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The Problem with Wanting to Grow Up Too Fast

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I can't shave my legs in the shower while Ian is patting on my thigh. You might think there is a simple solution to this problem: give the kid a bath. But Ian is not a kid that enjoys baths; no, he much more enjoys the water from the shower head as it pit-patters on his head. I get nicks and cuts but it is nothing compared to the pain of having a stinky baby. There are a lot of things that don't go right in my life because I am a mother; but I say, "To hell with those things." Like the time I dropped Ian off with his aunt before I went to class. I gave him a cookie to eat in the car and he fell asleep with cookie goo on his mouth. I put Ian on my shoulder and took him inside and gave him a kiss goodbye. When I got to my car, I saw Ian's cookie goo on my shirt; it trickled down my sleeve and dried before I could clean it well, but it wasn't a big deal. I would just go through my regular day with cookie goo on my sleeve not giving a damn. That's the thing about being a mom, most of the things you thought would ruin your life, don't. It could very well be a part of growing up and becoming an adult, but I would never know because I became a mother before I became an adult. If you want to know how it happened, we need to trace back to 2008.

* * *

2008, I had just graduated from middle school and was able to spend my summer reading books, drawing portraits of celebrities (Megan Fox, Johnny Depp, John Lennon, Naomi Watts, and Christian Bale), and practicing the steps of a dama in a quinceañera. My chambelan was my boyfriend at the time, but I had my eyes on someone else, Alex. He was away in Mexico that summer, but we talked on the phone almost every day. I missed him. He was my best friend in eighth grade. I met him the first day of class in eighth grade. I was assigned the seat next to him. He noticed that in my front view binder, I put the album covers for my Beatles CD's. I hated him because he would grab one strand of hair and just pull on it. I would beg him to pull it out and end my misery. He was smart, much smarter than me; he knew all the vocabulary words and shamed my answers in Algebra. I wanted to desperately trade seats with someone else, but when I was placed somewhere else, I really missed him. So, we would send signals to each other from opposite sides of the room. He was the only person who could understand my misery and joy. We talked endlessly about music, books, and Tenacious D. It wasn't long before we became best friends.

He would always ask me to be his girlfriend but I wouldn't acknowledge it him because I was already taken by Edmund. By then, I had been with Edmund for two years and he was what I thought to be my first love. A tragedy happened when one of my best girlfriends, Rita kissed Edmund... It was a silly story, something about him asking her to date his good friend but she wanted something in return and that something she wanted was a kiss...I guess. I pretended like it did

not bother me. I told them I forgave them both, but in truth, I was simply indifferent. The confusing part about it all was that before any of it happened, Rita had a crush on me. The feeling was not mutual. I loved Rita as a sister, someone to love unconditionally. Maybe the kiss was a form of revenge. I didn't think too much about it because I knew she would try to be extremely kind to me from that point on, but in my mind I would not let her get the best of me. Alex made me feel better, we would talk about things that interested both of us and my mind would be occupied for hours. Nothing thrilled me more than the sound of the ringtone I had for him from across the room, "Oh oh oh, oh oh oh I love you..."

My nephew Jaden was born in August of '08, he was the most precious thing I ever laid my eyes on. I wanted to hold him and bathe him with kisses but I couldn't because he spent many weeks in the NICU inside a little transparent box. His dad, my big brother, was 19 years old. He was a student at Cal State LA but did not like college much and decided that quitting and becoming a responsible father was the route he had to take. He got a job as a security guard and halted his body building career for a while to focus on Jaden. I loved Jaden so much, and any chance I could get, I wanted to feed him, change him, or put him to sleep. He was my first baby, I cared for him the way a mother would. As he got older, I taught him things that I thought a little boy should know: how to wash his hands, shapes, colors, the funniest cartoons to watch, and how to love his family. I did not mind caring for Jaden while I did my homework or while I had friends over. I would have done anything for that baby. At the time, I did not know that my experience of caring for such a young child like Jaden would prepare me to care for my own child not too long after.

When Alex came back from Mexico, he came to visit me. There was a special something between us but I just could not leave Edmund for another guy that way. When Edmund wanted to break up that first week of high school, I didn't feel the infamous hurt, in fact, I felt nothing. It did not take Alex long to ask me to be his girlfriend again. On the phone, on the night of my 14th birthday, he asked me and my heart stopped because I knew that this time I would say yes. I would see him every Sunday at our Confirmation class and he would stop by my house from time to time. It seemed my parents thought we were just friends, but I am sure they knew better. Alex changed schools and even though we were not at the same school in the first place, things changed between us and we broke up. When Alex and I broke up Edmund wanted to get back together. I was never fully alone to develop my own thoughts on the world around me. Eventually everything with Edmund kind of fell apart and again I found myself with Alex. Edmund later began to date other girls but I continued to love the boy I met in eighth grade. Alex and I hit a few bumps in the road and most likely will continue to do so, but what relationship doesn't? Struggles are what make relationships great, and our relationship sure has had its share of struggles.

