

Bourbon and Milk: "Are You the Mother?"

Bourbon and Milk is an ongoing series that dives into the perplexing spaces parenting sometimes pushes us, and explores the unexpected ways writers may grow in them. If you're interested in joining the conversation or contributing a Bourbon and Milk post, query Giuseppe Taurino at giuseppe@americanshortfiction.org.



“Mama,” my three-year-old son says a hundred times a day, right before he asks for something—a hug, a glass of milk, a kiss, a Netflix show, a toy that I have hidden up high because he whacked me with it—and I respond immediately, instinctively. I hear *Mama* and I think, *me*. I don’t even think it, really. I turn automatically, just as I have for my whole life at the sound of my name.

It took a long time for this to happen. Much longer than I thought. Even still, some days, I wake up and think, *I am somebody’s mother!* and it seems hilarious, absurd. Mothers are competent and patient and full of answers. They fix things for you. They are selfless. They have cool hands, always. They worry all the time. They are concerned about sunscreen, bicycle helmets, wearing shoes, if you need a scarf, if you need a coat, if you need to pack a snack, if you need to charge your cell phone. They believe in putting the children first, *no matter what*.

I am not these things, not yet, maybe not ever. I am not patient. “Just one more second!” I am always begging through clenched teeth, exasperated, trying to finish typing something while Rowan climbs on my lap, tears my hands off the laptop with his freakishly strong baby-paws. I’ll drive us all the way to town—a half hour from our house—and realize that he’s not wearing shoes, because I never put them on him. When he and I were both sick with a stomach flu this winter, we lay on the couch together watching movie after movie on the computer, a bucket in between us on the floor. At one point he asked for water. “Oh my god,” I said to my two and a half year-old. “I can’t get it for you right now, buddy. I just can’t.” He petted my head and said, “OK mama. You sleep.”

When my own mother visits, she is made nervous by his daredevil antics. “Alyssa!” she cries, pointing to him teetering on the back of a chair.

I glance up. “He’s fine,” I say, flipping the pages of my magazine like a teenager.

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The first time I went outside with my newborn—my public debut as a mother—he was fourteen-days-old. It was also the first time I interacted with strangers, or anyone other than the people who had been there when he was born: my husband, my parents, and the two midwives who attended the birth, though it was technically illegal for them to do so.

I gave birth to Rowan at home, in the dining room of our apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, one of several flats in a huge old Victorian house that had been gradually falling into disrepair since 1889. We lived on the second floor. Some things about giving birth there worried me. I was worried that the birth pool we’d ordered online would crash through the floor when we filled it. I was worried that our neighbors—all youngish single guys who lived above, below, and to the side of us—would call the cops, convinced that someone was being murdered in there. I was worried that my mother, not the best in times of crisis, would lose her mind and demand we go to the hospital. But I wasn’t worried that something would go wrong, and nothing did—unless you count getting pregnant in the first place, which, in the throes of labor, I regretted profoundly.

When it was all over and I was lying in my own (plastic wrapped) bed in my own house, holding my new baby, I no longer regretted getting pregnant—though the first loving words I had hissed at my husband right after the baby finally came out were, “WE ARE NEVER DOING THIS AGAIN.” I also didn’t regret choosing to give birth at home, despite spending the final hours of labor in a wolf-like fugue state of borderline insanity, convinced I could teleport myself, magically, through sheer willpower, to anywhere there might be drugs to shoot into my spine and make it all stop. Being at home was quiet, and dark, and private. There were no fluorescent lights, no nurses whooshing in and out every half hour, checking this or that. The midwives left, my parents went to sleep on their air mattress in the living room, and it was just my husband and I and the mystifying little creature that had emerged from my body, who was clearly an alien sent to earth to make loud, upsetting noises, produce long, alarming ropes of black tarry meconium, and to keep us up, shattered and obsessed and elated, all night long.

It was two weeks before I left the apartment to take the baby to his appointment. That’s how we

referred to him at the beginning—we called him *the baby* instead of by his brand-new name, which made him seem very important, but also slightly divorced from us, like a precious object we'd agreed to take care of, temporarily, for somebody else. I'd spent those two weeks sequestered with people who'd known me my whole life, or at least a big chunk of it. Around them I just felt like myself—myself that was suddenly, shockingly in charge of a screaming infant I couldn't figure out how to breastfeed.

