

This Is Perfectly Natural: Identifying with The Mother in *Barbarian*

The first few months of motherhood do strange things to you. A friend hallucinated a home invasion. Another left her baby on the front porch to scream. I imagined coyotes climbing through the window at night to steal my daughter. I imagined letting them. But over time, you find ways to cope. Half a bottle of wine, or maybe three quarters. Wearing AirPods with your hair down so your toddler can't see your ears and you can pretend you're still listening to them. And the most important coping mechanism of all: identification with other mothers.

Move slowly, don't give yourself away. Your desperation reeks like cheap perfume. Push your secondhand stroller up to the sandbox, notice that the others are all UPPAbaby, don't get flustered. Park your kid in the corner with a pail and shovel and look around, but don't let them see you looking. How about the woman with the dead eyes pretending not to notice her kid eating handfuls of sand? That could work. Keep looking. What about the one whose kid just pissed all over the slide? Been there. Wait and see. If she sighs so deeply that you swear you can hear the bottom of her lungs, it's a match. If she says, "It's okay sweetie, we're learning," swipe left. Are you looking at the woman wearing the Minnie Mouse t-shirt staring lovingly at her toddler? Don't even think about it. Run for your fucking life.

When you do find her, that rare creature, the mom you can relate to, you'll know. She'll radiate, the way the unopened Pinot at the back of the cabinet does, or your pillow after you've finally washed it and the spit up is gone. When you tell her that you miss your old life, she'll nod vigorously instead of saying she wouldn't want it any other way. She'll trust you enough to tell you that she masturbates next to her sleeping husband every night, because the thought of touching him makes her as nauseous as raw chicken did when she was pregnant. And one day you'll both describe a strange ringing in your ears that you can't quite place, and you'll discover, together, that it's the distant scream of your atrophying brains. Warmth will spread through you, animating the corpse you once called your body, and you'll feel just a little bit like yourself again. There is nothing more important to a mother than feeling seen.

When I saw *The Mother* in Zach Cregger's 2022 film *Barbarian*, I saw her. It takes nearly forty-five minutes for her to make her debut, but I felt her long before that. There is a centrifugal force that emanates from this house, an undeniable pull that you try hard to ignore, but can't. Tess descends into the space that lies below, leaves, then returns, like a moth to a flame, like a child to its mother. Finally, out of the darkness, she appears. Greasy hair hanging in sheets over her eyes, pendulous breasts swinging, paunchy stomach jiggling. My breath catches in my throat. My eyes widen. It's like looking in a mirror. The Mother opens her mouth and expels a strangled scream. There is a stranger here, in her home, making too much noise. Her baby is afraid. She grabs Keith's head and slams it into the wall repeatedly, skull fragments mashing into his brain. He quiets. A smile spreads across my face. I've found her. The mom I can relate to. I would have warned her, if I could, that it's a terrible idea to have people over in the beginning.

Just as suddenly as she appeared, she disappears. The ruins of Detroit replaced with the rolling hills of Malibu. I long for her. That vision of varicose veins and poor oral hygiene. Am I

laughing at Justin Long or laughing at the memory her filthy canines conjured in me? Getting home from the hospital, running my tongue over my teeth. They felt like velvet. I realized I hadn't brushed in seven days. Clearly, it's been a while for her too. I tap my foot impatiently, silently pleading with AJ to hurry up and get to the Airbnb that once belonged to him and now belongs to her. There are countless memes about the overlap between making mom friends and dating. One of the ways: once you find each other, any moment apart is a moment wasted. We're wasting time.

Finally, AJ takes me back. We enter The Mother's room. Soft purple light plays against the walls. Blankets coat the floor. It's called nesting. At the center, a video of a gorgeous baby latched to his gorgeous mother's breast. Over the video: *I like to let my baby determine how long he likes to nurse. It's important that this process is relaxing. Not just for the baby, but for me as well.* I'm transported. Over all the lamps hung muslin swaddling blankets. Some were covered in ladybugs, others had waves, otters and starfish. In the middle of the night, the bare bulbs would pierce the paper-thin flesh of her eyelids and she would scream. Everything made her scream back then. I sat with her at 3, and 4, and 5am, eyes glued to the TV, watching breastfeeding instructional videos as my nipples cracked and bled. It was not relaxing. For me, or for the baby. But still, I watched those videos on a loop, hoping they would eventually make sense, hoping they would eventually make me a better mother. Another thing we have in common.

