

My Mother's Daughter, My Sons' Mother

[poem]

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My mother is vanilla ice cream with warm apples
cinnamon and nutmeg in a tan bowl that goes with everything
Sweet, soft. The warmth neutralizing the cold on your tongue
Easy to slurp down
Then there's me
A cherry pepper drizzled with puckering vinegar
Small
Perched on a turquoise plate that clashes with your table cloth
Pleasant, *almost* inviting
'Til you take a bite
Some spit me out
Others like the sour heat
My mother and I
So different
Despite our shared ingredients:
Dark eyes
Straight hair
Short stature
Defined jaw
Our insides
The chemicals that rush through our veins in response to our interactions with
others
Empaths immobilized by others' embarrassment
Neither of us can watch *The Office*
We absorb rather than enjoy others' awkwardness
Taking it – making it ours
My mother, a soft, rich neutralizer
Melting over hate
She makes it comfortable with her sweetness, hospitality,
Thick buttery sugar coating its sting
Everyone loves her
She encouraged me to do the same
To avoid attracting the gaze of contempt to calm my own anxiety
Don't fight them and they'll love you
Or at least not attack
I listened at first
But stopped early on
Perhaps my gnarled cerebral palsy limbs are to blame.
Diagnosed 'Abnormal'

With a hunched back, perched on turned in toes
The gaze of others was unavoidable despite my big smile and tiny frame
So Instead of coating for palatability I basked in its heat
Fire licked my insides –
Decades made me hot and crispy against the judgement myself and others endured
I got angry
Motivated
And even when my mother found the money to pay for the operations
To finally straighten my back and legs
So I ‘almost’ passed for normal.
And people found me small and cute
A tiny Tim with Sex appeal
I still didn’t want to make them comfortable
The fire was too hot for too long to put out
I want them to be with their acts of injustice
Stare at the hate behind their ambivalence
Stare at the hurt they cause in their action and inaction
They know how to stare
I know
They had no problem staring at me
For awhile I flailed in this heat
Around me women were not Too smart. Too angry. Too sharp. Too driven.
A small girl with a boy attitude
Too brazen. Too dominant.
My fundamentalist church bristled at me
Then at 10 I saw her
Blonde bob and blue pant suit
She wasn’t going to stay home and bake cookies
She was going to make the world better
I loved her
My mom was confused
Uncomfortable
I never voiced my adoration but she knew
Finally. About ten years ago:
She began to ask: “Why are you so angry?”
She senses my anger
Wonders at it
Worries over it
Why don’t I avoid situations that stoke my anxiety?
“Don’t read so much.
Do your hair more.
Mauve lipstick is so pretty on you.
You have nice lips.”
I smile
I know she wishes I’d paint my lips and keep them closed
She adores me
I adore her

But we're not the same
I dreamt for years of what it would be like to raise a daughter
One that I would teach to unapologetically crisp up against the patriarchy
Fight for herself
Fight for others
To not feel a need to coat the hate with excuses
Or wrap the misogyny in sugar
She'd feel comfortable burning it up
She'd *Wear What, Love Who and Fight For* whatever she wanted
She'd stoke her spiciness early on
And Not care if anyone couldn't take the heat
I'd be ready for her
I was ready for her from the moment my own feminist consciousness
armed with Butler and Bordo
had language to describe social injustice
This Spicy Nasty Woman was Ready to Raise Another
But she didn't come
She didn't come again
Or again
I'm a mother of three boys
Three boys who embody dominant masculinity from their tanned white skin and
salt roughened hair to their comfortable coastal suburban lifestyle
They wear candy colored polo shirts and boat shoes
And they're adorable
I wouldn't want to raise anyone else
We belong together
But I get glimpses of the normative southern masculinity they could grow into in
this red state
I worry
Will they become the hostility, the violence my mother and my feminine anxious
bodies absorbed?
Hers soothing with her sweet forgiving and mine burning with my spicy activism?
Boys
I'm raising
White
Economically Privileged
Able-Bodied
Boys
My husband reminds me
Like the First Lady of my childhood who grew up to Run for President
I married an equal
A partner who wants to change the world
Defies Gender Norms
Does the laundry
Paints his boys' nails
Mends their buttons
They see that

