

Chapter 1

Goodbyes and Hellos: Dealing with Loss in Early Motherhood

When you bring your baby home, you gain so much so very quickly. First of all, you gain a literal whole new human. *Hello tiny person I made from scratch – very glad you turned out better than my rice krispies usually do – welcome to the family.*

You gain, especially if it is your first baby, every single baby item invented because you think you need and will use it.¹

You also gain the ability to love a human more than you thought was possible. A true unconditional love.

There are many things that you gain as a new parent, it's true, but what is not talked about enough, is what you *lose*.

For Better and for Worse

I cannot speak for everyone, only about my own experiences, but unless you have people that you trust that are available to watch your kids, often, your marriage is going to go through a transition. Well, it's going to go through a bit of a transition regardless, but it's easier to navigate if you have help with the kids.

It is inevitable that your marriage is going to shift and change once you have kids. I remember when I was pregnant, both times, I found myself googling “Why do I hate my husband?”

¹ Listen, I hate to break it to you, but you will never use the wipe warmer. Actually maybe *you* will use it, but not your baby. When it is a code brown, or green, or yellow situation and there is poop somehow defying gravity and running UP your child's back, the last thing you are thinking about is the temperature of the wipes. Return it now, and buy more diapers – you're going to need them.

Everything this poor man did set me off. He smelled badly, he was always breathing SO LOUDLY, and would bring home the wrong snack (ok, maybe it was the exact thing I had asked him to go get, but by the time he got home I did not want it anymore and HE SHOULD HAVE EXPECTED THAT. Does he not know me at all?). Then, once the baby was born, and I watched that man do the hot-dad-carrying-the-car-seat-out-of-the-hospital walk, I sobbed in the car on the way home feeling like the luckiest girl in the world.

All that to say, pregnancy, birth, postpartum and early motherhood come with a LOT of hormonal changes. *A lot*. Then, there is the fact that you and your partner are suddenly thrust into parenthood together with no rulebook and no direction. The baby is screaming. The dog is barking. You are both sleep deprived, overstimulated, and trying to take care of this new precious bundle of life that has effectively started running yours. I remember fighting over the dumbest things during this newborn stage. Snapping at each other as our patience grew thin, and our eyelids grew heavy as we took turns trying to soothe our screaming baby.

Looking back, I cannot even remember what the arguments were about. I was hormonal, we were both terribly exhausted, and our life had been completely derailed by this new, innocent, wonderful baby. For something that weighed less than 10 pounds and couldn't hold up her own head, she sure held a lot of power over us.

Date nights became nonexistent – we either had to find times that worked with a sitter we trusted – aka my mom, for a few hours at a time, or bring her with us, which was not so much

a date as it was us trying to soothe a screaming newborn, while shoving bites of food in our mouth, our faces turning as red as our infant's – feeling everyone's stares. Our once romantic nights filled with passion, had turned into quickies when we could squeeze them in, "Hey! She will sit and watch the first 12 minutes of Moana before she starts screaming, now's our chance – GO GO GO!!!"

There is something really amazing when you watch your partner become a parent. It makes you fall in love with them in a whole new way. But having a baby can easily become all-consuming, and before you know it you start to slip into the roles of only "parents" – putting all your energy into your kids, and forgetting to put effort into each other and then you can find yourself in the dreaded "roommate phase."

Every marriage and relationship is going to look differently, and I am the furthest from a relationship expert. Maybe one day I will write a book about that one year marriage I had when I was 19, but that is not today. But, even with all my relationship mishaps over the years, I am constantly learning and growing, and some of the best advice I have ever gotten on this topic are from my friends who are married with kids.

So, friend, let me share what I've learned.

Let Them Figure It Out

One pattern I fell into quickly was taking over the majority of the childcare and being the "fix it" mom. Me doing the bulk of the day to day child care was slightly inevitable to be fair.

