

You know me. - Erin, Year 10, NSW

We met when you were born. You were decorated in pinks, pastels for a new birth. You definitely don't remember.

I was there then. I saw how the women swarmed your mother, how they told her how beautiful she was, how gorgeous her baby was. That was you. You were beautiful. You looked just like your mother. You cried then. An innocent cry. Your father hushed you and told you it was okay, I wasn't so close to him then.

I saw you turn five. At your birthday, it was princess themed, and you were dressed in pink. You had a tiara on your head and a smile on your face. As I watched, a little boy from class came and pulled it off your head. He made a face and ran.

I laughed. You cried. Your mother, now carrying a new baby, dressed in blue, came and patted you on the back "He only teases you because he likes you."

He only teases because he likes you, I repeat. You repeat it too.

It's in your mind in grade four. A boy had been making fun of your freckles. Well, it hadn't made you feel good when you looked in the mirror. But in a way it was okay. Because he liked you. I had told you that before and I told you again.

In grade five, your friend wore makeup. Some blush, some mascara. You had asked why. I had told her to. She tells you "I just like it."

Because she did like it.

I saw you turn twelve, I saw your primary school graduation. Your mum was smiling, taking photos. Your dad was late. He showed up with your brother. Your brother was holding a soda can. You knew then that your dad loved him more. It wasn't a large action. You could've forgotten it. But you didn't. Because I reminded you of it sometimes. When he missed your dance concert because he was tired. I watched you though, I was always there for you to lean on. When you looked in the mirror and you compared yourself to the other dancers. Your hair, your makeup, your costume. You decided you liked wearing makeup.

You wore makeup in year 8. It started with mascara and blush and became highlighter, contour, concealer. Your dad told you "You look better without all that makeup," but you felt better with it. So you ignored him.

And then you talked to a boy. I liked this boy. He made you laugh and smile with compliments. He told you you looked hot. He never saw you without makeup. He used to tease you. But you knew, they do it because they like you. You didn't mind I think, because you liked him.

You didn't need to like what was in the mirror. Because they did. And in some twisted way, you liked being desired. Your mum told you, *beauty isn't everything*. And you told her that you know, and that isn't why you dress up nice, you do it to feel good. And she lets it go.

I don't let it go.

I tell you it's for your confidence. You believed me without realising I told you that you looked pale and tired before you picked up those brushes.

On a Friday in 9th grade, I remember it, you came home. Long since you had talked to that boy, even longer since you had worried about him. Your dad was yelling, your mum listening. My hand was over her mouth, holding it shut. You saw her clenched knuckles and maybe for a moment you saw me too.

You asked what was wrong. It ended with a slap round the cheek.

Your mother stood silent and your father stopped yelling. I saw it all happen. Your brother came downstairs and asked what was wrong. Your dad said, "Nothing kiddo." Then his voice changed, because he copied my next words. "Your sister is exactly like your mother." And he picked up his bottle and left.

I was there later, when your mother apologised. "I should have protected you." And you tell her that it's not her fault. But I'm telling you it is, that she didn't have to marry that man. You cried then.

In tenth grade, you tell everyone you hated me. You almost did. But when you have to, you fall back on me:

"He didn't know better."

"Mum? Can you pick me up, dad won't answer."

Checking every window you walked by for your reflection.

You don't know it, but you are desperate.

You go to a party, multiple this year. The boys laugh and drink. The girls giggle and gossip. Some people will go off together, you don't wonder what they're doing. You talk and laugh.

And I was there. I pushed that boy that caught your eye into that girl. I made sure you knew that they liked each other. You didn't hate her. How could you? But I was there, smiling as you saw them walk by.

By June there was someone else. He told you that you were smart and kind. I didn't like him so much at the time. You got attached to his eyes and his smile. He couldn't clean but that was fine. By August, he had changed. I liked him better now. He told you he didn't like cooking. You said, exactly as I taught you: "That's alright, I can cook."

He grinned and tried to kiss you. You weren't in the mood, but he wanted you. You want to be wanted. So you let his hands go where they will and his lips do what they please.

So when he playfully punched you too hard that one time, or made fun of you for the hundredth time, you let him him.

Your mother liked him, he brought flowers over and smiled. Your father had been cold, but two strong handshakes had done the trick. You were surprised by how they loved him. Like a son, you used to think. I always thought they loved him more than they loved you. I always thought it was funny that his parents didn't warm up to you so much. His mum was friendly and his dad was polite.

I always told you, it's so much easier to love a son than a daughter. You finally accept it.

You made it through highschool with two failed tests, three failed relationships, and four scars you'll never get rid of. I was there when you cut them. I told you that the scars would be ugly. You didn't listen.

I kept that knife steady.

You remember those things. You remember me, by things I've said and done. But if you saw me around, you would not recognise me. It's easier that way, to make sure you know me, but you don't *know* me.

I was at your wedding, when you stuttered your vows and there was silence, but I laughed with the crowd when your husband poked fun later. I was the hand that smeared your face with cake, and told him not to apologise.

I was there through your pregnancy when you tried to hide that bump. I was there when your husband cheered for his new baby boy and you dressed him up in blue and everyone said how beautiful he was and no one said the same to you.

I was there when your husband picked up the bottle and first yelled. I stayed with you and held your mouth shut while he did it. That could only make it worse. And suddenly you understand how your mother felt. And your little boy looks terrified.

I was there when you called your brother to ask him for advice and he told you to stay, because being a single mother is hard.

I watched when you had a baby girl and your husband didn't cheer, but kissed your cheek. He hit you later, when your kids had gone to bed. I was next to them, asking them why you hadn't left, why you made them suffer through it.

You didn't leave then. You never left. Stay, women are loyal and strong, you can survive, I tell you.

So he leaves. A liver failure. And I'm at his funeral, telling everyone how much he loved his family and recounting the happy memories. You cried then.

I was there when you yelled at your daughter. I was there when you realised your son can't cook. I was there after they moved and you were alone.

And I'm here at your grave and you must remember me now. Because I am not so easy to get rid of. Because no matter what happens, I'm here. You know me so well but couldn't pick me out of a crowd because I've been behind your back all along. *And you always knew and yet you never realised.*