



surprised by motherhood

everything I never expected
about being a mom

LISA-JO BAKER

mother | superhero | tea drinker







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Surprised by Motherhood: Everything I Never Expected about Being a Mom

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For my mom, Jo, who was always going to write a book.

For my husband, Peter, who was never afraid of my story.

For my children, Jackson, Micah, and Zoe, who helped me find the words.

And for my Savior, Jesus, who I believe would have loved me the same whether I ever had children or not.

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why I wrote this book: because you are my people

I GUESS MOST people who write books about motherhood start out by telling you how much they always wanted to be a mom. That is not my story. At sixteen, I was a skinny South African teenager with a crush on the tall, lanky swimmer who rode a motorcycle and left me roses. When I was seventeen, my mom was in the hospital and I was trying to figure out how to cook roast chicken while the pastor's son laughed at me all barefoot and cliché in the kitchen. When I was eighteen, my mom died and I swore I would never have kids. At twenty-one, I fell in love with a boy from the American Midwest with cowboy-green eyes, and at nearly twenty-five, I married him, on the condition that he wouldn't be expecting me to produce children.

More than a decade later, we have three. There's also the dog and a hamster. This is the story of how I got from there to here. *Here* being a sleep-deprived, messy rental house where I've discovered three things about motherhood. One,

motherhood is hard. Two, motherhood is glorious. Three, motherhood is hard.

In between, there's a lot of sleeplessness, laundry, and diapers. And I'm still such a newbie. At this moment, Jackson, my oldest, is about to turn seven and lives for tae kwon do summer camp and flexing his biceps in our full-length mirror. Our middle, Micah, is four and a half, weighs more than his brother, and will lay you low if an animal is ever harmed in his presence. The baby girl, Zoe, arrived just over sixteen months ago, and my heart will never acclimate to the daily awe of rediscovering myself in her deep-sea-fishing-blue eyes.

Somewhere God is grinning. I can hear Him saying, "I promised you so" over and over again. How He always saves the best till last, and each new baby has seen me unwrapping unexpected treasure again and again until I'm laughing too and agreeing. Yes, the best. The very best. Even at 2 a.m. with the rivers of projectile vomit. Even then. I wouldn't trade it.

But I would do some things differently. I would throw away most of the parenting books that made me feel like I was somehow failing this most important test of womanhood—being a mother. I'd throw out the advice about what I was doing wrong or should be doing differently or should aspire to be doing. I'd just revel in the daily, sleep-deprived merry-go-round and eat a lot more chocolate cake.

Also, I'd go up to tired moms dragging screaming kids through Target and give them flowers. I would stop every single new mom I ran into with chocolate and promises that they could do it. I would tell them they're my heroes—for

every month of pregnancy, every 3 a.m. feeding, every boo-boo kissed, every diaper changed, and every plate of food they never got to eat hot.

I'd be tempted to break into song. But since I always forget the words of any song I try to sing and am notorious for just making up whatever pops into my head, my new plan is to write to them instead.

Sweet, exhausted, amazing, resilient, fearless, remarkable, run-down mom—this book is for you. No matter how you got from there to here, can I just take your precious face between my hands, look deep into your sleep-deprived eyes, and whisper, “You are much braver than you think”?

You are my hero. Someone needs to say it out loud, and I'm happy to be that someone.

Would it be weird to say I think about you late at night? When I'm rocking Zoe in our old white rocker with the faded yellow, Desitin-stained cushions, I'm thinking about all those mamas working the midnight shift. I'm thinking about all of us who are dancing our babies back to sleep or waiting up for them, like every generation of mothers before us—the ancient two-step that tattoos our love into the carpet, the hardwood, and the bosoms of our children.

Tired we may be. But also victorious. You are a wonder. What you do—it amazes me. You've got this. Even on the days when you think you don't. When you can't imagine one more shift. When you want to take off running after the ice cream truck. When you can't remember when you last washed your hair. When you want to climb back into your

SURPRISED BY MOTHERHOOD

pre-baby body and the days that didn't start with Elmo and end with bathwater anywhere but in the bath.

You've got this.

This book is for you. And for me.

This book is for us.