It was 104 degrees in Louisville that summer. The parking lot of the doctor's office shimmered like a mirage. By the time I had hauled my leaden, post-partum body, with its extra layer of pregnancy whale fat, and the huge bucket carseat with my eight pound baby tucked inside, I was sweaty and dizzy. I stood at the counter sliding insurance cards back and forth with the receptionist, acutely aware of a throbbing, all-consuming pain in what the midwives tactfully called "the pelvic floor."

The receptionist and a nurse chatted in a boring way about Rowan and I and our appointment and where to put us and who would weigh him and I paid no attention. Then there was a pause, and I looked up. Another nurse with a clipboard was standing there, staring at me, waiting for a response.

"Are you the mother?" she repeated.

I checked behind me to see who she could possibly be talking to, but nobody was there.

"No," I said, indignant.

She frowned, confused, and looked at her clipboard, then back at me, then at the carseat sitting at my feet. I looked where she was looking. We both gazed at the baby sleeping in there, a little raisin in a brown onesie with white piping, a matching hat, rubbing his hands together in his sleep like Lady Macbeth, which he had done *in utero*, and which I'd been able to feel him doing, when he was still inside me. It had tickled.

"Oh," I said finally. "You mean *his* mother. Um, yes."

I followed her into the maze of offices, dazed. For the duration of the appointment, the doctors and nurses referred to me as "Mom." As in, "OK Mom, go ahead and take his diaper off."

I was dumbfounded. I was too rattled even to point out how irritating and condescending it was to have someone other than your own child refer to you as *Mom*. It was inconceivable to me that someone could look at me and think, *mother*. When I tried to picture myself that way, something short-circuited in my brain. Of course I was aware that people change, that I had changed, many times already over the course of my life. Every new stage—going from daughter to college student, to adult, to wife, etc.—required a sort of slow melting into a new self, something so gradual that I barely noticed, was barely aware of doing it. But when the baby was born—when he came out of me in that searing explosion of pain, all slippery and bloody, crying his hoarse, robust little cry—a new version of me had been born, too. In a flash, a new self. One I didn't recognize at all. *Mother*, like a dress that didn't fit, was too small or too strange, and I

couldn't get it around me, didn't even realize I was supposed to try.

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I thought that having a baby would make me want to write about having a baby. I imagined I could turn all those fractured hours, days, months of Rowan's first year into fiction; that I was basically *required* to, since it was now my entire world. I started a dozen stories from the point of view of a young mother, trapped in a little apartment, driven slowly, blissfully insane by the sensuous, repetitive inanity of caring for a newborn. But none of these stories ever got off the ground.

As it turned out, I did write about parents, but not in the way I expected. I was disappointed with myself, later, when I looked back at the stuff I was writing. I was in the middle of one of the most unique and intense and insanely animal things you can do in this life—birth another human!—and I wasn't writing a word about it. Instead, I wrote a story set in the eighties, about a girl who has to move because of her dad's job. Another one about a teenager, disgusted with her parents for what she perceives as their inability to run their lives in a responsible way. All kinds of kids were cropping up when I sat down to write, their parents circling their self-centered universes like planets, attracting attention when they did things that were confusing or non-parental or difficult to understand.

I was obsessed with it, the weirdness of having birthed a creature who has—and will have for most of his childhood—an entirely different concept of who you are than you do.

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I remember hitting the age, as a kid, when it suddenly dawns on you that your parents were not always your parents, that they have had, and do have, and will have, entire lives beyond you. They were young and single once, they were teenagers, they were children. Obviously I knew this—even when I was nine or ten or whatever age it was that this thunderclap of knowledge came along, I didn't imagine that my parents had hatched from an egg at the age of thirty, just to birth and raise me. But you can know something in a distant, unexamined way and not *know* it, not really.

I was in the attic at my grandparents' house, rooting around under the eaves where all the old stuff is stored—smashed dance corsages, blurry black-and-white photos, letters and cards and buttons promoting long-dead presidents—and came across a paper plate with my mother's tiny handprints on it. *Adrienne*, she had written in crayon, in the sprawling, shaky, uneven lettering of a kid just learning to spell. I remember feeling a little bit heartbroken—that I hadn't known her then, that in some ways I would never know her, really, even though she is one of the people I'm closest to in the world.

