

Please Mommy?

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“Please Mommy?”

The young child’s face turns upward, innocence still present, a mouth pure – never yet used to hurt another, and desperate eyes magnified by the coke bottle sized lens in his black-rimmed glasses. A child’s wants, yet not the kind that brings annoyance. Nothing as selfish as more cake or some toy he really does not need. This plea was pure in the making. Again, he directs his desire toward his mother – my mother.

“I can do it.” I say determinedly.

My mother’s face has turned away slightly, not willing to bear the pain she sees in her child. A pain she has seen too often. A pain that hurts her in ways I am not aware of, nor should I be, at least not then.

As I look into my mom’s face I do not see the tiredness she struggles to shake off. I do not understand that she is working 10 to 12 hours a day, trying to keep her family clothed, fed, and housed. I do not comprehend the stress she is under, coming from a long day serving others, to coming home to serving us. Her life is full of nothing but work and too little sleep.

At times she must look into a mirror and see a beautiful young woman passing through life in a way she had not planned; a woman yearning to be free, to do young things again, to hang out with friends, to go on dates, to dance.

“Please, one more time.” I say, interrupting her inner debate. Sending me to bed would be the smart thing, but would it be the right thing?

The blackness of the night has enveloped the small kitchen where we sit. My brother and sister have been asleep for some time. I have remained with my mom –my only real hope of surviving the day that is to come. Spread out on the table before us are books and paper. A pencil rests in my hand ready to continue the lesson. A lesson we have gone over time and time again. A lesson that most my age would have understood by now. A lesson that bored her the first time, yet a lesson I have not conquered.

My mother says this scene was common. From the moment of my birth I never understood failure even when it surrounded me. Defeat I understood but it was temporary; failure is permanent. Defeat is a thing that happens; failure is a state of mind.

So, that night, like so many others, I wanted to continue, and on that night, my mom let me. I was her responsibility and she loved me. It was not what she wanted to do; it was what she needed to do. She has spoken of her mixed emotions. Her love tainted by frustrated resentment and her pure selfless desires blended with understandable egocentric needs, all mixed with guilt.

So what path in life got us to this table? What passions do we praise or blame?

I sit and stare into the black and white photo of my beginnings on earth. I see a young couple whose joy has been captured and frozen in a frame. They are standing in my grandmother's kitchen. Behind them the door leading to the back yard is open in an impossible attempt to cool the house with the hot, humid night

air. There is no such thing as cool in the middle of June in Belton, Texas. In 1958 the house didn't even have a window air conditioner. My mother says she struggled to keep her hair in place and keep the sweat from showing. My father was covered with a sharp-looking suit and must have been soaked under his white shirt and blue tie.

They are standing in front of a table that holds only one thing, a cake. It is not store-bought but made by a loving mother and grandmother. The multi-layers are covered with butter crème icing and decorated in blue to match my mom's dress. It is the same dress she wore at her prom. I smile as I look at the cake because it looks like it is warped. My mom says it was melting from the heat.

The story that counts is not the weather or melting cake, nor the five-minute wedding in the living room. Their story begins with the youthful passion of a nineteen-year-old boy and a fifteen-year-old girl who met through friends. This connection begins when their eyes meet, hands touched and then their first kiss allowed lips to taste an addiction that would never really be forgotten. That day marked a journey, which, 13 months later resulted in the wedding picture I have on my desk.

As most passionate relationships do, this one had as much drama as it had love. Their young age meant they had no life experience to draw on to help control the fire in their hearts. Reason was used as a last resort and bold emotional reaction paved their path.

They did not need each other. I am told my father was a ladies man and my mom was a jaw-dropping gorgeous young woman! In the picture, she is only

sixteen, yet looks more like a twenty-year-old starlet. A stunning brunette with a shapely figure and confident smile meant she too could have anyone she chose, and she chose love. She received a marriage proposal from another man after a break up with my father. She had accepted this man's ring, more out of anger toward my father, yet her heart would have nothing to do with it, so she gave it back, made up with my father and gleefully accepted his proposal for marriage.

Once they said, "I do," they battled the humid evening, ate a little melted cake and started their life together in a motel room on the road between their old life and the Camelot they envisioned their lives would be. My mom said they spent the night, as newlyweds do; yet also filled the night air with laughter. They were so giddy and happy they just could not stop laughing. It would be the best night of their life together.

Nine months after the picture was taken my brother was born. They had not planned on having a child so soon, but they welcomed him with love. Camelot was not perfect, yet they still had love's passion on their side, so the rest did not matter as much.