Lisa-Jo Baker



CHAPTER I

motherhood is a superpower

HARDWARE STORES USED to intimidate me. All those aisles of wood—two-by-fours or four-by-eights or ten-by-twelves—I have no idea. It's like an entire store full of math. And math has never been my friend. The rows of glue and tools and things that require electrical wiring skills are only somewhat more intimidating to me than the men who work there. In their gruff orange aprons, they seem to be able to smell estrogen from a mile away, and I've always been sure they would shut down any communication attempts at the first whiff. Nothing terrified me more than having to ask where the air filters were. I'd rather have walked laps around the store than be forced into admitting my sense of deep confusion and

desperate need for storewide GPS to make it out with my dignity intact.

The gym could make me feel the same way. Stocked with so much big equipment that fit, sweaty people who don't at all look like they need to be there in the first place seem to know intuitively how to use, these places have always struck me as a clubhouse I'm not cool enough or brave enough or fit enough to enter. My friend Katherine could tell you about the time I showed up at a gym in an outfit that screamed, "I have no idea what I'm doing here" and sneakers that added, "I've never been on a treadmill in my life and would prefer to go back to walking the mall, where I belong." I did one obligatory circuit before I hightailed it out of there and didn't return for a decade.

It didn't matter that I'd gone to law school, worked overseas in jobs with big titles, spoke several languages, or been through a bunch of passports; I always felt ridiculous anytime I entered either a hardware store or a gym.

But then I gave birth to three human beings.

Not all at the same time, mind you (although it sort of felt that way the first time around). I grew a baby and pushed him out and lived to tell the tale. And a few weeks later I walked into the biggest, most macho, super-trendy gym in our neighborhood. I walked past the rows of workout machines. Past the aerobics studios and stationary spinning bikes. Past the pool and the warm-up area and the indoor track all the way into the deep, far recesses that housed the gym equivalent of a "man cave"—the weight room.

I walked in wearing pink and just stood there. I surveyed the landscape of muscles and testosterone and weightlifting hulks, and I didn't blink. At home in my brand-new, brave body, I stood and let the rush of assurance run through me that I wasn't afraid anymore. I had scaled Everest. I had run with the bulls. I had shot the rapids. I had bungeed with the best of them. I had done something that required a kind of strength none of the men in that room could imagine, let alone replicate.

I just stood there and let the braveness seep all the way through me, and in my mind I might as well have been Kate Winslet, with arms spread eagled over the tip of the *Titanic*, yelling, "I'm flying, I'm flying!" And it was true. Just with much less glamor and a lot more call for nursing pads.

It was like discovering a superpower—becoming a mom for the first time. It has led me to believe that motherhood should come with a superhero cape along with the free diaper bag and samples you get when the hospital sends you, otherwise defenseless, home.



But the feeling fades. It fades under the mounds of laundry and more diapers than any of those pre-baby war stories could have prepared you for. It is threatened by the mundane reality that you will never be alone again. Ever. And that a baby would put an FBI tracking device to shame for the strength of its orbital pull on a new mother, who cannot leave

the driveway let alone the neighborhood without what feels like years of planning.

So we turn to books. We buy bookshelves full of good advice from well-meaning experts who manage to make us feel even more tired than we did to begin with. Seven years ago, I thought there was a formula to parenting—you do what the books tell you to do, and then the baby does what the books tell him to do. I'd aced college and law school and figured motherhood would go down the same way. It turned out my baby had completely different plans in mind.

Motherhood became the first test, other than federal taxation, that I thought I was truly going to fail.

I would read all those books that tell you when the baby should be sleeping and when the baby should be eating and when the baby should be this, that, and the other thing-ing, and all I would see was a big, fat red F. Jackson did nothing according to anybody's schedule but his own.

And he threw up a lot. I would finally get him to eat, and he would look at me deadpan, cough, and puke it all out again. Forget crying over spilled milk, I wept over what felt like oceans of baby puke.

Wept.

Parenting is not for the faint of heart. And it's especially not for those type A personalities accustomed to having all their ducks in a row, all their check boxes checked, and their sofa cushions, cereal boxes, and entire lives neatly arranged.

I had a nursing chart. I'd harnessed my elementary school poster-board and marker skills and set up a timetable. After

each feeding, I would dutifully put a check mark in the box—which side I'd nursed and how long—before I stumbled deliriously back to bed. Jackson cried, I nursed, I made check marks, and he never, ever once slept or ate as much or as long as the books promised my chart and me he would.

F, F, F, F minus in parenting.

I pretended it made sense to me. I pretended I had a handle on his “routine.” I pretended I hadn't started to resent all those parenting books lining the shelves of our teeny one-room cottage.

