

# "You Were Such a Beautiful Woman..."

by Taylor Nolte

*As with many women who come to our workshop in the jail, Taylor came to her writing with the question, "How did I get here?" Certainly she had been doing her very best, shouldering responsibilities that would have been daunting to most adults. Shouldering way too much for a 17-year-old until, in the blink of an eye, in a moment of bad choice to drive while drinking, her entire life changed. In spite of this serious interruption of her life plan to join the Marines, in a circumstance where many others of her age would have caved in to bitterness, Taylor always presented herself with a calm abiding maturity and acceptance, taking responsibility for her mistakes, and intent on making the best of her "time." (While serving her sentence in prison she is a full-time straight-A college student).*

*In sharing this writing, her one concern was that her anger towards her mother at the time we meet her on the page would be misinterpreted as a lack of love and respect, when in fact it came out of the fearful and desperate heart of a young and very devoted, struggling daughter. Though shy to share this piece, it is her hope that it might comfort others in the same, all too common predicament of living with an addicted parent.*



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I pulled into my driveway and laid my head back on the seat with a sigh. This was the seventh day in a row working at the pizza place. *Sixty hours this week, I thought, more days, more hours, more money. Whatever pays the bills . . .* I realized I had only ten minutes to get ready for night school. Damn, I had to hurry. I walked to the door thinking, I hope Mommy cleaned up. I walked through the sliding doors into the living room, immediately disgusted as usual.

Cigarette smoke filled the air. My mom's bed, the couch, was a mess as she sat there in the same clothes she'd had on for the last three days—her boyfriend's sweat pants and a shirt. She used a kitchen chair in the living room as a table with a filled ashtray, her drink and more junk on it.

On the floor lay more cigarette butts and the half-gallon of vodka, half empty, with her Diet Pepsi next to it. I knew her back-up was in the freezer. What a hot mess. Her drink in her hand was almost done . . . soon she'd refill. I took all this in in an instant as soon as I walked in. Certainly not the mother I used to come home to. That mother had burgundy big 80s hair, green eyes and red lipstick. That mother made me breakfast in bed and put a scoop of ice cream in my hot cocoa. She taught me how to do my make-up and tease my hair. This woman in my living room—her hair was brittle and

frizzy, her lips were bare and chapped, and freckles covered her face.



"Poo-poo head, bring me to the store."

Ugg, I hated when she called me that.

"Wait till I get ready for school and I'll see if I have time." I looked at the clock . . . damn, five minutes left. I poked my head in Grandma's room.

"Hey, Grandma, are you hungry?"

"No thanks, baby girl, I just ate some oatmeal."

"Are you sure? I'm leaving for school soon."

My Grandma was my world. She was an overweight eighty-year-old woman who always wore dresses. Her eyes were hazel and she smelled like Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds. I noticed her hair was growing—I had to cut it soon. She too was changing in front of my eyes, becoming weaker in the knees. She used her walker to get up from her desk and transfer to her hover-round wheelchair. Me and Mommy called it her motorcycle. She started it up and zoomed right past me.

I got dressed for school, still smelling like bread from work. No time to shower . . . damn.

"Okay, I'm ready."

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"Let's go," my mom said.

"Um . . . I don't have time. I can't be late for school. Take Grandma's car."

"I don't like driving that car. Plus, you know I had a drink."

Yeah . . . a drink, I thought. I closed out the rest of the argument. I'd become very good at practicing selective hearing and tuning out the slur in her words.



Coming home from school was no better than coming home from work. As I walked in the door, I heard Mommy screaming at Grandma. Oh Jesus, not again!

"You're a horrible mother . . . you always were! That's why Daddy died. You know, he cheated on you!" my mom yelled viciously at my Grandma.

"Just leave me alone!" Grandma cried back.

I could see her getting upset and hearing my mother talk to her like that stabbed me like a dull knife. I had to break in.

"You're the horrible mother! You're always drunk while I bust my ass for the both of you!"

I had to defend Grandma because I know she didn't start it.

"Grandma, go relax and listen to music."

I turned to my mother, "What are you doing? How dare you speak to Grandma like that! Who do you think you are? Clean this living room . . . it's a fucking mess!"

I knew their fight was about my mother stealing Grandma's money, like always. I opened the freezer and took her vodka and ran to the toilet.

"I hate this shit . . . it's the fucking Devil!" I yelled.

"Taylor don't!"

I poured it out before she got to me. She pushed me.