They hear it
To calm my anxiety he says:
“Watch Them.
Hear Them.
They’re already Becoming.”
So I do
And he’s right
They’re different
Their context is not mine
They are not children of second-generation immigrant factory workers in a
smalltown church
They are raised in a time of questions
That thick binary line of gender is broken, jagged, still cutting but able to break
through
They can see the possibilities
Black, brown and white have become bolder
Color blindness called out for the fake it always was
And they See
And they speak
To me
To each other
This gives me hope
Hope I burst with and Want to Share with Others
So I post when I hear the two oldest talking on Facebook
For those 1000+ “friends” I picked up over the last 10 years
I Give Some Hope
And Make Some Squirm

On Romance and Relationships:

Be Open

Tony to Vinny: Vinny someday you’ll get married to a girl and I’ll be in your wedding in a blue suit.

Vinny: Yeah.

Tony: And some boys marry boys.

Vinny: Yeah.

Tony: And since either is okay, if you love someone and aren’t sure which they are you can be surprised.

Vinny: Yeah. Surprised.

Be Respectful

Tony: Vinny, it’s okay to kiss girls or boys, but only if they want to. If you ask for a kiss and they say “no thanks” you say, “no problem.”

Vinny: Yeah, No kisses no problem.

Tony: You got it.

Be Practical

Tony: Vinny, you can marry a girl or a boy. You marry who you love, but know that if you marry a boy, no one will have a vagina for a baby to come out of so if you want a baby and you marry a boy, you'll have to find one no one else has already.

Vinny: Yeah, you'll have to find one.

On Race:

Be Loving

Tony to Vinny: Now Vinny, all people are very important. Black people, brown people and white people are all important and you need to love everyone lots.

Vinny: Yes, I love everyone.

Tony: Some people don't love people because they are black or brown. And some people don't like blue people.

Vinny: There's blue people?

Tony: Yes, I've never seen one. I think they may not live many places. Like Lemurs only live in Madagascar. But we should still love them no matter what. People are hurting each other and it needs to stop.

Vinny: I love blue people.

Be Hospitable

Tony saw a story about a [pool party](#) in Texas. This was his reaction:

Tony: Mama why did the police do that to those people?

Me: Some of the people at the pool party didn't want other people there and they started calling them names.

Tony: Why? Swimming is fun with lots of people. Was the pool too full to swim?

Me: Well, no. I don't think so. Some people just don't like to share with people who are different from them. They were being mean and had a fight and the police came.

Tony: Was the police officer allowed to do that to them since he's in charge?

Me: No, he isn't a police officer anymore.

Tony: Good. He needs to be more responsible. (pause) Maybe those people can come to Grandma's house for a pool party. We like different people.

Me: We do. They live far away, but we can have another pool party sometime.

Tony: That's a plan. I'll show them my new snorkel.

On Violence :

Be Pragmatic and Proactive

Tony, looking at the photos of the people killed in [Orlando](#)

Tony: Who are those men, mama?

Me: They were killed at a party last night. Someone went into the party they were at and shot them.

Tony: Why?

Me: He had a lot of hate in him.

Tony: Was there no police to save them all?

Me: The man's gun was bigger and stronger than the police officer's so it took a long time for the police to stop him.

Tony: Was he an army guy?

Me: No.

Tony: Why can he have a gun that's stronger than the police?

Me: He just bought it in the store since there's no law against it.

Tony: Call the president and tell him to make one.

Me: I'll try.

On Gender Roles:

Be Confident

Conversation with Tony before bed:

Tony: Mama, what Christmas light color is your favorite?

Me: I like blue. How about you?

Tony: I like the purple.

Me: It's pretty.

Tony: A boy at school said purple is for girls and I shouldn't like it.

Me: What did you say?

Tony: That I was sad for him that he didn't have the confidence to just let everyone like what they liked no matter if they are boys or not.

