

LaTendra

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LaTendra's back hurt, and the baby's foot was kicking a rib, but she had to fix dinner for Terrell and Kaiesha. Mama had started working nights at the nursing home, so that left LaTendra to babysit. Since she'd dumped Jabbari's sorry ass when he wouldn't claim this baby, she didn't have a boyfriend, and now, with her belly so big, she didn't have the energy anyway. She poured a stream of oil into the pot of boiling water and dumped in a box of spaghetti. Kaiesha would be happy, but Terrell would pitch a fit since he only liked sugar. But that's all he was going to get.

Terrell stood behind her, tugging on her sweat pants, whining for a cookie, so she stuck her leg out to keep him away, balancing on her other foot. She wanted to get dinner over so she could put him to bed and stretch out herself. "Kaiesha, come get your brother."

"In a minute." LaTendra could hear the Power Rangers song and knew Kaiesha was dancing in front of the TV.

"Kaiesha, come on." LaTendra's feet had gotten too puffy for shoes so she could only wear flipflops. The baby (she was sure it was a girl) sat low inside her, and every few minutes a twinge would make LaTendra double over and breathe in and out until it stopped. She'd also outgrown everything except the sweat pants she'd gotten from the Village Discount. Her legs were swollen, she had stretch marks, her belly button stuck out, and although she was peeing all the time she hadn't done a number two in days.

"Terrell, leave me alone!" He jabbered about wanting his mama. "Well, Mama ain't here, so you listen to me!" He rubbed his snotty face on her hand, and she batted him away. "Quit it!" He fell back on his butt and started to

wail. “Here, have a cookie and leave me alone.” Fishing out a couple of Chips Ahoy, she plunked him down on the floor and folded the cookies into his grubby hand. Steam had fogged the kitchen window. She wiped her brow and arched her back. “Ooh, Terrell, you’re getting on my last nerve.”

In the bedroom, the phone rang, so she lumbered over to get it. “Come with me, Terrell.” It was her friend, Shawna, calling to report that Jabbari had hooked up with Renée. Thanks, Bitch. She was about to shut Shawna down when she heard a crash in the kitchen. Dropping the receiver, she rushed in and saw Terrell on his back, screaming, waving his arms and legs all around, spaghetti caught in his clothes and hair. “Kaiesha! Come here! Get me a towel.” She hoisted Terrell up and ran to the living room and put him on the floor, then gently lifted his soaking hot tee-shirt. The brown skin had peeled off, leaving pink patches. Feeling faint, she patted him with a towel, while trying to hold him still. He kicked, fighting her off, his eyes rolling, his shrieks rising in waves. When one of his kicks caught her right in the belly, she let go of him, and he crawled away, collapsing on his stomach, shivering, batting his legs and arms on the floor. She pulled his leg, turning him onto his back, and dragged him over to her. “Kaiesha! Call 911 and tell them to send an ambulance.”

Kaiesha stood in the doorway, crying. “No, I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Say your little brother got burned bad and they need to come fast.” Kaiesha was hugging herself. “You go now!” Kaiesha ran into the bedroom and LaTendra was afraid she’d have to let go of Terrell and get on the phone. But then she heard her sister giving their address. “Tell them the apartment number too.”

“I did.” She stood several feet away, wheezing in big gulps. Would this make her have an asthma attack?

“Now, get me some honey.

“Mama’ll be mad if it mess up the rug.”

“No, she won’t.”

Kaiesha brought her the plastic bear and LaTendra dribbled honey onto his skin, but it was hard to spread it on his burned skin. His voice was hoarse from screaming, and she wrapped him again in the towel, hugging his back to her belly so he couldn’t kick her again, holding him tight until her arms ached, rocking him. “Ssh, Terrell. Come on, baby. Ssh.” Her heart banged in her throat, and waves of heat rolled over her.

Afraid to call her mother with Terrell screaming in the background, she waited until the paramedics came. They strapped him to a board and listened to his heart. One of them asked if LaTendra was the mother. “She’s at work.” The man shook his head and muttered something about Child Services.

She called and the nursing home paged her mother, who took a few minutes to come to the phone. LaTendra told her that Terrell pulled the pan off the stove when she turned her back.

“Why weren’t you watching him? You know he get into everything. Oh, my baby.” LaTendra, who was only fifteen, wanted to say, “I’m your baby too.”

“I put honey on his skin, Mama.”

“That won’t do no good if he’s burned bad.”

“Mama, I’m sorry. It was an accident.” But her mother asked to talk to the paramedic, so LaTendra didn’t get a chance to tell her mother she’d get Kaiesha off to school in the morning.