They determined they would be more careful and would not have another child until they decided they were ready. Nineteen months later I was born. I was not planned and they were not ready. Camelot was forgotten, yet love was still a driving force and passion its partner. They no longer saw each other in the same way. There were cracks in their relationship, yet it still held its form.

I posed problems from the start. I came too early, weighed too little and would not drink any kind of formula. Each week, when I should have gained weight, I did

not. No matter what they fed me it made me sick. This made me cry. I cried a lot. I could not be comforted and my parents got little rest. My mom suffered from depression and guilt. She was the mother and weren't all mothers supposed to be able to care for their children? The constant noise escaping my mouth irritated her ears and the guilt penetrated her heart. She wanted me to be well and she wanted peace so after a number of weeks the doctor recommended rabbits milk.

My parents would have gladly tried this if they had had the money to buy it. The cost of one day's worth of rabbit's milk would have used a weeks' worth of grocery money for the entire family, so my mom, in desperation, did what she was told not do – she feed me whole milk. She watered it down and added a little carob syrup and fed it to me. I ate it. I liked it. It did not make me sick and I stopped crying.

For a time I was healthy and happy. This gave my mom some needed rest and the family a needed break from the continuous stress. My parent's marriage was only held together by their continuing passion. They still loved each other but that love was bruised, and their youthful idealism was fading and would be gone within four years.

Then the event that would forever define my life happened.

Once a week my mom would get the use of the only car the family owned and would drive to my grandmothers to wash clothes. These trips were pleasant times for her. She was able to get out of the house for most of the day and visit her mother. It gave my grandmother time to see her grandchildren and help my mom look after us.

After lunch my mom took us to her old room for our afternoon nap. While we went to sleep, my mom and grandmother talked and finished the laundry. Within a short time of putting us to bed and the smell of fresh folded laundry filling the kitchen, my mom seemed to freeze as a feeling of fear swept over her. She knew something was wrong and she knew it was about me.

Entering the room, she could see I was sick. She reached for me and could feel the heat coming off my body, even before her soft hand touched my face. I was engulfed in a fever. When they checked my temperature, it was unreadable because the thermometer they used only went to a 103F.

The friend is too often seen as the enemy. A fever is not the disease; it is a warning that an infection is present and more importantly it is a cure. A person's immune system will produce a fever to kill the virus because most viruses cannot survive above 99F. In this way, a fever is your friend. As long as the fever is not caused by an outside source, such as a heat stroke, a high temperature lets you know there is a real enemy it is fighting, and it is rare that a fever will do any damage unless it climbs too high and stays too long.

The trusted friend can become a dreaded foe. My mom's instincts were right. At thirteen months I was too hot and she quickly took me to the family doctor. The first reading at Dr. Hamilton's office was 103.6 and I was moved to a hospital in Killeen, Texas. When we reached the hospital my temperature had reached 105. Now they were all worried. In 1961 the limits of medical knowledge and lack of modern treatments made a high sustained fever a serious matter.

For six days my temperature stayed between 106 and 107. The doctors and nurses tried to bring down the temperature. They bathed me in water and used cooling sheets. It did not help. They gave me medicines. It did not help. They took test after test to find the cause of the fever but failed. They sent the samples to another hospital, yet they could find no infection, no cause. They could not help. I stayed in the hospital for days, giving off a deadly heat, and nothing they did helped. My body was engaged in a war with an invisible foe and the fire meant to destroy that foe was slowly burning me from the inside.

My mom's trusted doctor came to her bearing the type of news doctors never want to share. He told my mom he could not save me. He said I would soon be in a coma caused by the fever. That a fever this high and for so long would kill me.

Mom did not cry. She was not afraid, because she did not believe him. It was not some desperate hope, or a disbelieving denial, nor was it simple faith. My mom said she knew I would not die. She didn't believe it, she knew. So, while others reacted to the news in sadness and tried to comfort her, she simply remained silent in the knowledge that I would continue to be.

I did not die. I never fell into a coma. I drank fluids from my bottle. I slept. I cried. Mom says I was a miserable baby, but I kept fighting. I never gave up. All others were amazed, but not my mom. While those around her smiled and praised God, my mom maintained her knowing silence.

The doctor come to her again, this time explaining that it was true I had lived, yet the temperature had burnt me so severely that I would always remain in a vegetative state, never walking or talking again. The left side of my body had

already shut down. I could no longer move my left arm or leg. They feared the right side would soon follow.

My mom did not cry. She knew the doctor was wrong. She knew that was not to be my fate. Instinctively she knew I was a fighter, that despite the odds, I would be ok.

