



# Love Looks Back on Itself

A writer riffs on our mothers, ourselves,  
and the spiral of love's ever-changing perspective.

by **Tammy Kennon**

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*I'm glad her name is Tammy,  
It seems to fit her style.  
She's love and life and mischief,  
You can see it in her smile.*

So begins a poem my mother wrote about me when she was 39 and I was a scrappy 11-year-old, the kind of girl known in those days as a tomboy. It's unclear why she chose to write a tribute to me alone, the third of her four children. Maybe it was Mom's small attempt to right my awkward, three-strike entrée into a fully formed family that already had a girl and a boy.

My dad was hoping for a much-needed tax deduction, yet I was born six hours into a New Year. Strike one. A boy, born just before me, was crowned the New Year's Baby (and got all the gifts). Strike two. If that wasn't disappointment enough, my parents planned to call me Steve, but there was yet that other unfortunate strike three.

It was my eight-year-old sister who insisted that I was Tammy. (And, personally, I think a poem that begins "I'm Glad His Name Is Steve" has no legs.)

It is a testament to Mom that none of these potentially scarring beginnings made a mark on me. I was not an anonymous kid in a crowd, but her daughter with unique foibles and varied interests. Mom took the time to know me.

*She's tennis shoes and bobby socks,  
She's clutter, glue and mess.  
She sleeps with fourteen pillows,  
And she hates to wear a dress.*

Mom was the stay-at-home variety, the only one on our block, long before that was an honorable "choice." And though we were poor, Mom used thriftiness and sacrifice to make sure we never felt it. She tells me she had two pairs of panties in those days. Every night she washed one by hand so she'd always have a clean pair.

Even so, somehow without fail there were presents under the tree, often purchased with books of Green Stamps, and new Easter dresses with horrible lacy ankle socks and patent leather shoes. In Easter photos my sisters are beaming in their frilly frocks, while I, the eternal tomboy, glower like I might slay half the neighborhood with my lacy, umbrella-shaped purse – or maybe just did.

*We love her most of all because,  
Her heart's too big for words.  
She loves all helpless little things,  
Like babies, cats and birds.*

In the wrinkly way that life folds back on itself, I walked in Mom's shoes for a few days — or at least in the cadence of her lyric. When I was 39 and my twins were 11, I borrowed Mom's rhythm to write similar odes to their sweet and quirky selves.

Until that moment, walking around in Mom's words, I had always read her poem from a daughter's perspective. Now as a young parent, I saw it through the rose-colored mother lens, one so clouded with love that it can only focus on a hopeful, Disney-bright future strewn with butterflies and bluebirds. Nothing else lets a mother breathe the next breath.

*She climbs the highest mountain,  
And picks the brightest star.  
She brings home love and rainbows  
In a peanut butter jar.*

*"When I was 39 and my twins were 11,  
I borrowed Mom's rhythm to write similar odes  
to their sweet and quirky selves."*



*“Life is a one-way street, but sometimes it feels more like a spiral, like the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*, spinning us round and round — child, parent, parent, child.”*

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Now that I'm 56, it's a rare and wrenching gift to look back at my mom through this poem, so innocent and hopeful, adoring and optimistic. I feel protective of her in a parental way; I want to freeze her in time, because I can't bear to tell her about my bumpy life ahead and the heartache I will cause her. She doesn't know yet that I will suffer heartbreak after heartbreak on the quest for a relationship that would transcend her own.

Young Mom doesn't know the anguish of seeing me leave her church and abandon her God, move far away from her tiny New Mexico hometown, the only one she's ever known.

How many restless nights will she pass while I live alone in D.C. and New York, traipse solo through foreign countries or, perhaps worst of all, live on a sailboat on an unfathomably deep blue sea, a life so alien to her that she won't know what to ask me about it.

Maybe it's a tragic blessing that today's Mom, just like the 39-year-old, doesn't know any of these things.

Mom's whole world now exists utterly in the moment. She lives in a just-right room at a cheerful assisted-living community where she fills in

the hours by filling in crossword puzzles (mostly by looking up the answers in the back). Every day, a few more wisps of my childhood rise up like steam from a still, morning pond and disappear from her memory, leaving me as the sole guardian of my history, plus one treasured poem.

On the wall across from her recliner, the Tammy poem hangs in a frame. Perhaps some days she looks up from her painstaking work of putting letters on a page, and, for the briefest second, remembers that little girl, who now, like her mother, fills the hours by meticulously putting words on a page.

Life is a one-way street, but sometimes it feels more like a spiral, like the tornado in *The Wizard of Oz*, spinning us round and round — child, parent, parent, child. Now as Mom and I awkwardly settle into our reversed roles, I wish for her as she wished for me:

*Oh may the wind be to her back,  
Her stars within her reach.  
And may her ever-trusting heart  
Find love and joy and peace. ♦*

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