

MATRESCENCE



Contents

SHORT STORY **1**
Rhino's Crossing

POETRY **3**

ESSAY **9**
Motherhood, Moments
and All The Things

POETRY **13**

ESSAY **17**
Mind Over Medicine

EDITORIAL **23**

Matresence

MAGAZINE

Editor-in-Chief

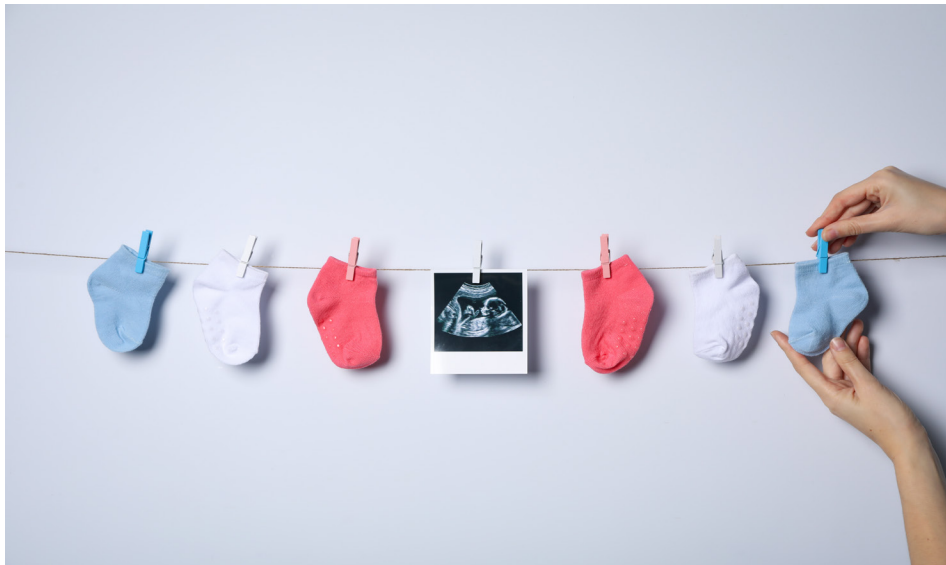
Kimberly Reyes

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And so our mothers and grandmothers have, more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see - or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read.

-Alice Walker





Letter From The Editor

Dear Reader,

It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural issue of Matrescence Magazine. It has been an incredibly special experience bringing this publication to fruition. What started as an unformed idea about giving mothers a place to share their voices has come to life with the help of the whole All The Unexpected community. This issue would not be possible without the many women who chose to entrust their work to us. I will remain forever grateful to them for this gift.

Their voices represent mothers from across the spectrum of experience. Some of them just starting out on this journey and others already grandmothers themselves. They hail from city centers and rural farms alike. This breadth of experience is central to the work I do. In spite of our many differences, there is at the heart of it all a universality surrounding the bringing of children into this world. We all want our children to be healthy, happy and successful in whatever path they should choose. There is great beauty in these simple truths of human experience and I hope that comes across in this issue.

So again, thank you dear reader for joining us as we begin this journey. I'd like to also extend the invitation for anyone reading this who would like to share their work to please do so. We will be accepting submissions for future issues on a continuing basis and I am incredibly excited to read what you have to share. Enjoy this first issue!

With Love and Light,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kimberly Reyes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kimberly Reyes

Short Story

1



Rhino Crossing

by R.J. White

Miles isn't agile enough to stop Matt Lucerne from pegging Jim in the back of the head with a football, so he doesn't try. The point of the ball strikes Jim with precision. His long, thin, floundering body folds and falls and remains twisted, half in and half out of the tiny space for many seconds. Matt Lucerne takes off running, the echo of his laughter flapping behind him like a cape in the wind.

Miles thinks about helping Jim up. They haven't spoken since the incident with Carter a few weeks ago. Miles doesn't have a particular beef with Jim; that's more of Carter's thing. Miles' choice to keep his distance from Jim is purely out of self-preservation. Jim is a walking, talking hazard. Too much of a social liability. But they've known each other since the third grade, which accounts for something. Something solidifying, something permanent as far as Miles sees it. Yet still, he hesitates to reach out his hand. An awkward tension makes his body flinch, then become still. The problem is that helping Jim wouldn't just be a gesture of common decency; one that most people would appropriately expect. It would be a commitment. Jim is prone to these types of run-ins, especially now that he isn't on speaking terms with Miles and the crew anymore. Miles doesn't want to create an obligation for himself every time Jim finds himself on the floor.

Jim pulls himself up on his own. He puts on his cracked, brown leather jacket that once belonged to his father. It fits him like a tent. Jim shrugs on his bookbag and slams his locker shut. He walks away without sparing a glance in Miles' direction.

Up until a few weeks ago Jim was the fifth member of Miles' crew with Ty, Carter, and José. His membership had always been tenuous. Always hanging on by the frayed, fibrous ends of the thread that held the rest of them together. But they'd tolerated him. He was a year older and the only person they knew with a car who was down to go anywhere they asked, whenever they asked, and happily, desperately.

