

Learning to Fly

By Kristen Epling

Matewan High School, Mingo County

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Honorable Mention Recipient

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It's raining. Not a downpour—just a light drizzle, a foggy rain that makes the whole world a bit sad. On days like this, I still think of her, remembering the minute details of her face, her aroma, the way I felt when she held me. Wet, cloudy days are when I feel she's with me the most. I think about how she, my mother, my best friend, changed me, in some ways for the better; in some ways for the worse. Every nuance I picked up from years of closely observing her every move seems to stick with me, her mannerisms becoming my own. I'm not sure whether it was her actions that impacted the core of my being or if it were the questions she left unanswered. However, the mere fact that she was in my life has made me a better person for many reasons. Some, I cannot explain. Others, I do not know yet, but as I grow older, I am fully becoming aware of the impact of her presence.

I clearly remember riding in her old, beat up white Honda, surrounded by the hazy smell of Marlboro Lights, hairspray, and vanilla, a mixture so etched into my sense, I can smell it now. Sound of the early 1990's blast from the radio as my fun-loving mother drums on the steering wheel as though it were her instrument and sings to the road as if it were her audience. Her thick deep red, curly hair sat perched in an untamed ball atop her small head as her large, mischievous brown eyes smiled down at me from under a veil of thick eyelashes. I wanted to be just like her.

However, I was young and naïve, firmly believing that Mom was exactly as I saw her: a princess stuck in a chaotic world to which she never belonged. You see, my mother never quite grew up. The role of adult, with its jobs and payments, responsibilities and aggravations was

something she never understood; I'm not sure she ever really tried. She was never emotionally capable of being a mother and really did not want to be one. Looking back, I realize that she was capable only of being my friend, sharing her mistakes while encouraging me not to repeat them. We had many mature conversations in the Honda. It was here at an early age I learned the secrets of the world.

As I grew older, the childlike veil through which I saw my mother began to disappear. I resented being left at random houses for days without clothes or food, not knowing where my mother was. Why it was so hard for her to take care of us as other mothers took care of their children?

Once, I vividly remember being dragged up Peterfork Hollow. Having no one to keep me, my mother was forced to take me to the center of her addictions. Too young to understand at the time, I nonetheless could sense the urgency, the need in her actions. "Stay in the car," she demanded.

"But, Mom, it's cold, it's dark. I'm really scared!" I pleaded.

"Get out and come on then," she muttered indifferently. Stepping from the car, I looked up at the beautiful array of diamonds sparkling rhythmically in black velvet draped across the heavens. We trudged up a set of old wooden steps into a crowded, dingy trailer smelling strongly of cigarettes and something I could not identify. I plopped on an old flowered couch while she disappeared into a back bedroom. Hours later, I was awakened by a woman who resembled my mother but could not have been her, one who pulled me up by the arm and forced me out the broken door. Something was different, something was cold about her. She yelled at me to get in the car, though my gut instinct told me to stay exactly where I was. I did as I was told, however, and soon realized my mistake. She drove erratically as if she could not see at all,

swerving, hitting ditches, and crossing yellow lines. Terrified and confused, I did not understand her sudden change and rash behavior. Then we simply crashed. Gone were my child's eyes, replaced by those of an adult who decided never to follow my mother's rules or those of any other authority figure ever again. I had to trust my gut instincts.

Although succumbing to her addictions, my mother was a beautiful, caring woman with a heart of gold. She loved her children; even today, I do not doubt that fact, but something bigger controlled her life. I'm not sure she had the strength to stand up and stop it completely, though she tried.

My happiest memories are at Dewey Lake. Mom loved the lake, with its deep blue skies mirrored in the waters below. Here, she was happy, playing games, laughing, splashing, and enjoying being together. Dewey Lake is the place I can remember really feeling like a child, skimming across the water as warm air patted my face and pushed tears out the sides of my eyes. Mom would sit crossed-legged at the very front of the boat, hair up, eyes closed, arms spread, as if she were flying. With her glistening brown skin, auburn curls flying, I always thought she looked like an angel, the definition of freedom; however, I knew then that I never wanted anything to control my life the way substances controlled hers. I wanted to live as I saw her before me. I vowed that my children would always be taken care of first and foremost and that they would love me the way I loved her right then. Looking back, I think I had an epiphany that my mother would not spend many days upon this Earth because no one, other than me, could understand her.

One warm spring day, a few years ago, my mother disappeared. She simply ceased to exist. Her loved ones searched for three long, excruciating months before finding her remains buried carelessly in a shallow grave up one of the many hollows that wind through West

Virginia's mountains. I am puzzled how someone could effortlessly, selfishly take the only person I ever remember loving. Later, I learned that at the time of her death, she had tried to ask forgiveness for things she regretted, one final attempt at heroism that tragically led to her senseless, brutal death.

In the twisted irony of it all, I know my mother was never content being simply human. She wanted to spread her wings and fly into the wind. Somewhere deep in my spirit, I know that's exactly what she's doing. Never perfect, my mother spent years trying to correct her mistakes, to right the wrongs she had selfishly committed. At her best and at her worst, my mother single-handedly made me the person I am today. Her short life was not lived in vain. I have discovered that holding on to secrets about who I am and where I come from is toxic. I know that keeping secrets could kill me, just as keeping secrets killed her. Only by admitting my wrongs and trying to make amends do I gain the strength to survive.