



10-2014

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Sophie Lefens

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Recommended Citation

Lefens, Sophie (2014) "After Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing";" *Inscape*: Vol. 34 : No. 1 , Article 24.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/inscape/vol34/iss1/24>

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AFTER TILLIE OLSEN'S "I STAND HERE IRONING"

by

Sophie Lefens

I stand here painting my son's bedroom blue and what you asked me drips heavily under the brush.

"I'm sorry I didn't protect you. You're my daughter. I love you. How can I take care of you now?"

"Take care of you now . . ." Even if I did tell you, what good would it do? You think because you are my mother you can soften every jag and jab? I have lived for thirty years. There is all the life that has happened despite you, because of you. And when is there time to forget? I will make lists of memories in between sips of cold tea and squeezing pears at the market, trying to smoke out the bad with the good.

You loved being a mother, peeling open each day's color for my fresh eyes. In the garden, you put snapdragons on my ears and called me queen. Why do I remember that most?

You said flossing saved lives and sang to us in your hard, rain voice while my brother and I marched towards the tub. You taught me fire and salt and the difference between strength and conceit. I breathed in the air you exhaled.

I was seven and nine and twelve, feeling too much and knowing too little, and you forgot to edit your sighs. My ears tuned to the slow build of marital friction and to the dissonance of midnight weeping. I waited at the edge of the stairs, checking for silence before I could sleep. And even without hearing, I heard. I swallowed your grief with my morning cereal.

A friend of yours, the mother of my middle school best friend, asked me how you were doing, if there was anything she could do for you. I said *no, she is fine, I will take care of her*. But at night you drooped in my doorway, told me you were too sad and too lonely before collapsing into my bed. I patted your head as you fell asleep. I was a hero then, not knowing how you would slowly smear my childhood sun.

I will never total it all. I will never call you and tell you to how take care of me now. You were heavy and dark at a time when children need light. You were a mother of desperate, not calming love. Your wisdom came too late and is still coming.

So let it be. So all that is in you will not bloom. There is still enough left to live by. Only know that you are more than this paint dripping downward, spreading thin, helpless beneath the brush.