And still he ate at a snail's pace and woke up to eat slowly at 11 p.m., 1 a.m., 3 a.m., 5 a.m., and 7 a.m. I kept waiting to fall in love with him, and instead I just felt like we'd both failed our midterms.

There was an afternoon when a friend came over for tea. (We do that a lot in South Africa. It's one of the best customs ever—early morning and late-afternoon hot tea and cake or cookies or pie or rusks—our version of biscotti. And it's genius, I tell you. Genius.) Jackson was passed out on a milk high in my arms, and Natalie had two kids wrapped around her ankles. I was desperate. I was up-since-five-on-a-cold-South-African-morning tired, sore, and desperate for a formula that would give me back my old life.

I had been living with one foot in my stay-up-late, sleep-in-late, come-and-go-as-you-please world and one foot in my I-want-to-be-a-mother-if-the-baby-would-just-leave-me-alone world, and I wanted something to make the commitment to motherhood easier. I wanted the baby to adore

me. I wanted to be the mom on those billboards with the beautifully blow-dried hair, lying in bed with one cheek resting against her cherub as he beams up at her. I wanted Jackson to want me for more than my milk. I wanted him to care about my feelings. I wanted him to wrap chubby arms around my neck and declare his undying affection for me and my sacrifices in front of smitten strangers. I wanted him to feel bad for all the puke and the laundry and the fact that I couldn't remember the last time I'd actually been out to a movie theater.

I wanted the baby to love me with such unbridled, adoring passion that everything I'd lost along the way would be worth it. Especially my size 6 jeans from Prague.

I didn't know it then, but I was grieving.

I was grieving the loss of a stage of life I'd loved, and I needed directions to navigate into this new one. A life where everything was unfamiliar and often scary. A life that couldn't be reduced to a poster-board checklist. A life that was mundane and unpredictable at the same time.

I stared over the top of Jackson's blond head and asked Natalie, "But when will he *love* me?" That one question carried all the weight of a mom half out of her mind with exhaustion and confusion.

And from the way Natalie paused and how gently she answered, I think maybe she understood everything I wasn't saying. She read the billboard over my head and quietly answered, "What you're doing now—all of it—that is what will build the love." I thought about it. I thought about every

wake-up, every diaper change, every bottle, every single step of pacing to rock him back to sleep, every thankless load of laundry, every extra shift of cleaning up all the food I'd just fed him.

We drank tea in silence for a while. Kids played. Jackson slept.

The parable of motherhood is a profound one. I just didn't know it yet as I spooned more sugar into my Five Roses tea, passed the rusks, and wondered if time spent visiting could have been better spent sleeping. I didn't know that I was being grown up by this baby who had spoiled all my alone time. I didn't know that you continue to labor long after the baby is born. I didn't know that there was someone connecting the cacophony of dots that spelled out my life, which so far had seemed without rhyme or reason.

I walked with Natalie down the flight of stairs and rows of framed family tree photographs to the top of the steep driveway that rolls downhill and away from my parents' front door. The jacaranda tree was blossoming—a purple rain—and we hitched babies on hips and hugged good-bye one armed. Jackson was awake, and I felt ready to go another round.



a mother
continues to labor
long after the baby
is born.



why you can't
possibly know what
to expect when you're
expecting



I WENT INTO LABOR at around midnight in South Africa during an ESPN basketball game. We were up that late because midnight is the time they broadcast American sports in their entirety in South Africa, and my homesick husband was craving a little NBA. While he was up late watching sports, I was soaking my whalelike physique in the bathtub—the only way I'd found to take the edge off feeling like I was carting around several watermelons on my insides.

We were living in a small cottage in my parents' backyard, and Peter was downstairs in the main house while I was in the blue bathtub. I was as relaxed as only a clueless, first-time mother can be and enjoying the water, the weightlessness,

and the crickets chirping outside. There was a hint of jasmine in the air, and I was about to heft myself up and out of the tub and off to bed when I heard a loud popping sound. I stood up with the excitement of the uninitiated to see if my water had broken, but that is not an easy thing to judge when one is already standing in an entire bathtub full of it.

So I got out and dried off and kept trying to peer over my bulbous middle to see what might be going on in the parts below that I hadn't seen in quite some time. All seemed quiet on the home front, but I figured I'd waddle down to Peter anyway and update him on what sort of felt like it might have happened, because that's what pregnant women do—we give our husbands a play-by-play on every iota of every odd sensation, twinge, craving, or imagining that goes on in us for the nine months it takes to grow a human being.