* * *

At some point in my life I decided that the only way to get forward in a career was to go to college. Those plans came to an abrupt halt the day the pregnancy test came out positive. I still remember Alex walking into Walgreens and buying it for me, because I was scared to even do that. I took the test in the bathroom of a nearby Starbucks and let it sit for a while. What felt like hours resulted in the biggest shock of my life. It was hard to read the results but when I finally understood, I could not possibly digest the monumental news. I walked to the patio of Starbucks where Alex was waiting for me and I told him. I tried to trace it back to the day that it happened--it was March, and Alex and I went to Knott's Berry Farm together on a double-date. We bought matching Star Wars shirts and a few days later decided to go bike riding in our new shirts. That was the day it happened, that was the day I got pregnant.

I continued with daily activities throughout my junior year of high school, not really addressing what was going on with my body. I even spent that summer—being four months pregnant--at a math and science camp in what I like to call the “college in the forest.” No one knew, not even my parents. I freaked out the day my ankles swelled up like they were on steroids. I thought it was all the walking I had been doing, you know, in the forest. It was a sad day when I had to return home. Sad not only because I would miss the smell of the redwoods in the morning mist, but also because I was going to be five months pregnant soon and did not know how I would continue to hide my secret.

It was August and my senior year was approaching. I was having a hard time figuring out what I should do. Alex told me that the decision was mine and he had no say in the matter. I wanted to see a doctor or someone who could possibly help me figure out what to do about my situation. I took some money from my mom's purse to pay the co-pay and the bus fare; then I waited until my parents left for their anniversary weekend trip at a casino. My mom found the money missing and they both immediately confronted me. Unable to hold it in any longer, I told them the truth. My father was enraged; he kicked things around in my room and cursed the boy who did it.

“How did it happen?” my dad asked.

“I don't know.” I said

“Como que no sabes?!” my dad yelled.

“I was drunk, I don' know how it happened.” I realized at this point how idiotic I sounded, my parents knew that I was not the kind of girl to get drunk at parties and have sex with random men.

“Dad, I lied....I had sex with Alex and the condom broke.” I sighed hoping they would not find out that Alex and I did not use a condom at all.

“What? You mean every time he came over to do a project for school, you guys were having sex?” my dad was confused.

“What are you talking about? We don’t even go to school together,” I responded.

My dad thought that I had conceived a child with my high school friend who occasionally came over to my house to do homework or work on group projects with me. I had to explain to my dad that the father of my child was the boy who would come over on Sundays or weekdays to hang out with me. My mom knew exactly who Alex was, and who his mother was. My dad then proceeded to give me a lecture about how I “do not know how to pick good looking men” and I “should be bettering the family and not dating men who were not good looking and in a lower familial income range than ours.”

It did not matter what my dad said because, after all, I was going to give birth to a baby. No matter how many times he scorned me or judged me, that fact would not change. He says that I got off lightly. In a way it is true, he could have kicked me out of his home and on to the streets as many other parents have, but he didn’t. And even though when Jaden was born and my dad didn’t want to be called “Grandpa,” he currently enjoys spending as much time with my son as possible. He even asks me if he can take my son to work with him for the day. The power of witnessing new life can bring even the most cynical man to feel warm emotions.

My parents did not want to leave me alone that weekend so they took me and my little sister with them on their trip. It was the worst and most awkward family vacation I ever experienced. The good thing is that I do not remember most of it; trauma will do that to you. I only remember my mother calling me into the hotel bathroom to speak to her. She told me that she did not want me to have the baby. But I was so far along in my pregnancy that that option seemed to me like a horrendous thing to consider.

If you were a teenager living in 2008, you most likely saw a movie called “Juno.” At the time that I saw this movie I thought, “How terrible! To have to go through those experiences and humiliation simply because you are pregnant.” Back then I did not know that I would go through the same thing. When I was pregnant, I thought “maybe I can disappear for a while, have the baby, and give it up for adoption to the family that used to rent the house in our backyard.” They were a wonderful couple and could not reproduce. When I told my parents of my idea my dad told me that “Only dogs leave their babies. Is that what you want to be? A dog?” There was nothing I could do, I would have this baby and give up going to college. I would stay at home because my parents would never allow me to move out.