When breastfeeding isn't working, they tell you to switch to bottles, like it's easy. After capturing AJ, The Mother shakes a dirt-caked bottle in his face, its yellowing nipple dribbling watery milk. She's doing everything right. But what she doesn't know, what I wish I could tell her, is that sometimes they'd rather starve. AJ just screams and screams. Tess warns, "If you get upset, she gets upset." I'm getting upset. The Mother knows she needs to switch feeding methods, she's a quick study. She babbles and boops! her baby on the nose as she maneuvers a squirming AJ into the cross-cradle hold. I held my daughter the same way. She offers her nipple just as I did, waving my enormous, blue-veined breast in my screaming baby's face. She would push me away with both hands, face contorted in horror, like I was force-feeding her poison. As tears streamed down my cheeks, my husband would whisper in my daughter's ear, "Don't you see? She just wants you to be her baby." Wait, no. That was Tess. Sorry, I'm having trouble keeping track. The stories are overlapping.

The Breastfeeding Journey (a term coined by moms who are not like us) feels like it will never end. When it finally did for me, it felt like the end of a prison sentence. But my breasts still filled with milk for weeks, turning hard like stones. I still woke up in the middle of the night, terrified I'd overslept and my daughter was starving to death in the next room. When those phases passed, I felt a different sort of ache. A longing to return, to go back to the time when I could hold her against my chest and feel her milky heat against my body. But there is no going back, and I watched her pudgy little legs wobble, then walk, then run. All of it, away from me. As Tess runs screaming from the arms of her mother, escaping through the broken basement window, The Mother reaches for her desperately, clinging to a closeness that she will never find again. In return, Tess hits her with her car. It's so hard to let go.

Her children are growing up, and as all the parenting books will tell you, it's important to let them assert their independence. But this is precisely the double bind of motherhood. From the moment they are born, your head is bashed against the wall just like Keith's, but instead of

bone fragments, it's misogyny that's driven into your brain. You are no one. Your child is your only source of happiness. You are the foundation upon which your house is built, and you cannot crack. But! When the time is right, let them go, with a smile. After your identity has been stripped away, they will steal the one you've replaced it with, the one you cling to now: The Mother. Hiding in Andre's water tower, AJ asks, "What the fuck is she?" Andre responds, "She's just a crazy lady living in that house." Precisely.

But she's a fighter, that's why I love her. She chases after her kids, beating Andre to death with his own arm when he gets in her way. She runs with the ferocity of a mom whose kid has forgotten their lunchbox, arriving at the top of the water tower to find AJ dangling Tess over the edge. "Come and get your baby." Tess falls into the void. Without hesitating, The Mother jumps. Her broken body lies beneath Tess, her arms cradling her gently. Blood splatters from her brain onto the concrete. I'd make a joke about it being a no-brainer, but there are tears in my eyes and I couldn't laugh if I tried. AJ stands above them, marveling at the unbreakable bond between a mother and her daughter. He could never understand. But then, Tess gasps for air and The Mother rises too. She kills the boy who hurt her baby girl and takes pleasure in it. It goes without saying that I do too. She turns to Tess, her face changing completely, filled with care and concern. She holds an unsteady hand to Tess' wounds, strokes her cheek, tries to lift her into her arms, to take her back home where she will nurse her, back to health this time. But Tess knows what all children know, "I can't go back." Tess holds AJ's gun to The Mother's head. The Mother kisses her hand, presses it to Tess' forehead, and looks at her. The expression on her face is the same one I've had on mine since my daughter was pulled out of me, my guts on the table, her screams piercing the air. It's a look that says, *My life is yours now, do what you want with it. I will love you anyway. My baby.* The Mother speaks clearly for the first time: "Baby." BANG.

Tears roll down my cheeks as The Ronette's *Be My Baby* plays over the credits. *Oh, since the day I saw you; I have been waiting for you; You know I will adore you 'till eternity.* And just like that, she's gone. That rare creature, the one I have been waiting for. The Mother who made me feel seen. Later, I'm sitting on the couch scrolling through IMDb like an addict trying to get one last fix. I get to the credits, I'm searching for her in a sea of headshots, but she's not there. Of course, the prosthetics will make her hard to recognize, I reason. But then I see it, her name followed by another that makes no sense: The Mother...Matthew Patrick Davis. It's like being shot in the face by your own kid. Excruciating, but inevitable. You never really know someone. One day, you'll find out she's an anti-vaxxer. Or she'll start a lifestyle blog. Or, worst of all, she'll sit you down, her eyes warm and crinkling at the edges, and she'll tell you she's decided to have another one. A chasm will open between you. Unanswered texts, FaceTime calls ignored, then missed birthdays and you never speak again. You'll see yourself for what you are: A Fool. For believing it could be another way. The mother is a solitary creature, just a crazy lady living in her house, alone.