I was (am) a stay-at-home mom, and my husband worked(s) long hours. That means most of the rocking, feeding (*all* the feeding with my daughter who refused to take a bottle. Or a pacifier. I even bought one they only make in Sweden and she still refused), burping, bathing – etc., was done mostly by me because I was the only one to do it.²

A problem was created by me (it's me hi, I am the problem). When my husband would come home and try to help with the baby, and my daughter would start to cry – I would immediately step in and “fix it.” I was “better” at it. No, I did not actually feel superior, but I just could get her to stop crying faster because I was there more. I knew what to do. I had already worked out my kinks, and tried the 50 ways to hold her until I had found one that she liked.³

The problem with doing that was it left my husband feeling like a failure, and put more of the childcare load on me. It caused tension. I would get resentful of him for not helping me more, and him resentful of me that I was always trying to fix it.

² I know there is a modern day fairy tale of splitting all the childcare 50/50, and eating dinner together at 5 PM, but in this day in age that is an impossible reality for many families. Gone are the days where Mom stays home while Dad works a 9-5 and the kids play outside all day, letting Mom clean and cook. For so many families, that is an impossible reality to sustain. Anyway, back to letting my husband figure it out himself.

³ (You know what's so funny by the way? I know, another side quest, come along, won't you?) It's very funny when we try to describe to someone how to hold our baby the way *we* do. “No no, you need to bend that arm at 72 degree angle, and pat her back gently with your other hand. Also slightly bounce up and down, while leaning your head to the right.” And when that baby cries it sets off a little biological alarm in your brain and makes you want to fix it *immediately* – it's like nails on a chalkboard times a million. It sent me into fight or flight mode and I needed to fix it, and fix it now.

Here is how we broke that cycle. I had to realize that the fact is, *you are not responsible for your partner's parenting*. They are allowed to do things differently than you (not that it needs to be said but obviously that does not include causing any kind of physical or emotional harm to your children). Just like there are multiple ways to get the same answer on a math test, there are many ways to raise a child, all of them “right.”

One example of this is how my husband and I play with the kids. My husband is a tough and tumble guy. When I try wrestling with my kids I start imagining them breaking bones, my anxiety wins, and I shut it down quickly. Play time is over. But my husband has always been the one throwing them in the air, wrestling, and tickling them, and they LOVE it.

Meanwhile, I handle the crafts, slime, kinetic sand, and play-doh. Neither of us really like those things, but it makes my brain misfire a little less than his. Not much, but a little. Your kids will have something unique to gain from *both* of you.

So, my best advice is let your partners figure it out. Yup, your baby might cry while they do. Just like they did while you figured it out yourself. I also believe every parent should invest in some *really* good noise canceling headphones. Helps with that pesky little biological alarm. But more on that later. You have to let your partner figure out how to do it in their *own* way. They will feel more capable, you will hopefully get more breaks, and your kids will feel equally secure and taken care of by *both* parents.

Date Night Rules

Next, let's talk about dating. You may have been a couple that would go on date nights a few times a week, your schedule free and ready for anything. "Oh, I hear there is a new pizza place that just opened up down the road, want to check it out?" "Bobby and Jill invited us last minute to the lake house, and they have JET SKIES! Let's Go, I'll start packing!"

Then, you bring that sweet little blob home and date nights have suddenly disappeared. Poof. You both are exhausted because your little sweet potato likes to sleep all day and party all night, just like you used to. Again, if you do not have affordable, and reliable childcare, finding time to escape, alone, can be a challenge. So what can you do?

Some of my favorite post-kid dating advice came from my friend Alyssa. Alyssa and her husband Michael have been love birds since high school. In fact, we were all in band class together, me jamming on trombone, Alyssa rocking the percussion section, and Michael bringing the bass with the tuba. The two high school sweethearts grew up, got married, and then had *four kids in five years*. Now, they were lucky enough to have lots of options for childcare and managed to sneak away for a date night once a week. Thank goodness for grandparents.

She told me they had one rule for their date nights, and it was what they were allowed to talk about. That one night a week they went out to dinner, or saw a movie, or whatever they decided to do, they were not allowed to talk about the kids, the bills, or work.

Have you ever heard an idea that sounds so simple but at the same time blows your mind? When she said this my jaw hit the floor. It's like she told me she discovered electricity. It left me thinking, "Why didn't I think of that?" My husband and I would go out occasionally and then talk about nothing but the kids. Understandably, the kids were both my job and my whole life so I did not feel like I had much else to offer conversation wise, but this advice my friend had given me was *gold*.

