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The Wrath of Motherhood

Taylor Parks

I have always admired my mother's hands. They were so nimble, yet so strong. She played flute and piano her entire life, which led her to instill a strong sense of rhythm in my family. She was the driving force of our pulsating dynamic. Her hands would move up and down the keys as we sang along to our favorite songs. My sister slowly took after her, devouring book after book, perfecting each piece. Chopin, Schumann and Tchaikovsky filled my childhood with the comfort of sweet melodies. We grew up

seated at the piano bench, crafting our futures around classical cacophony. She pushed us by enrolling us in lessons, instilling a powerful tempo into our everyday lives.

Every now and then we would all end up plopped around the piano craving the music our mother had gifted us. Her hands would float down the keys to Bach early on Sunday mornings, when the light beamed through wooden windowpanes. The music crept through our home and filled each crevice with a tender sense of appreciation.

We were seated at the long and tall dining room table, our feet dangling off our chairs in anticipation of the forthcoming. My mother's fingers were draped over the table, resting calmly on top of one another. She cried often, never holding it back. It was something we were all used to. "Crying lets you feel," she would say.

The previous night's sweat still glazed over my body; I worked nights as an Emergency Medical Technician, and the summer months were busy and hot. My sister sat patiently, very unlike herself. She sat straight, with her head the slightest bit angled in prolepsis. My tall, bubbly stepfather sat with his shoulders drawn in as if he were carrying the weight of every mistake on his back.

Her voice shook as she said, "Thank you everyone for coming. We needed to have a family meeting." A sigh clouded the room. Family meetings weren't anything new to us.

She exhaled and went on. "We finally know why I have been feeling so tired all the time, why I can't go grocery shopping anymore, why I can't do anything when I get home from work, and why I can barely wake up in the mornings." She paused in exhaustion.

"It's not arthritis, or a haywire strain of the flu or pneumonia. I've been diagnosed with progressive multiple sclerosis." I looked to my sister and saw that her eyes were beginning to swell. They'd known for a week.

Puzzles were her specialty; she was always piecing others together. Crafting their futures

with her gentle hands, she would cut and paste and add glitter. The phrase "Your potential is boundless" would echo through the halls of every school she stepped foot in. She took children who gave up on life, themselves and their futures, and instilled a sense of hope in them. She would push them, almost as hard as us, to accomplish their dreams, painting them a future they didn't know was possible, encouraging them to reach a little higher and to further their education. She would pick them up off the streets and move them into college, unearthing their rotten parts and untangling them from their resistance. All the while, she collected their grief and packaged it into potted plants.

The room went silent, like all the air was sucked out in one fell swoop. The deep-red walls of our dining room enclosed us, leaving us with the biggest monster we had yet to face—a monster that was hiding inside of the person who made us.

I sunk into my chair a little deeper, my feet almost able to touch the ground. It took everything in me to not crash to the floor and hide. I stared deep into the beautiful mahogany table that my mother was so proud of and began to see what she loved so much about it.

You could see all the places where we didn't use a placemat. There was a wax ring where I had accidentally left the candles burning too long after dinner, scratches from one too many crafts, and stains from sauces spilt. Yet, the table withstood it all. It was a shield. It had made it through three marriages, two divorces, and many, many family meetings. It was stained with our tears and love. Memo-

ries were encapsulated in each grain: Christmas brunches, Thanksgiving dinners, the time when we all cried about losing our grandmother, the dinners following funerals, hospital visits, and hard conversations.

She reached a hand across the table, the hand that wove me to life, and continued. With her voice cracking every third breath, she explained, “My doctors say that there are ways that we can halt it...with the right dose of exercise, vitamins, infusion treatments and therapies.”



Her hands carved our futures as she pushed us down our paths. She would pick us up each time our biological father let us down. He was the one who skipped out on so much of our lives. He was the one who had left a slit in the hazy, yellow kitchen wallpaper with a carving knife, the one who chose temptation over responsibility.

We would alternate from house to house for approximately four years, packing our belongings, leaving our nest of love and entering a cold dark coop every other week. His roars echoed through the house as doors slammed and dishes crashed to the floor. His hands were rough and foreign, calluses outlining each crevice. His presence dwindled throughout the later years as he prioritized temporary highs. He gave up on us throughout the entirety of our lives, picking us up when he found it necessary and forgetting us later that week. He meant well but he couldn't execute the wrath of fatherhood.

Why wasn't it him? I thought to myself. How was I supposed to watch the one who wove me to life deteriorate as I get stronger each day?

Her hands wrapped around us, engulfing us

once again, wiping the tears and tucking us in, “Tomorrow is a new day.”



Infusion I

She called me from the chair with the milky, white liquid pulsing through her veins. Heat penetrated her body in the form of hugs from heating pads, something she constantly carried with her, as if anything could make her smile any warmer. Our conversation was light-hearted. We chatted about the show she was watching, the newest family drama, and the long drive to her doctors. I always followed up every other question by asking, “Do you feel okay?”

“How are your vitals...did the nurses tell you...can you tell me...are you warm enough...what kind of medication did they give you for your constant and ever-growing pain...does it sting...do you feel dizzy...are you warm enough...do you feel lightheaded...do you feel like you're going to throw up...are you warm enough...are you warm enough...are you warm enough?”

I was used to asking these kinds of questions to every single one of my patients—it was my form of small talk. However, over the past few months the line between my patients and family blurred.

She came home tired and slept for what felt like years. When she finally rose from her hibernation, she was weak and full of hope—although I knew somewhere in there she knew this was going to be a far longer fight than we had anticipated.