My mom and the nurses kept rubbing and moving my limbs and soon I started to move them on my own. I waved my hands, moved my head, and wiggled my feet. Everyone else was relieved and joyful. My mom remained in her knowing silence.

The doctor again approached my mother. This time he said it was a miracle I was able to move, but the damage to my brain still remained, that I would not be like most boys. I would be mentally handicapped. I would never grow beyond the reasoning of a child, never go to school, and never be the man I might have been.

My mom did not cry. She knew he was wrong. My life did not hold such a fate.

The doctor had more bad news. He also told her I would be blind. That the fever had damaged the optic nerves in my eyes and that could not be repaired.

My mom did not cry. She knew that he might be a great doctor, but he did not know her son. She silently held me in her arms, knowing that all would be well.

The doctor was wrong. I am still alive. I am not blind. I am not mentally disabled. I did go to school, did do as other boys do, and hopefully am more of a man than she had hoped for. My mom knew I would find a way.

There was a cost. Even the miracle of a child's life saved could not prevent scars. The first price paid was that all I had learned in my thirteen months on earth

had been erased. I was a newborn again. I had to relearn all I had ever learned. To grasp, to hold my head up, to look around, to vocalize, to roll over, to play, to sit, to crawl, to eat, to stand, to wave, to smile, to laugh, to say, "Mama."

My eyes were also scarred. I was not blind, yet the fever did damage the optical nerves in both eyes, damage that cannot be repaired, even with all the medical advances we have today. I have severe optic atrophy. My pale nerve fibers mean I have very poor vision even with glasses. My eyes have never seen a sky full of stars, yet I can see, and for every beauty that escapes my eyes, my mind fills in.

Mentally I am sharp. I comprehend and understand as well as most. I can learn, read, and reason. I am no better or worse than the average person. My grades in school were just below average but passing. My difficulty was in the need to have more time to learn. My school did not allow teachers to spend that much time with one student. Most also did not understand that it was not my mind that could not learn, there was just a connection that took a little longer to light up. Once that connection was made, my understanding was keen.

I still do not read or learn as quickly as most. The connection from word to brain takes longer, more likely because of my eyesight. This has not stopped me, yet it has been a challenge. Today it is almost unnoticeable, yet when I was a child, it was much more difficult. I had not learned to adapt to my limitations. I had not learned to use my strengths to bypass my weaknesses, however what I lacked in ability, I made up for in determination. I never believed I could not learn, so I never stopped trying. I never understood that others could comprehend or read more quickly than I, just as I did not realize that others could look up on a clear night and

see thousands of stars flickering against the black background of space. I always assumed that others looked up at night and saw what I saw, the moon surrounded by blackness.

This brings us back to the small kitchen where a boy and his mother sit. Many things could have happened that would have left the table empty that night, yet the echoes of the past remain as they happened and that night, and others like it, played as an important role in my life as the fever that forever changed me or my parents' marriage that made me.

I think the bible tells us not to judge one another because the life of an individual is too complex for any soul to truly grasp. We, who live this life cannot fully understand or appreciate how complex our own lives can be. The very real and intertwined points of experience we move through determine not only the next point of experiences we will live but perhaps every point for the rest of our existence.

When my mom looks back at her life as a mother, she has regrets. She looks at all she might have done to mold us into whom we became. She looks at our life choices - our mistakes, and wonders what she could have done to prevent them. She looks at each of our lives and when she sees misery, sadness, or pain she will take on that hurt and then blame becomes her companion. I am not a parent and don't understand what it must be like to hold a child in your arms and take on a responsibility of another soul, yet I do wonder why she does not take as much credit for our successes, our happiness, and for all the great things we do and are.

When I look at my mom, I remember the story of that night, for in the light of that small room, when I felt the surrounding darkness of hopelessness moving in on me, my mom said yes. In doing so she filled her son with hope and more importantly, filled him with a mother's love. In that one instant, she anchored my soul with the knowledge that I was loved, that I was important, that there was a person in my life who believed in me. Despite what the doctors, teachers, specialists, government workers, and even family members said; there were two voices that night that said you can do anything you believe you can. My voice alone would never have been enough. I needed that second voice, the most important voice in my life at the time. I needed her voice - her faith.

If my mom insists on judging her motherhood, this is the type of thing she should be judged. I now know how difficult it was for her to make these decisions. I understand everything she did was not perfect, how could it be, yet when it came to what really mattered, she came through. I don't believe parenthood is about perfection, it is the loving bond the parent gives a child that gives him the self-assurance needed to successfully live a life of meaning. Yes, that foundation can come from other people as well, but mine came from my mom. She loved me. She believed in me. When she did not want to, she said "yes".