I found myself looking up "interesting questions to ask your partner to get to know them better" on long car rides, and dinners. Once, I asked my husband, "What was something you got into the most trouble for as a kid?," and this man told a new-to-me story about how when his parents went away for a trip, he had a garage sale and sold a bunch of their things. His mom got home and saw the neighbors using her furniture, and made him go back to every single person he had sold something to and get her things back. I asked why he did it and he said he was ten and just wanted money. A little entrepreneur in the making. A shock to no one he ended up in sales years later as his profession. We had been together I think around seven years or so before I had ever heard that story.

I think that there's always more to learn about your partner, and this gave us the perfect outlet. But, you do also obviously have to talk about the bills and the kids, and all things *business* eventually, so when do you do that? Alyssa told me she and her husband instead of talking about those topics during date nights, they instead set aside an entire separate time to talk

about the business end of things in their life. They pick a day during the week or month where they can sit down and hash all of that out. It allows both important conversations to happen in their own time and place. Next time you and your partner get a night to yourself, try challenging yourself to not talk about the kids, or work, or the mortgage, and see what happens. It's okay if it feels awkward at first.

Now, I know dating in general post-kids can be hard, and usually the reason is finding someone to watch the kids. I hear so often from moms that they lack babysitters. Either they do not have someone they can trust or they cannot financially afford one. Child care is *not* cheap these days. So if you are not able to sneak away outside of the house, maybe have a date night in. The goal being here, is time, with just you and your partner, away from your kids, to exist as people, not just parents.

A lot of times for me and my husband, that means hanging out after the kids go to bed. We eat our own separate dinner from the kids (I'll talk more on this a little later), and usually watch a TV show, play a video game, or a board game. Although we did have to ban Rummy, we got way too competitive – I threw my cards across the table at one point and called him a not so nice name. My mom told me her and my Dad used to leave a chessboard out, and whenever they had a free moment they would pass by the board and take their turn, sometimes taking a week or more to finish a game. It was just a little reminder throughout the day that they were thinking of each other.

Other, in-home date ideas is to make a list of movies you both have been wanting to watch – pick one off the list, pop some

popcorn and snuggle up. Find a video game you both enjoy. My husband and I weirdly really enjoy playing golf on the Playstation. You can paint together. I recently saw a trend of couples painting portraits of each other, they sit across from one another and try their best to paint the other person, the end results often being hilarious. You can do a puzzle together, try out new recipes together, or start a book club, and read the same book together and discuss it!

Your dating life is not going to look the same likely, nor will any aspect of your life look the same, after bringing home that baby. And listen, I hate change just as much as the next person – seriously it keeps me up at night, my therapist says it’s something to do with control issues due to anxiety – but just because your dating life is now looking a little different does not mean that it is *over*. It just means you have to get creative.

Pack His Bags (and Then Pack Yours Too)

I know this section may be unattainable for some of you reading. So much of motherhood is as hard as it is because of the lack of village that many have. This is another theme you are going to see come up a lot. You have heard me bring it up several times already in this chapter alone, and you will hear it several more times before you finish, but not having a support system to help you during early motherhood just makes everything harder. It just does. So, if you are someone who this does not apply to (right now – because as your kids get older, more opportunities will be possible) just skip ahead to the next section.

One of the best things my husband and I ever did (still do) is take a trip, usually once a year if we can, just he and I.

That's right baby, we leave those kids at home, say sayonara, and get the hell out of dodge. The stars usually align at least once a year, where everyone's work schedules line up (heck a lot of the time, our couple's vacation is really just a work trip for my husband that I tag along with) and we get to sneak away, just my husband and I. No kids.

When I brought this idea to the internet, I had many moms telling me that they felt too guilty to go on a trip without their kids. That they felt like it was a selfish decision. I think the conversation around motherhood, and what mothers are expected to sacrifice, needs to change as a whole. This idea that your children must *always* come first, even before yourself, because that sacrifice, that *mother's* sacrifice is what makes you a good mom, is why so many mothers get sucked into motherhood and lose themselves in the process.

