



To Be or Not to Be
a Mother

A memoir of a young girl testing the limits of fate.

Chapter 1: Practicing Motherhood

I don't remember the name of my first baby doll, but I know she came with a bottle that bubbled when I tipped it. I was maybe four years old, cradling her in my arms the way I'd seen my mother with the infants at our daycare. I would sit on the floor, rocking the doll gently while humming a lullaby that I barely knew the words to. I wasn't playing, I was practicing.

From the moment we're born, the world begins molding us, and for many girls like me, that mold carries one quiet but powerful expectation: one day, you'll become a mother. No one said it out loud, but it was in everything. My toy box overflowed with baby



Christmas morning when I was little; I'm on the left with the curly hair. My aunt holds a pink box with a Zip-It Do Doll, a present for my younger cousin.

dolls and miniature clothing for them. I lost count of how often I was told I'd be "such a good mommy one day." And for most of my life, I believed it because I thought I had to.

Chapter 2: Signed Without Reading

As I grew older, the next step in this gendered memoir arrived: my first menstrual cycle. With the cramps and the blood came the conversation that mothers always sugarcoat, periods, and the responsibilities women must manage every month. At age 12, I understood what my mother was saying, but I never truly grasped the full depth of womanhood. She didn't say it

outright, but the implication was clear. This is part of what makes you capable of bringing life into the world. It was presented as natural, inevitably even beautiful. But I didn't feel beautiful. I felt as if I'd signed a contract I hadn't read. No one told me I could opt out.

By the time I reached high school, that contract started to feel even heavier. I was bombarded with lectures about abstinence, abstinence, and more abstinence. I come from a small town where a significant number of girls in each grade ended up pregnant, often without a stable father figure. If they could have handed out awards to students who graduated as virgins, they would have. Honestly, I wouldn't have minded; I probably would've been one of the recipients. That path seemed inevitable, too. Not because I had chosen it with intention, but because everything around me was designed to push me in a very specific direction: purity, obedience, and eventually, motherhood.



Easter Sunday at church, a moment captured from my childhood. I'm on the left, my mother sits in the middle, and my older sister is on the right. My sister and I wore matching purple dresses that day, a tradition my mother loved.

Chapter 3: Other Women, Other Questions

For over twenty years, I thought I knew the answer. Of course, I wanted to be a mother. It was a quiet, unquestioned certainty; one that had lived in me so long that I never thought of asking where it came from. But was that desire truly mine, or something I had simply absorbed from the world around me? I didn't start asking that question until college, when everything I believed about myself began to feel a little less solid. It didn't come to me in a sudden epiphany, but rather through a quiet, thoughtful conversation with one of my closest friends. We were sitting crisscrossed on her twin-sized dorm bed, our Notes apps open on our phones as we chatted about *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, the book we'd finished reading for our tiny

two-person book club. As we unpacked the book's themes of self-identity and purpose, she posed a question that lingered with me long after: What does it mean to be a woman, and is motherhood essential to that identity? Something in her words reached a part of me I hadn't paid attention to before, and for the first time, I allowed myself to consider the possibility that the path I thought I was on might not be the only one or even the right one for me.

Chapter 4: The Armor Doesn't Fit

I didn't expect a poem to unsettle me the way "Armor" by Sharon Olds did. I read it late one night for a class, half-distracted at first, until I hit the final image: a mother's son tumbling down the stairs of a museum, his chest vulnerable. Suddenly, I wasn't reading it as a student anymore. I was reading it as someone trying to imagine what it might mean to be a mother.