So waddle I did—down the windy little backyard steps cut into the side of the hill, where our one-bedroom thatch-roof cottage was located, and in through the back door, past the wall of family photos to the far end of the lounge, where the TV was whispering sports scores because everyone else in the main house was asleep.

You can probably imagine Peter's excitement at this non-development; I think he may have made eye contact with me, but the Bulls or the Lakers or some team was playing and he was pretty focused. So I lay down on the sofa across from him and wondered why my stomach felt so upset, since I didn't remember eating anything out of the ordinary for dinner. The bathroom was quite a waddle away, so I just lay on the

sofa trying to ignore the discomfort growing within me. But nature would not be ignored, and after respecting its call, I found that my belly still hurt, along with my lower back.

Over and over again my stomach cramped up, and I lay on the sofa watching the basketball game and thinking to myself that if these Braxton Hicks contractions were anything to go by, I wasn't going to make it through the real thing. I lay there and contracted and pretended to watch sports with Peter. After a while those Braxton Hicks became so bad I had to snap at my husband to "turn off the sound, for goodness' sakes" and breathe slowly and deeply to make it through each one.

Throughout my pregnancy I'd worried that I wouldn't recognize real labor once it started, but I was reassured by many well-meaning folks that I most surely would. I'd just like to take this moment to say, "I told you so," because for two long hours I was utterly, naively, and painfully oblivious to the fact that I was in pretty strong labor.

At 2 a.m. when I was breathing through clenched teeth and experiencing irrational waves of hatred for ESPN in general and the game of basketball in particular, Peter became convinced that it was time to go wake my dad. My father has been a family doctor for forty years, and I'd never been happier to be related to him than the morning of August 23, 2005.

He came down in his white T-shirt and boxers and knelt beside me with his long, lean limbs and bare feet. Then he

placed firm hands on my taut belly. Watching my face, he asked, “How long has this been going on?”

“About two hours,” I said as I lay wondering why on earth I hadn’t gone to a class about breathing techniques, because in that moment, it seemed I had somehow forgotten even the basics.

“When do you think labor will start?” I huffed and puffed at him through clenched teeth.

This is the point of the story when Peter and I finally started to wake up from whatever blissful ignorance we’d been swimming around in, because my dad looked up from his hands and my stiff belly and said with no small amount of stress in his beautifully accented voice, “My darling, you’re in active labor. You need to go to the hospital. Now.”

Pete and I, still under the illusion that labor would be “obvious” and that we’d “know exactly when it was time,” just sort of stared back at him. Someone may have dunked something in the background.

So my dad tried again. He turned to Peter and spoke slowly and directly to him. “Pete, go get Lisa-Jo’s bag NOW. You need to go to the hospital right NOW.”

Then we did what all new parents do. We made phone calls. Because nothing says, “This is the real thing” like getting to tell it to someone else. Well, Peter made the phone calls. I headed back to the cottage to change out of my pajamas and into real clothes. And to grab my bag. And to lean against the wall on my way there and back so I could breathe through each contraction. My husband, meanwhile, was calling his

parents in the States to tell them it was go time. My dad, I discovered when I made it back downstairs, was also on the phone—with my brothers who lived in Johannesburg, about a forty-five-minute drive from our home in Pretoria. In fact, the two men in my life were so busy spreading the excitement that it took some growling from me to get their attention.

I remember the three of us standing in the stairwell next to the photographs with our family tree while my dad prayed. There were whole lifetimes of doubt and anticipation crowded into that moment. My dad in his boxers, me in the sweatpants that had defined the last few months of my pregnancy, and Peter with his 2 a.m. hair all thick and standing on end. My dad put an arm around each of us and prayed a welcome for the baby, and I thought my heart would burst with the wild joy of it all if my stomach didn't first. I wasn't afraid. It turned out I wasn't afraid after all. God had met his promise, and in that moment I was so full of excitement and joy I can still feel it in my memory, all but pouring out of me.

I may have tiptoed into my parents' bedroom and whispered, "Good-bye, we're going to go have a baby" to my fantastic stepmother and totally freaked her out. And then we were off in the old blue Mercedes and headed toward the hospital. Peter drove very slowly, and I tried to explain to him that slow was for *after* the baby was born. Fast was for now. Very, very fast.



My dad had called ahead to let the hospital know his daughter was coming, and they were waiting and eager, and I knew we were going to be a team. I am now convinced that labor and delivery nurses are in fact angels dressed in light-green scrubs. There was no indignity with them. There was only a deep reservoir of safety and assurance that we were all in this together. I still wasn't afraid.