Also, Tara Olson voiced to Miles many times how she thought it was cool of them to let Jim hang around. She even went so far as to express her approval when she made out with Miles under the stairwell and rubbed her hand over his crotch. He had convinced himself many times over that their relationship with Jim was not conditional, that they were not those people, and that Jim was in and that was the end of it.

The day they had stopped talking, Jim had caught up with the crew in the parking lot where they would all wait for him after school to cram themselves into his twelve-year-old Honda. Tara had posted a video of herself singing "Driver's License," and Ty, Carter and José all stood around Miles' phone to watch. Jim approached just as the video ended. Carter had said, "She's gonna blow up. She already has twenty-five thousand followers. Lit."

Jim chuckled, leaning against the hood of his car. "Isn't she already blown up?"

Carter's nose twitched the way it always seemed to whenever Jim spoke. "Who's already huge? What are you talking about?"

"Your mom, right?" Jim chuckled again and then playfully punched Carter's shoulder. Miles winced, sensing what was about to happen. Carter, without any preamble or hesitation, cocked his arm back and slapped Jim across the face so hard that he spun around and fell flat onto the asphalt. Before he could strike another blow, Ty and José dragged Carter back towards the school while he hurled threats and profanities at Jim until his voice faded into the swarm of students.

Jim looked up at Miles from the ground. "José made a joke about Carter's mom last week."

"José made a mom joke. He wasn't actually talking about Carter's mom. And he didn't say anything about her weight. You can't make fat jokes about someone who's actually -- you know." Miles reached out his hand and, for the last time, helped Jim off the ground.

Clusters of students form and dissolve in front of the school as they arrive and board the idling buses. Miles spots Tara standing near the browning, skeletal bushes at the end of the sidewalk where his bus always parks. She's looking down at her phone. He takes a few extra seconds to admire her from afar while she's distracted.

When Tara looks up, she sees him. Smiles. Miles has to resist the urge to run to her. Then Carter slides out from behind her like some slithering, serpentine nuisance. Of course. This is his own fault. At lunch today, in a moment of frustration that Miles now regrets, he had mentioned that Amanda, his sister, wouldn't have dance classes all week on account of some infestation at the dance studio. He had only mentioned it to highlight that the potential for any actual crotch grabbing with Tara this afternoon was gone now that his sister and his father would be home after school. Carter had lit up. When Amanda had turned fourteen, Carter took on a sudden awareness of her that has now rendered him a constant appendage. But as far as Miles was concerned, he was like one of those vestigial ones that they'd learned about in science. One that humans had no use for and could be easily removed and discarded if it caused the body any trouble or even if it did not.

When Miles approaches, they board the bus and file into a three-seater. Tara goes in first, then Miles. He angles his body away from Carter. He and Tara spend the ride scrolling through Smule looking for her next song, her next bit of viral inspiration. He can't help but think about the future. Whenever he's around her it seems that he can only think ahead, how their lives will be when they're finished with high school. He can see hers as clearly and vividly as the world in front of him, a world full of bright lights, hit songs, an endless stream of success; but his own future is formless. He has no idea where he wants to end up, who he wants to be. All he can see is Tara standing next to this shapeless object that is his life. All he can hope for, right now, is that her hands will help mold it. Maybe she'll love him enough or pity him enough - and at this point he'll take it- to bring him along for the ride. He'll worry about how to make himself less disposable at some other time.

Amanda sobs on the front lawn. She cradles a small bundle wrapped in a towel. A furry, white hind-leg matted in red streaks peaks out from the bottom. Mile's dad is visible through the front door. He sits at the kitchen table talking on

the phone and massaging his forehead as if soothing a headache.

Carter gets to Amanda first and puts his arm around her. "What happened?"

Through hiccupped sobs, Amanda breaks into a story about how she was about to take Rhino for a walk but when she was heading out she realized that she forgot the poop bag and so she went back inside to get it and it took her a long time because there weren't any more bags under the sink so she had to grab a new box from the basement because Dad said that they should only use the biodegradable bags otherwise she would have just grabbed a regular plastic bag and she must not have closed the front door all the way and Rhino must have run outside because when she came back she saw that the door was open and then saw Rhino in the street bleeding and when she ran to get him he wouldn't wake up and now Dad's on the phone with animal control to figure out what they should do because he doesn't want to bury the dog in the backyard because of all the new landscaping.

When Amanda finishes her story, Miles' thoughts move immediately to his dad. He knows he should be sad for his sister, which he is, but he mostly wants to comfort his dad knowing that he'll probably be plodding his way through his own guilt for not just going to get the goddam bags himself. And knowing Amanda, she'll be wielding her grief like some kind of superpower until he breaks. Miles will have to be mindful to step in where he can. He is adept at keeping himself sidelined when it comes to dealing with other people's problems, including his own family's. But if there was one thing he could do to help his father in this situation, it would be to share the burden of his sister.

