

Mother Figures

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We must have been in a hurry the day that my mom and I shared a stall to try on our swimsuits. We both squeezed into the dressing room and peeled off our layers, with her grumbling about her body. I was fourteen or fifteen and mom was in her mid-fifties. She always wore a one-piece and was particularly modest. When she lifted her shirt, I saw for the first time her doughy, pink stomach with jagged branches of shiny purplish white going across it haphazardly, like lightning strikes.

“What happened to you?” I asked in shock.

She pulled her shirt down, yanked her remaining leg out from her jeans and tossed them onto the bench. Then she looked straight at me and answered, not unkindly, “You did.”

I had heard of stretch marks, of course. I had four older sisters, some of whom were mothers themselves. I had been an aunt since I was seven years old. I knew. I just didn’t *know*.

There’s no way to know. Not until you do.



When I was pregnant with my first child, I was a student at BYU and worked at a local Mexican restaurant as a server. Although I was just twenty-one, I had been married for two years, so there was no scandal attached to my burgeoning belly. My husband also worked at the restaurant, and we shared a warm relationship with the other employees there. One day, a friend came up to me and placed her hand on my abdomen. Her eyes glowed with excitement.

“Does it feel so magical? Is it amazing?” she asked, tapping my tummy softly. Her voice hummed with the thrill of expectation.

Although I was the one expecting, I wasn't thrilled. I was sick of the smell of wet tortilla chips. And at such a young age, I was mostly overwhelmed with exhaustion. Having this baby had been somewhat of a surprise. Two of my sisters had a hard time having biological children, and after their struggles, I was on alert. I thought we had better start trying early so we would be one step ahead of the game when the time actually came for us to have kids. Little did I realize that I would get pregnant almost immediately—in the middle of my junior year of college.

I turned to her wearily, "Actually, it just kind of feels like I have a parasite."

I didn't mean to be callous, or to pop her bubble of joy, but I had anyway. She quickly walked away in stunned silence. I hadn't meant to offend, but in my typical way, I had said exactly what I felt: I was being held hostage by a foreign entity, my body no longer my own. I had such a sense of body dysphoria from pregnancy that I hardly felt like myself.

It was similar to how I felt going through puberty—like my body was changing into a new organism that I was unfamiliar with and slightly scared of. I think most people probably feel this way to some degree as they change from child to adult. All of a sudden you're bumping your head on cabinet doors you used to walk under. Toes are getting jammed at the front of feet that have grown three shoe sizes in a summer. You don't know how to hug your mom anymore, because you used to fit in the nook under her chin, and now she fits in the nook under yours.

Puberty, pregnancy, nursing, perimenopause, menopause. There are so many changes for women's bodies with hardly enough time to acclimate before a new season comes.

On top of that, there is so much social pressure for a woman's body to appear a certain way that even when we're not experiencing one of these watershed phases of physical metamorphosis, we're bombarded with enticements to cause other physical changes to our bodies. Some of these are mild like dying your hair to cover the gray, or using creams and elixirs at night as if they were magic potions that could turn you young by morning. But some of the suggestions are more invasive like having a plastic surgery "mommy makeover," where parts of your body that have been altered by becoming a mother are changed back into their prematernal state.

If a good woman is a skinny woman, then is a good mom a skinny mom?



It started with a cough. Just a little *ahem-hem*-type cough that didn't go away after my mom had a cold. She went to her primary doctor, who

referred her to a pulmonologist where she was diagnosed. I remember hearing her voice from two thousand miles away on the phone. “The doctor has found that I have some scarring in my lungs. It’s called idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis.” Her voice caught, but she pressed on. “It’s terminal, but I should have five years.”

She said that there was a new medicine that doctors were hoping to try on her. I asked how she was feeling about all of this. I don’t remember her answer. My insides were melting, dissolving, leaving a shell of me standing there, holding the banister of my stairs with one hand and my phone with the other. I couldn’t tell her how devastated I was since she was the one who needed comfort. She was the one whose body was struggling. No, sick. No. Dying. A hard truth to accept.

Five years left of having a mother: 1,825 days of listening to her wisdom, soaking up her faith, and basking in the warmth of her approval.

I moved back home to be closer to her, but then Covid came. It was scary for everyone, but for a person with lung disease, it was terrifying. Time was short; she had only a few years left of her time on earth—shorter if she caught the dreaded disease. And yet it passed slowly, as if being pulled like cooling honey-candy. It got stiffer and stiffer, my interactions with her more rigid, controlled by outside forces and fear. I went grocery shopping for her and dad, carefully sanitizing my hands as I placed their groceries on the counter. “Wipe down what you can with Clorox before you put it away.” She nodded, her eyes half visible behind fogged-up glasses and a mask. We were almost afraid to breathe in the same room.

There were no hugs. No long chats sitting on the sofa side-by-side. There was a lot of appreciation and love, but also a hollowness where the physical affection and time together should have been.

She was vaccinated in December of 2020. I was vaccinated in March of 2021. We both wept when we could finally embrace. My heart quivered as I held her. She was tiny. The medicine made her queasy, and she was eating less and less. Her shirt hung from her shoulders, and she was constantly adjusting it to try to keep it on her diminutive four-foot, eleven-inch frame.

She woke up every morning and weighed herself. One hundred two pounds. “Need to eat more today,” she muttered. She would try a few bites of this or that, but many things upset her stomach too much to eat in quantity—mostly the soft foods that she could easily chew.

