



## In Their Shoes

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There was something wrong with Irene's mother, most days. She would stand out on the back deck, perhaps with the unconscious intention to smoke a cigarette, but wouldn't get to the point of lighting it before she would enter her own world. She would lean against the railing; not as if she was about to jump, but simply because that was the boundary of the wooden

deck. Her head would tilt back slightly, her breathing would become strained, like snoring, and her eyes would flutter. Sometimes her pupils would quiver in a doped-up stupor. Sometimes a slight moan would escape her throat; no one really understood a translation, if there was one. She would never really see you, never hear you, no matter how close or loud or present you were.

She would stand like that for a long time, until Irene's father would snap her out of it, his sharp voice cutting through the medications muffling her perception of sound. "It's getting cold," he would state, void of emotion, and she would trudge back inside, not because of an aversion to return into the house, but because her steps were so heavy and slow. Irene's father had to guide her back in, his patience level nearly empty after years of dealing with it.

But if the family did anything, they dealt with it—sometimes in unhealthy ways. Elizabeth tried bringing friends over, but stopped when her friends were freaked out by her mom sitting on the couch, blindly staring at a television blasting infomercials on repeat. Elizabeth stopped bringing friends home eventually. Molly, the youngest, didn't fully grasp what was going on. She stayed up at Grammy's when Mommy "zoned," a term that became too familiar and used too often within the family.

But Irene became the angriest. Irene was the oldest, seventeen years old, the same age as me. She was the one who understood her mother "zoned" because of the medications she took like candy for a leg that was never in as much pain as she claimed. Irene became angry because she was the one her father turned to when he needed a shoulder to cry on when the mother crashed the car because she was driving intoxicated—intoxicated with painkillers. Irene became angry because she was the one her mother asked for money from when she wanted to buy something she didn't need and would never use. Irene was the angriest, because she watched her mother be replaced by painkillers.

And I, I was the one who never understood, the one on the outside. I was the one

who fed off their anger, but never off their never-ending forgiveness. I was the one who couldn't grasp why they still called her "mother," when I believed that she had lost that privilege. I never grew up with a mother who was always only half-present; and I thought that mentally, physically offering to share my mother with Irene, Elizabeth, and Molly would make up for their loss. I was the one who would shake my head every time Irene vented to me, ranting about another story of something new her mother did.

But at their mother's funeral after she committed suicide—finally succeeding, after forty-odd attempts—on Father's Day before my senior year, I finally understood. When I saw Irene's father walking down the aisle, tears streaming down his face, I finally understood. Irene, the oldest, was clutching her sisters offering them support—Molly especially, the youngest, with the shortest time spent with a mother. I saw a broken family, a family scarred for life, a family that would never be the same again. And as I sat there in my seat, surrounded by sad people in a bright church with high ceilings and worn-down velvet-covered pews, I finally understood.

The term "mother" can be seen as a privilege, something a woman earns after her child is delivered from the womb. Sometimes the term "mother" is nothing more than a word in the dictionary, void of all connotations and emotions for a person. Or, the term "mother" can be a permanent fixture, a label worn like a tattoo, never removed for any reason. But I understood that day after years of confusion, frustration, anger, and misunderstanding, that one can never determine the meaning of "mother" for another child.