Mothers do not have to be martyrs.

Listen, in an emergency situation, my kids of course would come first. They would get food and water before me, etc. But there is a reason that when the plane is going down, you should put your oxygen mask on first before you help someone else. It's ok to buy yourself new clothes instead of getting yet another outfit for your child they do not even need. I once said, "my kid will not be getting an iPad when I do not even own one," and I stayed true to that. And, it is very much ok to leave the kids at home, and take a relaxing vacation without them. In fact, it's probably a good thing for you *and* the kids.

One strong memory I have of my childhood is when my parents took a two week trip to Scotland together. Various family members came to stay and watch my sister, brother,

and myself. My parents recorded themselves reading bedtime stories to us, and I vaguely remember talking to them on the phone once or twice. But I mainly remember my Grandpa making us a delicious, buttery full spread of breakfast – eggs, pancakes, and potatoes. I remember my mom had made a guide (literally this thing was a whole binder full) to help my family learn our routines and schedules and to help understand my little brother, who had verbal apraxia and was learning to talk at the age of four. My sister and I helped translate words to everyone like – “GUNG” – when he says this he means his blanket. I remember just having a blast with my Grandma, and Grandpa and Aunt Tammie.

My parents? (They flew to Scotland on different flights – in case one of them crashed and died. Much like how the President and Vice President do not fly together. That sounds like anxiety. Mom, I know you are reading this, did you have anxiety?) They had an amazing trip exploring a country they had both always wanted to see, and 15+ years later, even post-divorce, they still talk about this trip with fondness. They talk about the pubs they ate at, and castles they explored. How my mom made “Bahhhh” noises at every sheep they passed in the countryside, and how nervous my mom was in the car with my Dad driving on the opposite side of the road from what they were used to. It was a wonderful way for the two of them to spend time together, outside of raising kids together.

It's important, if you can, to get that time with just your partner. Vacationing with your kids is great, and I think family trips are equally important in their own way, but I need you to hear me loud and clear that it is in no way *selfish* to take a trip without your kids. You deserve time with your partner

that does not involve taking care of anyone but yourselves. You deserve to sleep in . . . ⁴ You deserve to hit the pool without worrying about your kids drowning. You deserve to eat a meal uninterrupted and take a shower without kicking bath toys out of the way first. You do deserve it, and you are not selfish for doing so.

Unicorn Friends

“Emily, this chapter is depressing. Who wants to talk about everything that you are going to lose when you bring home your baby?”

The answer is no one, and that is the problem. When we leave these things unsaid, then people who experience it (spoiler alert, many people) feel like they are alone, or that something is wrong with them. When you paint motherhood with only the brightest and sunniest color palette, you end up leaving a lot of moms in the dark about the things they are going to experience. I was shell-shocked by my transition into motherhood. I do not want anyone else to suffer in silence like I did, thinking I was the only one feeling these things. When my relationships started changing, I felt like perhaps it was just me sucking at this. But it was not just my marriage shifting. My friendships started changing too.

⁴ (Ok – I have to tell you though, you won’t. Sorry to kill that dream. Those damn kids control your sleep schedule even hundreds of miles away. I remember our first trip to Vegas after kids, waking up at 4 AM Vegas time (which was 6 AM our time at home). It was odd because in Vegas, that is around the time everyone is heading back to the hotel after a wild night out, and there we were, bright eyed and bushy tailed and ready for the day as everyone around us was slumping back to their rooms after their late night excursions. So, maybe bring some ZZZQuil so you can attempt to sleep in and remember what that feels like.

I just read an interesting article about (know when I say that line “I just read something that said. . .,” it means I most definitely saw it on a reel scrolling online, but I like to sound smart – shhh don’t tell) how most people change their friend group every seven years. And that makes sense to me.

People are going to move away, or fade apart because you are at simply two very different stages. This will happen at various points of your life. When you graduate high school and everyone heads off to a different college you may lose friends, distance causing you to fade apart. Then, when you graduate college, everyone ventures off to start their life, you may lose some friends then too. When you get married, move away, and stop your single partying days, you guessed it, farewell friends (mainly the party animals at that point).