In the poem, a mother watches her son marvel at the armor displays in a museum, suits of steel, polished and impenetrable. But as she watches him, her mind drifts into a darker place. She imagines him falling down the museum steps, "clutching his delicate unprotected chest" (lines 28-29). And she writes, "Gabriel dies, and dies" (lines 29-30). That image, of him falling again and again, unable to be saved, haunted me. It wasn't the line itself. It was what it made me feel: how terrifying it is to love someone so much, knowing you can't always protect them. I don't have children yet, but I imagine that kind of love wraps itself around you in ways you can't undo. And then what? You go through life with nothing to shield you. Where others flinch and move on, you absorb, as if the world forgot to give you the layer that makes it bearable. This poem brought my fears to the surface. I've often asked myself: Could I handle watching a child of mine suffer? Could I hold their hand through an illness I couldn't cure? Could I sit beside

them during heartbreak, failure, or something even worse and not shatter inside? I'm not sure I could.

There's a version of parenthood that lives in daydreams. It smells of baby lotion and feels like warm Saturday mornings and birthday candles. But there's another version, the one no one talks about openly, the version where the armor doesn't fit. Where no matter how hard you try, you can't shield them from everything. You can't guarantee their happiness, their safety, or even that they'll outlive you. That's the one that terrifies me.

I used to think fear would come later, after I had children, if I ever did. But that fear is already here. It lives in my chest when I see stories on the news, when I hear about a child getting sick, or when I watch a parent hold their grief as if it's the heaviest thing in the world. I can barely stand to witness it. How do they keep breathing? How do they keep going?

Every day, I think about my best friend Kali, who passed away from leukemia when we were six years old. One day she was here, playing Barbie dress-up with me, laughing over the silliest things, and then she was gone. That loss split my world into "before" and "after". I remember almost every detail of her funeral: her pink-lined casket, my mother handing me tissue after tissue, and most of all, the look on her parents' faces, how empty their eyes were. That moment, standing there in my little dress, realizing I would never speak with her again, never left me. And maybe that's where my fear started, not from



My best friend Kali and I at our daycare. Behind us stands the massive wooden play castle we spent countless hours exploring.

imagination, but from memory. And it's not fear of loss, it's the responsibility, too. The sheer weight of shaping a life. Of being the one they look to for answers, for comfort, for stability. What if I get it wrong? What if I'm not strong enough? Loving a child changes everything about you. Once it happens, there's no going back. You're no longer living for yourself. That kind of love is beautiful. But it's also terrifying. What no one tells you is that even the people who bring you into this world, the ones who were supposed to be your first safe place, sometimes fall apart too.

Chapter 5: Holding It Together

It was before my 16th birthday, during the COVID-19 pandemic, of course, when my parents separated. The world already felt uncertain: lockdowns, online classes, masks on every face, but this, this was different. The unraveling didn't come all at once. It started with small silences, short tempers, and dinners were eaten at different times. When my mother moved out of the house, the center of our family shifted. My sister and I went with her, but not entirely. Pieces of us stayed behind with my father, just as pieces of him came with us. No one truly abandoned anyone, but the shape of our family fractured. It wasn't whole anymore, and the silence that followed drowned out even the loudest arguments that had come before. The house stood emptier, quieter, waiting for something that would never return.

That day passed in a haze of shouted words and packed boxes, but I can still see the carpet. I sat there, staring at its pale tan pattern, hoping it might explain what had gone so wrong, wanting it to absorb the sound of two people who had once promised each other forever now

choosing something else. That was the day I stopped thinking love was enough. Because clearly, it hadn't been.

People say kids are resilient. That they bounce back. But what they don't see is how we hold everything in, how we try to carry the weight so no one else has to. I tried to keep the peace, to make things easier for everyone else, even though everything inside me was splitting. I had to pick a parent. I had to pick a side. And even though my mom and dad tried their best not to make us choose, we still had to. That's what no one tells you: sometimes love makes you choose. And sometimes there's no right answer.

Looking back now, I realize that this was when my view of love, and maybe even motherhood, began to shift. I had always seen family as a stable, permanent thing. I used to think of a family as something solid, something that could stand on its own. Now I know it's more fragile than that. It takes constant effort to keep it together, and even then, it's vulnerable to things you can't control.