In Alice Munro's *Walker Brothers Cowboy*, one of my favorite short stories of all time, the narrator, a young girl growing up in rural Ontario during the Depression, goes to work with her father, a door-to-door salesman. She and her little brother watch from the car as, house after house, he puts on a cheerful salesman's persona for his customers. They pay a sudden,

unplanned visit to a woman he knew a long time ago, before the narrator was born. The father and the woman, Nora, talk and flirt and tiptoe around each other and their shared past—things unsaid, things lost—and the narrator sees her father, briefly, through Nora’s eyes, catches a glimpse of the other life he might have chosen.

Munro breathtakingly renders a child’s limited yet profound ability to parse an experience like this—the girl doesn’t really grasp the meaning of everything she observes before they say goodbye and drive away, but it hits home like an arrow.

So my father drives and my brother watches the road for rabbits and I feel my father’s life flowing back from our car in the last of the afternoon, darkening and turning strange, like a landscape that has an enchantment on it, making it kindly, ordinary and familiar while you are looking at it, but changing it, once your back is turned, into something you will never know, with all kinds of weathers, and distances you cannot imagine.

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Fictional characters, like real-life people, are never one thing. They are everyone they’ve ever been, and all the people they will be. They are different things to different people. Sometimes, when I’m stuck, and a character feels flat or dull or static, I can unstick myself by looking at her through another character’s eyes. Who is she to them? What version of her haven’t I seen?

One of my professors during my MFA was Lorrie Moore, who ended our first semester-long workshop by delivering an extemporaneous list of advice on how to be writers. It was an excellent list. She told us to walk into every story as if into a house, to take it room by room, and stay inside it as long as possible. She told us to only drink coffee while we were writing, to preserve its magical properties. She told us that the best short story endings were the ones that shone a light back on the tale you’d just told, illuminating it in a new way. She told us not to have children, if we could at all help it, but if we had to—well, then, we had to.

She also told us that we had to have compassion for our characters. We couldn’t make them stupid or mean or incapable, just because it suited the plot for them to fail. We had to be generous with them, and give them all the skills and tools and wherewithal to survive and make it through—or not make it through, as the case may be—whatever scenario we had created for them.

Part of that, I think, is showing your characters in all their many facets, in their different, contradictory selves. The first time I read Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, I was struck by the way she snapped a portrait of a character at one age, then gave us, in a later story, an older, irrevocably transformed version of that person. Some of them bore little, if any, resemblance to their earlier selves. But instead of trying to bridge the gap, Egan let the gulf yawn open. It was mesmerizing, and a little disturbing, and felt very true. So much was contained in those negative spaces between stories, between who the character had been once, and who they were now.

We are resistant to change, as a general rule. We especially don’t like it when other people

change. Friends, spouses, parents. We want them to remain as they are—occupying a particular niche in our lives, consistent and comforting. Maybe we do the same with the characters we create—locking them down, refusing to imagine the profound ways that they can shapeshift over the course of a life. Every character, if real, would have shed her skin a dozen times by the time a writer dreamt her up, tried to flatten her on the page like a moth. Or perhaps it's more like growing a new skin over the old, so that all the old versions stay sealed inside—a matryoshka doll you have to figure out how to get open.

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Rowan likes to ask me my name. He makes me say the whole thing—first, middle, and last. Then he repeats it, stumbling because it's long. He finds it thrilling, to know my name, as though it's some kind of secret. He has a sly look when he gets it right—all eleven syllables—like he's just said a magic spell.

But after, he'll start to look worried.

“Are you my mama?” he'll ask, perhaps doubting, in his instinctive baby way, that I could have two names, two selves, and occupy both of them equally.

“Of course I am,” I tell him, “I always will be.”

I kiss his salty sweaty cheek, and he smiles, reassured.

Alyssa Knickerbocker's work has appeared most recently in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *West Branch*, *American Short Fiction*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, *Brooklyn Magazine*, and *The Best of the West: New Stories from the Wide Side of the Missouri*. She was the 2012-2013 Halls Emerging Artist Fellow at the Wisconsin Institute for Creative Writing, and before that the Axton Fellow in Fiction at the University of Louisville. A novella, *Your Rightful Home*, is published by Nouvella Books (www.nouvellabooks.com). She currently lives with her husband and son on the Kitsap Peninsula in Washington State, where she's working on a novel set in the area. Find her at www.alyssaknix.com.