Tara sits down in front of Amanda and places a hand on her knee. "Did you see who did this? Did you catch a license plate?"

Amanda sniffles then says, "Jim. It was Jim." Miles' first instinct is to not believe it, to hope on everything that Amanda is mistaken or lying. The last thing he wants is to be involved in another altercation with Jim, especially Jim and Carter, and now Jim, Carter and Amanda. Anger has already set into Carter's face and Miles knows that Carter only knows how to work out his feelings with brute force. He has to be artful and delicate in the way he expresses his doubt. Anything that might insinuate that he doesn't believe his sister will send

her into another bout of tears, and Carter would no doubt have words for him.

"What makes you think this was Jim?" Miles tries to make his tone light with curiosity.

"I saw his blue car turning onto Maplewood. I even saw his stupid bumper sticker. It was him."

"What did it say?" Maybe there was another person with a blue Honda that lived down Maplewood that also put bumper stickers on their car.

"I'm not an idiot, Miles. I know Jim's car. But it said 'Rotten.' Feel better, asshole?"

The only thing that Miles feels is the constriction of his chest wall. This has to be a sick joke. He glances around half expecting to find hidden cameras perched in the trees. He runs through a list of alternatives. Maybe it's a coincidence that Jim was turning the corner after Rhino was hit. Maybe Jim saw who hit Rhino and went chasing after them. Or maybe Rhino threw himself in front of the car. Amanda could be irritating and selfish, and when she was in the worst of her fits, sometimes Miles wanted to throw himself in front of a car too.

"If she said she saw him then it was him." Carter is up pacing now. Amanda looks up at him nodding in agreement. "He probably did it to get back at us for kicking him out of the group."

"You think he killed my family's dog to get back at all of us. Why would he do that? I'm the one who's the nicest to him."

"Exactly. He's probably pissed at you the most. Plus, he knows that I like -" Carter glances at Amanda. "- hanging out with your family, so he knew it would piss me off too."

A light breeze passes causing the soft white fur of Rhino's hind leg that isn't matted down by blood to lift and then fall.

"I'm going over there," Carter says to Miles. "You coming?"

"I am." Amanda raises her arm, still holding Rhino close with the other. Carter grabs her free hand and helps lift her from the ground. Tara gets up too. She doesn't reach for Miles to help and Miles beats back the urge to overthink it. The only thing that Miles knows to be absolutely true is that there is no way that he can let Carter and Amanda go to Jim's on their own. Even Tara knows it, the way she looks at him, full of concern. Miles takes off his bookbag and tosses it on the front steps.

"We'll go talk to him."

"I have no words for that bitch?" Carter persists in

his ire.

"I'll talk to him. See what he has to say."

"I think that's a good idea." Tara shifts her body so that she's standing closer to Miles. Something, like an excited Labrador, feels like it wants to tear through his body and tackle Tara to the ground.

Miles goes back to the front door, pulls it open and tells his father that they're all going for a walk. Still on the phone, still appearing that he'll wither away from stress, he nods his consent. Then Miles goes back to Amanda and lifts the small bundle from her arms. He imagined that death would feel heavier. But Rhino feels even smaller than when he was alive, and he feels sorry for the little thing. Gently, he lays Rhino on the steps next to his bookbag and readjusts the towel so that Rhino is completely covered. Miles sets off down the driveway, not checking back to see if the others follow.

It takes about fifteen minutes to get to Jim's. They head down Ethel Street, turn onto Maplewood, and then onto Gary Lane. The walk over was mostly silent except for some occasional reassurances from Carter about retribution.

They arrive at his house. A small, yellow box with browning window shutters that were once white, and paint flaking so badly that the house looks like it's in the process of decomposing. A plastic play-kitchen sits alongside the front staircase next to a wooden rocking chair and a spare tire. There's a single, leafless tree in the front lawn that slumps over into the street as if it's trying to uproot itself to find freedom. Jim appears at the window. He lifts it open halfway. Carter immediately starts in on him. "Come outside, bitch." Amanda folds her arms and leans in towards Carter.

In an uncharacteristic move, Tara steps in front of Carter and holds up her hand. "Just shut up for two minutes."

"Don't talk to him like that," Amanda says, though her voice wavered with a slight uncertainty. Even Miles couldn't predict what Tara was up to.

"You too," Tara said to Amanda. "Just shut up. I'm gonna speak to Jim."

Tara turns away from them to face the house, leaving no space for debate. The three of them fall back, though Carter still looks like he wants to charge through the half-open window and beat Jim senseless.

"Hey, Jim. How're you doing?" Tara sounds like a

Poetry



Issue 2023

5

Illustration: Kristina Krasavina

I gave my face away
to every beggar, madman, peddler
who fancied it might be
a lovely trinket.
I pushed it into any hands with greedy
abandon. Floods were but droplets and
I was a deep, deep well.
Until the day the bucket scraped the murky bottom
and I was empty.

