

# Untangling the Horrors of Being Parented Resentfully

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**In the ‘Beloved,’ ‘The Baby,’ and ‘Barbarian,’ Black women grapple with vengeful mothers and children. In my life, I’ve broken that cycle.**

If you had your abortion in Austin, Texas (back when you could still get one), at the place near 290 and St. Edward’s, you might remember the poster on the ceiling. At least, I do: In spite of the anesthesia, I remember the mint-green seats in the waiting room; another woman’s little drops of blood on the postoperative bathroom floor; the snack-sized bag of Ritz crackers I picked at afterward; and during—the poster of a beach at sunset tacked onto the ceiling of the operating room. Three years ago, in December of 2019, I was nearly ten weeks along when I terminated my pregnancy. I was resolute in my decision, but the sight of the poster on the ceiling sent me into tears, nearly halting the operation until I assured the physician that this was really what I wanted.

When I was a kid, I had a Polaroid i-Zone. These miniature cameras printed out thumb-sized images with adhesive backing. I’d take pictures of myself, my pets, and my toys. Most of these pictures wound up as visual aids to the letters I sent my maternal grandmother, Maria, while she served time at the women’s prison in Gatesville, Texas. The last tiny, sticky picture I ever sent her was of a sunset from my other grandmother’s porch in Gurabo, Puerto Rico (having either lost or broken my i-Zone on the trip back). In my anesthetic stupor, I felt a psychic connection between this operation-room poster and the Caribbean sunset I sent Maria, looping us in a time warp of daughters who hate their mothers, *ad infinitum*. The clinic staff couldn’t tell, but my tears were joyous. I was finally breaking the loop.

Even when I’m not high off medical-grade sedatives, I believe time works this way—particularly for Black- or Indigenous-descended people. For us, the past is more like a haunting presence, kneeling and wrapping an arm around us when we pray. I sensed this truth even as a child, but these ideas only became solidified when I read *Beloved*, Toni Morrison’s 1987 gothic horror novel for which she won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988.

The book opens with Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, and her daughter, Denver. The two women are isolated, living only alongside the vengeful haint of *Beloved*—Sethe’s other daughter, killed as an infant by Sethe’s own hand, and now a poltergeist-like presence filling the home with a baby’s venom. *Beloved* is not the only presence haunting Denver and Sethe: In this novel, the past is an active thing—such that, rather than memories, Sethe and her daughters experience rememories. More than simple recollections, the rememories of the plantation Sethe escaped from, Sweet Home, and the events leading up to *Beloved*’s murder at Sethe’s hands are tangible and always threatening to bedevil the two women if they aren’t vigilant. In *Beloved*, as in our lives, the past is a hungry, insatiable thing.

I don’t know if Maria hated her mother, but I know my great-grandmother died while giving birth to Maria’s younger brother. Without her, the baby didn’t survive. My great-grandmother’s death set off a chain of events that lead to my great-grandfather all but abandoning his children with destitute elders, to Maria dropping out of school

to pick cotton in the sixth grade, to her pregnancy with my mom at fourteen, and to her first set of arrests (which, in turn, snowballed into a life spent in and out of prison). In Maria's final years, she researched the burial place of her baby brother and spent the little money she had to buy a tombstone for his grave. Her mother's grave is still unmarked to this day.

This, I know for a fact: My mom hated her mother. She was embarrassed by Maria's reputation for being a drug dealer, sex worker, and cop killer. Where the two generations of women before me were robbed of their mother-daughter experiences, my mom set out to make ours—the one she and I shared—as unpleasant as possible. She was not only physically and emotionally abusive, but she'd often wish out loud that she'd aborted me. In my adulthood, when I tried to put distance between us, she once came over uninvited to personally deliver the message that she wished I were dead and that she would like me to kill myself. I used to believe she only said these things to hurt me, but I recognize now that there is at least a part of my mom that meant it.

This came into focus for me in 2015, when Maria was fatally ill and one of her nephews threw an eightieth birthday party for her. My mom spent weeks coaxing me into coming to this party as her moral support, and en route, she deliberately drove our car head-on into traffic. Though I'm missing some of my immediate memories of that accident, I remember sitting on a sidewalk beside our crushed Toyota Camry and asking for my mother. A paramedic knelt in front of me, scanned the crowd around us, and said, "I don't see her now, but she was fine. She was able to get out of the car on her own and tell us what happened."

I remember rushing to my feet and turning around in the crowd to look for her. When I spotted her, my mom was clear across the road; she'd walked across the wreckage and five lanes of traffic. She was standing alone on the sidewalk parallel to our wreck, observing the disorder brought on by the accident. And she was laughing.

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When I had my abortion in 2019, I could feel the threads of time connecting my great-grandmother's death to my mother's laughter after her attempt at killing us. The decision to not to carry my pregnancy felt like taking scissors to these connective fibers, separating myself and my future from this carnivorous, spiteful past. It might be my own proclivity toward childlessness (and that I've been thinking about my own abortion a lot since last year's reversal of *Roe v. Wade*), but the 2022 HBO Max series *The Baby* and the 2022 film *Barbarian* both struck me as being simultaneously about Black women, the specter of motherhood, and the hauntological nature of time.

In *The Baby*, a thirty-eight-year-old Black British woman named Natasha finds herself the steward of an evil baby she cannot get rid of. The baby is evil indeed: Viewers learn from a character with ties to the baby's past that he is an ancient evil—the manifestation of the fear that we are inherently unlovable. In an attempt at reliving and correcting his mother's suicide, the baby has refused to age—remaining

a literal baby in the sixty years since. Motherhood is scary enough, but the baby is a particularly fearsome infant: He has the psychic ability to murder, and he puts this ability to use often. In fact, since his mother's death, he has spent the ensuing six decades hunting women who do not want children (because they remind him of his mom), forcing himself upon them, isolating them, and then possessing them. As each new mother proves unable to love him, he kills her. (The show has been reviewed as "comedy-horror.")