After the paramedics left with Terrell, Kaiesha cried, asking for her brother, and LaTendra tried to give her a hug, but she swatted at her. LaTendra wrapped her into a hug. “It’s okay, Kaiesha. Terrell is with the doctors. And Mama is going there now.”

“I want Mama here.”

“I do too. Let’s go lay in bed and take our animals with us.”

She piled stuffed animals and dolls on their mother's bed and put Kaiesha in the middle. Kaiesha grabbed the Barbie and started undressing her as LaTendra stripped off her own clothes and crawled under the covers with her sister. Her back hurt, and pains ran down her legs. She propped pillows behind her head so she wouldn't burp up a sour taste.

Although she hadn't eaten, LaTendra felt like throwing up. Cramps rippled across her belly, so she rolled onto her side. LaTendra took the barrettes out of Kaiesha's hair and stroked her head. "Go to sleep. I'll wake you up when we know something."

Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Terrell on the floor, his arms and legs twitching. And heard his screams. How was she going to take care of her own baby when she let this happen to Terrell?

At about midnight, the phone rang. Her mother was at Children's Hospital with Terrell and said that they'd put him in isolation and had given him morphine for the pain. "They don't know nothing yet, but his face and chest are real bad. I'm just praying."

"I'm sorry, Mama."

"Yeah? Too late for sorry." And she hung up.

In the morning, Kaiesha asked why LaTendra got to stay home from school and she didn't.

"I have to wait for Mama."

"I don't want to go to school."

"You have to do what I say. I'm in charge."

"I'm telling Mama."

"Go ahead." Her belly really hurt now. Throwing a coat on over her sweat pants and top, she walked Kaiesha to the corner, where a crossing guard stopped traffic for school kids. Kaiesha clung to her legs. "You gotta go," LaTendra said. "I can't babysit you today." Kaiesha gave her a dirty look but shuffled across the street with the others.

Back at the apartment, she sank onto the floor, closed her eyes and felt herself drift off to sleep.

She woke up in a puddle, so she rolled over onto her hands and knees and crawled to the bathroom. Stripping off her underwear, she sat on the toilet, but then, a terrible cramp started and she had to stop and lean over, her hands on her knees. She inched over to the sink and splashed some water between her legs. More water spilled out. She knew the baby was coming.

Because the birth classes took place at night, she couldn't go, and she hadn't seen a doctor, so she didn't know her due date. Mama was furious at LaTendra for getting pregnant, just like she did, at fifteen. "Didn't you learn nothing from me? How'm I going to pay for a baby?"

But she wanted her mother there. Should she call an ambulance? How would they pay for it? As she was crawling to the phone, another cramp started, and she tried breathing, but it didn't help. Up on her hands and knees, she panted, screaming when the pain got bad. Her body felt like a rag someone was squeezing. Between the cramps, she put her face on the cool tiles of the bathroom floor. The pains came faster and got worse and barely gave her time to rest between them. At one point, she felt like she had to do a number two, so she pulled herself up to the toilet and sat down. But she felt the baby push hard and she slipped back to the floor, crying for her mama. She felt herself rip down below, and she screamed and screamed until her throat hurt. Finally, the baby pushed out of her and she fell back, sobbing. After a moment, she looked and saw the baby wiggling on the floor, then heard it start to cry. She inched around to look at the baby, covered with blood and sticky stuff with a big purple hose coming out its belly button and back into LaTendra's body. She lifted the cord and saw that the baby was a girl. Wailing, the baby's lips were shivering, her legs pulled up to her belly. LaTendra grabbed a towel and wrapped her up, putting the baby on her own belly. Then she had another cramp and felt something slip out of her, a blob

attached to the end of the hose. She'd heard about it, the placenta. After a moment, she held the baby to her breast because that's what new mothers do.

When she was sure the cramps had finally stopped, she dragged herself to her feet and got a washcloth to wash the baby off. So small. Her skin was light, but she knew from when Terrell got born that black babies darken up later. Jabbari was darker than LaTendra. Since she wouldn't ever know her daddy, LaTendra hoped the baby would look more like her. Seeing the baby on the floor made her think of Terrell twitching, and she shut her eyes.

LaTendra cuddled her baby for a while, but the floor was cold, so she sat on the toilet. Her bottom ached where the baby tore her. Stuffing two pads in clean underwear, she lifted the baby with the placenta and staggered toward her bed. They slept for a while until the baby woke her up, crying. LaTendra held the baby to her breast and felt the tiny lips start to suck. The cord with the nasty placenta made her feel sick, so she kept it wrapped up in a towel. After she rested for a while, she'd go to the emergency room, where the doctor could cut it off the baby's belly. She'd already chosen the name LaToya. Her skin was kind of wrinkled, but she had beautiful little hands and feet.

