

## For Mama

“She’s gone, Brenda. She’s gone,” my aunt Verna cried out as she spoke to my other aunt on the phone. The room was thick sadness and despair. It was then that I realized our family life had changed forever.

Up until that moment, I was a mama’s boy. Valarie Patterson was short in stature but big in presence with her auburn-colored curly hair, big, round glasses, and glowing caramel skin. She was stern yet gentle. Stoic yet vulnerable. Wherever Valarie Patterson went, I wanted to be by her side. As a kid, I hated it when my mom would go out of town without me (even if she was only a few hours away). I would cry and hang onto her leg as she walked out the door.

“Please, take me with you,” I yelled through the tears.

She would look down at me with her loving eyes and reply “Pooka, I’ll be back in a little while. I’ll bring you something back.”

Those words would quiet me just long enough for her to kiss me on the cheek and close the red steel door behind her. I would sniff a little and then whip my head back and forth between the door and my inattentive father. (My poor dad never had it in him to deal with my tantrums.)

I’ll be the first to admit that my mom spoiled the crap out of me. As her first born, I was showered with the most love and attention. Anything I wanted I got. There were days when my mom would let me stay home from school and fix my favorite foods for me (I mean, I couldn’t pass up lasagna). My mom wanted me to be her baby forever. However, my mom was a disciplinarian who handed out tough love when I needed it.

## Me, Mama and the K-Mart Showdown

When I was about three- or four-years-old, my mom and I went shopping at the local K-Mart. All I wanted to do was look around the toy section (and maybe persuade my mom to buy something). Like a little tortoise, I would browse and examine every toy that caught my eye. My mom, who was a patient woman, allowed me to do this for a while. Eventually, my slow pace got on her nerves, and she yelled at me to move it along so she could go to the beauty section. My little moment of happiness evaporated, causing me to become angry and stubborn. My moment was ruined. As payback, I stamped my little feet on the white-tiled walkway. I was in my blue and white short set (which I'm sure looked cute to other people, but not to me) and my arms were folded tight as I scowled at her. All I wanted was new toys. Nothing more and nothing less. To me, lotion and tampons were unimportant. After a while, I could no longer compose myself. I became motionless by the jewelry counter. My mom felt me stop and swirled around. She noticed that my fists were clenched in a statue-like pose.

“Adreon, come on,” she said in a stern tone.

I remained a statue (only blinking) as she and I began an intense stare-off over who was right. Mother versus son. Adult versus child. A dominant force versus a growing force. The two minutes, which seemed to stand still, went on forever. Neither one of us was willing to back down. Soon, she put her hands on her hips. In a passive voice she said, “Okay, then. I’m going over to the beauty section. You can come if you want to.”

She walked away without a care in the world. She didn't turn around once. In that moment, I began to panic about being left alone. There was no way my mom would leave me to fend for myself in this cruel world. But she did. Once I realized that she wasn't coming back, I ran towards her as though my life depended on it.

## **Sharing Mama**

As the K-Mart standoff of 1990 became a distant memory, my brother's birth and arrival from the hospital caused another momentary bump in our mother-son relationship. I remember my dad waking me up, from what I assume was a good dream, before midnight. He pushed my tiny, limp, arms through my jacket sleeves and placed my black strap-on shoes on my feet. Then he buckled me into my car seat where, as my four-year-old body tried to adjust to the nightlife, I went in and out of consciousness. As my dad drove us to the hospital, orange and yellow bands of light fell intermittently through the windows of his two-tone Caprice. He parked the car and helped Mom out. During the commotion, a nurse came through the double doors with a wheelchair. My mom sat in it and they rolled her off.

I don't remember much, but I have flashes of my dad pacing around a white and blue waiting room, taking short breaks to sit, more pacing, watching television, and more pacing. Soon, my mom was rolled out of the room at Roadrunner speed. I tried to catch her. I ran out of the room and into the hallway, but my dad swooped me up from the floor before I could get to her. My mom waved at us and yelled at me, "I love you, Pooka. See you later." Afterwards, my dad and I stood outside the OR. The big metal door shut and, although I was in my dad's arms, I felt alone. The only thing that I wanted to do was hug my mom one more time.

As the days inched closer and closer to my brother's homecoming, I was overcome with jealousy. Why? Because I had just realized that I would have to share my mom with a little being. As I entered my mother's white-wallpapered room, I noticed the dingy travertine floor. She motioned for me to move closer. I peered over the clear, plastic, bassinet and stared at the tiny human with curly black hair. This was not what I wished for when I looked at a star last summer. I thought to myself, He doesn't do anything. All he does is eat and sleep. This isn't fun. Whenever my mom and dad fawned over him, I became livid. Mom and dad used to do that with me, I would think to myself. This cannot continue.

Days before my brother was to come home, I decided to stay with my aunt Toni. In the meantime, dad spent most of the time either working at his manufacturing job or in my mom's hospital room. I enjoyed spending time at her two-bedroom, cramped yet spacious, apartment. Games and toys, of all shapes and sizes, filled the corners of my cousins' quaint bedroom and small hall closets. And the best part? I could enjoy the toys without having to share. To me, it was paradise. Some nights, my aunt allowed me to stay up late and eat her signature cornbread with syrup. As the homecoming grew nearer, my aunt's bed became a lush haven of soft pillows and sheets.

The morning of my mother's check-out day, my aunt bathed me and got me ready for my dad's arrival. I was dreading the whole thing. How could something I had wanted and wished for making my stomach hurt? I sat on the burnt orange chaise lounge, twiddling my thumbs and staring off into space, as I waited for my father to arrive. A few minutes later, I heard a knock at the door. My aunt ran-jogged to the door and greeted my dad.

My dad approached me, "Adreon," he asked, "are you ready to come home?"

I shook my big four-year-old head side to side and answered him. "No, I wanna stay here with Aunt Toni."

He was stunned. "Are you sure?"

"Yes!" I replied sternly.

He looked at me. "Okay," he said, "I'll be back later." After that, he left. I swear that it was less than an hour before he came back. He scooped up my belongings and put them in the car. Then, he grabbed me and buckled me in. Apparently, when my father came home Adreon-less, my mother asked where I was. My father told her what happened, and she responded with, "I don't care what he said. Go back and bring my baby home."

Once my dad and I arrived home, my mom came out of my parents' bedroom. She spread her arms wide open, and a glow radiated from her body. "Hey, Pooka!" she called.

I ran around the wooden coffee table and towards her as though I hadn't seen her in years. Her embrace was warm. As she drew me close to her pink nightgown, I realized that her hugs were the safest place to me.