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Paper Girls by Sydney Hubbel

When we were children, we used to play Desert Island in the backyard of my parent's house. My mother had planted three birch trees haphazardly in the grass and we would take their seeds and grind them up in an old mortar. We had seen videos in school of how people long before us ground up wheat and acorns with a stone on the ground to make flour, and we tried to mimic them using a relic from my grandmother's potion cabinet.

Ours was a full house with all three kids in one bedroom and my grandmother at the end of the hall. My father worked from home, his office in the living room. Us kids had to play outside as to not disturb him, not that it bothered us. The house was always musky and dimly lit with an overwhelming scent of incense coming from my grandmother's bedroom at the end of the hall. Incense and too many candles. I learned later in life that it was all to cover up the smell of a friendlier herb, not that we had any idea what it was anyway.

The neighbors hardly allowed their children over, and never allowed them inside. Our house was the weird one on the block, the home of the witches, where spirits danced and children disappeared. That never made sense to me. Our house was always full of children. There were three of us who belonged there and two that seemed to appear from nowhere. But our house was the weird one - where our imaginations came to life. In our minds, our house was a desert island, a pirate's cove, a witch's lair, a faerie's burrow. It was everything but the worn down little shack on Jameson street.

My whole world was on that street in those initial years. Church, school, home, and the few friends I had. I lived in a packed room that I shared with my two sisters, sealed in by blue walls and a wood-beaded curtain painted with dolphins. I hated dolphins and I hated the color blue. Truthfully, I was so full of hate in those early years. I felt I had nowhere I belonged, I was so unlike all those around me. I was an angry child with a box in my closet of pictures I cut out from my mother's fashion magazines. It was an old Converse box full of beautiful women. I loved looking at them. At the time I didn't really know why I loved it so much or why I cut them out in the first place. I was ashamed of it, but anytime I was alone in my shared bedroom, I'd sit on the closet floor and marvel over their smooth skin and long hair.

The women in the pictures told me I was an ugly sort of girl. I didn't have flowing thick hair, smooth skin, or long legs like the girls in the magazines. I was a frumpy child with thin hair and blotchy, freckled skin. I was constantly dirty with grubby fingers, matted hair, scabby knees, and always with a dirt smudge on my nose. I wore grungy hand-me-down clothes- so unlike the beautiful garb the magazine women adorned. They made me feel horrible about myself but still I couldn't resist looking at them.

Soon the dirt smudge on my nose came from having it stuffed in old books rather than pressed up against dirty glass and the paper women were replaced by one paper girl. Compared to the women hidden in my closet, she was an ugly girl too, with bushy hair and bucked teeth similar to my own. When I first met her, she was bullied just as I had been. It was not long before I began to relate to her. Then her character developed. Her intelligence was quickly revealed and she was loved for it. She was powerful and influential, yet often ignored. Like me, she was known among her classmates to always have her nose buried in a book; and she was mocked for it just as I was. However, it was the books that built her character, and so inspired me to follow suit.

Because of this paper girl, I stopped seeing myself as an "ugly sort of girl" and instead a smart girl and a powerful girl. It no longer mattered what I looked like as long as my mind was sharp and my tongue was quick. Before long, I was fascinated with the living woman behind the paper girl, someone I found even more inspiring. This woman called Rowling had built an entire world within her mind and used it to pull millions of children like me out of the dark pit of self-hate. She was a woman who shaped a generation into socially conscious adults in a world that thrives on the misfortune of others.

My house was the weird one on the block, full of witches and ugly little girls - but I learned to embrace it. I began to love witches and took pride in the rumors. The pretty little girls with bows in their hair could laugh as they pleased at my dirty nose and holes in my clothes. I would no longer let them shame me for what made me different, because my role models taught me that those things were of little importance - something I'd never have learned from beautiful women in magazines. My home became full of life and my mind full of wonder.