CHILD OF MINE

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WRITERS TALK ABOUT THE FIRST YEAR OF MOTHERHOOD

Edited by CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE
The entire first year of motherhood for me was tainted by violence: physical violence, emotional violence, social violence. Giving birth itself seemed to be an act of violence. The landscape of my body became a battlefield during labor. There was excruciating pain, screaming, blood from the tearing of flesh, and well-earned scars, which, like tattoos, will be forever etched on my thighs and abdomen. I was plagued by an undiagnosed depression that debilitated me throughout the greater parts of both the pregnancy and my daughter’s infancy. By the time my daughter, Korama, was born, the partnership between her father and me was crumbling. We had drained the pleasure from our romance and were left with only harsh words and hardened hostility. On top of everything else, in April of 1992, the month of Korama’s first birthday, Los Angeles was brought to its knees by racial injustice and riots. Indeed, Korama and I took
a journey that year that led us through fury and fear, through alarming confrontations with my past and necessary negotiations for a peaceful future.

In hindsight, I see now that I have always had a proclivity for turmoil and individuals who created or sustained it, as well as a predisposition to depression. This is a toxic combination for a new mother, but it was brewing in me long before I discovered I was going to have a baby. My own childhood was full of emotional disorder. I grew up in a household that mistook control and intimidation for love, the rush and intensity of anger for passion. There were never broken bones, just broken spirits, but we danced dangerously close to the threshold of domestic violence. And in the wake of our emotional wreckage, we concealed our pain with silence, retreated, like phantoms, behind facades.

A native of Ghana, I have lived in the United States since I was six years old and alternately embraced three disparate cultures: Ghanaian, mainstream American (read: white), and black American. My family strongly believed in traditional African values and principles such as the prerequisite respect of elders, the unspoken second-class citizenship of children, and the collective endorsement of corporal punishment. To not physically discipline one’s children is akin to not feeding them three square meals or not providing them with an education. It is virtually unheard of. As a result, I spent my youth in blood-curdling fear of my parents’ power. Their words—whatever words—were law. There was no freedom in my child-world to challenge or reject, no license to question. I held no rights that could be exercised without the threat of violence.

As it turned out, all that fear only translated into po-
liteness, not sincere respect. No child of mine, I promised myself, would grow up the way I did. I wanted to have a relationship with my children based on love and genuine respect, not fear or obligatory deference. At the same time, though, I wanted to pass on to them the honor of heritage. I wanted them to eat the food and speak the languages of my primary culture. It is a classic desire: wanting to mold a child into something other than a reflection of yourself, while refusing (or simply not knowing how) to abandon the tools and models your parents used to shape you. My better judgment told me that it would be a difficult, if not altogether impossible, task, so at a very young age, I vowed to never become a mother.

Ironically, I was the first among my peers to get pregnant. At sixteen I had an abortion. At nineteen I had another. At twenty, I had a miscarriage two weeks after I found out I was, for the third time, pregnant. Had I not miscarried, I would have most likely had another abortion. The fourth and last pregnancy I carried to term. Like all the others, it was unplanned and, initially, unwanted. I was twenty-two years old, a college dropout who feared that having a child would mean forgoing an artistic career. I ultimately decided to go forward with the pregnancy more because of cryptic dreams and vague longings than any strict logic or rational sense.

There may be such a thing as a "perfect" or "right" time to have a child, but by anyone’s standards the timing of my pregnancy seemed all wrong. My boyfriend and I were still living together but we had reached an undeniable impasse in our relationship; we fought constantly, throwing insults, objects, and punches to injure
one another. This was not the spirit in which Korama was conceived but until we split up, when she was eight weeks old, it was the tepid climate of our home. Given my history of low self-esteem and harmful liaisons, it was a climate in which I existed rather comfortably. I had never learned to expect anything more substantive than sex in a relationship, not even civility or consideration. Having a baby expanded my focus; it made me want to work things out in my life, especially with my boyfriend. I naively imagined that somehow our baby could bring us closer, if not erase the tension which was thick between us. I was wrong. The feuding persisted and eventually he threw me and the baby out of his home.