Instead I made piece-work of my gifts,
felt the rain, raised my price, pulled my face free.
Now I please no one, but I am whole.
Careful what you ask for,
I have swords in my smile and I cup
poison in the crease of my brow,
ready for the continuous stream of
dirty broken things. Bizarre old dinosaurs,
forcing me to keep dry powder.

-Mattea Orr



(I guess) I wouldn't know

Today you should be one years old.
You might be walking or talking, or so I'm told.
Would you be shy like your mommy,
Or like your daddy, be bold?
I guess I wouldn't know.

I might have thrown you a party you'd never remember,
Bought you a costume and gotten you ready for November.
Where at Thanksgiving you might be held,
By every other family member, but
I guess I wouldn't know.

I imagine we'd be getting ready for the Holidays,
Where you'd be spoiled by your family in so many ways.
Would you get tons of everything,
To wear, read and play?
I guess I wouldn't know.

Some days I really don't feel so bad.
But others, I am consumed by feeling empty and sad
I wonder if I would even be a good mom,
To the son I should have had.
I guess I wouldn't know.

I know you're not alone up there,
You have a brother named Angel that God thought we had to spare.
Your sister may soon join you,
I hope of both of them you care, but
I guess I wouldn't know.

I know you will not ever answer me back,
Ability to carry my babies is something I lack.
I want to believe you're in a happy place now, Jack.
But the truth is,
I wouldn't know.

-Hanna Hill

What a risk it is to love so deeply,
What a wild ride it is from the start.
Second guessing every decision,
The price we pay for them owning our heart.

You hear about the feeling of incomparable love,
Before it's yours to have and to hold,
If someone could bottle the magic of it,
Infinite amounts would be sold.

When their pain and happiness are now yours too,
When their wishes and dreams your life's goal.
When they hold your face and whisper "I love you"
And deep down it starts mending your soul.

9

Watching them grow is utterly amazing,
Yet excruciating at the same time.
Letting them go a little more each day,
Pride in your heart, tears in your eyes.

So my darling warrior child,
What I'm trying to put into rhyme.
Is stay magic, stay kind and true of heart,
And know you'll always own mine.

-Tori Teanby



Essay



Motherhood Moments & All The Things

By Sharon Keith

blinked.

Kenny Chesney told me not to, but I did it anyway. And now, as I look at my life, I think of that overused aphorism, “Where did the time go?”

I’m not the wisest person in the world, but as they say, with age comes wisdom. I have the age, and I’m hoping I have gained some wisdom, or at least the perspective, to review my life and find meaning and purpose.

I was never the mom who wanted “time to stand still.” I looked forward to my children reaching new milestones. No doubt, babyhood is a precious time--a time when you can hold your child tightly and get all the snuggles. A time when your children rely on you for their very existence. A time when you are needed.

While some of my sweetest memories of motherhood are of me simply holding my babies, those days were exhausting. I have never once wanted to go back to that time. As I have aged, my memory has glossed over the endless days of diaper-changing, feedings, and sleepless nights.

For me, the goal/reward was in the raising: taking them to church and teaching them about Jesus. Preparing them to go to kindergarten. Teaching them to share and always use their manners. Embracing the look of awe and wonder when they discovered something new---an idea, a concept, a fact. Experiencing life, both good and bad, realizing that it’s in the mistakes where we learn the greatest lessons. Praying daily that they would grow up to be good and kind upstanding citizens.

When I think back on my life as a mother, I had it easy. I didn’t endure the pressures that mothers have today. Facebook wasn’t causing me to question my worth or inciting a need for approval. My phone wasn’t buzzing all the time with notifications, texts, and calls. (Maybe that’s because all we had was a landline). Friendships took time and effort to cultivate and grow. Receiving a card or letter in the mail was a big deal. Unexpected calls and conversations from high school or college friends were an extra treat.

It was a simpler time. My free time wasn’t spent scrolling through news feeds on social media platforms, wishing my dinners looked as amazing as those posted online. I wasn’t inundated by “influencers,” who tell the world how they should dress, raise children, clean the house, put on makeup. Pinterest wasn’t available to inspire me to make the most awesome treats for my child’s homeroom class, or adorable and creative gifts for their teachers. Over-the-top parties and big productions were few and far between. Not everyone received a trophy or a ribbon, and championship rings were rare.

Although I hoped only good things would come for my children, I didn’t control the narrative, or protect them from the slings and arrows that life might throw their way. Maybe I was a slacker mom, or maybe I was just busy juggling life as a mother, teacher, counselor, and coach’s wife.

I trusted their teachers, and the few times (three) that I had questions about situations,

I approached it respectfully, always cognizant of the fact that there are two sides to every story, and that my kids weren't perfect.

Brian and I believed it was our responsibility to raise responsible individuals, and we tried to teach our children at an early age to be independent. Our endgame was to prepare our sons to stand on their own, make good choices, and become problem-solvers.

