

Mother Me

I did not plan on being a mother, at least not at age nineteen. At age eighteen I made my excited departure from home prepared for all the adventure that independence promised! I barely said goodbye to my parents when they dropped me off at my dorm. Almost as soon as they left, I began singing and dancing to what would be the soundtrack of my college life: *I'm in control... and I love it!* I may have had Janet Jackson's song on repeat, but the sentiment behind the words became disconnected from my reality about 11 months later. My parents had come to visit me for the weekend to catch up on how my first year at college had been. The conversation probably was not the one they imagined, and a few hours after they arrived, we were headed back home: my parents, me and the daughter taking shape in my belly.

My parents never said that I disappointed them. Instead, they almost immediately went into planning mode. They were the real dynamic duo, taking charge of every aspect of my immediate future and the future of the new addition to our family. I was relieved and saddened at the discovery that Janet Jackson had lied to me. Turning 18 in no way translated into being in control. I felt like I had failed everyone who had ever had good thoughts about me, and along with the burden of my own disappointment in myself, I could feel the weight of a new identity being thrust upon me. *Mother? ME?* I was not prepared to even think about what it meant to be a mother, and whatever thoughts I had were crushed with the knowledge that I was in no way equipped to live up to motherhood. Nevertheless, just as the adage suggests, I had made my bed, so I had to lie in it. Since I couldn't afford a bed for myself or for my daughter (not to mention sheets, blankets, diapers, bottles... you get the picture), my parents helped me to accept my new role using the "tough love" equation (heavy on the love).

I wanted to be a “good mother,” but probably not for the right reasons. I wanted to redeem my parents’ faith in me. I knew what people thought about single parents, especially young African American single parents, and I was determined to defy those stereotypes. I had broken-up with my daughter’s father several months before she was born, and he had subsequently decided to continue his carefree and independent life as a college student and not participate in her life, so I wanted to win the “break-up” game and prove that I was the better, stronger, more worthy person. I wanted to realign my life with God’s will and not feel so lost and broken. Doing the things that a “good mother” did seemed to be the best way to achieve all those objectives, and I was willing to make whatever sacrifice was necessary. So, I did the things I had seen my mother do and tried my best to have a loving and selfless attitude while I mothered the tiny, soft-skinned, doe-eyed, caramel colored little person that everyone kept telling me was a precious gift. The responsibility was awesome, but honestly, my connection to her was just average. I kept waiting for that feeling that so many mothers describe having immediately after holding their newborn. In all the movies, somehow, the pain of childbirth is quickly forgotten. The agony and sweat turn into unspeakable joy and tears. Even the bible says that “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world (John 16:21). Months passed and although I was being a “good mother,” that joy was elusive. I felt more like a babysitter.

By the time my daughter was four months old, I had become very efficient at the mothering thing – so much so that I was even multi-tasking! One day after I had given her a bottle and burped her, I decided I would do laundry. The hum and vibration of the dryer would put her to sleep while I sorted and folded clothes. The words,

“I just turned my back for a second” almost always precede the description of accidents that occur while children are in the care of parents, and this story is no different. In the seconds that I turned my back to pick up a piece of clothing, my daughter disappeared. When I turned back around, the baby seat was gone! Could someone have walked into the laundry room and taken her? For about ten seconds I looked frantically around the basement room trying to find her and overpower my heart that felt like it would race right out of my body. When I fell to my knees, I saw the baby seat in front of me on the floor turned over. The feeling of relief only lasted a moment when I realized that there was no sound coming from beneath the upside-down seat that had fallen off the dryer and landed on the concrete floor.

TEA! TEA! TEA! TEA! TANISHA WAKE UP! OH PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE WAKE UP! TEA! OH MY BABY, PLEASE DON'T DIE! PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE! TEA! TANISHA! WAKE UP! OH GOD.... OH GOD... PLEASE, PLEASE! DON'T TAKE MY BABY! PLEASE TEA WAKE UP! PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE!

I was too hysterical to figure out if Tea was breathing, let alone injured. Somehow, I managed to call 911, and soon after we were in an ambulance on our way to the hospital. I don't remember much of what happened in the transition between the ambulance ride and Tea being taken in for observation, but for days after, my ears rang with the loud screaming that I can only assume was my own. What I do remember about being at the hospital is Tea being taken from me, and several people including a social worker asking me questions that didn't seem relevant or make sense to me at the time. The tone of almost everyone who questioned me was suspicious and accusatory. It seemed like hours passed before anyone would give me any information about her condition, no matter how much I pleaded,

saying, “I am her *mother!*” Finally, a doctor told me that Tea wasn’t injured, and that she had very likely been asleep through the entire ordeal, but they still had more questions for me...about me. I didn’t understand why I couldn’t just take her home, and I didn’t fully understand what was *really* happening until the social worker asked me if I was angry before Tea fell.

Oh my God...they think I did this to her on purpose! They think I tried to hurt her!

During the quiet and anxious minutes that I spent in the waiting area, I just wanted to be able to hold Tea in my arms and kiss her little brown fingers and toes. I wanted to smell her baby breath and hear her little sighs and coos. I just wanted to take *my baby* home and mother her for the rest of her life. I was completely distraught, wondering if she would be returned to me or if the dispassionate woman with the ID badge would decide I was not fit to be a mother.

When I saw my mother rush through the waiting room doors, my whole being deflated into a familiar feeling. It was the same feeling I had felt at six years old as she came running out of the house at the beckoning of my scream when a neighborhood boy (the self-declared president of “the Hate Pam Club”) had pushed me onto the ground. I felt the same way a couple years later as she smoothed down the fabric of the Halloween costume that she had sewn for me on her machine. I was completely convinced that love (and maybe a little bit of thread) held together the unique design of my “Freddie Mae Fordham” original! The feeling was the same one I felt at every school assembly and softball game when she showed up to cheer me on. Better than a fan or cheerleader, more motivational than a coach or mentor, more influential than an advocate – Freddie Mae Fordham had shown up once again to save the day.

Within minutes of her arrival, the analysis of my ability to care for Tea ceased, and she was released. All the directions and paperwork were given to my mother, and even the nurse reached across me to pass Tea into my mother's arms. I was completely overwhelmed with the joy of being able to take Tea home and the fury of being so poorly regarded by the hospital staff, but I held my peace so I could hold onto what may have been my last shred of dignity. When we got in the car to go home, my mom handed Tea to me and I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed until the last of my childhood flowed from my nose and eyes. When I opened them, Tea's soft brown eyes were looking into mine. They seemed to be saying, *mother me*.