Ninety-eight pounds. She subsisted mostly on full-sugar Pepsi. When her oxygen test at the pulmonologist showed that her saturation levels had dropped off considerably, the pulmonologist told her that there was

no need to come into the office anymore. Mom began hospice care in the spring of 2022.



As summer drew to a close, Mom grew exasperated. “Why is this taking so long?” She grilled the physician’s assistant who came to check on her.

The kind woman answered, “Because you’re stubborn.” She patted Mom’s knee, the knee that had been injured as a teenager. The knee that had kept her from exercising more and losing the weight she always complained about. Yet here it was, outlasting her lungs.

She continued. “Your desire to stay is keeping you here.” She paused and then asked gently, “Are you afraid of moving on?”

The oxygen compressor ticked the time away, as it pushed air in and out, in and out.

Mom replied as quickly as she could, gulping air between words, “I’m not afraid. . . . I know where I’m going. . . . I don’t want . . . Heavenly Father to think . . . I gave up. . . . I don’t want to be . . . a quitter.”

She who was slowly suffocating; she who force-fed herself every day to lengthen her life; she who had read the Book of Mormon in German, French, and English; she who had served as an ordinance worker in the temple, a senior proselytizing missionary, and a docent at the Church History Museum—she wanted to be valiant to the end, and that meant, to her, to battle her body’s death.

“Mom, you have fought so hard and so long. You’re not a quitter,” my sister Liz reassured her.

“But it’s okay to not fight it anymore. You’re not quitting. You’re accepting Heavenly Father’s will.” I added. “You don’t need to eat unless it’s something you want to eat. You can rest.”

She sat up, perturbed by the idea of resting. “Heavenly Father has work for me to do on the other side of the veil! I know it! I am ready to die.” She looked around at us with the look that all mothers have. It means business. “I am ready.”

The next few days were filled with goodbyes as she steadily offered her words of advice and encouragement to her children and grandchildren. The siblings who could come gathered around her bed and sang to the woman who had taught them the melody of faith. “Isn’t this fun?!” she said, almost unsure again about leaving.

Our roles inverted as I helped care for her bodily needs and offered reassurance that she was being brave and good. She ate a green Melona popsicle, her eyes closed in bliss.

That night, she awoke as I sat next to her bedside. “Who’s coming?” she asked. Her voice was garbled and anxious, concerned that she would miss giving a last hug to one of her loved ones.

“No one’s coming, Mom. You’re done. You did it.”

She died the next day.



When it was time to dress her body in the ceremonial clothing for her burial, my sister Hilary and I went to the mortuary together. I had driven by it several times that week and every time I did, I thought, “Mom’s body is in there, but she’s not.”

It was quiet and we waited momentarily before being ushered into the side room where her body lay. She was dressed in white, and her hair and makeup were done well.

“These might be too big,” I said, holding up the temple clothing and looking at the shrunken version of my mother, her height compressed by time and her bulk long gone.

“She is tiny” the mortician said gently. “But I’m sure it’ll be just fine.”

Her hands were cold, and my hands were cold from touching where her warmth should have been. Logically, I knew this would be. But there’s no way to know. Not until you do.



I’m so thankful for the extra body weight that kept my mom with us for a year as she sipped on her Pepsi and coughed. She had complained about being overweight almost every week of my young life, but at the end of hers, it was a blessing. It allowed her to mother us for longer, and we needed it. Sometimes the things that we think are our downfalls end up being our strengths.

Without her here, I have felt myself becoming a new person, learning to love myself in new ways. Strange that so much of my growth would occur because of her absence rather than because of her presence. I knew that the challenging parts of my life would be more difficult without her. I didn’t realize that the joyful parts would be just as painful without someone to share them with. We are taught to mourn with those that mourn, but do we adequately celebrate with those who rejoice?

I would take a picture of my child and start to text it to her then realize that she wasn’t there to see it. So many milestones without a second witness to them; it was as if I had lost one of my eyes. And yet, over time, the shell of grief has sloughed off and I have found that my insides, once

gelatinous with pain, have solidified into wings. I celebrate myself when I fly.

When Christ was resurrected, he chose to keep the scars by which he gave us life. His body bears witness of his love for us. We are engraved on the palms of his hands (see Isa. 49:16; 1 Ne. 21:16).

So far as I know, no one has ever seen a resurrected woman in our dispensation. When I see my earthly mother again, or my Heavenly Mother, will her stomach bear the scars of giving me life? Will I be eternally engraved on her bowels of mercy? Will her figure be that of a pregnant woman, a witness of her unique power of creation?

I do not know.

But what I do know is that my mortal body is a tremendous gift. It has changed as I have gone through puberty, born my children, and aged with time. Yet each part of it is irreplaceable, uniquely qualified to serve my mortal existence. And that thrills me.

When Christ looks at his hands, I do not think he recoils in disgust at the changes his body endured to give us life. Still, many of us habitually belittle ourselves and our bodies—the vessels of the Lord—endowed with premortal responsibility to carry the sacred souls of God's children into mortality, because of the very changes they have undergone to serve God's purposes.

Motherhood is a unique privilege of knowing someone from their infancy and watching them grow, but it's also an exercise in spiritual growth and personal development. Willing mothers change, repent, and grow—embracing their emotional stretch marks as evidence of how much they have learned since becoming a steward of souls.

When I see my mom again, I hope that she will take me in her arms. I will ask her how she became a glorified, perfected being, with limitless creative energy, health, and wisdom. And when I ask her what happened to help her become who she is, I hope she will look straight at me and say kindly, "You did."

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