Korama and I moved into an apartment in a rundown building that I agreed to manage in exchange for free rent. I taught creative writing part-time, and more nights than I care to remember were spent working a phone sex line out of my home. A dense cloud of melancholy hung over my head. On my own, with a newborn, I began to reevaluate my decision to become a parent. Did I make a mistake? I wondered each night as I stared at the ceiling, swallowing worries. There was never enough money, and the only child-care assistance I received was from a small, makeshift support network of young, childless friends. Life began to seem too large and laborious to deal with.

Most of my time was devoted to obsessing about how much of a failure I thought I was. I felt as if I hadn’t succeeded at anything in life—not in my education, not in my relationships, not in my literary ambitions. It was hard for me to move past all the guilt and self-loathing. Caring for an infant was burdensome. It required more energy than the depression allowed me to give. I became
afraid of failing at motherhood as well, and that was a thought I couldn’t bear to consider.

Luckily, Korama was a low-maintenance infant. She rarely cried except when she needed to be nursed or diapered, and she slept soundly for long stretches of time. Mostly, she would just lie there next to me in bed and stare. Her look haunted me. I felt as if she sensed my ineptitude, knew in her tiny heart that she had been shortchanged by the heavens and granted a mother who was no more capable of dealing with the world than she. The life I had planned for Korama and me was all too quickly moving out of my reach.

When I think back to those days, what I recall most vividly is the enormous amount of rage and frustration I fought to suppress. While trying to maneuver around the guilt and resentment to access the love I knew I had for my daughter, my own potential for abuse was exposed and, to my surprise, I had been engaging in a constant and precarious flirtation with it. In August of that year, when Korama was four months old, I had to file a domestic violence restraining order against her father. He had come to my house for a visit with his daughter that ended with him beating me.

It has been said that parents often raise their children to be all that they themselves could not or would not be. That is not the kind of parent I wanted to be. I had always hoped my child would inherit a few traits that genes alone could not translate. Traits like integrity, pride, perseverance, the spirit of compassion, and a strong sense of self. I wanted her to be familiar with the sound of her own laughter, but one is not able to give what one does not possess.

My turning point came on a frigid evening in January of 1992. Korama was nine months old. The depression
had lifted ever so slightly, but I was still riding a flimsy seesaw of self-deprecating emotions. We were in the living room, Korama in one corner with her Christmas toys, I in another listening to my favorite cassette. I was flipping the tape over in the recorder when I caught the scent of burning food. Apparently I had forgotten to turn off one of the burners on the stove. I rushed into the kitchen. When I returned minutes later, Korama was crouched where I had been sitting, encircled by a spool of loose tape, the empty cassette still in her hand.

I could feel all the stifled rage traveling through every vessel in my body. I marched blindly toward her, ready to unleash it. My footsteps were heavy, thundering. Even the flesh on my palms was quivering in anticipation. I was no less than two yards away when I stared into her pupils. She looked as innocently petrified as a doe. She turned her gaze to the floor and curled softly into her body. I froze and studied the scene as if it were a photograph. I hadn’t touched her with a cruel hand or uttered an irate word and there she was, helpless, at my mercy. My God, I thought, what power!

Korama was numb to my presence when, at last, I sat down cross-legged next to her. Instead of hitting her as I had planned, I hugged her, picked the tape up off the floor, and placed it in her lap. My hands continued to shake, but not in anticipation. They were shaking because I had almost held an infant physically accountable for things she had no control over—my lethal choices in relationships, my poverty, my feelings of inadequacy; clearly, those were the circumstances at the root of my rage—and for what? Destroying a cassette tape that was worth no more than ten dollars? She was simply exploring and dissecting the world around her. She was trying
to learn and, as her mother, it was my duty to teach and guide her, not punish her.