If you think I'm touting myself as a candidate for Mother-of-the-Year, you couldn't be more wrong. I have failed in epic proportions too many times to recall, from forgetting to sign permission slips, to sending a caffeinated drink to school with my second-grade child (he actually sneaked the drink into his lunch box, but I received the wrath of his teacher in a page long single-spaced typed letter).

There are probably a million more stories about missing birthday parties (not my kids'), being late, missing deadlines, and other parental missteps. With each mistake, a lesson was taught and learned by me as well as the boys. I never strived to be a perfect parent. There's no such thing. But I always tried to do my best.

Since the beginning of time, parents have struggled to do it all. The more things change, though, the more they stay the same. Children grow up. They survive braces, and broken hearts. They hit the game-winning shot, or foul out. They graduate (sometimes as many as five times if you count Kindergarten, Intermediate, Jr. High, High School, and College).

And children leave home.

When both boys were out of the house, it was time for my husband and I to relax. To buy new furniture to replace the old that was passed on to life in an apartment inhabited by four guys and returned in less than stellar condition. It was time to travel, rest, renew and refresh. To change the wall color, to plant new flowers. To sing and dance joyfully, skipping down the driveway, rejoicing, "It's happened! We did it! We raised our kids and they survived!" We thanked God for His blessings and prayed for their protection as they moved out and moved on. We were now ready for the easy part of parenting. We had done our job.

Well, folks, let me tell you. The older your children get, the more

difficult it is to be a parent. There is a constant struggle to straddle the line between too much advice, or not enough. Should we tell them our way would be easier? Do we step in when we feel they might need our guidance?

You see, those little babies are adults, and now have lives of their own, even if we still see them dressed in their new school shoes and new backpack, ready to start first grade. Our roles have changed. We must respect their decisions and the way they do things. Being a control freak, this is difficult for me. And even more difficult than my need for control is my inability to keep my mouth shut at times.

Mothers never stop mothering. We always want the best for our children. We want life to treat them fairly. We hope the world will be kind. For them, we want "all the things."

Parenting is hard, but in the words of Merle Haggard, "Mama tried," and so did Dad. And when we failed, or came up short, got on their nerves, or in their business, we were always driven by the enormous and immense love we have for them.

God has indeed blessed our family. We understand it didn't happen by chance. We didn't just get lucky. We put in the work, and so did they.

To all the parents out there, you're going to blink. Life will go faster than you want it to.

But you can't stop time. There's no way to slow it down (unless you're a teacher waiting for summer, and the days seem never-ending).

Stop looking at your watch, the time on your phone, and the clock on the wall.

Embrace each day, and enjoy the ordinary moments, because that's where you'll find the most extraordinary things.

ALL THE UNEXPECTED

Podcast

Documentaries

Health

OUR MISSION

All The Unexpected is a resource for families as they navigate the incredible, yet often daunting journey of parenthood. Launched as a podcast, ATU has grown into a multidisciplinary resource library and media production organization. We help families to feel guided, supported and generally less alone during what can be an isolating experience. Through community and a wealth of pooled knowledge we provide a resource for families to empower themselves and others. Thank you in advance for being a valued member of our community.

ATU will continue to tell the stories of our collective past. Educating, enlightening and creating space for meaningful conversation. Your generosity in aiding our mission is deeply appreciated

Visit our website and Donate Today

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One line
Okay I'm good
Wait... another faint line
I guess I misunderstood
This is how it starts
The first test
The most loud but unbeknown most calm
Heartburn & nausea
I missed prom
Wake up, wake up, wake up
Change diapers & breastfeed now
...Look at my body
Who is she?
Postpartum
...Knock knock it's me
I love you my baby.. I'm crying with you
I'm sorry dads not here for this issue
Terrible twos
Tornado threes
Wouldn't imagine that part would be easy
You're growing up so fast
My age when I had the first test I passed
Becoming the person you want to be
Wait....
THIS is the hard part
Now I wish you were three

-Alicia Ervin



I wish I could go back

I wish I could go back and show you how I love you now, to when I felt so lost and scared and just didn't know how.

With mind and body broken, I just couldn't see an end, I only saw the fear and pain, no hope that I could mend.

Your tiny face and hands and feet filled me with utter dread, but now they bring me endless joy and utter pride instead.

The nights felt dark and endless and I waited for the light. These days, when I lay down to sleep I know we'll be alright.

At times I feel such deep sorrow for all that time we lost, yet know deep down to get us here, that was the price it cost.

So when I feel my guilt and shame creep back into my soul, I take their hands and show them it was worth paying the toll.

I let them hear your little laugh and let them watch you play, so they can see why I fought hard to get us here today.

They look at me with tears in eyes and marvel at us both, and go back hand in hand to tell the story of our growth.

I wish I could go back and show you how I love you now, to reassure us both that time and hope would show me how.

-Sarah Hens

Mind Over Medicine

How I Meditated My Way Through Childbirth

By Lindsey Pope

Prior to pregnancy, I had heard my friend's stories about their own childbirth experience and how the epidural was a "God send". I even had one friend refer to her Anesthesiologist as "Jesus". This made me laugh, and I was happy something helped their pain during their childbirth experience.

