

IG Chronicles

Mother Love, Mother Guilt

By Valarie Kinney



SOMEHOW, IT ALWAYS comes down to the mother.

The first person a teacher asks to speak to when a problem arises. The first person a physician discusses a medical issue with. The person the other mothers — at soccer and baseball practice, at Scout meetings — whisper about when she leaves the room.

That child is too thin!

That child is too heavy!

That child is too short!

Sad, shaking heads. Collective sighs. Satisfied hands clutch their Starbucks cups. Tiny sips of double mocha light foam cappuccinos.

And then...

What is she doing wrong? Why doesn't she do something to fix this? Surely, she must see The Problem.

Surely.

Surely, the mother sees the problem. She drops off her child with a smile and a wave, heads back to her SUV to rest her head on the steering wheel. She closes her eyes tight, unable to un-see the differences. The Problem. The fact that her child is unlike his peers; there are glaring discrepancies in the size of her child and the size of the others.

What have I done wrong?

Why can't I fix this?

Surely, she sees what the other mothers see.

And she sees the other mothers. She notices the way they turn their heads — just slightly — when her child joins the group. Are they checking? Checking to make sure their children are still superior? That The

Problem hasn't somehow affected the perfection of their offspring?

She sees them catch one another's eye, each in turn. A fraction of a second — barely that — but still.

Enough.

She hears the artificial coating in the invitation that comes just a little too late; the unnecessary volume in the equally unnecessary reassurances: "He's just a late bloomer" or "He'll slim down once he hits that growth spurt."

She hears the words that are implied, but not stated out loud.

"He'll be fine, as soon as you figure out where you went wrong, and fix it."

Judge and jury.

They cannot understand how desperately she loves him. How completely she would sacrifice to be able to fix The Problem.

Mother love equals mother guilt.

She knows something isn't quite right. This isn't her first child; she knows what is normal, average — and she just knows something is off.

Not quite sure what it is. Just — something. But, how could that be? She was so careful. No drinking, no smoking, no caffeine. Forty weeks of carefully measured actions. Vegetables. Milk. No undercooked meats. Never missed a prenatal appointment. No drugs during the birth.

She breast-fed. They said that would be better. Safer.

Well-child checkups are passed with flying colors. Hesitantly, she voices concern to the physician.

Her worries are blown off, like an

insignificant kite detached from a string.

All mothers worry. You're just overly tired. All babies are different. Nothing is wrong.

Nothing is wrong.

Nothing.

Except ... she knows there is something. But she lies to herself. She convinces herself to believe all is well. When the worry rears its head in her throat, lodging there like a child's bouncy ball, too big to move either up or down, just ... stuck — she busies her mind. Turns up the TV. Calls a friend to gossip about nothing. Furiously cleans. Invents extra errands.

Pushes the worry down, down, down, deep into her gut, where it belongs.

Until The Event. The Dreaded Something that changes the minds of those who dismissed her initial concerns.

The day the doctor sits her down and speaks to her in slow, easy-to-understand words. Do you understand? Yes, she understands. She looks him in the eye, forces herself to listen. She listens, but the pain in her chest makes her hold her breath. Oddly, she remembers another time when she felt this way. When was it? She searches her memory.

First grade. On the playground, standing on the swing with daring. Clutching tight at the chains biting into her fingers, she calls fearlessly to her friends, "Underdog me!" and sails away, up, up, up into the sky.

She falls. Hits the ground with a sickening thwack. She lies there, so

much pain in her chest and back she cannot breathe. She wants to cry out, but the air in her chest sits heavy as a block of ice. Unmoving. She is frozen.

This feels like that.

Labs. Tests. Appointments. Prescriptions. Journals. Journals! Logging every bite that passes the child's lips; every new symptom; every night that passes without rest; every unusual behavior. Furiously, she scribbles into the journals — here, she is certain, the answer will appear. A pattern will emerge, and whatever it is that has caused the Dreaded Something will show itself. She will eliminate it, and everything will be OK again.

She will be able to breathe again. She misses the way it used to feel, back when she could breathe without even thinking about it.

She cannot find the pattern. She cannot find the answer.

Sitting in the tiny exam room that has become far too familiar, she waits. The door creaks open, the physician enters and takes a seat on the little spinning stool. Small talk. She eyes the folder in his hand. She does not want to talk. She only wants the magical answer, the sword that will slay the Dreaded Something. She considers snatching the folder out of his hands. She smiles. She waits.

Finally, the answer comes. The block of ice in her chest somehow spreads to her shoulders, arms, head. She feels the slow freezing of her entire being. Her teeth begin to chatter.

It is her fault. The doctor says it jokingly. "Isn't it always the mother's fault?" He chuckles. It lingers in the air, like hot breath on a frigid day.

Here it is, then. The answer. She has done this to her child; her body,

her genetics, have caused the Dreaded Something. She cannot take it away. She cannot fix it.

Doesn't he see how much this hurts? He laughs and says he should create a frequent-flyer parking spot just for her family. Does he understand she would willingly give her home, her arm, her leg — her life — anything, anything to fix this?

Mother love equals mother guilt.

Sometimes at night, she hears the muffled strains of guitar strings being plucked and closes her eyes, listening, a smile on her lips. Her child has struggled so much, lost so much, grown so much. Still, her child finds beauty in small things: a brightly colored bead, an unusual sunset, a new song.

She hurries dinner in order to make it on time to school conferences. The teacher laughs as the report card is handed over: "If only I had a classroom of kids like this one, I'd be happy to come to work every day!" She feels a warmth, a melting in her icy chest. She straightens her shoulders and takes a deep breath.

Her heart constricts, her chest hurts as she watches the IV insertion. She rubs her child's back, watches as his eyes follow the hands of the nurse. Alcohol rub, gauze pad, syringe, bandage. He knows the routine; he knows once every item is in its own place, the poke will come. He sits up

tall, back and tiny shoulders straight. He does not blink or turn away. He watches with detached curiosity; he holds his breath, scrunches his nose — there, it's over. All done. He smiles and cracks a joke; his nurse laughs. She kisses his little head and tells him he is brave. She thinks to herself he is stronger than most grown men.

A child is bullied on the playground. A new child, and something about him makes him stand out. Something isn't quite right. He has a Problem. She watches as her child leaps in front of him, arms outstretched. Chin up, eyes blazing, her child protects him. The bullies back off. Arm slung about the new child's shoulder, her son offers to play with him, introduce him to some nice kids. Her eyes water with liquid pride. He has endured great pain, but he is such a compassionate boy. The Champion of the Underdog — he will not stand for hateful words or unkind actions.

She looks at the children she is raising. Kind-hearted, compassionate. Honest, cheerful. Funny. Creative. Loyal. These things are also her fault. She loves them with an intensity that burns the ice.

Mother love equals mother guilt. ■

VALARIE KINNEY is the mother of four children, three of whom are diagnosed with common variable immunodeficiency.

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