My parents had me set up a day to meet with Alex and his parents. I was five months pregnant. My mom helped me pick out a shirt from her closet

because all of my small sized shirts would clearly show my pregnant stomach. My dad told me, "What a shame it must be for you to have us meet them under this condition." It honestly didn't bother me. I knew Alex's parents, and they were very kind to me. They were probably also glad that even though their son was having a child as a teenager, he was having that baby with me; someone they had known and grown fond of. They wondered if I would live with them, and though the idea seemed inciting, I knew that my son and I would not be able to live in a one bedroom apartment with four other people. I also did not want to burden them. Since I would be living with my parents, they forbade me from seeing Alex until I gave birth.

Those first months of senior year were the worst for me. I had three classes with my ex-boyfriend, Edmund, and his current girlfriend. But I had other things to worry about. I wore a really big baby blue Santa Cruz sweater to school almost every day. My school did not allow students to wear sweaters in class so I had to ask my doctor to write a letter to my school allowing me to wear mine because I had asthma. I never took that sweater off, not even during those hot August days. I went to school every day like there was nothing under my huge sweater. I remember one day sitting in my AP Government class when I felt a bit light headed. I asked the teacher if I could use the restroom, and on my way there, I almost fainted. Fortunately, I was able to sit down on the stairs before I did, and I just laid there for a while. I had only eaten two granola bars with a glass of milk that morning which used to be something that would keep me full until lunch time, but not when you have another organism in your uterus. Once, in homeroom I overheard the teacher talking to students about a new student that transferred from Crenshaw High his senior year. She said, "You only transfer your senior year if you did something bad." At these words I could not help but feel despondent that I would also transfer schools for a reason that was beyond imaginable for my teachers.

When I left the school, my mother spoke to the Vice Principal and attributed my leaving to the "asthma treatments I was receiving". I transferred to an independent studies school where my work consisted of reading chapters in a textbook and doing a quiz at the end of each chapter. What my previous homeroom teacher said was true, I did something bad, but besides those financing my journey, no one knew, not even my two sisters. They did not find out until I was six months pregnant. My cousin, who also lives with us, did not find out my secret until a few weeks later. My mom made me sit down with my tias to tell them myself. Most of them had their first child at 17 and were very sympathetic toward me. It was really comforting to know that at least some of my family members were supportive. I got most of what I needed at my baby shower. There is something about a teenager having a kid that makes people want to buy gifts. No one from my dad's side of the family was there; he did not tell any of his

brothers or sisters that I was pregnant. He probably felt that he didn't have to since they all lived in Mexico or maybe his pride kept him from the subject. His family that lives in Los Angeles did not know until I gave birth and my sister uploaded a picture on Facebook of Ian and I in a hospital bed. I could tell my dad's side of the family was disappointed, not because of the fact that I had a child, but because I had hid it from them for so long. But, I was scared, scared that I would ruin my father's reputation, because that is the way he made it seem.

Fall was in full swing and the days were getting colder, but ironically, I no longer had to hide my belly at school with big, warm clothing. I wanted to flaunt my baby bump. I had always pictured what I would look like when I became pregnant and this was it! I liked my big belly. I did see Alex once after school for a few minutes before he left. My parents also let me go stroller shopping with him and his parents and Alex was present at the baby shower. I had always told myself that if the love of my life untimely passed away, that I would at least want to have a child with him so that I would always be reminded of him in our child. I doubt this has anything to do with my story though; I just wanted to let you all know...

Ian was born two weeks after the baby shower. I was able to take him with me to school, but he was a newborn and it was December. It was no time to take a baby on a bus from South Central to Downtown. Alex was missing credits and decided to enroll in the school as well. I was so happy to be going to school with him again. My eldest sister would watch my son Monday mornings while I went to school. When I got home, I would find my hungry son with a dirty diaper while my 21 year old sister was still asleep in my bed. I did not like the situation, but I couldn't afford a babysitter so I would make Ian's bottles before-hand and put the diapers and wipes next to my bed. Luckily, I was able to cut down my time at school and get home earlier. My sister hated when I took longer.

I knew what people were saying about me.

"She won't graduate high school."

"If she does, she won't go to college."

"If she does, she won't do well in college."

I also knew that I had to prove them all wrong. Their words did not hurt me or make me angry. I avoided being on Facebook or other social networks that could potentially be used as a way for bullies to communicate with me. During my pregnancy I received texts from an unknown number, most likely through a texting app. The texts said "Good luck sleeping at night knowing that you aborted Kevin's kid." Kevin was a boy in my high school that had a crush on me my junior year. And though he was a sweet boy and I liked to spend time with him, I could not date him because I loved and was dating someone else (the story of my life). I never dated Kevin, let alone had sex with him. I did not know what prompted the texts and I was just so disillusioned that someone actually took the time out of their day to send me those text messages. I later found out that Kevin

spread a rumor around school when I left; he told everyone that he was afraid that the child I was pregnant with was his. My friends tried to stop the rumors in honor of my absence, but honestly, I do not care what people think of me and I care less of the lies they spread about me, because after all, they are lies.