That incident prompted me to take a look at myself. Every relationship I had ever had was, in some way, abusive. In each one, I played the role of the victim. It was always the fault of someone else that I was not the person I wanted to be. From one involvement to the next, I carried blame, like a bouquet of flowers, and placed it in the open arms of my partner. It became clear to me that I opted to be with those people because they fulfilled my subconscious wishes to be mistreated; they re-created home for me. The fact that I was living out a dangerous cycle came without question. What I was unsure of was whether I would be able to break that cycle.

The highest vision I had of myself was far removed from the reality of my actions. I wanted desperately to be the mother I always dreamed of having when I was a child; I wanted to become the person I knew I was capable of being. For days afterward, I combed my brain, trying to figure out a way to change who I was. Then it dawned on me that I had already changed. The woman who approached her daughter in a crazed frenzy was not the same one who sat next to her and offered maternal tenderness. Somewhere in the moment that separated those two women, I took responsibility for myself and for my emotions. I made a definitive choice to reject the patterns of my history.

Progress was slow. My financial troubles grew worse before they got better. And the anger, that righteous indignation which eased me into adulthood, did not automatically disappear. It lingered as depression for years but once I sought proper medical treatment, it too went away. However, during those first trying months, the bond I share with Korama found form and strengthened.
Crucial compromises were made. For example, my books, cassettes, and other possessions that might be destroyed by a child’s curiosity were placed on high shelves.

I shamefully admitted to myself that my inattentiveness to Korama in her earlier months was a passive type of abuse, but abuse nonetheless. Rather than continue to let her lie idly in her crib simply because she was not hungry or in need of a diaper change, I played with her and held conversations with her, as I had when she was in my womb. When Korama’s first birthday came, it was as much a celebration for me as it was for her. In the twelve months it had taken her to learn how to walk, talk, trust, cultivate a solid personality, and use it to relate to others, I had relearned many of those very same things for myself.

Exactly three weeks and three days after Korama’s birthday, the verdicts in the trial of the officers accused of using excessive force against Rodney King were announced. The largest civil insurrection in American history followed. From the safety of our Los Angeles home, Korama and I observed the violence through the windows and on television. It was harrowing. Everyone was using their anger as a justification to hurt someone else. As we watched, Korama stood beside me clutching my leg. I wondered how much of what was happening made any sense to her. Surely she was registering something. We think so little of what impact our actions have on children, especially those who are still nonverbal. What do we know or understand about how they process hurt, disillusionment? Korama had seen so much in her first year.
Violence breeds violence. That night I made a resolution in my heart to never strike Korama and to never invite abuse—of any sort—into our household. Keeping that resolution has been no simple feat. Korama, now five, is an intelligent child with a will as strong as stone. She is everything little girls are not supposed to be: rough, aggressive, determined. She talks back—in several languages, using a patois of phrases pulled from English, Japanese, and Spanish, as well as Ga, my native tongue.

Needless to say, finding appropriate and effective methods of discipline that complement her development but do not involve physical force can be challenging. It requires patience, respect, and unwavering faith in the power of words. Admittedly, when I have been at my wits' end, the thought of spanking her has come to mind. It would be a quick fix, for the short run. But in spite of, or perhaps because of, my past, I recognize the importance of teaching Korama to understand that love and violence do not go together and should not be accepted when given hand-in-hand by the same person—be that person a lover, a friend, or a parent.

Several months ago, Korama and I were taking a trip together. A man seated next to us on the plane remarked, "What a cute little girl," then suddenly reached over to pat Korama on the head with one hand while pinching a chunk of her cheek with the other. Annoyed by the invasion of her space, Korama pulled back, looked him square in the eyes, and said firmly, "It's not nice for people to touch each other without asking. Please ask me next time." When I was her age, I didn't feel entitled to claim, let alone exhibit, such personal agency; I would
have silently accepted the intrusion. That Korama did not make me proud. It was a sign that she—and I—were making great strides in our personal growth and that if we continued to travel the path we were on, both of us were going to turn out just fine.