

I Know of a Woman

Emily Bennett

I know of a woman who was raped at the age of fifteen. This woman's name is Teri Bennett. She dropped out of a private high school after her junior year. She went to a public school, and when she failed her senior year, her parents forced her to repeat it. After that, she dropped out of community college and had a child at twenty-one. She got married at twenty-four, but then divorced at twenty-five. She then became addicted to prescription medications and attempted suicide eight times. In her mid-thirties, she became addicted to crack cocaine and has been in and out of jail ever since.

Teri taught her little girl how to roller skate. She is the one who put a Band-Aid on her daughter's knee when she fell and scraped it. She went to all of her daughter's elementary school band concerts. She made sure that on Christmas morning, her daughter had so many presents that it took her nearly two hours to open them. She taught her daughter how to give herself a pedicure and helped her with her homework. She read bedtime stories to her at night. She watched over her little girl and protected her in times of need. She also helped her daughter find the voice of God.

Teri is my mother. She has obviously not made the best decisions in her life, but she is my mother, and I will always love her. When I was nine years old, I learned that my mother had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I didn't really know what this meant; all I knew was that she was sick and acting strange. This was the first time I remember having to really take care of my mother. I learned how to keep a household clean, cook a meal, write checks to pay bills, and much more

because my mother was too sick to do any of those things. I became the head of the household.

When I was eleven years old, I had to drive her car five miles to pick her up from a bar at two o'clock in the morning because she and her friends were too intoxicated to drive. It was just the first time of many that I would drive my mother around illegally. This may shock people, but I actually preferred driving my mother everywhere instead of the other way around because I was in a better state of mind to be driving. My brain was clear. On more than one occasion, my mother would swerve into oncoming traffic or another lane because she was on the verge of "falling asleep." Even now, I am skittish in cars when other people are driving, regardless of how many years of experience a person has. I always offer to drive, not to be nice to them, but to avoid my own anxiety.

When I was twelve, I went to court to testify in front of my entire family, including my mother, that I did not want to live with her anymore. By this time, I knew that my mother was not being responsible and that I needed to find an escape from the situation. It always seemed that my mother and I had reversed roles, in that I acted more as the responsible adult and she was the child sneaking out at night to be with her friends. Thankfully, my father has always been there for me. With him, I was able to live a relatively stable and comfortable life. Without my father and my grandparents there to support me and take care of me, I definitely would not be studying at James Madison University, and very possibly could be dead instead. My mother has still been in and out of my life, but it has been indirectly. I was no longer late to school because my mother could not get out of bed. I was able to have

friends over to my house without worrying if they were going to figure out my mom's secret.

When I first moved in with my dad, my mom was still allowed weekly, supervised visitation. My dad would take me to my grandparents' house—our designated meeting point. This was supposed to happen every Monday night, but my mom never came to any of our visits. On Christmas Day, when I was thirteen, my mother was in a drug-induced coma. I remember sitting on the couch on what is supposed to be one of the happiest days of the year for a child, thinking, "Why does my mother always choose drugs over me?" I knew that my mother was smoking marijuana and drinking heavily night after night, but it was not until a few years later that I learned that she was also addicted to crack cocaine. I have often wondered what led her to drugs: being raped, getting divorced, or having cancer? To this day, I still do not know the answer.

Her troubles made her suicidal. The first time that a drug overdose landed her in the hospital, she was legally dead for over twenty minutes. The doctors thought that she was going to have severe brain damage, but when she was finally resuscitated, everything was relatively normal. Then, one day, I received a phone call from her. She was calling to tell me she was sorry for being such a bad mother and that I would not have to worry about her anymore. She said that she just wanted to tell me goodbye. I knew exactly what she meant, so I hung up the phone and called 911. My mom was calling to tell me that she had taken a handful of sleeping pills because she did not want to live anymore. The ambulance that I called picked her up and took her to the hospital. My dad wanted to protect me, so he told me that

I had to sit in the waiting room at the hospital. I did what he said, but even from the waiting room, I could hear her screaming, "I hate her! I want to die!" and other hurtful things.

The doctors were able to pump her stomach, and she was physically fine. She was taken straight from the hospital to prison because she was on probation at the time; earlier in the year, she was caught stealing and had evaded the police. My mother was sentenced to three and a half years in prison. She's still there. I often pretend that her not being an active part of my life does not bother me, but the truth is that everybody needs a maternal figure. Because I did not have one, I missed out on things such as prom dress shopping with my mom and talking to her about my first "real" boyfriend. My mother also missed my sixteenth and eighteenth birthdays as well as my high school graduation. My father and grandparents did a wonderful job "filling in" for her, but of course it was not the same. There was no way that it could have been.

Now that time has gone on and I have gotten the whole story about things that happened when I was a child, I am glad that my mother did not die that day. I am glad that I still have a mother to argue and fight with. I often look ahead to the future to a time when I have children and wonder what explanation I will give to them about their grandmother and her past. I also look into my future and wonder if I am destined to "become my mother." This is one of my biggest fears. Now, do not get me wrong, even though my mother has done all of these terrible things, she is not a bad person. My mother is, contrary to how it may seem, a wonderful person, and I will always love her. However, I fear that I will inherit her addiction and

alcoholism, and it is because of this that I choose not to drink when I go to parties. I'm always the designated driver, and I'm completely fine with that title. In fact, I prefer it. I've seen the consequences of alcohol and drugs on a person and those around them, thanks to my mother. Thus, it is because of my personal experiences that I have made the decision not to drink or do drugs.

As a college student, some people might think I'm overreacting or living my life in fear, but I think I'm living my life conscientiously and aware. I talked to my mother about my decision once, and she said it did not surprise her that I do not like drinking or drugs. She said that she always thought that I would either follow in her footsteps and become overly involved in the partying scene or would turn completely away from it. She also told me that she was proud of the decision that I made, which in all honesty, meant nothing to me. I have learned not to care what my mom thinks of me, so even though it was nice of her to say that, I question whether it was actually her saying it or the drugs. Even though she has been drug free since she was incarcerated, her brain was damaged from the continuous drug use, so some of the things she says I simply cannot take to heart because it's not actually her talking.

My father has always told me that everything, including alcohol, is acceptable in moderation. However, because of my predisposition to alcoholism, I do not think that drinking, even in moderation, would be a safe decision for me. It would take so little for me to get caught up in that lifestyle. Every time I see a commercial on television for alcohol, I think, "What if I took just one sip?" Then I think, "What if I like what I taste? Will I become an alcoholic? Am I destined to

become my mother?” I am so terrified of becoming an alcoholic/addict that I have decided to educate myself on the consequences to scare myself out of becoming a “user.” I am determined not to become another statistic. Aside from that, I simply do not want to drink or do drugs. Putting toxins into my body so that I can “feel good” is not appealing to me. I love going to parties to dance, meet new people, and just have a good time, but the next morning I want to be able to remember what happened. This is my personal view and I do not condemn people that choose to drink and do drugs because that is not my place. I do not have a right to judge others or the way they live. I simply live my life the way I want to and let others do the same.

My goal in life is to become a respectable woman with good morals and values. I have had many people show me what this looks like, and contrary to what people might think, my mother is one of those people. She is a good, respectable woman with good morals and values. Unfortunately, along the way, she made some mistakes, and now she is paying the consequences. She will be getting out of prison in August 2012. When she is released from prison, I do not know what our relationship will be like, but I do know that we will have a relationship. I will be there to support her, and it is my hope that she will finally be there to support me.