

## *The Perfect—Not-So-Perfect—Woman\**

HATTIE PERKINS

“Hattie, time to wake up,” my mother called. It was her voice that woke me up every morning before school: a tone that was strong and clear, but always sympathetic. I’d walk downstairs and sit with her on the couch, drinking the rest of her coffee while we watched the *Today* show. She watched as my brother and I caught the bus every morning and was there when we came home.

“How was your day, sweetie?” she’d ask.

“Gooooood.” I’d answer. I’d continue to tell her about recess, playing in the sandbox, and getting glue in my eyes from arts and crafts. Her dark eyes, revealing her Penobscot Indian descent, listened intently. She was smart, she was strong, she was beautiful.

“15 years,” she said. “15 years of my life, I’m leaving behind.” My mother’s voice screamed through the empty rooms of our house, bouncing off the naked walls and piercing back through our ears. We were in the process of packing our things for the big move: a new home, only a town away. Her dark gray eyes glared at us, expressing frustration and sadness. No matter how hard she tried, she was the kind of person who couldn’t hide her emotions, unlike my father who concealed every sentiment. After her rampage, my brother and I quietly finished cleaning.

I remember the nights, lying in my room, trying to sleep over my mother’s screams. The move wasn’t her idea, but it needed to be done. This house was too small for five people, and we, well I, wanted a dog. She had become attached; she’d raised three kids in this house. I didn’t understand that then.

My mother’s voice was heard less now a’ days. She lingered through the days, ghost-like, inward and distant from the world. She spent hours in her room, sleeping her life away. Her dark eyes had become red and swollen. I wanted to comfort her; I wanted to hug her and tell her everything was ok. I wanted to treat her the way she treated me when I was young. I wanted to tell her about high school. I wanted her to know how great and scary it was, but she couldn’t hear me.

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\*(inspired by “My Father’s Voice” by Tom Romano)

It's strange how silence can be more deafening than a blood-curdling scream. The other house was loud, but it acknowledged the problems of the day. This house kept secrets. It hid the empty bottles in the basement, and the pain killers in the cabinets. It hid why my mother slept in my sister's room for four years. It kept us from knowing the distance that had grown between my mother and father. Looking back, maybe it protected us. Maybe we were too young to know the truth. But I knew the truth.

Do you remember looking at your mom and thinking she was Superwoman? Do you remember realizing that she wasn't? For some, it's a sad day when you ask your mom to help you with homework and she has no idea what to do. That's the moment where you touch ground and see that everyone is human.

Storms don't last forever, thank God. When my nine-year-old sister found my mother passed out on the bathroom floor, we knew it was time for an intervention.

Therapy and lots and lots of love helped my mother get through these dark times. She moved out of my father's house and now lives in her dream home: a log cabin in the woods where it's always freezing because she insists on heating the house only with a tiny woodstove. I don't look at her that same way I did when I was young. She's still strong, smart and independent, which she reminds me of every day. But I know that she is sensitive and easily hurt, no matter how much she denies it, and I wouldn't want it any other way.