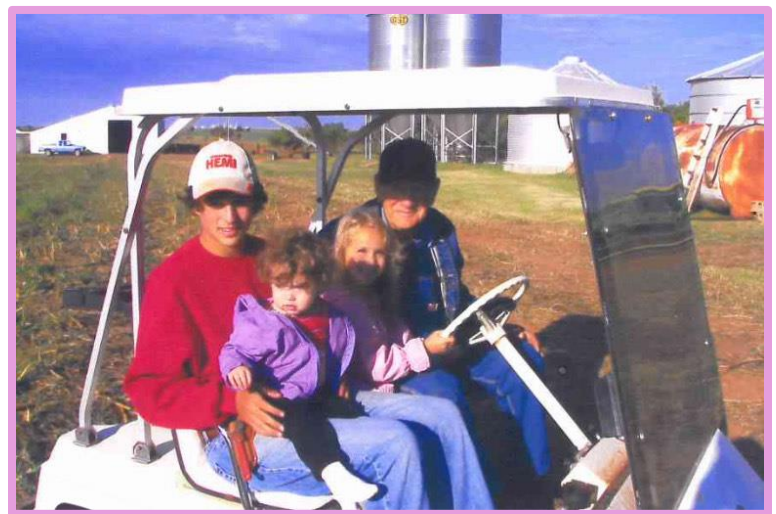
My parents' divorce didn't make me bitter about love, but it did make me cautious. I've become a little more careful with the idea of forever. I've learned that love doesn't happen; it must be chosen repeatedly, sometimes even when it's hard. I want love that lasts, but I know now that it's not a guarantee. I also know that love alone won't hold a family together; it takes communication, commitment, forgiveness, and a willingness to grow together, not alongside each other. So, when I think about having children, I think about what kind of home I want to create for them. Not physically, but emotionally. I want to do things differently. I want to build something steady, not perfect, but honest. I want my children to grow up knowing that love can be hard, but also that it's worth fighting for. Those families aren't defined by how they look, but

by how they love. And maybe that's what scares me the most. Because I know how it feels when that love fades, when the structure you depend on gives way. I know what it's like to have to rebuild yourself from the pieces left behind. And I don't want my children to ever have to carry that.

Even as the idea of family shifted for me, it didn't vanish. If anything, it became more precious. Because even though my home changed, I still carried with me my mother's love, through the traditions we kept alive, and the stories passed down from women before me. That's where I started to find a different kind of clarity. Not in certainty, but in remembering what family has always meant to me: joy, connection, and continuity. And for that, I always come back to the farm.

Chapter 6: The Farm at the End of the Road

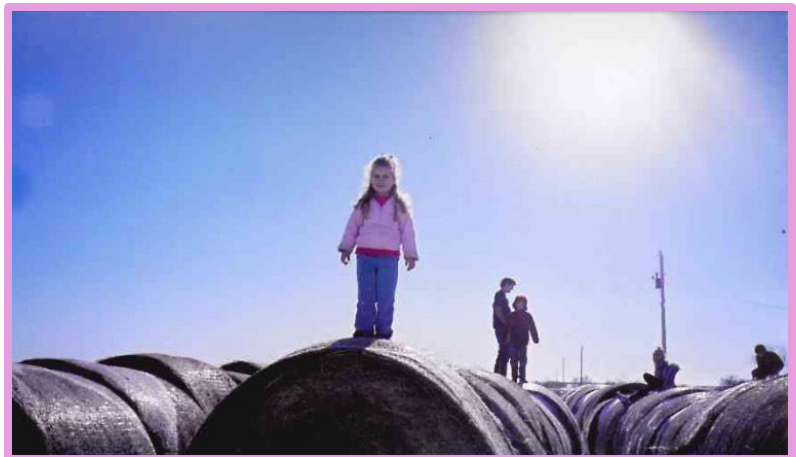
There's a stretch of road in Oklahoma that I know better than most things in my life. It curves past open fields, quiet cattle, and hedge apple trees that seem to cover the driveway no matter what season it is. At the end of that road is my great-grandparents' farm; the kind of place that feels suspended in time, where the screen door always creaks the same way and the smell of something warm in the oven fills the air, familiar and constant, as if it's always been a part of the old farmhouse.