"That costs money! What do you think you're doing you little bitch!"

"Yeah . . . Grandma's money!"

She would do anything to get her alcohol . . . lie, steal money, or even ask my friends to take her to the liquor store since I refused to enable her. It was so embarrassing.

I had to get out of there. I had to get away. I left to go meet my friends outside. Hanging out with them was my escape. With them I could act my age, have conversations like what we'd do with a million dollars, or what would happen if the world really did come to an end in 2012. I met up with my homies and we played badminton in my yard for a couple of hours. As the night came to an end, we said our goodbyes

and I watched them pull out of my driveway. I sat on a patio chair and smoked a cigarette, drinking the rest of my drink and watching the television flicker through the blinds.

I knew my mother was in there holding her drink in her hand. It was the same as holding a knife in her hand, because she was killing herself with that poison. She was moving less and less from the couch each day. Something in my gut had me frightened. This time, instead of worrying about the bills, or school, or her getting a job, I feared for her life. I'd seen my uncle die from alcoholism. When you drink like she was drinking there was no happy ending. Maybe she didn't help with anything in my life or Grandma's, but she was still my mother, regardless of what this disease had turned her into.

I finished the rest of my drink and debated whether to sleep in my car or pop a DVD in my TV. Guilt and sorrow were pumping through my veins. I hated seeing her in her own filth, looking like hell, drinking around the clock. This was not the life of a happy woman. How did she get to this rock-bottom level of depression and loneliness? I needed to do something even though I always ended up feeling helpless. I was sick and tired of making plans with her to go job hunting, buying her an outfit, just to get turned down the next day because she was "sick." She's always sick. But who the hell prescribed her vodka? I tried to hold the tears back and decided I was going to go inside.



I walked in and she was sitting on the couch with her cigarette and her drink. I tried to walk past her and say goodnight, but I couldn't. No matter how hard I tried the sobbing came out and I couldn't stop. I gave her a hug and she hugged me back. I let go and sat on the chair across from her. I had to do something and this time I wasn't taking no for an answer. I couldn't let her die like this.

"Mommy, why do you keep doing this? Can't you see you're killing yourself? I know you're not happy and I'm sorry, Mommy, but you can't do this to me and Grandma. Stop being selfish!"

She couldn't understand my blubbering cries, so I tried to calm down and repeated what I had just said.

"This is what not working has done to me," she said.

"So, let's get you a job. I'll take you shopping and buy you a new wardrobe."

I stared at my mother, knowing she couldn't work in the condition she was in. Bartending was out because she was way too slow, she moved like a turtle and acted like she was eighty but she was only forty.

"You were such a beautiful woman . . . You still are, but you don't care about anything anymore. Listen, if Chris doesn't treat you right, let's go and get you a new man. Once you work and get out and have your own money, you'll be back to the same cocky woman you were."

She played with the straw in her drink, swirling it in a circular motion around the melting ice.

"I just need to work. I'm a social person . . . I need to be around people. That's why I loved my job . . . Bartending, it's what I do. You like to do what you love for work."

I got a glimpse of how she felt inside . . . a scared, lonely little girl who felt incompetent in doing something new.

"Mommy, sometimes you have to do what you have to do. Almost any job you socialize with people. You'll feel so much better getting out there again, looking beautiful, and breaking necks . . ." I said trying to boost her confidence.

"Mom, you're killing yourself with this alcohol. It's not making anything better. Didn't you learn from Uncle Kevin? You can't go that route, Mommy. You have to stop! You wake up and drink 24/7 . . . that's not normal."

"Don't you notice I've calmed down? I told Chris I want to check out an AA meeting . . ."

Denial! I felt like I was running in circles with her.

"You keep putting me down," she whined, "and I don't want to get up. I have to want to do it. You can't make me!" She paused and looked into her glass. "Honey, go get me some ice, would you?"

I ignored her and walked into my room. How could she just brush this off? I felt robbed of my mother and robbed of my



child-hood. She didn't care anymore. Coming home to argue with her and to clean up her mess was becoming overwhelming.

Another night of crying myself to sleep.



"Beep . . . beep . . . beep!" I hated the noise of my alarm clock. I had an appointment to check out this studio apartment that I'd been thinking about moving to, but I called and cancelled. How am I going to leave these two people who need me so much? My mother would eat Grandma alive and spit her out. I had a feeling that once I did move out I wouldn't see them again . . . especially my mother. These would be my last moments with them and I wasn't ready for that. I needed them like they needed me.