Before the sun crested the horizon of the Southern Hemisphere, Dr. Shaw and her team of nurses would lead me in the long dance of generations of women before me. I knew they were there—all my sisters with their birth cries echoing down through the years crowding into a small, white, sterile delivery room in South Africa. In that moment I was becoming one of them, and I caught myself astounded at the out-of-body realization.

But then it was time to push, and the pushing lasted much longer than it should have. A tug-of-war birth that ended in forceps and a rush to rescue my son, who was entering the world via a stubborn back labor and posterior position. I would have him out and in my arms, and I didn't care what it took.

"We're going to need to cut, Lisa-Jo." Dr. Shaw was calm but urgent. "I know we talked about wanting to avoid an episiotomy, but we need to get him out now."

"Do it," I told her. "Do whatever you have to." Peter says

I didn't sound soft or romantic or any of the other adjectives I remember but instead that I roared with the guttural voice of motherhood, "Jackson, come on. Come on, Jackson!" as I bore down and my team pulled and my son was dragged into the world.

When he finally came unstuck, he came out fast, like a cork from a bottle—all wet and screaming and so very alive. This firstborn son of mine—they placed him in one grand arc from my womb onto my belly, and I looked down at the scrunched-up face of that tiny human and was born again.

It is one thing to read about and imagine the birth stories of a hundred other women; it is quite another to witness a brand-new being you have pushed out of your own body cough and gasp his way to a first breath as lungs that have never held oxygen before expand for the first time. It is one thing to understand with your head that man was made in his Father God's image; it is quite another to look into the crinkly eyes of a wailing infant and hear his cries soften as you whisper, "I'm your mama" and you see your own image imprinted over his profile.

It is sacred. It is bloody. It is real.

It is truth that climbs off the pages of Scripture and leaps alive into your arms when theoretical beliefs in a Creator give way to experiencing the act of creation.

It is the backdrop to any childbirth war story that might have terrified you for the previous nine months. It is truth that colors wildly outside the stark black-and-white lines of labor. It is the heart of the heart of motherhood. That

sacrifice—this seeming indignity, this hard and aching moment—produces such joy.

The sun was rising as I stared down at him. This baby I'd spent my whole life dreading. His face was turned blindly in the direction of my voice as I kept repeating those three words I never expected to utter: "I'm your mom. I'm your *mom*." And deep inside of me, the crater of hurt left over from losing my own mother and the joy of my womanhood in the same year closed over, and I was filled with an emotion I still can't quite put into words. It's a good thing I was barefoot already because I knew with all my lost-and-found self that this was holy ground we were standing on in a South African hospital at 7 a.m. on a Tuesday morning.

That was the beautiful moment—backlit by a sunrise, the ecstatic adrenaline of a new mother, the glory of an epidural, and Jesus in the room.

But as I would learn, motherhood is a roller coaster of highs and lows. And just a few weeks later I experienced the second real milestone in my motherhood, and it was far more mundane.

My loud family was all gathered in the dining room and sprawled out in the living room, probably eating melktert and reveling in the wonder that was our son. He was asleep, so it was easy to appreciate him through the fog of sleep deprivation. But something woke him before I could really enjoy the fact that he'd been sleeping. And when he started to cry, everyone turned and looked at me. I kept waiting for someone else to get him when the realization dropped into

my world that it would always be me. I would be the forever one expected to go when he cried. When he got hurt. When he was hungry or tired or teething. When he took first steps and when he fell down and when he graduated college and when he got his heart broken. That would be all me. Me and his dad. And me.

And I nearly stopped breathing with the weight of it.



MOTHERHOOD:
when theoretical
beliefs in a Creator give
way to experiencing
the act of creation.





CHAPTER 3

from zululand
with love

BEFORE WE GOT MARRIED, I told my husband that I didn't plan to have children. I may not have put it quite as politely as that. But I was carrying around a gut wound of leftover childhood junk, and it had convinced me that I'd rather run far away than have kids. It was a backwards coming-of-age story from there to a delivery room in Pretoria, South Africa.

Our DNA is borne from our stories as much as from our mothers. Maybe they're the same thing. Both of mine started deep in the mealie fields of Zululand—now modern-day KwaZulu-Natal—in South Africa. I grew up on the stories of a young couple—a missionary/doctor/father and a brand-new teacher/bride/mother—learning how to speak Zulu and

make stywe pap, the stiff porridge-like maize meal that's the consistency of Play-Doh and a staple of South African dishes.