A snapshot from my great-grandparents' farm; my great-grandpa at the wheel of his beloved golf cart, my cousin Austin in the passenger seat with me on his lap, and my sister nestled between us and our great-grandpa.

That farm was our gathering place. It's where we laughed the loudest, ate the most, and hugged like we meant it. Every holiday, birthday, and summer afternoon seemed to land there. I can still picture the crowded living room, adults squeezing onto couches and kids piling onto the floor with paper plates balanced on their laps. We didn't need much, just each other. In a world where things often fell apart, that little patch of land held steady. It reminded me that family can be both fragile and enduring. And in that space, I saw the kind of motherhood I admired. Not only through my mom, who managed to calm the chaos and make everything feel safe, but also through my grandmothers, aunts, and cousins, who were raising their kids in the background of it all. There was a quiet strength in the way they cared for everyone, sometimes without being noticed, but always being felt. These women weren't perfect. They bickered and teased each other relentlessly, but they showed up. They passed on more than casseroles, they passed on resilience, generosity, and love that didn't have to be spoken aloud to be understood.

That's why Tressie McMillan Cottom's writing, especially in "New Money", resonated so deeply with me. When she wrote, "Home for us is wherever the eldest matriarch of the family lives," (p. 937) it clicked. I knew exactly what she meant. My family's legacy wasn't about land deeds or trust funds; it was about connection. To me, inheritance has always meant recipes written in cursive on index cards, Saturday night dinners, and the way we all



That's me perched on a row of hay bales, with my cousins and sister in the background. We'd spend entire days climbing, running, and jumping across them, collecting scrapes and bruises along the way, but we'd always end up laughing.

know how to fold laundry the same way.

Still, I've started to think more intentionally about the kind of inheritance I want to give. Not emotional, but practical. Like Cottom, I think about freedom. What does it mean to give your future children choices you never had? Not the kind of wealth that isolates, but the kind that enables education, security, and time. Cottom writes, "People say they want to be rich. I think what they want is to be free" (p. 936). That struck something in me. I don't dream of raising kids in a mansion. I dream of giving them the freedom to be themselves without the constant pressure of making ends meet. That, to me, is the real inheritance. And maybe that's what I've always admired about the farm. It gave us freedom, not in the financial sense, but in the emotional one. We were allowed to be silly, loud, soft, and messy. We belonged to each other. If I ever do become a mother, that's what I want to pass on. A home that holds space for everyone, and everything, as we are.

And yet, even with all that emotional clarity, the question still lingers: do I truly want the future I was raised to admire? The warmth of the farm, the strength of the women in my life, they offered a blueprint. But they also left room for me to imagine something different. Lately, that question has echoed in unexpected places, not just in books or conversations, but in music,

in
the quiet
my



stillness, in
corners of
becoming.

My sister and I playing in an old farm truck trailer filled with wheat grains. We'd climb in to explore, always finding grasshoppers, beetles, and other creatures hiding among the grains. I'm the one standing up.

Chapter 7: Holding Space for Longing and Uncertainty

Sometimes I still dream up names for children I haven't decided to have. They come to me in quiet moments: when I'm folding laundry, walking past the baby aisle at the grocery store, or seeing someone's social media with photos of them celebrating their baby. It's not constant, but it's there. That soft, quiet longing. At the same time, there's uncertainty. Not fear exactly, but a deep awareness of how much this choice would change me. How much does it demand? And how irreversible it is. For a long time, I thought I had to decide now, yes or no, mother or not. But lately, I've realized that some questions aren't meant to be answered right away. Some questions ask to be lived into.