Zach Cregger's film *Barbarian* seemingly pits a Black woman named Tess against The Mother, an interbred and superhuman subterranean crone hell-bent on making Tess her baby. Like Beloved and the baby in *The Baby*, The Mother is similarly attempting to redress past traumas in her life; she is the final product and lone survivor of decades of incestuous, underground rape at the hands of her father. When we are introduced to The Mother, she swiftly murders a man after she sees him shouting and pulling at a frightened Tess. We know The Mother to have witnessed the abduction, violent sexual assault, and forced births of dozens of women; it seems her feral desire to mother Tess was set off the moment she saw Tess in potential danger, recalling moments of her life when she was unable to protect other women from her father. Though she does not kill her father, The Mother is able to act out her desire for revenge against him by killing a man who has multiply harmed Tess (and he also just so happens to be a self-absorbed gentrifier with a history of sexual assault).

Though we often align monsters with bad guys, the stories in *Beloved*, *Barbarian*, and *The Baby* offer nuance; the baby, The Mother, and Beloved may be murderous and willing to stop at nothing to manifest their desires, but the traumatic experiences they've endured are the sorts of experiences that create monsters of people. You may hesitate to empathize with "bad guys," but *Beloved*, *Barbarian*, and *The Baby* all illuminate something true enough: It is in our nature to recreate the moments of our childhoods when we felt unloved in an attempt to correct them. While my years of cognitive behavioral therapy have taught me that this can be a healthy impulse, I worry about the monsters we risk becoming if we stay in that place for too long. I know those monsters well: not only through characters like The Mother, the baby, and Beloved, but in my mother's forceful parenting and through my own experience of becoming an unquenchable pit in my attempts to prove I was worthy of love.

When Maria passed, my mom (notorious for running obituaries for even the most tenuously related family members) placed no obituary for her own mother and buried her nearly in secret. None of Maria's nephews or nieces were invited; no one from her prison ministry group; no former lovers or any of her friends. Apart from my mom, my brothers and I were the sole invited mourners. Initially, I thought the decision to have a private funeral for Maria was a final testament to my mother's rancor, but at Maria's funeral, she pulled a copy of the saccharine and sappy Robert Munsch childrens' book *Love You Forever* from her purse and instructed us to take turns reading it out loud.

In sending Maria off, my mom attempted to rewrite the whole of her sixty-five years of history with her mother. She insisted that her relationship with her mother

had been close and loving (it had been anything but), and she was trying to manipulate the narrative of their relationship by keeping away anyone who would have contested this revision. I realized then that, in some ways, this reappraisal had been a major project of my mom's life—if not with her own mother, then by becoming a mother herself. And because the past is sentient, these carefully laid-out plans were foiled: Uninvited mourners hijacked the service; we never did get to the end of *Love You Forever*. I was elated. Though we weren't particularly close, I knew Maria wouldn't have approved of this ahistorical rewrite.

Standing in the kitchen of Maria's old house on James Street, my brothers and I joined my mom for a humble funeral reception meal of quartered pimento cheese sandwiches, Big Red, and conchas in almost-perfect silence. We said goodbye in front of the pomegranate tree where, as children, my brother and I would take turns picking off the fruit and throwing them at each other as hard as possible, hoping they'd burst open and stain each other's clothes. As I watched my brothers hug my mom goodbye, I considered how unfortunate it is that so many women, like my mom, started families hoping to fill a personal void and found instead that motherhood is also lonely. I decided then not to repeat this cycle.

In 2019, staring up at that tropical-sunset scene, I was fortunate to be able to make good on it. My abortion didn't just end an unwanted pregnancy; it saved me from becoming the sort of despotic mom seen in *Barbarian*. Where I've seen myself in the child-wraiths of *Beloved* and *The Baby*, having an abortion has been healing here too: In exploring my feelings of gratitude for being able to make that choice, I've also found sympathy for my mother. Her pregnancies (in 1969, 1980, and 1987) put her within the first generation of US women who had legal abortions available to them, but still, because the cultural tide favored wifedom and motherhood, her options for a different sort of life were circumscribed.

Since my abortion, of course, *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned. In the United Kingdom last year, women could still be criminally prosecuted for botched self-managed abortions. Where neither *Barbarian* nor *The Baby* are explicitly about Blackness, both protagonists in these 2022 horror stories about motherhood are Black women, which tells me that—in a similar way as Toni Morrison grappled with questions around Blackness and motherhood in 1987—we are still considering the fraught relationship between Black women and motherhood today. Then as now, we are left confronting a haunting past in which carrying a baby to term was often a forced condition, and the act of mothering was an entirely different beast. These stories make clear that in a landscape where race and bodily determination are intrinsically tied up within one another, Black women—for whom motherhood in this country has often come with particular accompanying horrors—will invariably be those most impacted by the loss of abortion as a right.

Lauren Lluveras is a sleepy Puerto Rican woman living in Austin, Texas. Lauren is pursuing her PhD in Black Studies at the University of Texas and when not sobbing in front her open laptop or disassociating to *Frasier* reruns, she is likely at the Aristocrat Lounge making forced but thoughtful points about Baz Luhrmann's 1999 hit single, "Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen)." Lauren has written opinion editorials and cultural criticism for *VICE*, *the Conversation*, *Teen Vogue*, *HyperAllergic* and perhaps most notably, has had bylines featured in *The Billings Gazette*.

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