In the kitchen, she swiped at the worst of the mess but had to stop because she nearly fainted. What if Terrell didn't survive? Would he have scars? Would her mother ever forgive her?

Back in the bedroom, she fell asleep next to LaToya, then woke up with a start, afraid that she'd rolled over and smothered her. LaTendra clawed at the covers, found the baby under a fold of the blanket, and burst into tears. What if she dropped LaToya? What if she burned her? How would she and her mother handle three children?

LaTendra grabbed sweatpants and a sweater from a pile on the floor. She sat in a chair with LaToya, staring at her, running a finger along her cheek. LaToya had big, wide-spaced eyes and little ears that sat flat against her head.

Good, at least she didn't get Jabbari's big ones. LaTendra worried she'd been born too early, and they couldn't afford more doctors' bills, especially with Terrell in the hospital. She took the pink blanket she'd bought for the baby and wrapped her up so that just her face showed. "I love you, LaToya," she said, kissing her. The baby had started to cry again, her mouth quivering. "Ssh, baby. Ssh."

She stuffed her feet into tight boots, then zipped LaToya and the placenta in a towel under her coat to look like a baby bump. Careful to wait until no one was standing out front, she left the building. Snow was falling, and the wind blew. Weiss Memorial, the nearest hospital, was several stops away. She walked to the bus stop and looked north, stamping her feet, hugging LaToya under her coat, making sure the baby had room to breathe. Her legs still felt shaky and the cold hurt her sore bottom. After ten minutes, the bus still hadn't come, so she decided to duck into the Catholic church to rest and get warm.

Although she walked by this church all the time, she'd never been inside. Her mother had grown up Baptist, and they went a few times at Christmas and Easter to her grandmother's church on the South Side, but after she passed they stopped going.

LaTendra climbed the stairs and pulled open two sets of heavy wooden doors. A long, high ceiling crisscrossed at the front and colored windows ran down the walls like ribbons.

Inside the door, there was a tray of electric candles, half of them lit. An old white lady stood in front of the candles, and she pulled a wrinkled dollar bill from her pocket and stuffed it into the box, then she pushed a button to light a candle. Over the candles hung a painting of Mary holding up baby Jesus, balancing him on one hand, gold shooting out of their heads. He looked like a little man, not small and fragile like LaToya. LaTendra wondered if she should buy a candle for Terrell, but she didn't have any money. It must be the honor system because no one was watching to make sure you paid. What did

those candles do anyway? Would they make Terrell better? She didn't think so.

LaTendra saw a big stone bowl with water in it. A Mexican lady pushed past her and dipped her fingers in the water, then crossed herself before walking down the long aisle. An old man with a walker wheezed up and did the same thing. LaTendra stuck her pinkie into the water and unzipped her jacket, touching LaToya's forehead with her damp finger.

She walked down the aisle and sank down on one of the benches, stretching out her feet and looking up. From the outside, the church didn't look big, but this tall ceiling made her dizzy. Two rows up, a man, down on his knees, mumbled under his breath, crossed himself and sat on the bench.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, but LaToya started to cry, and LaTendra was afraid of getting in trouble for bringing a baby to church. She saw a little wooden house with two doors. It said Confessional. She slipped into the wooden house and closed the door behind her. The smell of polish made her nose stuff up. LaToya was working herself up into a good cry, and LaTendra sat, bouncing the baby, but it hurt so she started to cry herself. "Please, stop, LaToya." She unzipped her jacket, lifted her shirt, and took LaToya out, putting the baby up to her breast. LaToya pinched her lips on LaTendra's nipple and that stopped the crying. It hurt though and she could feel herself leak into the pad. She'd heard from Shawna that Catholics could tell their sins to the priest, and they would go away. She wanted to confess that she'd let Terrell get burned and that she was scared of being a bad mother. At the hospital, she knew they'd ask her a lot of questions. Maybe they'd be mad at her for giving birth at home. Was she supposed to cut the cord herself? But what if she had and LaToya had started to bleed? What if it was too late to cut the cord and LaToya had to wear it around all the time? Would they call Child Services on her? She felt woozy and was afraid

she'd pass out. But the box was warm, and she couldn't bear taking LaToya out in the cold again. All she wanted was to go back home and sleep.

The music had started, and LaToya knew there'd be more people in the church. She was afraid the priest would find her in the house and get mad at her. It was warm in the wooden house. LaToya would be safe. Someone would find her and take her to the hospital. It was a church. The painting with the baby-man Jesus. All those people who were praying for someone. Maybe they would pray for LaToya.

The baby had fallen asleep again, and LaTendra kissed her several times on the head and wrapped the cloth around her, placing her on the low bench. She said, "I'm sorry, LaToya," before leaving the wooden house, slipping out the front door and into the street.