I waited a bit later in life to have my one and only child, and was 37 when I became pregnant. While I felt about clueless about having my own baby, I had a lot of confidence in two things:

1. I wanted to hire a Doula
2. I wanted to avoid having an epidural unless it was absolutely necessary

My first item, hiring a Doula, was something I got a lot of support toward. I was fortunate to have met one in-person who I liked right off the bat, and after our initial meeting, I knew she was a perfect fit for me. She also supported item #2 on my list and said she'd do whatever she could to help me reach that goal.

Item #2 on my list, not wanting an epidural unless absolutely necessary, was not as well received by some people I shared it with. When I spoke the words out loud, they gave me the "Are you crazy?" look which would often be followed up with a comment like "Just wait, you'll need one."

Before going any further, I should back up for a moment to explain that I have no issues with epidurals in general and am grateful that they are available to help women through the childbirth process. What I had an issue with was the culture around childbirth, strengthened by the medical community and women around you, who make it sound like it isn't really an option.

I've always been highly sensitive to medication, even ones as simple as Motrin. I have a history of two surgeries in my childhood, and both times I woke up with a reaction to the anesthesia used. I distinctly remember waking up from the second surgery and having the nurse inform me that my lips turned green.

Outside of my personal history with anesthesia, childbirth

brought about this stronger sense of feminism into my body. I thought about how many women around the world, throughout history and today, give birth without an epidural. If they could do it, I could do it.

When I needed help sleeping a few years back, I found guided hypnotherapy to be very effective in helping me. I began researching hypnotherapy for pregnancy and was pleasantly surprised to find that hypnobirthing, a meditation technique for childbirth, exists. I immediately told my husband, and we signed up for an in-person session that was close enough for us to attend.

After learning the hypnobirthing technique, I continued to meditate on a regular basis. I wanted to feel confident in the technique, so much like anyone wanting to get strong at a certain skill, I practiced quite often. Fortunately, I had plenty of time as my child decided to take her time and arrive one week late. Knowing I had a scheduled date for induction helped my mindset remain focused.

At the hospital, of course the epidural questions continued. Several nurses assumed I'd be receiving one, and I'm sure they doubted me when I said I didn't need it. With my Doula's advice, I was able to work with the hospital to keep my Pitocin at the lowest level possible to start my contractions. Every time a contraction came, I'd meditate through it. I also used aromatherapy to help myself stay anchored. Also with my Doula's advice, we established a 'safe word' that I would not utter unless I was very serious about changing my mind on the epidural - but I felt pretty determined to not actually say that word.

After several hours of contractions, the hospital made the decision to break my water. This being my first child, I had no idea how much more intense my contractions would become afterward. The pain became very intense, but I just kept using the hypnobirthing technique. At one point, I stated that I needed to be checked to see how many centimeters I dilated. I told myself



that if I was anything less than seven centimeters, I'd have to get the epidural and at least I could know I tried my best. At that point. They told me I was ready to push.

Transition was easily the most pain I've ever experienced in my entire life. However, this intense motherly instinct took over and I just gritted my way through it. Was it pleasant? No. But, fortunately for me it was only two hours. I lost sense of time and truthfully everyone around me. It was just me, and my need to get my baby out, and my Doctor.

When my baby came out and was placed on my chest, I experienced the absolute best moment of my entire life. I was exhausted but filled with not only extreme love for my child, but also extreme pride in myself. I felt like a warrior. It is still my greatest accomplishment.

If you think I'm crazy for going epidural-free, I don't blame you. However, I do want you to trust yourself over anyone else. You are, instinctually, a warrior woman who can have a baby without an epidural if you desire to do so. Truth be told, as a mom, you can do anything you want to do. Just remain strong and trust yourself, and you'll be so happy you did.

hostage negotiator from a heist movie.

"I'm fine," Jim responds.

"That's good."

"Yeah, it is."

"I'm sure you already know this, but Amanda has a little white Shih Tzu named Rhino."

"Yeah. Who cares?"

"We think he was hit by a car this afternoon."

"Okay."

"Rhino died."

Jim hangs his head. "That's sad."

"We were wondering if you saw anything on your way home."

"I saw your video from last week," Jim responds. "I was surprised you chose a Radiohead song. They're pretty old."

Tara looked taken aback by the abrupt change of course. "Oh. Yeah. My dad loved them. I guess so do I."

"My dad used to play Amnesiac all the time. He had the vinyl. I hated it. They're a boring band."

There was a long pause before Tara responded. "They're not for everyone," she finally says. Tara was so keen to keep the peace she wouldn't even acknowledge when her feelings were hurt. Miles knew that Tara picked a Radiohead song to remember her late father, and he assumed that Jim's dislike was mostly related to his own father being estranged. Of all the bands in the world, both Tara and Jim have a shared pain over Radiohead, and it makes Miles jealous. He's being ridiculous, yet even knowing this doesn't make him feel any less jealous. He wants to link himself to Tara in every conceivable way. There's an aching impulse in him to shout out that he too only has one parent, even though he sees his mother every other weekend. Miles takes a few steps forward so that instead of standing slightly behind Tara, he's standing right next to her.

