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My Mom: Modern Day Superwoman

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Morgan Widner
First Place Winner
Creative Non-Fiction Category
2018 Emerging Writers Contest

My Mom: Modern Day Superwoman

Alone. Invisible. Unwanted. These are only part of the daily emotional roller coaster of someone with a hearing impairment. The hearing-impaired community is seen daily as people incapable of functioning normally and alienated, in most of the world, because of their differences from the hearing population. The American population has a low tolerance and the beginnings of a fear toward people unlike themselves; a fear of the unknown, purposely avoiding others on the street and even avoiding conversation online unless they are ‘speaking out’ in outrage at something that offends them. Society grooms children to morph from their innocence and genuine love for humans into self-interested, self-obsessed, introverts who fear the unknown. One childhood experience of mine still haunts me, and I recall it in my narrative as representative of the way *othering* has the potential to alienate and harm vulnerable people.

Hundreds of people bustle by, a constant roar of conversation and footsteps pushing and passing on the cold white linoleum. The smell of overdone perfume and sweaty male musk overwhelm my nose. My small fingers curl around the edge of the silver aluminum shopping cart as my mother nudges me forward. “Keep up with me, Ladybug.” I nod and stay steady pushing my way forward, grownups' elbows keep brushing my short curly hair against my face, just as fast as I can push it back. Numerous aisles pass as more people pour into the main corridor as if the side aisles are rows of hourglasses and the people are sand falling in an endless cycle.

Finally! We break through the crowds, and I can breathe air someone has not just exhaled! The smell of fresh produce slaps my face as we round the corner and turn toward the front checkout lanes. The walls turn from a marshmallow white to blue jay blue as the roar of foot steps fades into syncopated beeps of scanners. My mother pats my back as she slows, allowing me to relax my tired arm, and tells me I did good keeping up and staying with her this time. Mom and I walk across the milky white tiles toward the hairspray, which she had just remembered she ran out of this morning, when my young hazel eyes saw the child.

A young girl, not much older than I, her dark hair tied back and as straight as a board. She was standing in front of a case of new Harry Potter books, tears falling from her face as she silently screamed for help. I tap Mama on the arm, pulling at her shirt, and I pointed to the girl. Mom stops to follow my small-outstretched hand, eventually seeing what I saw. I watch as people continued to stagger by her, unable to see her pain.

Invisible. Alone. Afraid. Helpless. She surveys the people who could not hear her screams, too consumed with their own troubles and the events of their own lives. Mindless zombies trekking across the floor, trapped in their own cyclical hell. Why could they not hear her? Was she invisible? Mom turns back to me, told me to stay exactly where I was, and she runs over to the girl. She kneels beside her and starts talking, but the little girl just motions to her ears and continues to sob. I watch as my mother begins to motion with her hands, random shapes and movements. I had never seen mom do this before. Then, the girl begins to motion back! It was as if they knew some kind of secret code that nobody else knew. They had their own secret language that the rest of the world, including me, could not understand.

Mom comes back to get me, and we walk with the girl to the front, and her mother is there! Her mother was already waiting on her. The older woman hugs my mother, her tear-stained face breaking to a smile as she kneels to embrace her daughter. I look up at my mother as a single tear falls from her eyes. Mom and I leave the newly reunited family, check out, and then vacate the store. That is when she finally explains what just happened to small, naive six-year old me.

“Mama, do you have superpowers?” I ask as we pulled out of the black asphalt parking lot onto the four lane to drive home. She laughs, “Well, not exactly. What do you mean?” I reply, wide-eyed, “Back there...with the little girl. You talked to her, and then she pointed at her ears, then you guys did a bunch of this,” I explain, followed by a multitude of random hand and arm movements, “and then we walked her up to the Walmart people. Why couldn't anyone else understand you?” My mother laughs again, smiling both at my innocence and creative mind. “The little girl couldn't hear me,” Mama explains. “She is deaf. She cannot hear anything. Her ears don't work like ours do.”

From that point on, I was forever changed. I had never seen someone who was that different from me. I did not know anything about people who were like that little girl. I was only six. I was supposed to start school in a few months, but now my little mind was spinning like a bubble in water rapids. All I had ever known until this point were my family and their friends, who were all similar to me. I had never been around any different. I had to know more. I knew God made people to be perfect, so why would He make people who could not hear? I pondered what my life would be like if I could not hear. Never being able to hear my mother tell me she loves me, or hear my dad yell in excitement when I caught my first fish.

A great sense of compassion for people grew inside of me that afternoon, like the grass this past summer. Mama always said I have a big heart for people, and now I know why. I never wanted to see another person with the same amount of hurt and fear I saw in that little girl's eyes. I made a promise to myself that I would never ignore someone as the other people in Walmart ignored that little girl.

I was still so confused. “So, what was all the hand waving and stuff? What was the special secret conversation? I wanna know what you said! I told you that you're Superwoman, but you said it wasn't a superpower.” Mama smiles again, but this was different kind of smile. This wasn't a laughing funny smile. This was the kind of smile she gives me when I learn something new or when I do something special. “I was talking to her in Sign Language, Ladybug. That's how deaf people talk. They use their hands and sign different things,” she giggles “or they wave their hands around and each different movement means stuff.” Fascinated, I reply, “Well, I think it was a superpower because you were the only one who could save her!” I exclaim, pretending I knew EXACTLY what I am talking about, “Wait, does that mean Grandma is a superhero too? When we leave Grandma's house and she motions 'I love you' out the window. That's sign language, too?” Mom nods, “Exactly, but that's how deaf people communicate all the time.” I nod, imagining my mother and grandmother dressed as superheroes, rescuing people in need.

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