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Level III Honorable Finalist

Letter to poet Tommi Jo Casteel concerning her poem, "Mama's Hands"

Dear Tommi Jo Casteel:

Although I've known it for the longest time, my mother displays a façade that covers her inner nature. A dark, curly haired woman, my mother continues to endlessly amaze me. As a vibrant seventeen-year-old with physical attributes like my mother's, I strive to work as hard as she does on a daily basis. She cooks, she cleans, works daily in a hospital as a social worker, as appears as if her faith in family orientation and fortune are immaculate. No, she is not perfect, but yes indeed she was raised as a hard working woman. Believe me, my mother has the wit and personality of a woman who seemed to have had everything handed to her all her life. When I stumbled upon your poem, "Mama's Hands," it put into perspective how blessed I am to still have such a diligent figure in my life. Her hands are not clean, as a result of the work and effort she puts not only into her job but also into her home life. She works very hard every single day and still continues to mask her successes and accomplishments.

An image of a utopian family: A mother and a father, sipping red wine and having a meal with beautiful and effervescent children. Works stays at work and family is ever-present. Of course, this is ideal and is strived for among all families. Although my life consists of the polar opposite, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

In August of 2010, my hardworking, loving mother was faced with the hardest "job," per say, of her entire life. This experience trumps any discharge of patients at the hospital or trying to make it to each and every one of my and my sibling's sporting events. You see, it became a job that only faith and hope could help her accomplish. My mother, who seemed almost invincible to any task, was forced to fight for her life.

Battling breast cancer was never ideal; my family life began to crumble as my mother began to suffer. There were endless, sleepless, and tortuous nights. My image of a perfect family began to collapse recklessly and I was beginning to lose almost everything I came to know and love. Family meals, game nights, as well as movie nights and all that they entail with keeping up with the family deteriorated before my young eyes. The cancer began to take its toll on not only on her health, but our family. My mother felt guilty for the troublesome outcomes of her illness.

My mother continued to fight every day for her life, something that no mother of three should have to do, yet she never gave up. My mother fought the effects of the chemotherapy, the grueling process of injecting poison into her bloodstream. I saw scars upon her from the surgery and the tubes and medical equipment that suffocated her hospital room. Her curly brown hair, which always seemed to be everywhere, was suddenly nowhere. She was bald, thin, feeble, and weak.

As soon as I came across your poem "Mama's Hands" in my 8th grade English class, I immediately made the connection to my situation at home. My mother worked tirelessly every day between her job at the hospital and fighting for her life. Though she has "working hands," she reaps the benefits of her hard work. My mother not only survived breast cancer, but has been cancer free these past four years.

As you know, "Mama's Hands" is a very symbolic piece. In your poem, the mother was illustrated to have dirty hands to represent all of the hard work that she had accomplished. A lack of "dirty hands" symbolizes a lack of diligence and character. I was raised to believe that if one has not worked hard for themselves, then they have not fully lived. My mother reaps the fruit from her hard work, and due to this, her hands are not polished.

Through this experience, I have developed and changed my point of view on the world. I've loved, learned, lost, and gained many things from this disease, and through your poem, I have learned how vital it is to work hard and reap the benefits. With hard work, strength, and family unity I now know that all things can be done. My mother was lucky, she lived. Some are not so lucky. This simple yet significant poem has changed me into a more confident person who will invest hard work and effort into every day.

Sincerely,

Taylor Frommeyer