Me: What did he say?

Tony: He said, "What does confidence mean?"

Me: Did you explain it?

Tony: I said it means to know what you're doing is good and fine for you and everyone else whether or not they think so.

Me: You handle yourself well.

Tony: Yup, I'm getting known for that.

And With These Values Donald Trump is:

Better off in Heaven

Tony: Mama, do you know who Donald Trump is?

Me: Yes, Do you?

Tony: Yeah, is he dead yet?

Me: No, not yet.

Tony: Will he die?

Me: Well, we all die sometime.

Tony: We do. Well, maybe that will happen for him. God must like him since He made him. He might be better in heaven.

Me: What have you heard about him?

Tony: (Very seriously) Nothing good, mama. Nothing good.

In Need of Basic Decency Tutorials

Tony: Mama, why won't Trump just say he's sorry to the [family](#) he said mean things to?

Me: Well, sometimes people don't like to admit they're wrong.

Tony: But he's just being more wrong by keeping on talking without saying sorry.

Me: That happens when we don't say we're sorry when we should.

Tony: Yes, it's better to say sorry, that's the first step, then "How can I help fix it?"

Me: That's great advice Tony.

Tony: Daniel Tiger taught me that. Maybe Donald Trump would want to watch him learn stuff.

Me: That would be a good first step for him.

So They Decide:

He's Unqualified

Tony: Vinny we have two choices for President, one is Donald Trump who is very bad. The other is a grandma with blond hair named Hillary. Tell people to vote for her. She's the first grandma to ever run to be King of America. That's very important.

Vinny: Yes, grandma will be a good King.

And Pray

Tony, praying with Vinny and Nico: Dear God, help Donald Trump understand he's too mad to be president. Hillary Clinton smiles more and talks smart even though she's boring. Amen.

Vinny: And remember to feed Patton (our poodle who died) until we're there and throw his Frisbee. Amen.

And Say with Confidence

Tony to me over play dough on his day home from school:

Tony: Mama, what are you thinking about?

Me: I'm just hoping Hillary wins.

Tony: She will. Everyone gets to pick together and Donald Trump is mean to people.

Me: Sometimes mean people win, Tony.

Tony: Sometimes, but this is a vote so whoever the most people like wins and most people don't like being mean.

Me: I hope you're right.

Tony: I actually am.

...

But the Electoral College Disrupts Logic

And They Remind Me That in the Despair

When the fire on my insides begins to burn my soul in rage and frustration that

Tony to Vinny watching the movie Inside Out:

Tony: See Vinny, you need sadness too. All feelings are important.

Vinny: Why, Tony?

Tony: I think without sadness, we'd never know how great being happy is.

Vinny: Oh, okay.

Tony: And sometimes you need to be mad because something is wrong and being mad means you'll try to fix it. See so they're all important.

Vinny: Yeah, they are. That's right.

And Say of the Future

Tony: Mama, someday I'll be in charge with all my friends and we'll make sure everyone has a house and time to go camping and to the beach.

Vinny: And go down waterslides when they finish the jobs they like.

Tony: We'll all be so happy. No one will be mad or scared about anything. You'll be old by then, Mama, but if you eat your vegetables and get exercise, you won't be dead.

Vinny: Yeah, mama. You'll be old, but not dead.

Me: Thanks guys. That's something to look forward to.

Tony: Yes it is.

*So I eat my vegetables and exercise
remembering that this nasty woman is raising bad hombres*

Little Cherry Peppers Ready to Sizzle

And this is why I could post the day after a Nasty Woman Lost to a Hateful Man:

We need to move forward even if it feels like we're going backwards. And we'll keep speaking up for what's right. Silence isn't the answer. Overall, people do choose justice, even if it takes awhile. I still believe that. I have to. For Tony's, Vinny's and Nico's sakes I have to. Nico's up. It's 5:24 and time to start the day after the election.

And know, better times are coming.

And those who find these peppers NASTY, Will Need to Learn to Take Our Heat

#WEARETHESPICYRESISTANCE