

No One's Mother, I Am Her Daughter

When I was ten, my mother walked by my bedroom with a basket of dirty laundry and saw me flip the light switch off with my elbow. She paused at my door. She'd told me to clean up my floor, and now glanced at the mess heaped too high in my own arms; grubby clothes, plastic cups, toys.

"You'll make a great mother one day." She grabbed the socks off the top half of my pile and moved on.

Her observation stuck with me as I grew through puberty. I treasured it—*you'll make a great mother one day*—proud that, at an early age, I was pre-disposed to a natural grasp of requisite mom-skills. I always pictured myself one day looking like her: constantly exhausted, half-adventurous and half-frustrated, cooking the same pesto pasta every night before two girls' dance classes, and springing together, like magic, Christmas on a shoestring budget. I wanted to be that. And I crowed inwardly: I'm a handless multi-tasker, undoubtedly ordained to be a formidable mother one day too.

True to that description, Mom cast no illusions. Little girls are encouraged to dream big about becoming a mother and dream hard for it. My own made it clear that motherhood was three-fourths treacherous and should be strenuously avoided until called upon. In high school, when I fell in love with a brown-eyed guitar-playing hippie from Western Pennsylvania named Lucas, my mother warned me about conception, gripping the steering wheel on the ride home from my first gynecologist appointment, "Don't do anything we'll have to fix later."

That terrified me into abstinence for a long, long time.

Her warning sparked an assumption that procreation might come a little too easily for me, a little too fast. Maybe it was because I didn't have a reason to assume otherwise: school tended to go pretty smoothly for me; I had a wide-range of both talents and friends; things I wanted I could generally find a way to get (except for those Delia*s pea coats everyone else seemed to

have in 2001. I was too poor for anything but a boring choker accessory). My thinking aligned my prophesied mom-powers with my exceptionally powerful reproductive organs.

My mother married my dad when she was 23 and had my sister when she was 29; my brother two years later. Her first pregnancy was immediate; her second was so effortless it happened while she still was using an IUD. Erin and Michael looked like my dad, so I was the one to look like her. My need to be the matriarch of my own tight-knit family was strong, and it grew stronger as my ovaries revved up the monthly production line. In order to orchestrate my motherhood into existence at the ideal time, I assembled my toolkit—birth control, good boyfriends, college degree, protected sex, probiotics—and my vision board: free from my mother’s rote 80s mold, I’d marry at 28 (hair glossy); bask in two years of blissful marriage and first-world travel; build a bold career (starlet); immediately conceive (natch); labor quickly (no drugs); and bundle into my palms a little girl who looked exactly like me. Fast and easy, successful and beautiful.

As planned, I married my college sweetheart at 28; eighteen months later my health took a nosedive. I suffered a major brain injury, an emergency craniotomy to correct it, followed by years of grand mal seizures, depression swings, and all the complications that come with trauma. My husband Josh and I traipsed into every office of every neurologist in Los Angeles and the only thing they all agreed on was this: do not get pregnant. Not now.

Wait until we know the meds work.

So I turned 30 without fanfare; then 31, 32, and 33. Life seemed to get harder for me as it got happier for everyone else. I lost my jobs. Friends began to have fat, little babies; so did cousins, my older sister Erin. I went on Lexapro. Second children were born, thirds. My license was revoked after a seizure, I got it back, had another episode and lost it again. Women had baby showers and “sprinkle lunches” and first birthdays. For every celebration, I Prime-ordered the kiddie bath towel that everyone always loved. It looked like a unicorn.

Great gifts threw people off the scent: I raged with jealousy. I didn’t look like my mother anymore; I barely looked like myself. My head had been shaved pre-surgery so I kept it short in self-punishment and winced to think strangers might glance over and get it: she is seriously unwell. I

obsessively ran my fingers down the hairless craniotomy scar that curved over my skull, hating that my future kid could trace their fingers down it too and never know a time when their mother didn't wear it.

And still, I ached to have a child myself one day, I wanted it even more desperately. Selfishly. *What am I doing wrong?* The old plan had been so airtight. How do I move forward? My old plan had been so focused. My old plan was dust blowing around our bedroom. We bought a king mattress to fill the space up. And waited.

Monday mornings at 8 a.m I would call Mom at her home in Philadelphia while I walked the dog, wailing about this life I didn't choose and these horrifically fertile friends, and she'd soothe me, repeating her all-encompassing mantra, "This too shall pass, Teresa. It will all pass."

Infuriating. But if I cried too hard, she'd say, "Do you want me to come there? I'll come."

"No," I'd brush her off. "Don't come." I would lose my strings if that mantra was repeated to my face.

On the cusp of 34, I had reached the age of my mother when she had me, her third and final child. Josh and I had been married for 5 ½ years. I had taken all my pills, gotten off others not befitting a fetal spine, and with my driver's license in hand, my doctors confirmed: *we're good to go.*

And it worked. On the first try, I was pregnant. For just a few tiny weeks, I was going to have that baby.

