

# What Matters

by “Kevin”

I’m 24, and I haven’t lived with either of my parents for almost six years.

My parents still haven’t officially divorced, and I’m not sure they ever will. They don’t live together, and what they decide about that doesn’t seem to matter so much to me now. When I was growing up, I was scared to death of their getting a divorce, but now I’m not so sure why. A lot of my friends had divorced parents, and they seemed okay. But maybe that’s just how it looked from the outside.

I have to admit I take some satisfaction out of not having much to do with either of them anymore. We can’t seem to talk about what really happened, and I don’t feel like it’s up to me to make things better or more honest than they are.

What strikes me most in looking back is how my older sister and I would spend so much energy taking the temperature of everything. When the fight was on or, maybe worse, when I thought it was about to start up, I looked out for everything. In a second, teams and school and friends didn’t matter. And what seemed to suck up all my energy were the smallest things. What room was my mom in? Was my dad too close? Did the stupid dinner rolls get burned? Did my dad forget something from the store? Did my mom start to refer to my dad as “your father”?

My parents either didn’t know or didn’t care. They could call the shots, so maybe they didn’t know that for us every minute had its doubts.

I listened for any clue for how life would go. How did my mom sound when she said she needed help with the dishes? Was it a request, or was it a complaint about what life had done to her? How was my dad going to interpret it? What was the look on everybody’s face? How angry did their breathing sound? What was just the right amount of quiet? Was there too much or too little? How close was either of them to going to bed?

And mostly, I think I listened for how things were touched. How hard the salt was put down after somebody used it. The way the dog’s food can was slapped against her bowl to get the food out. Was the extra banging just my imagination, or was the world about to explode? I listened for the way the doors sounded when they were closed. My mom and dad loved to fight with slamming doors, sometimes starting with just a little extra push and then building from there.

And when this was going on, all I could think about was how ashamed and scared I felt and whether there was some way I could get them to stop.

I don’t remember growing more able to deal with it as I got older. I stayed the same small foolish boy who once tried to hide under his sister’s bed. A counselor used to tell me I shouldn’t feel responsible for what they did. I know that’s right, but even now those still seem like just so many words.

Partly to escape, I think, I read all the time, but it grew hard to think in school or even to want to do well. Once my dad yelled at my mom that it was a miracle I ever learned anything with the way she was acting. It sounds funny, but for a while I became guilty that I ever made good grades. My grades had given my dad one more thing to throw into a fight.

My sister has more problems than I do. But I still find it hard to think about things that once were important. If things go well, I'll finally graduate from college, but it's taken almost two extra years, I did poorly and had to leave my first school, and I really don't see what I'll do with what I've studied.

I don't want to make excuses, but my life has become a lot like what happened during those fights. I think less and less about the dreams I used to have, while I can't seem to stop thinking about what's wrong with everything.

Growing up like we did isn't about big dreams. It's about the sounds doors make when they close.