

*“But I can get a new dad, right?”*

## Being All the Things

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It's five-fifteen and my eyes open of their own accord from an active dreamscape. I am all the way at the edge of the bed, about to fall off, and my son's head is nestled into the crook of my shoulder. I gingerly lift it off my arm so I can extract my body and hopefully get to writing. Suddenly, it occurs to me that I left a load of laundry in the washer, thinking I would get up to transfer it to the dryer after I put Maurice to bed, but I was too tired and slept right through. Before I can even stand up, though, he notices the warmth of my body is gone and says, "Mommy, come back and lie down with me." I oblige, hoping he'll drift right back to sleep, but when I get in on the other side of the bed it's cold and urine-soaked—no wonder he'd pushed me so far to one side of the bed! Exasperated, I return to the other side and snuggle in.

As I lie there, I begin to try and work out the logistics of the laundry, calculating how I'm going to get the bed linens washed and transferred to the dryer before we go to sleep tonight. The process is made more complicated by the ones sitting in the washer now. I wanted to wake up early to write, but childcare and running the household takes over. I am grateful I have a washer/dryer in my apartment, but I'm also looking for a new place to stay, as we need to downsize, and I don't know that I'll have this convenience wherever we go next, even though it's essential to my

ability to continue pursuing my writing and scholarship outside of my other commitments. Renting in Los Angeles is expensive, and renting for a family on one measly educator's salary is hard.

When Maurice seems sufficiently asleep, I try and sneak away again. I begin to deal with the laundry and realize I have to unload the laundry basket before I can unload the dryer before I can move the wet clothes. My shuffling around in the bedroom to put away the clothes wakes my son again. "Is it wake-up time?" I tell him no, and he sits up straight as an arrow and loudly says, "What did you say?"

I tell him it's not wake-up time and miraculously, he puts his head back down on the pillow, and that's the end of it. Forty-five minutes after I first tried to get up to write, I finally manage to get my fingers on the keyboard, the dryer running in the background and the early sun pouring in the living room windows.

I SHARE MY STORIES of mothering as a way of exploring the intersection of various identity markers—especially age and class, since my experience of being an older parent is inextricably linked with family culture, social location, and the expectations that accompany both. I certainly don't pretend to write for all older parents; I speak from my limited perspective and the incredible privilege that comes along with being a highly educated, American-born white woman, whose long-retired parents are comfortable enough to provide significant financial support to me and my child, even if their age and geographical distance precludes them from helping out in other ways.

THE IRONY IS THAT I ended a pregnancy when I was seventeen, feeling certain there wasn't a soul who would support me in making a different decision; at the time, I understood my parents' response to mean they would not provide me any financial or material assistance and that I quite literally would be on my

own. But I don't think it's a huge stretch to say the challenges I face as a single, forty-three-year-old with a PhD are not all that different from the ones I would have faced had I been a single parent earlier in life. Now there are varied roles to balance, which complicates things, though parenting is certainly made easier in that I have a significant safety net I can count on—in a way I at least thought I couldn't, twenty-five years ago.

This easy access to wealth seems wildly inequitable to me; it's also what allowed me to pursue higher education without having to maintain a day job. And it makes me wonder if the experience of becoming a parent after forty is reserved only for those with social and economic privilege. Many older parents take on the expense of fertility treatments or international adoption, and, if single, add that to the burden of being a sole income-earner raising and supporting a child.

My journey to parenthood involved a period of intense grieving tied to my adolescent abortion and centered around the impending loss of my fertile years. I had no committed relationship to leave open the possibility that pregnancy might happen in the context of a partnership, and I wasn't interested in adopting or exploring IVF. I had settled into real peace around having a life without the experience of parenting. Then, not long before my thirty-ninth birthday, I became pregnant the old-fashioned way and happily welcomed a child into my world. The other party took the same risks I did, which led to the pregnancy, but wasn't the least interested in becoming a parent. For the most part, it's just been me and my son ever since.

"YOU'RE MY BEST MOMMY," Maurice says at bedtime as he snuggles his head into my shoulder, what he's long called his "nest." I wonder how long it will last. I'm already fearing those tiny losses, as he becomes too big to call me *mommy* or want to spoon as he falls asleep.

“I’m your only mommy,” I deflect, as I often do.

“And you’re my best mommy.” He pauses briefly. “My dad isn’t.”

I ponder these words, knowing that he’s thinking about Dad and family more as Father’s Day approaches and they spend an inordinate time on this arbitrary commercial holiday at his preschool, which is more a glorified daycare. In LA, public, subsidized schools are reserved for very low-income families, and many preschools in Los Angeles have multiyear waiting lists and price tags to match. Whether or not they’d be more desirable to me—embodying antibias and culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive language, and the like—is questionable, and they’d most definitely be far whiter, which wouldn’t be appealing at all.

Before I can respond, Maurice continues, “Remember at the train playground? With my dad? I dropped my thermos and he wanted me to pick it up. That was a long time ago.”

