

# The Modern Woman

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“It is literally impossible to be a woman. You are so beautiful, and so smart, and it kills me that you don’t think you’re good enough. Like, we have to always be extraordinary, but somehow we’re always doing it wrong.” – Gloria (from Greta Gerwig’s *Barbie*)

## 1.

At maybe five or six years old, I met a new girl named Laura that had recently moved in across the street from my grandmother’s house on Barbie Court. While Grandma and the mother chatted in our front yard, I was spraying the hose to water her prized hydrangeas. She was shy, around a year younger than me, and had straight blonde hair compared to my frizzy ball of curls. We were playing around when I squeezed the nozzle on the hose just a little, enough to let a shower of tiny droplets down upon Laura on accident. The water quickly transformed into her tears as she complained of being wet just as quickly as I’d turned it on and off again.

My grandma harshly yanked the hose away from me and sprayed a cold, hard stream of water directly in my face. Perhaps a punishment that was soft to what she experienced growing up in a post-WWII world, lacking a thin switch or whooping belt to the backside.

“How do you like that, huh? Don’t do that again! Get inside!”

This time, it was my cue to cry. Dripping with water, I squeaked out an apology before running into the house to hide beneath the kitchen table. I was angry, apologetic, and scared of my grandma’s outburst.

*“I was playing. I didn’t mean to be mean,”* I chanted to myself in consolation.

When she stormed back into the house she continued her reprimand, “Don’t you ever do that again, you hear me? Did you like getting sprayed? No?”

Between sobs I was able to utter, “I—I—I I was just playiiiiing. I-I— didn’t mean it.”

“Quit your crying or I’ll give you a reason to cry, you baby. You’re fine. You have no reason to act like that.”

At the age of 32, I still think about this moment and what I learned: *It’s not*

*okay to feel how I feel*—or at least, it’s not okay to let others see it. This is one of many examples of how the women in my family are taught to tiptoe around on eggshells and turn the other cheek, condemning all those who don’t. My grandma grew up experiencing prejudice for being the darker skinned child of Welsh and Indigenous parents who were not taught that children had feelings. She was tough as nails because she had to be, especially when she entered relationships with men battling demons of alcoholism, infidelity, and indifference.

As I’ve grown older, I’ve learned that it is not just our family, rather there is something at large within modern society. Our men hide their poor behavior behind women’s fear of ridicule because they can, but more importantly, our women bury their feelings because they must—and the message continues that we *all* must. In Greta Gerwig’s 2023 film, *Barbie*, actress America Ferrera plays a single mom, Gloria, raising a young girl in a world that is constantly at odds with what it means to be a woman. Gloria shares a bold monologue about the societal expectations against women, including this line: “You have to never get old, never be rude, never show off, never be selfish, never fall down, never fail, never show fear, never get out of line.” I wonder if anyone in my grandmother’s life ever told her it was okay to be angry or to make a mistake, or even get out of line a little bit.

## 2.

I sat in the sterile patient room at Barrington Health Center for my one-week post-partum checkup at the age of 20. My body was uncomfortable—exhausted from sporadic sleep and my feeble attempts to get back to a “normal” schedule with a working partner and a newborn. My emergency C-section had been successful, but what I wasn’t prepared for was the aftermath.

“Hi Ashley, how have you been feeling this last week? And let’s look at those stitches,” my OBGYN said with a cheerful tone.

“Oh, uh, I’m okay. My body’s kinda having a hard time recovering but I guess it all looks okay. He’s doing great too.” I’d already relayed all this to the nurse, but by then I’d become accustomed to the two-step process of explaining to the nurse who greeted me before the doctor. I pulled my loose-fitting shirt up and yoga pants down a little to expose the 6” horizontal wound, whose stitches hardly had enough time to begin dissolving into the skin—another scarlet letter of my *new* life.

“Those look great! Just keep checking them each day and be sure to give us a call if they start to ooze or become infected, okay? Now, mentally, emotionally how are you feeling?”

“Uh, I don’t know. I’m out of the medicine from the hospital and I’m just

sitting around the house all day, I don't really get to do much. No one really calls to check on me." I answered quickly, but it felt like a loaded question. Internally I thought, *what can I say doc, everything has changed. I love my baby but it all feels so overwhelming. What if I can't do it?*

We continued through the list of standard questions before she determined that Zoloft would be a good fit for me. It had never occurred to me that I would ever need an anti-depressant, let alone that I could be experiencing post-partum depression just a week after birth. In 2024, it feels much more acceptable to discuss the reality of motherhood across all platforms, but being the first mother in my friend group, aged 19-21 in 2013, it felt unnatural and taboo. It was uncomfortable to have my entire life centered around this sweet little baby while everyone around me—if they even tried to be around at all—was still partying on the weekends.

The most interesting thing in my life had become engrained in motherhood, which I was expected to succeed in without a real support system, just a little pill to fix the chemical imbalance. Gloria puts to words the way I was beginning to feel, "you're supposed to love being a mother, but don't talk about your kids all the damn time." But it wasn't just my friends, the women in my family were also distant, despite being mothers themselves. There would be long stretches of time between hearing from my grandma or mother, causing an even deeper divide between my life before motherhood and after. But my entire life was now about taking care of my child, having no hobbies and limited social interactions, so what else was there to talk about?

### 3.

As a child, I longed to be a graceful and skilled dancer. If it weren't for my parents' low-income, I thought, I could have put in the hard work that was necessary to achieve this goal. One warm, summer day in the early 2000s, I rode shotgun with grandma in her blue Chevy van, travelling around the city of Franklin, IN running her errands.

