

Men and Babies

by Michelle McEwen

"What you want from me?" That's what mama said this morning to the baby; I heard her. I saw her standing over the crib asking "what you want from me" as if the baby was gon' stop crying and start talking. She stayed there so long standing over the crib letting the baby cry, that I just went on in the room and got the baby and fed him myself like I been doing. I'm more like his mama than she is. She who had no business having another child twelve years after me. We were fine— just the two of us: going to the supermarket together, standing in the magazine aisle reading the latest magazines and tearing out pages of the things we wanted to remember to buy later when he had some money. We can't do that now— the crying baby would draw too much attention to us in the magazine aisle. I don't know when the last time I tore a page from a magazine, folded it, and put it in my back pocket. I do remember the first thing I tore out was a picture of this woman with lipstick the color of plums. I told my mama I wanted to wear lipstick this color when I got to be of lipstick-wearing age and my mama said, "Tear it out so you'll remember it." I still have that picture, too, in the left corner of my top drawer behind my bras that I don't wear 'cause I don't have nothing to fill 'em up. Mama skipped the training bras and just gave me her old bras. I'll be 25 before I can wear her old bras, but she thinks I'm wearing them. She gave them to me when she went shopping for new bras to impress the man that would later end up being this new baby's father. Those new bras only impressed him long enough to make the baby— they couldn't keep him around, though. Mama, on the phone, had told Aunt Lo that that man don't know what he lost by leaving her. She said, "I'm glad I let that sucker go. Supposin' I had ended up with another child?" The next month she was back on the phone with Aunt Lo talking about how Aunt Lo wouldn't believe she was having another baby. "I would tell him," mama said, "but I don't know where he is." So now it's me,

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mama, and baby at the supermarket— shopping for formula and pampers and baby wipes. That's where all the money goes. Mama say we can't do like we been doing—getting all that soda and snack food and name- brand toilet paper. I can't even go up the magazine aisle without mama saying, “Come on here, we gotta go.” Mama say she can't wait until I can work, so all her money don't have to go to feeding and clothing us.

Babies change everything. But men change them more. If it hadn't a-been for Thomas coming to our door that day, this baby wouldn't even be here. Mama cares more about men than her babies, Aunt Lo says. She says mama is always saying, “Why shouldn't I? The man came first.” Aunt Lo doesn't like that about mama— that she puts the man first. She said Mama always been like that since she can remember. That's why, when Thomas came knocking on our door, in a suit, selling something, mama let him in. She said he wasn't selling nothing she wanted or needed, but she wanted him. She made him grits and eggs and used the last bit of butter for his toast even though I had needed it for my biscuits. When I told her about that, she shoed me out the kitchen and gave my biscuits to Thomas. Mr. Thomas, that is. That's what she made me call him when he started coming by regularly without his suit and briefcase. Mama told Aunt Lo that she think she mighta cost Thomas his job. Aunt Lo says men are dumb like that— will lose a good job over a no-good woman. She says women are like that, too. She says mama lost a good job once because my father, before he was my father, used to keep mama up all night she could hardly stand in the morning. “She lost her job and her man, but won you.” That's what Aunt Lo said that time she told me about mama losing her job and daddy in the same day. I like that— the idea of mama winning me, like I'm some carnival prize she had to aim a ball hard in the right direction for. But mama don't see it that way, Aunt Lo says. She say mama sees me and this new baby like we are reminders of a love that started out good but ended bad and “sometimes she don't want to be reminded.” Aunt Lo says since I

don't hardly look like my daddy, mama can stand to be around me. But this new baby, a boy, looks so much like Thomas, mama can barely stand to look at it and when she does look at it, she's seeing Thomas and not the baby. Aunt Lo says I better keep an eye on mama around the baby because she thinks mama been daydreaming too much lately and she fear mama gon' drop the baby one of these days. That's why I'm always all the time burping him and changing him and rocking him and taking him out to get some sunshine. When I went by the post office last week, pushing the baby, this lady said to me, "You sure that's your mama's child?" And I nodded. But I'm not so sure these days— you should see how worn out I look by the end of the day. Mama never looks this worn out. Aunt Lo says when school starts up again, she gon' try to come by and check on mama and the baby. I don't know how I feel about leaving mama alone with the baby when I go back to school. I'm getting to feel like he's mine. If mama was to drop him, I might lose it and haul off and hit her. I told Aunt Lo this and she told me not to say things like that only because folks might hear. I told her I wasn't going back to school and she grabbed me by the arm and told me to keep my behind in school or I'd end up like my mama. But I can't let anything happen to the baby. Sometimes I think the baby would've been better off if I *was* the mother. Aunt Lo says she thinks so, too, since I got more sense than mama. And I know I do because just the other day, while I was warming up a bottle for the baby, I heard ma on the kitchen phone (she took it with her into the pantry and shut the door— slamming it on the cord) talking to a friend of hers. She said, talking about Aunt Lo, "She thinks I'm not fit for looking after the baby. She's acting like I could hurt him or something." Then, she said, talking about me, "Well look how well I did with Eddie—she's a woman just 'bout. She's even wearing my bras." Later, before she hung up the phone, she said, talking about herself, "Folks wanna make like children are the best things in the world but the truth is what can they do for you when you hurtin' so bad down there from wantin' lovin' that you feel like you might lose it? I would lose it— wouldn't you?"