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She instilled a sense of gratitude throughout our family, not for fancy gifts or special occasions but for each day. She would ask at each meal, “What are your roses and thorns?” We found solace in knowing that at the end of each day we could return to a nest of love.

Our home was a sanctuary of appreciation and warmth. She planted pain deep in the beds of our family and allowed us to bloom. And bloom is just what we did.

The echoes of our future reflected off each peak that surrounded our home. The path to

our front door was littered with stones—stones she scavenged herself. Finding each and every one and morphing them into a walkway framed by troughs of lavender. The natural antidepressant safeguarded our home from outside invaders. Little did we know the monsters were coming from within.



We sat in silence for what felt like an eternity. Until my sister, a hardheaded, resilient girl, let out a loud yelp followed by a flood of tears. I gazed up from the mahogany table in search of my mother's eyes, but for a moment, a pastel blue haze glazed over and she disappeared. What was left was a world without her, a world that I did not want to be a part of. I blinked through the tears and her blur reappeared.

The world stopped for two moments—just enough for me to catch my breath. Finally, for the first time in years, for the first time since she started showing symptoms, I felt at ease. We finally knew. All the nights spent in constant worry of this unknown illness went to waste when I found out it had been hiding inside her this whole time; a sense of pure doom filled the emptiness it left.

Her eyes filled with sadness like never before. “We cannot let anyone know of this, not even grandma. We cannot let other people worry about this. They will put the wrong kind of energy that we need into our fight.”

She couldn't hold back her tears any longer. She reached for the box of tissues that was placed perfectly in the center of our table. But before she went to take for herself, she handed us each a few tissues. It was unnatural for her to put herself first.



Local artwork filled the walls of our home with an appreciation of the world that surrounded us. The mountains were calling, and the Catskills held all of our secrets. I found solace in rolling fields of wildflowers and teardrop-shaped waterfalls. The day I told her I was raped, we both headed for the purest place we knew—the mountains.

I trudged down through the evergreen forest to a waterfall that sat at the base of our little valley, under the assumption that no one knew of my secret oasis. I peered through the evergreens and heard the murmurs of a distant cry. As I approached the base, I saw my mother hunched over, seated on a rock, shoes off, feet planted in the offspring. We sat feet submerged until our toes pruned.

I had waited almost a year to tell her of the filth I was plagued with. I was scared to let her know of my tainted reputation. I was scared to let her know that I was unable to defend myself—I was hopeless and weak, the inverse of everything she taught me.



“So, does this mean we can get a dog?” my sister jokingly, yet genuinely, asked. Everyone let out a little chuckle behind the tears. “No, but really?” she repeated. My mother had not wanted a dog since Biscuit passed because “there would never be another Biscuit.”

The first boy I ever loved had whiskers and a dark wet nose. You could smell Biscuit's stale, earthy scent before you saw his warm eyes and wagging tail. A rare skin disease left a pungent smell roaming through our house.

His soft red hair was attached to each inch of our home. His eyes held a million years of wisdom and love. Sometimes I swear he was placed with us because someone knew that we needed him. We needed him to teach us that unconditional love was supposed to fill this home and follow us throughout each chapter of our lives.

Surprisingly, my mother crept into the question and answered, “Yes...we can, it will be my service dog.”

The walls of the room crumbled as I stood up to run and hide. In three swift motions, I was in her arms pressed tight against her fragile body. She felt more fragile than ever before, so I held on tighter, in fear that she was going to vanish at any moment.



I wish I could replay the moment a photo was taken. My favorite photo of us was at a Grateful Dead concert. I couldn't have been more than one. I'm engulfed in her arms with a rainbow hat plastered with peace signs and yin and yang symbols. Her smile is contagious. Her eyes twinkled with hope and love for the new chapter that was before her; little did she know of the horrors it would hold.

I have always wondered if my mother knew she was going to get divorced. I assume not, but I wonder if she ever had a sense that she was settling, that there was something better out there for her that she just hadn't quite yet found. She settled for years and years, constantly searching for ways to ease the chaos that flooded her life. With a chronically ill brother who passed, a father who abandoned her, and a husband who was an addict, it was no wonder that her strength

was immeasurable. She slowly unraveled her childhood tales throughout our lives. Calmly explaining her abandonment, she shimmered light only on the pieces that painted a shallow picture of the truth.



I ran and hid, trying to stay invisible for hours, as I would after each family meeting. Two knocks on the wooden door led to my sister's hand guiding me out of my depression. We sat on the edge of the bed in silence. She puckered her lips and engulfed a white cone in flames. Smoke emerged from pursed lips in swirls, filling the room in waves, each ripple ribboning through the air. The sticky, sugar-coated leaves burned until they heated the tips of our fingers. We sat enchanted until my sister disappeared through the thick smoke, leaving me to my lonesome.

My mother waltzed into my doorway, peering in at the devastation she just unintentionally laid. She didn't speak, but I felt her stare from behind me. She floated over and engulfed me with love and atonement. “I am going to be just fine. You cannot worry about me,” she said, as she squeezed me a little tighter.

She sat beside me and reached for my hand. Her's were cold; they were always cold. She was wearing her engagement ring, which was unusual for her. She only wore the vintage ornament when she needed something a little extra that day. However, it hung off her hand a little differently this time. It had been resized a few times in the past months because her hands had been shrinking. They were frail, no longer the strong fingers that would pound the keys early on Sunday mornings. She hasn't played in years; her hands have not been cooperating with her.