

# Forces

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## Going Back

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Non-student Winner  
NaNoWriMo Flash  
Fiction Contest  
November 2023

## Going Back

Heidi Shipp

**Kerry walked into the cramped 9-by-12-foot room and smiled. This was her ... then. Her bedroom, her childhood, her cookie-cutter suburban Dallas block.** Sure, the dingy beige carpet was freshly vacuumed and there wasn't the yesteryear detritus of school papers, empty bottles of Wite-Out and CD liner notes scattered around. But her walls were still filled with her '90s angst — taped posters curling on the wall of Faith No More, The Cure, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana. She had always felt like a poser about that one. She had only listened to Kurt Cobain wail once on the radio and bought the poster before even buying the CD. She remembered saving up exactly \$10.81 with tax and listening to it over and over again, the odd babysitting job helping to slowly build her grunge-era collection.

Earlier in the week, her dad called to let her know he was finally clearing out her childhood bedroom. What did she want before he started packing up for donations? He wasn't selling the house, he assured her, just tackling "rough stuff." Rough stuff was what her dad called chores that you put off for later. He was in one of his organizing moods and it couldn't wait until the next time she was in town. She thought it was an excuse for some face time.

As soon as she stepped inside, she forgot about the present day. She forgot about her call center job, about the monumental student debt for a degree she didn't use. Instead, she melted into the nostalgic warm memories of her middle and high school years. Her windows were obscured with a collage of her drawings and Polaroids of friends. The setting sun cast a familiar glow filtered through the keepsakes of her youth.

Dad had kept the room exactly as it was, his memento box he called it. Kerry hadn't made it back to Texas often — every recreational decision hinged on her finances. Ten years out of college and she could barely afford a spontaneous plane ticket home. But he had it ready for her when she could visit, even though she found herself always setting up camp in the living room.

Kerry took in her room. To the right was her old TV sitting awkwardly on her multi-colored dresser, the paint scratched from every time she moved the heavy thing. To the left, her black iron twin bed. Opposite that was a plaid loveseat, its armrests worn from years of her perching on it to look out the window directly above it. People watching was a favorite pastime. Butted up against the couch was her beloved vanity.

Her curved wooden vanity was vintage then so it was probably antique now, she chuckled to herself. On it, a veil of dust covered a mirrored tray with tiny perfume bottles all lined up. Next to the tray was a decoupaged shoebox filled with her favorite CDs. And next to that a tiny Sony CD player. She wondered if it still worked.

Kerry opened up a Dinosaur Jr. CD and popped it into the disc player. She hit the power button and pressed play. Out crooned J Mascis' gravely and pained voice.

**"Oh, there's no goin' back to that  
I'm so numb, can't even react"**

He sang as Kerry made her way to her bookshelf. Here, more Polaroids were taped to the edges of the shelves. Postcards of her so-called art propped up against "The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe" and "How to Make Homemade Soap." Yearbooks from sixth to twelfth grade were

stacked on the lowest shelf. She remembered trading yearbooks and writing long flowery prose of never losing touch, punctuated with the cartoon characters she became known for. After gathering all her friends' signatures senior year, she never once opened them again. She had closed the door on those friendships and those daydreams.

Behind her, her favorite thing about her room — her closet. It was shallow and long, lining the entire back wall. Best friends' scribbled graffiti outlined the closet door frame, bringing back memories of sleepovers where very little sleeping was done — it was truths, dares and secrets shared instead. The Sharpie signatures earned her a month of no phone once they were discovered. Her mom took the phone handle, but left the rest of the phone. So, she would plug in the base anytime her parents left and call her friends, pressing random phone keys — anything to let them know she still existed. By the end she had mastered rudimentary versions of "Hot Cross Buns" and other simple nursery songs using just dial tones. Her friends' parents complained of weird crank calls that they would all giggle about during lunch.

She pulled open the faux wooden accordion doors to her closet. Patchouli incense seemed baked into the few clothes she had never gotten rid of. Her fingers lingered over her forest green velvet baby doll dresses, her long crinkled floral skirts, her favorite baggy overalls from the Gap that she hand-painted. In the back, next to her burgundy Doc Martens, her easel splattered in paint leaned against unframed paintings and sketchbooks.

Kerry breathed in and closed her eyes. No, there was nothing she wanted to keep. She was so far from this girl. This girl who thought she would be an artist and live in an industrial loft in New

York. It was so cliché, it was sad. An artist's life was out of reach. She opened her eyes and turned around to leave. But her bedroom door was gone. Kerry laughed. How lost had she gotten in the past? She looked to her right, where the door was supposed to be. She expected to see her stickered full-length mirror nailed to it. Instead the wall was blank.

**"I ain't telling you a secret**

**I ain't telling you goodbye"**

The room felt like it was shrinking. Kerry pounded on the wall where her bedroom door had been. Nothing made sense.

She noticed a ray of sunlight reflecting on the carpet and up the wall where her fist had just been. She followed it to its source. Kerry stared at the ceiling. What? How? Her mind flipped through scenarios — this is some kind of joke.

There, directly above where she stood, was her bedroom door. As she foolishly reached for it, her reflection reached back. Kerry's mouth formed a small "O" as a long-forgotten sheet of paper fluttered to her feet. She picked it up. It was the lyrics to the song she played now in her girlish handwriting, with her doodles lining the edges. She remembered an art teacher saying they belonged in a comic book. She was so proud she had taped it to her mirror so she could see it every day before school.

**"I'm taking away a lot of stuff**

**I'm telling you it's rough**

**But not goodbye"**

Kerry stared at her reflection again. "This," she gestured around the room, "is me." She spoke to no one but herself. She felt her vision blurring and she reached to lean on the blank wall to steady herself. Instead, the cool touch of her mirror met her hand. The CD skipped and the song repeated.