If you are lucky enough, you will find some unicorn friends in your lifetime. Those friends that are with you for the long haul. For me, that is my best friend Megan. My unicorn. She was my first friend when I moved to my hometown, at the ripe age of five years old, and we have been best friends ever since. We are 34 this year, and that means she has been in my life for 29 years. There is not a major life moment that does not include Megan in my memories. I mean she was even there when I got my first period, and she was next to me when my mom told me my parents were getting a divorce. When I got married and had kids, even though she was in a different stage of her life, she stayed with me through the chaos. My kids call her “Aunt Megan,” and she just had her first baby, six years after I started my own motherhood journey. She is my unicorn. She rode the waves of motherhood *with* me, instead of, well, abandoning ship.

Unicorns, as you know, are rare. More than likely, you are going to lose some friends when you become a mom. There is just a different set of priorities you have after you have children. Suddenly, your days are scheduled around nap times, and bedtime routines. For the record, I am the latter. I *will* be leaving early to get my kids at home and in bed by their bedtime, because the two hours I get to myself after they are in bed and before I head to bed myself are crucial to any mental health I've got left. Plus, it's a great excuse to leave a party early (one you didn't even really want to be at in the first place). "Oh sorry, she is getting tired, we have to go! I wish we could stay longer!," you say as your wide-awake baby sits in her car seat as you gather up your things, inching to the door.

When you have friends that do not have kids, especially if you are younger, they are likely going to be in a very different stage than you and have different priorities than you. If they were your "going out" friend, and you were heading to the bar together every Friday night, getting drunk and dancing until 2 AM – you probably are going to fade away from each other. You may still find yourself up at 2 AM, but you'll be making bottles instead of jungle juice and your dance moves will shift into the "mom sway" where you rock back and forth hoping your baby finally closes their eyes. If they were the friend that you met for lunch with every Saturday, promptly at noon to catch up and gossip, you either have to change the day, or have them come over and gossip while you bounce a baby, donning spit up stains on your shirt instead of a cute sundress. If they cannot adapt, then, yup, you guessed it, bye-bye friend.

I have lost friends throughout my life for various reasons, and I wish I had advice for how to deal with it. It hurts. It's hard.

It is like you are mourning an old life and a past version of yourself when a friend decides to disappear. I am still to this day trying to navigate my feelings about it. All the feelings and sadness you may feel is totally normal. It makes you cherish the friends who stay all the more. Plus, once you have kids, you get to make a new type of friend (you may already have some) – *mom friends*.

Emily's Guide to Making Friends: One Rule Only

Get Your Cute Little Butt Out of the House⁵

Get out of the house. You are not going to make friends sitting at home all day. Well, that is not totally true. You can make friends online. But you need some friends you see in person too, not just on Facetime. Your new bestie is not going to be your DoorDash driver who has brought you your third order of Raising Canes this week. OK, maybe they might be, but it is highly unlikely. So what do you do?

Join a class. Go to the park. I once saw a swarm of moms pushing babies in strollers walking together in the park for some sort of Mommy and Me Fitness Class. I never signed up because I don't really enjoy sweating but it *seemed* fun to have a designated place where a group of moms could get together and chat. Get your baby in a Mom and Baby gymnastics class.

⁵ I was going to say Get your *ass* out of the house, but then I thought – am I swearing too much here? Is there such a thing as “too much” swearing? I changed it to “cute little butt” because I thought that was cheeky – no pun intended. . .ok maybe it was intended, whatever. I love a good pun, sue me. Ok, enough of this side quest, which is really just diving into all the directions my brain seems to go while writing this; let's get back into it.

You will get to watch them roll around on the gym floor while you try not to pee bouncing on the trampoline. (Also, I know we joke about this as moms, but you should not actually be peeing yourself. You need some pelvic floor therapy, go look into that.) Go to the local library story time. Go to the splash pad.

Just GO.

All of those classes are for the baby – sure, fine motor skills, socialization, whatever – but they are also for the *moms*. You will get to gather with other parents who likely have kids around the same age as you. And listen, I get it, I am as socially awkward as it gets. I leave social interactions often shaking my head thinking “Why, Emily, why on Earth did you ask her how her Grandpa died?” I don’t even love ordering my own food.