Jim looks at Miles directly. His dark, stringy hair hangs on both sides of his face, his shoulders droop low and forward. His body looks like it wants to close him in, keep him unseen. Despite his awkwardness and poor taste in jokes, being in the group stabilized Jim, offered him a kind of sanctuary. Without them he was left to the wild. An unforgiving swell of remorse rises inside of Miles.

"Jim, no one cares about the shitty music you like or don't like. Come outside and let's handle this." Carter shouts past Miles and Tara but remains standing behind them. Miles gets the sense that Carter has lost steam and is just putting it on for Amanda. It's hard to stay riled up at the sight of Jim languishing in his

living room window.

Miles finally speaks. "Just shut the fuck up, Carter, will you?"

"Yo, what's your problem? You're defending this piece of shit now?"

Miles ignores Carter and speaks to Jim. "There's no need to come out, Jim. We just want to know if you know what happened. We're just looking for the truth. Whatever it is, it's fine. It's just for closure and shit, you know?"

Jim shoots him a dirty look. It unsettles Miles, makes him feel the need to keep talking. "It's not like we're accusing you. Maybe you saw who hit the dog. Or maybe it was an animal that got Rhino. Remember when we were kids and we saw that hawk try to eat that stray kitten? Maybe it was something like that."

"Are we reminiscing now?" Carter crosses over Tara so that he's on the other side of Miles. Amanda follows him. "Remember when you called my mom fat, bitch?" Carter shouted to Jim in the window. "He killed your sister's dog. Act like you care, man."

"Am I not standing here trying to figure out what happened to the fucking dog? Please just let me do this my own way."

Miles looks back at the window and Jim is gone. "You see? I'll go up and talk to him. Stay here."

Miles knocks three times before Jim responds. His voice comes through the other side of the door. "What do you want, Miles? We're not friends anymore."

"I'm still your friend, man. I'm just trying to figure out what happened. Amanda said she saw you turning the corner after she found her dog dead in the street."

"How can you say you're my friend when you haven't spoken to me for three weeks and four days?"

Miles reaches for something to say. "We just needed some space. Things were getting rocky between you and Carter. We all needed a breather."

"Fuck off."

"Look, did you see who hit Rhino? Or maybe, did you hit him by accident?"

"What does it matter who killed the dog? It's already dead."

"It matters to Amanda. And me. And my dad."

"You already think I did it so why do I need to say it?"

"If you didn't do it and you didn't see anything then just say that."

"Would you believe me?"

"Yeah, man. I would."

"Would Carter? Amanda? Tara?"

"I don't know. Probably."

"You guys are all assholes."

"Jim, did you kill the fucking dog or not?" Miles is losing his patience. He looks behind him to see if Tara notices. She glances over at Miles and then goes back to talking to Amanda and Carter.

Miles turns back around. "Jim, I'm sorry. All right?"

Jim doesn't respond.

There's clattering on the other side of the door, as if items are being thrown around.

"Jim, what are you doing?"

The clattering comes to a sudden stop.

"Jim."

"What the fuck?" Carter's voice rises from the street. Miles follows Carter's gaze back to the window. Jim stands in front of the window wearing a bicycle helmet. He smashes his head into the window. Then he does it again. Then again. And again. And again. And again. The window cracks. He does it a few more times until he drops out of sight.

Miles backs away from the house as if it has just gone up in flames. Which, in a way, it just did. His mind struggles to make sense of what he's just seen. He looks over at Tara, Carter and Amanda, as if somehow, one of them might be able to explain. But the three of them stand fixed in their spots, slack jawed. Tara is close to tears.

Miles' anxiety grows with each passing second of silence. They should never have come. He should have insisted that they leave it alone. There was no point to this ambush.

More seconds pass. Jim still hasn't reappeared.

"I'll call 911." Tara takes out her phone and steps away to make the call.

An old, red Accord pulls into the dirt patch of the lawn. Jim's mother gets out of the car still wearing her apron from work. Her hair is twisted into the kind of knot that tells anyone who looks at her that she's short on time and sleep and self-care. She eyes the four of them in the street, then her cracked window.

"What's going on? Where's Jimmy?"

She hurries up the stairs, shoves a key into the door and pushes it open. Jim is slumped against the wall near the front door in a mess of household items that must have been tossed around when Jim was looking for the helmet. Miles inches back towards the house, pulled by both fear and curiosity. He has to be close to the damage, see it, face it, whatever it is.

Jim turns his head slightly towards his mother.

He's breathing. He's conscious. He's alive.

Jim's mom squats down beside him and asks him a string of questions. What happened? Who did this to you? Did they hurt you? Which one of them hurt you? Can you speak, Jimmy? Can you speak to me? Who hurt you? Who hurt you? Who hurt my boy?

