The worst were the walls, painted a blinding shade of dandelion. I remembered the hours my mom had spent pouring over paint samples, waffling between sunshine yellow and paint the town pink. She finally decided she wanted the perkier color they had. Now the bright walls seemed to mock us. The whole room was a freeze frame of a moment I wanted to tuck away. I’d grown accustomed to averting my eyes and hurrying past it down the hallway but every so often I couldn’t help staring at those damned walls. They had massive windows overlooking our yard but in the darkness I couldn’t see outside, all I saw was my own reflection.

Later that night as I brushed my teeth, I peered over the banister and watched my mother clean up the kitchen. She stood in the dim orange light scraping the uneaten food in the trash, carefully wrapping in tin foil the pastries she’d baked for me. She was draped in a fleece blanket and her slippers were so tattered that her toes poked through the ends. In the big kitchen with all the empty chairs she suddenly looked remarkably small, her thin frame shivering in the midst of all that dead air. But I didn’t like thinking about it all and suddenly I wanted nothing more than sleep.

The next morning my dad was back and I asked if we were all doing the ritual family diner trip that we always take morning I return home from school. But mom was busy, so my father and I drove alone to the local diner, where I soaked my waffles in too much syrup and

nestled into the booth close enough so I could smell my dad's familiar scent of spearmint gum and aftershave.

"So, how's Andover?" At fifty-five my dad still hadn't really learned to wait to speak until after he'd finished chewing, so as he peppered me with questions little bits of waffle sprang out of his mouth and onto the table.

"It's good! I mean, it's school. It's fine. I like my classes though."

"Yeah? You still have that nice algebra teacher, uh what's her name —"

"That was last year, dad. This year's geometry. How's everything at home?"

"Oh fine, fine, everything's great."

"Mom made me so much freaking food last night when I got in," I giggled. Teasing my mother is one of my family's all-time favorite activities. It's our hobby, our passion, and at the rate we practice it's almost an Olympic sport. We tease her for the time she spends poring over cookbooks even when no one's hungry, for the small things that bother her like unmade beds and coffee-stained t-shirts. "Dad, she made me sweet potatoes *and* regular potatoes. And like, enough food to feed all of the state of Connecticut and maybe some of New Jersey too." My dad forced a small laugh. His eyes stayed flat though, and he didn't add in any of his usual quips — "your mother really does starve us," he likes to say — so I dropped it. "So what have you and mom been up to lately? Anything fun?"

"No," dad shook his head. "No not really. We haven't really had the time."

The rest of the week passed quickly in heaps of laundry and long strings of questions about my life at school, my friends, my boyfriends or lack thereof. Dad and mom kind of avoided each other, inventing exit excuses when the three of us ended up in a room together

and segmenting my time between the two of them in arrangements that seemed pre-meditated. The occasional family moments we had seemed orchestrated on my behalf — this one evening my mom suggested we all play Uno, and the night my dad drove the three of us to the local ice cream shop. I asked my mother about it one afternoon, when we were in the basement sorting through old storage boxes.

“Dad seems pretty busy lately.” I began unpacking a box filled entirely with teacups, delicate china ones my mom refuses to give away, inherited from a distant relative.

“Yeah hon, he’s got a lot on his plate lately. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t want to spend time with you, you know that right?”

“Yeah I know, I know that.” I blew the dust off a small cup covered in images of little Victorian women. “But do you ever get to spend time with him?”

My mom sighed. “Things have been different without you around Jess. It’s been... hard. The house is too empty.” She studied me, her eyes trained on mine. There was more she could have said but she didn’t need to vocalize it. I knew that when I was at school there was no real reason to play family card games, no excuse to drive to the local diner and ask for a booth for three, no justification for cooking large meals. She added: “And you know the past two years haven’t been easy for any of us.”

I thought about the dandelion yellow walls upstairs and I nodded. I picked up another carton, this one full of the stuffed animals I’d kept on my bed when I was younger.

“Are you ever gonna give any of this crap away mom?”

She looked up at me sort of sadly. “It’s one of those things I’ve been putting off for way too long. But you get attached you know? I’m just used to having all of it around.”

