

Adult Essay
Honorable Mention

My Mother's Hands
By Sarah Birnbach

My mother's hands healed and wounded. They created and destroyed.

Hers were the hands of a nurse, touching patients with tenderness. Always clean. In a pediatric doctor's office, those hands lifted children, hugged children, cared for sick children. Those hands cleaned wounds, consoled fearful children, wiped away tears.

At home, those hands spanked and brutalized her own children. They wore impatience like gloves. They wielded the belt and wooden spoon with precise accuracy. They held the bar of Ivory soap as it was shoved in her daughters' mouths to clean away bad words like "shut up."

Those hands sewed our names on our gym uniforms to conform to school standards, and sewed hems and buttons with a skill passed down from her father, the tailor.

Those hands accidentally closed the apartment door as her mother lay dying, empty hands without the key to let in the neighbor summoned to help, shaking with fright at having seen her mother lying in a blood-soaked bed. Those 10-year-old hands tossed dirt into the grave to cover her mother's coffin.

Those hands hugged every nurse who cared for her husband as he lay in a coma for nine days, the life slowly ebbing from him, yet they never once rested on the daughter who stood by her side.

Those hands meticulously recorded every income and every expense with precision in a small ledger book, beginning when she and her newlywed husband had few dollars to live on. Hands that held a pen to fill in the blanks in the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

Until now.

Those hands can no longer sign a check. Hands that have to the grip the walker that facilitates her mobility. Hands that can no longer heal, can no longer wound, can no longer create, and can no longer destroy. Hands that soon will be laid to rest...covered by dirt by mourning others.