"I want to be a ballerina; I want to dance around the stage!" I said wistfully, having recently watched performances like *Cats* and *Riverdance*.

"Well, I don't think that's going to work. You're just too big and too short to be a ballerina. Plus, those dancers start so young, you'd never catch up. I used to be thin like you and even then I couldn't have been one."

"Oh, but maybe I could start the classes?"

"Yeah," she scoffed, "like your mom is ever going to have the money for that. She can hardly cover the stuff you do need." Her criticisms of my mom, my

dreams, and any other woman were always just that, an immediate condemnation.

To be fair, it was the early 2000s. The ‘grunge-heroin chic’ look of the 90s turned into America’s Next Top Model anorexia but were really just later offspring of the ‘50s housewife aesthetic’ my grandmother grew up in. After little comments about my eating habits or how my clothes fit from Grandma and the other women in my family, I would spend hours watching thin models on TV, exercising incessantly, then binging hours later because I’d never be able to look like what I saw on TV. The voice that rang around in my head would say, *to be thin was to be beautiful, and to be fat was to be a failure*. It wouldn’t be until I was nearly 30 years old that I learned that plenty of other millennial women had felt the same way, or that my grandma, in all her anger, felt it too. *We weren’t good enough in our own skin*. There is always someone, somewhere (even within our own homes) who has something negative to say about the way our clothes fit, the way we walk, talk and cry.

Seemingly in response to the ‘Millennial Diet Culture,’ Gloria goes on to say, “You have to be thin, but not too thin.” The pressure to be *just enough* has always weighed heavily on me, in part because of the way the women in my family taught me about what the “right” body looked like. I look back at photos of the young girl I used to be and waves of sadness wash over me because the girl in those photos was certain she wasn’t thin enough or pretty enough; the girl I see when I look at them now is thin, at times too thin, but beautiful, nonetheless. I wonder why no one ever told me it was okay to *be okay* in my own skin, no matter what it looked like.

#### 4.

We sat in her kitchen, me on one side of the counter and her on the other, as she floured the surface to begin rolling out dough for our sweet bread. We spent many hours during my adolescent years doing just this. She would show me the proper way to prepare dough or how to can vegetables for the winter, hoping that I would take note, but the desire to be a ‘kitchen woman’ never really stuck—just the stories I would hear in between.

“Well, your no good grandfather slipped out on me during our honeymoon, drinking it up! Let alone, took off with some floozy after your uncle was born and then said it was my fault. Leaving me to raise two kids on my own. Anyway, here look at this, see how I’m doing it?”

My grandma, never a gentle woman when recounting the disparaging behavior of men after being scorned twice, had shared about my maternal grandfather before but not to this degree. The older I got, the more I learned about the misdeeds of men in my family and the toll it took. Nearly a decade later, Gloria

would boldly proclaim, “You have to answer for men’s bad behavior, which is insane, but if you point that out, you’re accused of complaining,” and answer for it my grandmother did. As a teen in the early 2010s, I wasn’t equipped with the tools to offer any sort of condolences other than a feeble, “Oh, I’m sorry. That is terrible.” To this day, little snippets into her past come out in casual conversation, seemingly out of nowhere, and switch topics just as swiftly. From everything to the alcoholic and cheating behavior of her second husband, my uncle’s DUIs, the “loser men” my mother has dated, and of course, the misdeeds of my son’s father.

I find that there is a stark difference between her experience as a young single mother and mine, shown primarily in the subtle shifts that have been happening between how we reflect on our experiences—not to mention I am still single, while by my age she’d already remarried. This new generation of women are starting to complain *justly* about the men that come into women’s lives no longer answering for their bad behavior—something my great-grandmother would never have done out loud; something my grandmother had to experience heartache to be able to speak out loud; something I am still fumbling my way through to understand.

## 5.

Gloria finishes her speech to a room full of Barbies with, “I’m just so tired of watching myself and every single other woman tie herself into knots so that people will like us. And if all of that is also true for a doll just representing women, then I don’t even know.” This was the mic-drop moment heard ‘round the world in 2023. I sat watching it months after its release in theatres, long after the discussion had already begun about what Gerwig had meant by it all. Countless reviews criticized the movie, though plenty heralded the thought experiment that it produced. Regardless of which side of the fence viewers were on, *Barbie* ignited a flame within me. If I have been so deeply affected by the “expectations of society,” then how could I have expected anything more from my grandmother and others of her generation?

Therapy and self-help books can now be found abundantly compared to the 1970s when she was in her 30s, teaching people of all kinds how to extend grace to themselves and how to stop tying themselves into knots to meet other people’s expectations. I have shelves filled with books on healthy relationships, self-acceptance, parenting, shame and family dysfunction. My grandma, as much as I love her and as much as she’s loosened her grip on anger, has none. I spent years fearful that I would end up as bitter as she was, but now I am starting to suspect I have all that I need to start living apart from fear.

What I find Gerwig’s greatest gift to her viewers was that we can break free from the mold and from the weight of expectations—from our expectations, not society’s. Countless memories highlight how our adolescence—and for some,

much of our adulthood—is dictated by thoughts like, “*if I looked like this*” or “*if I behaved like that*” then I would be lovable, then I would be enough. However, the older I get, the more I have started to ask what *I* really want, allowing that to be *enough*.