My mother surprised me by coming into my room with breakfast. She made me an egg-in-a-nest and a chocolate milk shake with some soda. She sat on my bed and handed me the plate. Breakfast in bed? Today really was going to be a good day! I loved when she did these things. My mother was still here, but seldom seen—like an eclipse.

I told her I wasn't leaving, that we'd stay together.



Heading westbound on the LIE wasn't as exciting as eastbound. The sky was getting darker, reflecting my mood.

Exit 51, the one I took for work, came faster than I wanted . . . back into the routine. School was getting more intense as the year came to an end.

At home, it was like me and Mommy hardly talked. Grandma told me she wasn't eating very much. I tried to call a few of my mom's friends and family members to try to arrange an intervention but no one seemed to care. I didn't know what to do but keep my life movin'. I felt like she'd started getting worse quick.

Monday came and I presented my mother with flowers and one of those jumbo cards. She actually looked happy. It felt good to put a smile on her face.

The due date for my Health Project was about a week later. It was a serious percentage of my grade and included a seven-page es- say, a presentation with a visual. I had to do a good job to maintain my good streak of 90s. That night, I got home from school and the lights were off as usual and Mom was asleep on the couch. I hopped onto the computer to get busy. A few hours later I heard my mom scream from the living room, "Madeline! Madeline!"

What the hell? I thought. It's nearly 4 A.M. She's probably having a crazy dream.

"She's been actin' real strange tonight, Taylor," I heard my Grandma mutter.

"What do you mean?" I became really scared and stood up from my desk when I heard my mother call for Madeline again.

"Mom??" I was surprised to see her eyes open. She had crazy eyes, like there was nobody behind them.

"Where'd Madeline go? Tell her I forgot something!"

"What the hell are you talking about!? Madeline was never here! Are you dreaming?" I suddenly grew very angry, feeling like why is she doing this shit now?

Earlier in the day I'd hidden her vodka from her. I'm surprised she ain't fiending.



Curtains separating desperate families. Doctors and nurses running frantic. The smell of anesthetic and the sound of shoes clicking on the linoleum floors. The beeping of the machines. I stood next to my mother holding her hand. She looked even worse under the fluorescent lighting. She was so yellow, so weak. She asked me to take a picture so she could see what she looked like. "I'll never drink again!" she managed to blurt out.

It was only me and her, with the occasional nurse poking in. "She's dehydrated," I said to the nurse. "She needs water!"

"I'm sorry, she can't drink. The IVs are hydrating her."

My mother's tongue looked like the tongue of a cat. Finally the nurse gave me wet Q-tips.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with these? Where's the fucking doctor? She needs attention now!"

The nurse demonstrated how to wet the inside of her mouth with the Q-tip to keep it from drying out and then left.

Where was anybody to help? I thought. I couldn't believe Grand- ma was home alone and I wondered what she must be feeling, waiting to hear from us. But it was just me and Mommy in our little cubicle of hell. It felt like everything around me was in slow motion. People screaming, bleeding, clipboards being passed around every- where. A social worker came to speak to me, but I blew her off and went outside. Walking past each curtain, seeing the patients with their families. I turned around. Mommy was alone, but sleeping now.

Outside, the weather was beautiful but my mood remained the same. I reached into my purse for my cigarettes. Shit! I didn't have any. Everything had happened so quickly, I'd left them at home when the ambulance came. I leaned against the wall of the building and slid to the ground. My legs couldn't hold me up anymore. I felt like I couldn't handle this anymore by myself. I kept screaming, "It's over! It's over!" and cried harder than I'd ever cried in my life. I knew this day was coming and now my mother was here in Good Sam and she was going to die!

I kept hiccupping, gasping for air, my whole body shaking. I rocked aback and forth. It was hard to be optimistic when it's the truth. just the other day we were watching *Desperate Housewives* together. just the other week we were at each other's throats with vicious words. How did this happen? How did this happen so fast? She's not getting out! She's not getting out!

My phone rang but I didn't want to talk to anyone right now. My emotions had me by my throat and I was suffocating. This is my mother—the person who gave birth to me and has been there for me for most of my life! She's in trouble and pain . . . internal bleeding and dehydration, liver and kidney failure and getting a blood trans- fusion. How could her body just fall apart so quickly? Why didn't I notice this? I should have been home more! It's my fault! She was my responsibility! What did I do wrong?