It was six months ago, in fact, when we last saw his dad. And to him, it must feel like an eternity. I tell him as much and add that it’s really too bad that happened. Then Maurice says, “But I can get a new dad, right?”

“Well, we’d have to meet someone and decide we really like them and they really like us, and maybe they start hanging around a little more often and we see what happens—just like with any of our friends.”

“Maybe I could get a dad and two moms!” Maurice adds enthusiastically.

“Maybe,” I respond warmly, so enamored of my son and his openness to different family arrangements, his ability to question the norms presented to him at school. Still, there is ambivalence, as there may always be for me—a kernel of wishing for something else, something that looks more like what I’ve been conditioned to believe is the proper family structure, of wishing his biological father could have a meaningful relationship with my son (and

perhaps me, too), no matter how difficult it actually is to be in relationship with him.

I COULD HAVE a near-twenty-five-year-old, had it been a socially acceptable choice to continue a pregnancy when I was seventeen. It wasn't. That could-have-been child could ostensibly have their own child by now, and I could be a grandmother; I certainly have the gray hair and the physical exhaustion to prove it (bending over to tie my child's shoes is a loathsome exercise). So I really shouldn't be surprised when people ask if my now-three-year-old is my grandchild. I certainly don't blame them. While it may be at least vaguely normal for people like me to become a parent for the first time at forty, in many cultures both outside and within the United States, having a child at this time in life would only really happen at the tail end of one's childbearing, not as a first-timer.

HONESTLY, I'm more startled when strangers ask if I'm my son's therapist (yes, this actually happened), or the babysitter, or when they say, "Where did you get him from?" or, "He can't be yours, you must have adopted him" (yes, people actually say this too). These sorts of comments probably have less to do with my age and more to do with his and my skin color being quite different, but they have a similar effect, as far as imposing a particular norm of what family is supposed to look like. I try and receive these comments with a hermeneutic of generosity, but it's difficult. People may just be curious, but their lack of imagination and implied judgment is unwelcome.

In addition to the challenges that come with being a one-parent, multiracial family, the challenges I face as an older parent are particular to my social location. It's daunting, to say the least, to complete a dissertation while single-handedly raising a young child and determining how to effectively chart a postdoctorate career path in my early forties, knowing I want to be around for

my child while also earning enough to provide for him, yet also being overlooked by many potential employers for either lack of teaching or publication credentials (I was parenting!) or for being out of the nonacademic workplace for so long (I was pursuing higher education!).

The PhD was a labor and birth as significant as having a child, and, these days, this society values that time, emotional commitment, and intellectual stewardship about as much as it does reproductive labor. It makes me question how much second-wave feminism really did for us. We have the option to pursue a career and higher education, but only at the expense of becoming a parent. We have the option to become a parent, but it is far more difficult if we try and do that outside of a traditional family structure, where there is at least one high-wage-earning member of the parenting dyad. However we end up managing parenting and our career, we are virtually on our own, and the person who assumes primary childcare responsibilities during the especially intensive parenting years will be penalized in terms of earning potential and career development. We need a personal safety net if we want to parent alone.

People are becoming parents at an older age through various means and in various family constellations, but at what cost? Is it only an option available to people who have access to significant income and/or wealth? As older parents with the power and privilege that come with delaying parenting in the first place, how can we use that power for good? What can our own experience of marginalization—the burden of which we may feel in only some small way, as compared to other parents with fewer resources—do to help us better respond to the oppressive cultural narratives and public policies at play? I don't have the answers to these questions, but I navigate them in my everyday interactions, where we bump up against some of the complex realities attached to identity and the values I hope to instill in my child.

MAURICE IS ASKING ABOUT when he can come see me at my school. I don't really know. He says, "Who's your teacher, Mommy?" And I tell him I don't have a teacher, per se; I *am* the teacher.

"Are you all the things, Mommy?"

I nod my head.

"Why?"

"Because that's what mommies do, my love."

"Are daddies all the things too?"

"Sometimes they are, yeah."

"What about Ceces and Papas [what he calls his grandparents]?"

"Maybe sometimes they are too. But mommies almost always are all the things."

"Why?"

"Well, think about it. Who takes care of you? Me. Who feeds you? Me. Who makes sure you have clothes that fit you? Me. Who takes you to the doctor when you're sick? Me. Who brings you to school every day? Me. Who makes money and pays the rent?"

By now, Maurice has caught on and enthusiastically announces, "You do!" Then he adds, "Mommies really *are* all the things."

Being a single parent is not easy. We have to be all the things. And that's with the wisdom and experience of my age and the resources that come with my social privilege. Women still bear the brunt of reproductive labor in this society, and we have not tried to ease that burden in ways that could further equity. To me, this should be a high priority in the contemporary feminist agenda, so that it's not just those of means who have the option to become an older (single) parent, and so that the efforts of our forebears to create more educational and professional opportunities for us can be more fully realized.