I can still close my eyes and smell mangoes. I can still hear the cicadas and the hadida birds and feel the red dirt between my toes, no matter how far I've traveled away from my childhood. And it took a journey of three hundred miles and three decades backwards to write the story that ended in a delivery room in Pretoria and started in the heart of Zululand.

It was August of 1974, the season of South African spring. My father, fresh from medical school, and his friend Cliff were the only two doctors serving the Manguzi Mission Hospital, named for the abundance of mango trees that marked the area. South Africa is a place of dry heat except for this tropical heartland of the Zulu nation. Remote, rural, and echoing with the guttural clicks and lore of Shaka Zulu, Manguzi was a place where apartheid was only slowly encroaching at the time.

My young parents beat it back with nothing but their faith and the way they chose to live. In the heart of the community—working, praying, serving, teaching, doing life alongside. And over nine of those months, my mother's belly grew large and stiff as that stywe pap, and she swayed to the rhythm of stamping feet and voices joining in chorus across fields and in the chapel where my father preached on Sundays.

While the mangoes ripened, Dad was flown by bush pilot into the remote parts of the countryside to set up clinics under the avocado trees. He tells how he tried to control

the rough airsickness of the bumpy plane rides by setting his sights on one scrubby thorn tree after another en route to the villages. More often than not, he lost.

Mothers would line up with babies strapped to their backs by huge felt blankets. Choruses of flies and voices filled the air. Vaccinations, medications, and large doses of empathy were distributed. Sometimes long lines of open mouths would form for the dental clinic, shots given one after another down the row until the nursing sister made her way back to the beginning to start pulling the numbed teeth.

But even in the face of modern medicine, sangomas swore that the spirits spoke to them and demanded sacrifice when a woman was barren or a child was ill. And the people paid. The people always paid. They paid the malaria and the TB; they paid the wealthy and those with white skin. They paid the government and the leprosy, and they still managed to retain pieces of themselves.

This is the story my parents delivered me into. Because you can stoop through the doorway of a smoke-stained hut and eat over a three-legged cast-iron pot using only your fingers as utensils as you share about the day—and for a moment, you can be family. Our moment lasted three years. And I was born into the heart of it.

I don't know if my mother was afraid to have me so far from home. I do know that she claimed the promise from Isaiah 65:23, that the chosen of the Lord “shall not labor in vain or bear children for calamity” (RSV). And on the day my

mother bore down and delivered me into the world, my dad tells over and over how first she stopped pushing.

As he stood beside her, his young wife simply stopped in middelivery of their first child. Just out of medical school, with only Cliff on hand to assist, he couldn't understand what she was thinking—this woman who would give me her name.

“Jo,” he said. “Jo-babe, you need to push. You have to push. She’s coming. It’s time!”

And my mother, he says, smiled and waited before she bore down again and delivered me into his hands—baby catcher, father, missionary man. They say I screamed loudly enough for my stoic ouma—mother to my own mother—to comment about her first grandchild with the last name of her fiery son-in-law: “Yes, you can tell she’s a Rous.”

Only later, when I was in the yellow crib they had painted and safe under the mosquito netting, did he ask my mother why. “Why did you stop pushing?”

And ever since I was a little girl, my heart has raced at her answer. “Because I didn’t want it to be over.”

Since so much of my story with my mother was cut short, it has somehow soothed me to know that from the beginning she didn’t want it to be over. Like a hand stroking damp hair from my forehead, she reaches out of the past to soothe my thirty-eight years with the reminder that mothers never want it to be over.

Even the hard stuff.

They may want it to stop. They may want to find room

to breathe, to weep, to panic. But they don't want it to end—this delivering, shaping, cheering, loving, bringing life into the world.



In the meantime, my mom was not good at normal mom things.

She regularly burned dinner because she neglected to pay attention. She'd be reading in her bedroom while the three of us kids were watching *MacGyver*, and a stink would begin to rise from the stove. Eventually she'd come running down the hallway shrieking at us for not telling her and scraping the charred bits off the green beans.

But food was secondary to community. And Sundays were for guests. Our house was always full. Watermelons bopped in the swimming pool, and the mashed potatoes were piled up high on the dining room table next to the sweet corn. With my habit of sneaking ice cream late at night, dessert was sometimes awkward, and my mom would have a conniption fit—albeit a quiet one—that there was nothing but a single scoop left to go with the meringues.