My whole life I was a student with good grades. I was a leader in all my classes and helped other students with their work. Many people have told me of their surprised reactions when they found out I had a baby. They could not believe that someone like me would get pregnant. "Someone like me?" I thought "Someone who has sex? If that is the case then you should be surprised that your mother got pregnant and that your grandmother did too." It's not hard to get pregnant at a young age, especially not for a teenage girl in a young and small charter high school in South Central that lacks proper sex education classes. No one taught me how to put a condom on or that there were different birth control methods and one could choose the one best for their system. My mother and father avoided the subject and the internet at the time was full of useless information that almost never applied to me. But honestly, I cannot use those aspects of my life as excuses. In the end, my actions were my own and I had to take full responsibility for them. I would never have had sex with Alex if I did not feel that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. No one thought that I would stay with Alex-- we had been together for three years before then and this year will be hitting the six year mark. I don't know what prompts people to make assumptions the way they do. Sometimes people ask me if I am with my boyfriend because we have a child together. "Well of course!" I say, "Why wouldn't I be with him if we have a child together? We both love each other and our son so much that being happy comes naturally to us." It is possible to love someone at the age of thirteen. It happened to me and I know it was true love despite what people tell me, and despite their growing arrogance.

I had a lot of time on my hands when Ian was a newborn so it should not come as a surprise that I watched a lot of television. Teen Mom was a show I regularly watched. I compared my life to those of the girls in the television show. They had their own apartments and cars under their names but they seemed to lack the capacity to forgive. Forgive themselves for the sudden change they had caused in their lives and/or forgive the person they made the change with. It seemed like all their stories were the same. But what about girls like me that were still determined to reach the goals they had set for themselves before they got pregnant? I had to prove the negative statistics wrong. I knew that graduating high school was the first step. I started my freshman year at Loyola Marymount University. I was a commuter and knew I would not be able to spend a lot of time at school doing regular college kid stuff. Before the semester began, I got a flyer in the mail about the First To Go community at LMU for first generation students. I would be able to take two classes with 19 students and get to know them. It was

the perfect opportunity to be a part of something on campus without having to put too much time into it. The first day of orientation I felt bold. When I introduced myself to everyone, I also mentioned that I had an eight month year old son back at home. No one said anything. I felt really dumb for blurting it out that way. I told myself that it was the first and last time I would ever introduce myself as a mother.

Eventually I realized that being a mother was a part of my identity and I should not be ashamed to introduce myself as such. I usually try to relate to older people by telling them that I have a son. At an alumni wine and cheese event, I was standing all alone at a table because I did not know anyone there. A woman came up to me to talk to me and asked me about myself. I decided to tell her that I was a mother to see if we could connect. Sadly, she had no children but gave me some quirky stories about her nieces and nephews. I felt like a complete idiot. She must have thought I was a mess. It turned out that she was the guest speaker for the event, but I could not stay long because I had plans to meet with my English group for a project and was not planning on being late. She was a lovely woman and I was able to connect her with her boss from Undergraduate Admissions where she worked during her time at LMU. However, I felt embarrassed at my forwardness and the fact that I had to leave the event early.

That's how life is when you are a mom in college. No, scratch that, a mom that wants to be with her son as much as possible. I pack as many things as I can in a day so that I do not have to waste one minute not doing anything. No one thinks I have a life outside of my university. I have just as much responsibility to be at home that I do to be at school; if not even more. Scheduling is hard for me because I always have to wonder who Ian will be with while I am away. Alex and his family take care of Ian while I am at school, but when Alex is at school or at work, Ian is with me. Usually people that don't have children give me the same responses.

“You have a two year old?”

“That must be hard.”

“How do you do it?”

“Oh the terrible twos”

I find it hard to relate to other college students sometimes. I feel that since my experiences do not really coincide with theirs, we probably would not make good friends. Currently, I spend three days out of the week working at school and taking classes. At 5:30 P.M. I run to my car and drive out those campus gates to pick up my son at his dad's house. The other four days of the week I am with Ian. I love my days off because I can sleep in with Ian and I am awakened by his little body hovering over mine, kissing my face and laying his head on my chest. I do not mind sacrificing social time because I have always been an introvert and damn proud of it. Of course this is not to say that I did not make any friends in

college, I just have yet to build those lifelong relationships that so many movies and novels depict. My other friends my age that have children do not go to college. Sometimes I remain alone in my thoughts without a friend to share them with. Alex always lends an ear to my problems and has some of the same ones too since he is also a parent who is also a first generation student in college. I love that we can easily slip back into our child-like mode and play with Ian in a way that most parents cannot connect with their child. We switch watching Ian throughout the week, and our routine seems to be working so far.