Miles' head is still spinning. He doesn't know what to do with his body. His limbs feel numb. He makes his way back to Tara, Amanda and Carter who have all seem to have lost their ability to speak. They remain standing in the street, waiting, though they have no idea what for.

Soon an ambulance pulls up in front of the house. Then the police. A cluster of neighbors huddle a safe distance away, curious, but not so curious that they would let themselves come within reach of whatever misfortune has shrouded this plot of land.

About twenty minutes after the police arrive, Carter's mom pulls up and rolls out of her car, which lifts a few inches off the ground once she's completely out of it. Right behind her is Miles' dad who looks more exhausted now than he did when Amanda was crying on the lawn. The two of them wait by their cars as a police officer approaches them.

Miles, Amanda, Carter and Tara sit on the edge of the dirt patch, in that order, and still, not one of them has said a word. Tara will only look at the ground or towards the opposite end of the street, away from Miles. Carter wraps his arms around his knees. He looks like a little boy. Amanda kicks a rock back and forth between her feet. Miles wills himself to sink into earth and disappear. When he's unsuccessful, his mind searches for something pleasant, something light. His thoughts take him back to the bus, a little more than an hour ago, when things were still normal, when he was hope-filled, when he was not singed with horror. He remembers the song that he and Tara had chosen for her next video. He had never heard it before, but he liked it. It was fun, fast-paced, colorful, and loud, and it had a good beat. He replays the song in his mind, and he bops along to it while he waits for whatever was coming to him. Even when, finally, Tara looks over at him in a sort of horrified confusion, he doesn't stop. He keeps bopping along to the beat.

Editorial

On Gentle Humanity

Imagine walking into your office one morning a mere 4 minutes late. You had a horrible start to the day, that included a splitting headache, lost keys and road construction that appeared out of nowhere overnight; all contributing to the delay. Without even giving you a second to put your stuff down and gather yourself your boss appears and starts yelling, “why are you late? I need an immediate explanation for this!” Your fight or flight response kicks in and in your startled state you begin to stammer, not able to even get the words out to explain what happened. Your boss’s anger becomes palpable and he just dismissively motions for you to go sit at your desk as he walks away muttering under his breath.

As you sit at your desk and try to regroup, feeling embarrassed and isolated, a slow horror creeps over you as you realize that you left the report for today’s meeting sitting on the kitchen table as you rushed out trying to be on time. Having spent hours the night before perfecting it, you cannot believe that you have forgotten it. The shame spiral starts to grow and you know the day is only going to get worse from here. The time for the meeting rolls around and before you can even begin to explain why you don’t have the report, you see your boss writing your name in red marker on the whiteboard for the entire staff gathered to see. The rest of the staff sits up a bit straighter all terrified to be the next name on the board should they commit a transgression themselves. A workplace like this one would be described as toxic at best and downright abusive by even the most liberal of measures. So why is it that we balk at the idea of this behavior when it involves adults, but would see little wrong if the same scenario took place in a classroom?

The answer is simple. And that is that we often don’t treat children with the same understanding and respect that we would at a base level show adults. And frankly it makes absolutely no sense. What do we teach a child when we make the classroom a place of shame and ridicule? The answer is, absolutely nothing. You often hear the argument that we’re preparing them for the “real world”, but how does that fly when we would never treat adults in the same fashion? We don’t write the names of subordinates on the wall at work when their behavior displeases us, we don’t ask someone having a hard time to sit in the corner and think about why they need to smile more or better yet tell them they can’t have lunchtime because they yelled. It’s time we do away with the archaic notion that children are somehow less deserving of respect than other members of our society.

This notion of respect and inclusion in the conversation is at the heart of gentle or conscious parenting. We see a constant derision of these methods online almost daily. Parents and so-called educators railing against those who would choose this path claiming that it creates spoiled brats who have no boundaries and can't follow instruction. This couldn't be further from the truth. Gentleness with our children isn't about not setting boundaries or letting them do whatever they please. On the contrary it is about showing them those boundaries on their level and at moments when they can see both the how and why. It's about fostering a relationship of trust and understanding that continues to support them as they grow and enter a world that will continue to test and challenge them. This is how we actually prepare them for the big bad "real" world out there. It is a series of choices that we consistently and consciously make in every interaction we have with a child. It results in the teenager who has made a mistake and thinks, "Oh no I've messed up and need to call my mother because she will guide me," instead of the child who says, "Oh no I've messed up and can't call my mom because she will yell at me and make me feel even worse."

Gentle and conscious parenting isn't just for our children. It's also a moment to be kind to ourselves. To allow that we have and will make mistakes, but to also hold space for correction. There isn't a finality or judgment to be placed. It is a way of interacting with our children and ourselves that allows for constant and consistent evolution. It holds space for us to have bad days but it also asks that we apologize when we transgress. We owe the next generation the wholeness of our healed selves. Let us commit with mind, body and soul to raising children that will not have to heal from their childhood.



Cycles of Joy