But most of all, she made room for the people, so I never noticed how the house looked or what food she was serving. I saw how they all wanted to be with her. How loudly she laughed behind those owl glasses and how there was never an expected end time for people to leave.

People stayed. The kids swam. Watermelons were split for dessert.

But from my perspective as a mom now, I realize it was hard for her to pay attention to things like the food and the right time to pick us kids up from school. Living loud in the midst of a crowd came easily to her. Being one-on-one with a child or trying to embrace a memory-making moment—those seemed like work.

We'd wait under that scrawny jacaranda tree at the Willowridge High School front gate, and she wouldn't come. We'd wait and eat Nik Naks, and my friends and I would watch cute boys from under shy eyelashes. We'd wait and she'd pull up enthusiastically late, and we could smell the popcorn on her breath.

“You went to the movies without us!”

She'd laugh and deny it, and we all knew it was true anyway.

She constantly danced between her old life and her new. With the books and movies and stories that ran so thick and deep inside her, it was sometimes hard to find room for her kids. But on the days she invited us in—on those days it was magical.

When I was twelve, she took me out of school to go to the movies with her. I was so important I thought my skin might split. But I was careful not to scare her off. I was careful not to be anything but utterly grown up. We went to see Mikhail Baryshnikov in *White Nights*, and she wanted me to understand freedom and art. How art brings us all the

way into discipline, but how within those parameters there is a world of free. And that is what makes it all the more rare and beautiful.

Or maybe that's how I remember what I was *supposed* to learn. Maybe all I saw was the tap dancing and the Russian ballet defector and the desperate plot to rescue him. I saw the sinewed muscles and the cost to becoming great at anything and the fear of not being able to live that legacy. I was scared and exhilarated and brave as I watched with my mom and we danced for a whole hour and a half together.

I watch that movie now and can braille my way back into the world that included a mother.

I watch it now and can understand how it was hard for her to give up so much of what she'd been—a drama major, an English and Latin teacher, a totally unabashed bookworm. She loved stories and struggled to find the balance between living them and reading them.

I understand much better now that I'm a mom too.

I understand because Jackson was just a few months old when the second or third installment in the Harry Potter series made it to South African shores, and I holed up for an entire day to read. If the book hadn't been so thick, it would have been easier to balance the baby and the bottle of milk and the novel across my lap all at the same time. I understand because I, too, walk the tightrope between my old habits and my new ones, and as a mom, I want to be present in mind as well as in body. Smartphones make it easy to pretend. I'm sure my kids smell popcorn either way.

I understand because I want to stay up till 2 a.m. reading a new book or talking to a friend or watching an entire season of *Friends* without having to pay for it the next morning. Without having to worry about a 6 a.m. wake-up call from an extremely chipper and persistent toddler.

I understand because who doesn't want to escape for an afternoon into a realm where women go to the bathroom by themselves and don't need to narrate what they're doing while they're in there?

It's funny how having a mom and becoming a mom are so profoundly connected. For eighteen years, I had a mom. Then for the next eighteen, I didn't. And I won't for all the other years after that.

Eighteen years when they're your first feel like a lifetime. I guess they are. But because they were spent so inwardly focused, I missed much of what my mom was like. That would have been the next eighteen, right? Getting to know each other as adults.

There are so many gaps. So many questions I would ask her now over hot, sweet English tea and scones. Not the hard American kind, but the soft, fluffy South African kind, served warm with butter melting into them and a topping of strawberry jam and whipped cream.

Most of her parenting these days comes through memories. There's so much I want to do differently. I must be a much harder critic than if we were sitting across a pinewood kitchen table comparing notes. But the memories are all I

have to go on as I rewrite the story of motherhood for my own children.

My father, with all his flaws, has aged in my memory into the profoundly approachable dad he is now. We have continued to do life together, so it's easier for him to come out favorably in the balance. But my mother . . . I must search and sift and piece together scraps—scraps that might be unfair. But they're all I've got. They are my story.

She said things I wish she could take back. She said things I'm sure she'd wish she could take back. And they wriggle deep under my skin without my even realizing it, buried there for years before my own babies force me to dig them out.



I was sixteen, and it was the season of beauty pageants. We were in the old green VW Passat station wagon turning onto Charles Barret Street when I hugged my knees to my skinny chest and told her, “Mom, when I grow up, I want to be Miss South Africa.”