I wish there was an easier way to quickly get to know someone, like a dating profile for mom friends, or a business card you could just hand someone and then run away:

Emily, 34

Always has snacks

Enjoys reading, building Lego, and hates long
walks on the beach because sand sticks to places

Want to be friends?

Check Yes or No

But unfortunately to make new friends, I had to make myself *uncomfortable*. I approached moms who I felt an initial vibe with and ASKED FOR THEIR NUMBER. I know, I am cringing just thinking about it. But you know what? No one

said no. Not one time. And they always gave me their real numbers. Even if we ended up never getting together, I was never outright rejected when I asked.

Most moms out there are just like you and me – just wanting some friends who are going through the same things as they are. If you muster up enough courage to break the ice, then they will probably breathe a giant internal sigh of relief that you made the first move. And you may just meet some amazing friends that way.

Making mom friends also gets easier when your kids start school and start to make friends of their own. They tend to be better at this skill than us, typically if they spend more than a few minutes together they will deem each other “besties” even before they know each other’s names. If you are lucky, they will make friends with kids whose moms you get along with too. This proved true with my Daughter and her “bestie” Claire. They were best friends in preschool, and that caused a natural and effortless conversation starter with her mom, Nicole. We ended up walking the girls to school together every day that it was warm enough to, and Nicole even had a son who was my son’s age. (She has since had a third baby, but I will not be making that baby a friend.)

We started having playdates and bringing our sons to story time at the library together. We had similar viewpoints on most things when it came to parenting, and she became part of my village. She would stay with my daughter on the playground after school when I was running late, and I would drop off things to school for her when her kids were sick, etc. She ended up moving away about halfway through the school year, which honestly was very rude of her to do, and we were

all pretty sad about it, but they only moved about an hour away, and we still visit even years later, and we text constantly about all the crazy things our children say and do.

Making friends as an adult can be hard, and awkward and feel uncomfortable, but if you can push yourself outside of your comfort zone you might just make friends that will help you through this season.

Where Did I Go?

While my marriage changing and losing friends was hard, what hurt me most of all, was the fact that I started to lose *myself*.

It happened gradually. I didn't even realize it was happening in fact until I was already out to sea, drowning. It's just like that, losing yourself in motherhood. It's like when you are at a lake in the summer and you hop in an innertube. You close your eyes and relax in the waves; you look up at some point and realize you are a little further out from shore than where you started. You aren't panicked, you're not too far, and you are a strong swimmer, you will be ok. You close your eyes again, but the next time you open them, you feel panicked. You are suddenly surrounded by water. No land in sight. You kick your legs and you cannot remember how to swim. You flail your arms, and yell out for help, but no one comes to rescue you. You feel like you might drown, and you do not understand, the shore was just there. How did you drift so far? How did you not realize it? That is what it felt like to me when I looked up at my reflection and did not recognize who I saw in the mirror. I had been buried in diapers and bottles and breastfeeding and baby shark for five years.

When you have young children, you take on a type of caretaker role. Especially at the beginning, they need you for *everything*. They need you to eat, sleep, and drink. They need you to help them build the muscles they need to crawl, and eventually walk – aka you listen to them scream as you force them into tummy time on the floor. You teach them how to use the bathroom,⁶ you teach them how to get dressed, and teach them their shapes and colors. There was a moment as I was patiently trying to get my daughter to use a fork when I realized how much my mom had taught me. All the simple day to day tasks (laying all those bricks) that she had taught me how to do. By the way, thanks Mom.

Many moms, with the lack of the modern day village, and especially if you are a stay-at-home mom, end up carrying most of the mental load as well. Your mind is running 24/7 planning grocery lists and dinner ideas, trying to keep track of doctor appointments, and making sure you bought the right diaper size because your kid had another blowout this morning. Trying to keep up with the laundry, the dishes, and finding the source of the weird smell coming from the playroom. (Spoiler alert, it's always a sippy cup of milk, and yes it will be chunky, and you should most definitely just throw it away because it's not worth even opening it at that point.) Later, I will help you deal with the guilt of not being able to keep up with the house, but when my kids were both little, I thought about it, and cared about it a lot.

