

Radiance

She has two jobs.

She usually reads seven books a week.

She cooks.

She cleans.

She is a mother of three.

She has a son with special needs.

She works 26 hours a day (or what seems like it).

She rescues cats.

She doesn't fart.

She is the world's fastest shopper.

She is a first aid expert (non-certified).

She owns a cape, many in fact, from past Halloween costumes she made by hand, but she is vulnerable to kryptonite: being on time.

That day she spent all morning in the bathroom teasing her hair, applying makeup and fussing over both. I sat on the edge of the tub pretending I wasn't mesmerized by her every movement.

She ran a soft brush over each cheekbone, in one subtle stroke dusting a trail of shimmery pink, just like the pink that kissed her cheeks when she smiled, but this pink didn't fade with her laughter. She put on her eye shadow and mascara, her brow creased in concentration making her eyes very big so she could cover each single lash with the black goo.

In my dirty jeans with holes in the knees, my favorite Derek Jeter jersey, and my backwards baseball cap, I sat on the edge of the tub. I was embarrassed to admit that I wanted to look as pretty as she did.

My mom isn't the type to spend hours in the bathroom, at least not primping. I remember coming home one day to find her on her knees scrubbing the kitchen floor while singing some Celine Dion song at the top of her lungs.

It wasn't the prettiest sounding voice, but nothing dogs would bark at, either.

Her hair was a mess, and if that hadn't done it, her smell would have given her away. No Herbal Essence, no expensive perfume, just that distinctive fresh out of bed mom smell. She hadn't showered yet. Her face was bare, and she had on a pair of sweats and my dad's ratty t-shirt from college that had a forgotten beer stain or two. She had been cleaning all morning.

Most memories of my mom are of her on her hands and knees scrubbing a toilet or driving me, my brother and sister around. Always makeup-less, wearing her usual sweater, mom jeans, and Birkenstocks combination with some kind of festive sock peeking out from underneath, just mom.

She wandered over to the closet and pulled out the bag that held her dress. When she unzipped it, the deep blue that spilled out from inside made me think back to the dressing room the day she first tried it on.

It felt like I had been walking forever. I was past the point of exhaustion but she wasn't showing any signs of slowing down. A fall mosaic of the outdoors nagged at me as we walked past the shop windows brimming with the reds and browns of the cozy season. All I wanted to do was get out of this stuffy mall and go play some soccer with my friends. As we rounded the corner, the warm smell of melted butter and cinnamon from Auntie Anne's pretzels teased my nose and my mouth watered, which ignited my stomach's rumble.

"Mommmmm," I whined. "I'm hungry. Can we please have lunch now?"

As if I hadn't said anything at all, she took a sharp turn into the next store. Weaving between the racks, she looked for the perfect deal. All at once, she stopped in the middle of the store, her eyes set on something. She plucked a hanger off the rack. From it flowed a dark navy dress that sparkled in the light and almost reached the floor. Still she wasn't satisfied; out went her hand again, sliding hangers quickly along the rack, grabbing one, two, three more possibilities.

Back in the dressing room disappointment crossed her face as she turned and adjusted each of her choices, looking for a better side, a more flattering view and not finding it. She slumped back through the door over and over again looking defeated. Some were too small, some too big. Finally, when she appeared in a red dress with a little smile on her face I got hopeful. Maybe she would like this one. Maybe we'd be done here soon. Maybe she'd be good for a pretzel on the way out. But once again she stepped in front of the mirror and her face fell. I didn't know why. I thought she looked beautiful.

"What's wrong, Mom?" I asked "This one looks nice."

"It's just not the right one," she answered.

She looked upset, so I dropped it. As she walked back to the dressing room I started to feel like she would never find what she was looking for. This was our fourth store and I hadn't seen even a glimmer of anticipation in her eyes since the first dress she tried on was too small. Still, I hoped she wouldn't just settle for something already in her closet. She really deserved to look as pretty as we all thought she was. Interrupting my thoughts, the creak from the dressing room door opening met my ears, and I look up.

A smile spread across her face. No words were necessary; the sparkle in her eye said it all. She'd found her dress.

Now she carefully lifted it over her head, making certain to protect her make-up. She slipped it on and turned so I could zip up the back. Running her fingers to flatten the creases, she took a deep breath before looking in the mirror. Her eyes met the woman's in the glass staring back at her, and she gasped in shock at the stranger in the mirror, the beautiful woman I saw every day.

I was surprised when she went to the cupboard to choose her perfume. She pushed by the stout black bottle with silver writing--the one I saw her spray every morning-- to the back of the cabinet where the clanking bottles told me she was looking for something else. Finally her hand emerged clutching a tall dark purple bottle with a golden top shaped like a jewel, I had never seen it before. She sprayed some of the perfume onto the inside of one of her wrists and rubbed the two together. The fragrance met my nose and made it tingle. She sprayed it one more time into the air and walked through the trails of scent, hoping some might cling to her new dress.

She is a woman who dedicates her whole life to other people. On this one day she dressed so she could feel about herself the way everyone else saw her. She looked radiant. It was my uncle's wedding, her little brother, and she'd pulled out all the stops.

When she walked into the reception, the sparkle from the chandelier caught her smile and brightened the whole room. She floated through the crowds all night, graceful and poised; she shook strangers' hands and danced with my father. Her calf length dress swept down the curves of her figure and hung perfectly. The navy blue brought out the brilliance of her eyes, and the intricate beading on her sweater made her look delicate as porcelain. Everything worked together to make her look perfect--flawless.

I see those housewives of New Jersey and New York or whatever city they're in now, and I see their nice clothes and freshly done nails and hair and make-up, all supposedly beautiful women. Then I look at my mom and see her with only a dab of mascara, her glasses falling down her nose, and her hair in a tangled mess on top of her head, and I think to myself, *this* is beauty.

Once in a while I see her going through her closet bare-faced, dressed in sweats, the mom I'm used to, in search of that perfect navy dress. I watch as she tilts her head to the side and smiles to herself, remembering that night. After a few seconds, she shakes her head, zips up the dress cover and puts it back in her closet. I don't know exactly what she sees or thinks about when she pulls out that dress, but when I look at that dress I think of a night--just a night--where I saw my mom in a dress--just a dress-- the same person she is when she's wearing sweatpants and my dad's old t-shirt on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor singing some Celine Dion song, just as beautiful as always.