

Take a moment to reflect on the word “home”. What does it mean to you?

The sun is shining overhead, illuminating the streets below. The leaves blow with the wind, showing the rough trunks of trees. With the windows open, the laughter of children spills into the building, finding its way into every corner. These children are on bikes and scooters, never stopped by the occasional screech of the wheels. They laugh as they run, they laugh as they fall, and they laugh as they get back up. They chase each other, saying tag your it. The school bus doors open at the end of the street, creaking as more children skip off home. Their bags are quickly discarded for the contagious happiness of their friends, where they play until their parents get home.

The gas exhaust is shut down as they pull into the driveway, the backlights shutting down. They step out of their car, carrying their bags with a quiet jiggle jangle. They pass the children running along the sidewalks, following the smell of a home cooked meal awaiting them inside. Next door, an elderly couple walks out of their front door, locking the door with their keys behind them. They hold hands, smiling at the youth passing them, as they get into their children's, who is now an adult, car.

Home is a place everyone can grow and feel safe in, regardless of house value. Then, why is it that most can't afford a house? In this market, most people can only dream of owning a house, something our parent's generation never had to think twice about. It doesn't matter what your definition of a home is.

This isn't right.

Everyone deserves to have a house to fill with memories, same as I did. I am extremely grateful to have a house to call my own. Even though this structure I live in may not be what I deem my home, it has still kept me safe all these years, and it scares me that I might not be able to afford to buy one in the future.

Home isn't defined by four walls and a roof. It is not defined by having heating or air conditioning, or by having a backyard. I used to believe that it was defined as a place where you make memories with your loved ones. That these memories, whether they are good or bad, shape us into who we are and what we will become in the future.

My home has seen me in my greatest moments. It saw me when I got my first job as a tennis coach at the Oakville Club and when I started my school's tennis team. When I started reading again, slowly falling in love with my imagination once more. It saw me when I pressed create, resulting in an instagram account with over seventy two thousand followers. When I signed the document, officially becoming a WEBTOON Ambassador. When I created my book donation for the Oakville Hospital, wrapping thousands of books by hand to give to the pediatric ward. It saw me when I was selected to be student council prime minister at my school. It has seen offer after offer from universities, and one of the last things it will see is me accepting my dream program, Health Sciences, at either McMaster University or Queen's University.

I don't use the term, last thing, lightly. This home my mom and I have created is the only one I know. I've spent the last eighteen years of my life here, and I keep telling myself

we are moving forward. Yet, it doesn't feel that way when the reason we are moving is because of *him*. The *alcoholic*, the *drunk driver*, the *abuser* who uses only his *words*, the *people pleaser*, the man who I used to call *dad*. All because he didn't pick *us*, and chose to only leave his debt behind.

Leave *me*.

What made my home so special shattered after he left. I felt like everything I'd ever known was a lie. It was easy to believe when I found out about each and every lie. About how our very relationship was a facade, and he only used me to make him look better. It forced me to mourn a person who didn't even exist. Who never existed in the first place, and that tore me and my home apart.

The paint isn't chipped. The floorboards are still in perfect condition. The lightbulbs aren't burned out. The house, physically, is in perfect condition. Yet, every memory that I held dear to my heart has been tainted by his disappearance. No one ever teaches you how to mourn when that person is alive. I know he lives a town away, so close, yet he never reaches out. Instead, he fights to stay out of my life. He is very much alive, yet the person that I had loved had never been alive. It was like they had died in my arms, an animated corpse.

My home is the memories we make in a place, but what happens when the memories that shaped you are tainted? I started spending less and less time at home. I worked more hours, joined more clubs, and went out with friends. I did everything to escape

my home so I could escape the thoughts that would slip into my brain. Until I figured out what a home really was to me.

Home isn't a thing to me, but a person. My home is my mom. She is who helps me make my most wonderful memories, and saves me when I start drowning under the weight of my emotions. I now know that the house you buy isn't about what's inside, but who you fill it with.

She inspired me to keep living. To keep pursuing tennis after I injured my knee, to become a tennis coach. I wouldn't have a job I love, coaching children, or having a tennis team at school that I'm proud to say I created. To follow my passions, whether it be reading and writing, which has led to me creating my own book community with members across the globe. Through it, I've had amazing opportunities to work with publishers like Penguin Random House and Simon & Schuster while making lifelong friends. To speak up for what I believe in and invite SAVIS, a sexual assault prevention organization, to educate my peers about it. Now, not only is my school informed, but we've built such a good relationship with the organization that they'll keep coming back. To face my anxiety and not let it define my actions, allowing me to chase things with all my heart. To follow my dreams and apply to the health sciences, even when the chances of getting selected were slim. Now I stand here, acceptance in hand.

Home is where my loved ones are. That is how we make the memories that truly shape us. Even when the darkness creeps in, they stand with you, ready to weather any

storm. Without them, I would only know what a house is. To know the definition of the word *home* is a blessing in itself.