That's when I started hearing my doubts reflected in unexpected places; in music, in lyrics I never expected to carry so much weight. Lately, I've been exploring genres I hadn't connected with before, opening myself up to new voices and perspectives. One song caught me off guard: "Take Your Mask Off" from Tyler, the Creator's newest album, *Chromakopia*. I didn't expect it to resonate, but it did, deeply. One line stopped me in my tracks: "They dream about your nest..." I knew exactly who they were: family, tradition, even the younger version of myself who assumed motherhood was a given, not a question. All those voices had a dream for me. And for so long, I tried to live up to it without ever asking if I wanted to. But then came the second half: "You crave flyin' alone." And I do. Not out of selfishness, but out of something deeper; a desire to explore who I am when I'm not responsible for shaping someone else's life. I crave quiet mornings, spontaneous decisions, and the space to create something that belongs only to me. That kind of freedom doesn't mean I'm empty. It means I'm still becoming.

Still, the line that lingers most is: “Fantasize about the dream you left on the shelf.”

Because I do. I imagine the softness of a newborn’s breath, the chaos of family dinners, the sacredness of being someone’s safe place. And sometimes I wonder: if I leave that dream on the shelf too long, will it gather dust I can’t wipe away? Or will it wait patiently, knowing I needed time? I don’t have answers; no one does. Time will reveal them. That line holds a dual meaning for me. It speaks not only to the dream of motherhood, but also to the personal aspirations that might be set aside because of it. I dream of traveling, anywhere and everywhere. And I wonder: if I become a parent, will that dream have to shrink? Will time and money stretch thin? Will that version of me fade? That’s the tension I live in now. The life I have is full: full of love, of growth, of people who see me clearly, but some days, it still feels incomplete in a way I can’t explain. I’m learning to hold space for that paradox. To let myself imagine a child’s laugh without needing to know when or if it will happen. To celebrate the mothers around me without feeling obligated to follow. To ask, not “Do I want this forever?” but “Do I want this today?” I’m learning to hold space for both longing and doubt. This space I’m in, this in-between, feels suspended in a moment of waiting, nothing has ended nor begun. I can look ahead, or I can look back, but right now I’m standing still: breathing, observing, and becoming.

If motherhood is in my future, I want it to be a conscious step, not an assumption. I want it to be a choice made with love, not expectation. And if it’s not, if my path looks different than I once imagined, I want to know that I honored myself enough to let that be okay. We don’t talk enough about the beauty of not knowing. Or the strength it takes to wait. But that’s where I am: holding space for love in all its forms, for family in all its shapes, and for a future that might not be the one I grew up expecting but still feels like home.



Another photo of my sister and I, with our mother between us. We're wearing matching outfits once again.



One of my earliest baby photos, with my mother holding me close.



This is one of my favorite photos of Kali and I, taken at one of our favorite parks during my birthday party. It's a memory I'll always cherish.

Somewhere between the baby dolls I rocked on the living room floor and the harder questions I've learned to ask about love, family, and identity, I've started to understand that motherhood, like womanhood, isn't a role you inherit, but one you shape, and one that shapes you in return. I don't have all the answers, and I'm learning that's okay. This memoir isn't a declaration; it's a process. A gathering of memories, fears, hopes, and questions I'm still carrying with me. If I become a mother, it will be a choice made with full awareness of the risks and the beauty it holds. And if I don't, it will be with the same deliberate love I've inherited from the women who raised me. The kind of mother I hope to be would carry pieces of my own, her quiet strength, her patience, her unwavering presence. I want to pass that on not through biology or tradition, but through intention. Through love chosen on purpose. Because becoming isn't about fulfilling someone else's idea of womanhood, it is about deciding for myself who I want to be and holding space for that to keep evolving.



A special photo of my mother and I at Family Day with my sorority, captured in the spring of 2024 during my freshman year at Missouri State University.

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