I resolved never to tell Mom about the miscarriage. I hadn't even wanted her to know we'd officially tried. She would have gotten too excited while hope had become punitive for me: *if you get too happy, you might be building a bomb in the living room.*

Months passed: no more miscarriages but no more pregnancies either. Attempted parenthood overlapped with an anti-convulsant medication that pummeled me with vertigo spells so strong I only had one sweet spot midday when I could open my eyes and walk a straight line. But I took the epilepsy meds with the lowest fetal risk for one reason, in order to keep trying for our healthy child.

When I suffered another seizure, this time alone in my car, hope kicked back.

On the phone with her, I had a panic attack. She insisted she come. I warded her off, “No, Mom, please don’t.”

Pause. “I already bought the plane ticket.”

In the background, I heard my sister’s three kids running around her living room, screaming at each other over the din of “Daniel Tiger” on the television. “I’m coming,” she stated.

Two days later, while Josh and I met with my neurologist, she patiently read her book in the waiting room.

“You just don’t take to this anticonvulsant well,” the doctor said. “But as long as you’re trying to get pregnant, we can’t replace it. So, we’ll switch the dosage.”

Josh asked if the medication change would affect our baby-making timeline. The doctor looked blank. “Don’t do anything until after the dosage change is over. Then wait three months. At least.”

“Wait three months,” I thought. “Just wait for the landscape to change.” Yeah, that’s it. “I’m a downright champion rule-follower,” I consoled myself, “so I will become the best mother-in-waiting.” Yes, that’s it.

We drove home in silence, my mother in the backseat. *Just steel myself for bad to roll over to good before it rolls back again.* I squeezed my imagination to make myself fit into the vision of a successful mother; loving and wise, seizing on a nursery floor.

It wouldn’t work. Maybe I shouldn’t wait, maybe, at this stage, I should just avoid. Motherhood couldn’t be about moving on to a new life. It must be one life spilling into another. Mine spilled everywhere, on everyone around me; maybe it would be best to just shut down the inane dream then and there. *Let it die on its own.*

When we got home that afternoon, Mom waited patiently while I screamed in the alley behind the garages. I buried my face into her freckled warm shoulder and wailed as she said my name quietly, over and over, like she was gently tying my boat to the pier.

We splashed around in a waist-deep wading pool near my house, and she chattered while I pretended to listen. I hated my friends, I hated my sister, I hated myself. She said that she had begun reading the *Outlander* books for the third time; there was a memorable sentence that particularly moved her in the fifth book about the stillness of pine trees in North Carolina.

I burned inside; I hated my broken skull, my bloody brain, my defunct uterus. She waxed on about her plants and my nephew, who would turn 7 in October. She talked as if we were simply two women standing around in a cool, wet box trading anecdotes about our small lives.

I finally couldn't take her musings about the neighbor's walk-in overtaking the reverberating self-hate inside of me. I yelled, "This is never going to happen for me."

She stopped. Came again to me, pushing water aside. Nothing to say, because she had been talking and talking just to save me from verbalizing my fear.

As we walked home, I glanced over. She marched, her towel flung over her shoulder, her toes squeaking in her wet Crocs, smiling a little as she glanced around at the bougainvillea cascading over neighborhood patios. The afternoon was still beautiful. She was with her full-grown daughter, in her bathing suit, walking past blooming walls.

My mother was the one who taught me how to build a fire, how to gauge the perfect moment to jump headfirst into the Jersey Shore's brown waves, how to use the family camera and cut Jell-O into stars. She defined motherhood: she was a person who created things. Fixed things. Watched her daughter fight in a million ways against dying too early, whether in a car or in a pool or in her own brain. Promised things she couldn't ever deliver, just to make her child feel stronger, safer, for as long as necessary.

I'd thought her promise was that her body was mine and her world mine too. But what she had said—*you will make a great mother one day*—it was never about my journey to motherhood, it was hers. She had a child to care for, but herself too. What else was she doing that day when I was 10 and she was 44 and we were both carrying piles of our dirty things?

Mom never meant that I would become her. She only recognized my real natural talents: I was resourceful, resilient, a creative problem-solver, all that she had to be when she had children. She wanted me to believe what she already knew: *you are strong enough to keep moving if you hold something heavy.*

I stopped walking. Standing on the sidewalk in dripping pool-water, I said slowly, "It doesn't matter if I change, does it? Or if you get another

grandchild that looks like us or I can't get away from this. I'll be to you like I always was."

She stopped too, a little ahead.

Her face melted into a soft cloud; the puffy lines around her mouth and a display of crinkles splayed around her eyes. "Yes."

I hung my head. She wrapped me into the valley of her shoulder where heavy bra straps had permanently sunk into her skin and held me where nothing had happened; not the neurologist or the last-minute flight, not the injury at all.

That flash of a moment when I was 10, when she was walking quickly down the hallway, what she had said was never about the light switch; it was about the elbow. *If your arms are too full, if the switch is too high, help is too far, if I'm not there, that's when you look beyond your hands, and that's how you reach the light anyway.*

Use whatever you've got, she may as well have said. You'll need to. That's what mothers do.