She looked at me and answered out of the deep well of her own insecurity: “My darling, I think you're beautiful, just not in that way.”

I didn't know until then that it was possible to be a girl and not be beautiful. I didn't know there were two kinds of beautiful.

My grown-up self wants to ask her what she was thinking

and in the same breath wrap both arms around her and hug her hard, whispering, “Mom, I always thought you were gorgeous.”

I sift through the words and listen for the undertones of insecurity I will not pass on to my own daughter. *Dear God, please help me not to pass them on to my own daughter.*

We drove on in silence, and just eighteen months later she was lying in a hospice bed, her head wrapped in a faded pink scarf with threads of silver running through it.

I went to show her my prom dress. The kind of dress that looks good on a tall, scrawny girl. It was royal-blue velvet with long sleeves and a scooped neckline that dipped off both shoulders. And it hugged with a curve that gently outlined the potential of a nearly eighteen-year-old all the way to the floor.

I spun slowly.

I didn't know what she would say.

I loved her so much my insides ached. I stood at the foot of her bed and twirled. She had on the light-turquoise sleep shirt I remembered her wearing every morning as she stood in the driveway waving, dancing us off to school.

I waited.

And all the grief and joy and life I felt came welling out of her eyes. Four words. She said the four words every daughter longs to hear: “You are *so beautiful*.” And in the last room of a long hospice hallway, I saw myself as a woman for the first and the last time in the reflection of my mother's eyes.

One week after I turned eighteen, my dad came home carrying her small blue suitcase.

“Why did you bring home mom’s stuff?” I asked him. “She needs it.”

He just stood in the doorway with tears running down his face.

I kept asking him long after I understood the answer. I kept asking him so I wouldn’t have to hear his answer. And when I finally did, I took off running to try to get out of my skin, and I ended up outside at our swimming pool. I dove in with all my clothes on, while the sun shone so indecently beautiful on a day that should have felt anything but normal. No watermelons bopped, no kids laughed, no guests rushed around to make it to evening church in time. Just the Kreepy Krauly pool cleaner chugging along the bottom and the empty afternoon ahead.

I called Liza Murphy, and her mom drove over to pick me up. We made small talk, and I had no idea how to share such awkward news with anyone. I finally choked it out to Liza when we were alone in her room. Her mom didn’t know until Dorothy, the friend I’d known since first grade, arrived weeping to find me.

Twenty years ago.

I could never have seen it then. That all these random dots would connect to map out the latitudes and longitudes of a life I wasn’t lost in after all.

But moving forward is usually impossible without first going back. And the girl who swore off motherhood needed

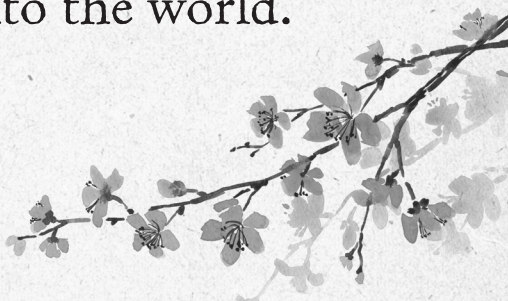
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to unravel her story before she could make sense of the newborn sleeping in the crib next to her, surrounded by swathes of white mosquito netting.



MOTHERS MAY WANT TO FIND ROOM
TO BREATHE, TO WEEP, TO PANIC.

but they don't want it
to end—this delivering,
shaping, cheering, loving,
bringing life into the world.






most people who talk
about motherhood start
out by telling you how much
they always wanted to be a mom.

Not Lisa-Jo Baker. She was eighteen and growing up in South Africa when her mom died, and she swore she would never have kids. But then she fell in love with an American boy with cowboy-green eyes, married him, and now, a decade and two continents later, they have three. This is the unlikely story of how she got there.

Along the way, she has discovered three key things about motherhood. One, motherhood is hard. Two, motherhood is glorious. Three, motherhood is very hard. And while she wouldn't trade it, she would throw out all the parenting advice that made her feel like she was somehow failing this test of womanhood. Because all the "what to expect" books in the world can never truly prepare you for the sheer exhilaration, joy, and terrifying love that accompanies motherhood.

This book is a reminder that being a mom isn't about succeeding at some parenting checklist—it's about what motherhood prepares us for while we're busy preparing for it; how a new identity brings new meaning for our future and new appreciation of our past; and how there is wonder to be found in the daily merry-go-round of dishes, laundry, and tiny humans.





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