⁶ (I could write a whole chapter probably on potty training alone – but it is ok to wait until your child is ready. Both of my kids were potty trained at four and are just fine. Just saying.)

When you spend your days solely taking care of someone else 24/7, it becomes *very* easy to start to neglect yourself and your own needs. I remember not having the energy to shower or brush my teeth. My hair, grown out, and my dark roots were exposing my new gray additions. The idea of sitting in a chair for three hours, and paying \$200+ for a hair appointment felt like a pipe dream. I am just happy I did not attempt to cut my own bangs at that time, or shave my head.

Makeup? Before I had kids, I had loved experimenting with makeup, trying out fun bright colors. At this stage? I was barely showering – makeup was the last thing on my to do list. I was maybe showering once or twice a week. Showers meant my kids inevitably unrolling all the toilet paper, trying to get to the cat box, and deciding to take out every toy they own. Most days, it was not worth the energy, and I would tell myself false promises about how I would shower later that night, only to find myself at the end of the day with just enough energy to crawl into bed. Often, I even forgot to brush my teeth.

Going from one to two kids, then parenting two kids, 2.5 years and younger, during a global pandemic had left me a shell of myself. Who was Emily? What did I like and enjoy doing? I could not even remember the last time I listened to music I liked in the car. I could not care less what I was wearing and any hobbies I once had were a pipe dream. I was a shadow of myself. I lost myself in the shuffle of caring for everyone else. I have found so much of my struggles in motherhood are “normal” and pretty universally experienced.

It helps me feel a lot less alone to know that others are feeling the same as me. I again perused my mom's journal and found this excerpt:

"I just am not sure how to deal with all these feelings. I need to be responsible and do the best thing for the family i.e. suck it up – put a smile on my face – pretend everything's peachy. That sounds good and I try. It's tough, though. I feel a lot of the time that everything is being drained out of me. Any spirit I had a year ago, just seeped out of me. I don't feel like there is any of *me* left. Everything creative and passionate in my soul has been stuffed under a pile of diapers, schedules, and paperwork. I don't want to be this sour, resentful, bitter wife and mother forever. I am just not sure how to get myself moving forward again. I've actually been having dreams about mowing my own lawn and pulling carrots out of my garden. I hate this angry look I have on my face most of the day. I want to smile and laugh once in a while with my girls instead of just trying to hang in there until they take a nap or go to bed. I want to relax and have fun with them and I can't seem to manage it. Emily drew a picture of me today. In her 'family portraits' she has not included me until today. She drew a monster. One eye and a straight line mouth. I am not psychiatrist but I'd say that's not good."

Reading my mom's entry made me feel seen, and understood. How many times had I felt the very same things in my own motherhood journey? How many times had I looked at the clock and pleaded with the universe to make time move faster to get to bedtime? I often would catch myself saying "only six hours to go," just trying to make it through the day. I would

feel immense guilt that I wasn't enjoying every single second of motherhood (which is utterly ridiculous by the way, I hardly enjoy every second of anything). I would feel badly about myself and what type of mother I was instead of saying "Wow, this is hard."

You start caring for someone else 24/7. Fulfilling their every need. You are trying to still make time for your spouse and your friends, and it starts to leave very little time for *you*. Most moms have a period of "losing themselves." My mom did. I did. Almost every mom I know does in fact. I found myself a stranger to myself. I no longer knew what I even liked or enjoyed anymore. I was lost. Plain and simple. Emily had been taken over by a single role – "Mom." And I know it's the "most important role" I would ever have, that's what everyone says.

And, I love being a mom, and I love my kids. But I am also an entire person, outside of "Mom." Who are we outside of the roles that we play? When you strip away titles like "Mom" and "wife" – who is left behind? Are we *more* than the roles that we play?

I like to think so. I like to think that at the core of it all I have my own identity and that when the question is asked "Who am I?" – I would have a list of things to tell you, "mom" and "wife" only being part of that list. I feel like before those early parenting years I knew who that person was. But as I stared at myself in the mirror I realized that person had disappeared. I had lost her. And I missed her.

So, I decided it was time to find her again.