



With a Little Help From My Friends



3 weeks ago by DORÉ

Words Tarajia Morrell

“You’re going to need support,” people told me ad nauseam when they learned that I was having a baby on my own. I knew they were right, but I couldn’t fully comprehend what that meant. I’ve never been great at asking for help. Fear of being a burden and years of self-sufficiency mean I don’t always have faith that others will catch me if I fall, but within days of my daughter’s birth, I was forced to change my tune.

Though my daughter was born perfectly healthy and the hospital released us the following day, we rushed to the emergency room twenty-four hours later, appropriately concerned about her drowsiness and lack of interest in feeding. From our arrival at the ER on July 4th—where others in the waiting room had third degree burns from backyard fireworks—my daughter and I plunged into a spiraling medical rabbit hole in which doctors used terms like sepsis, paralysis, meningitis, encephalitis and possible death. The fear I experienced in those harrowing early days of motherhood was worse than the most cruel physical pain. I vowed that if my exquisite baby got through this macabre parade of worst case scenarios, that I would change my approach to parenting entirely: I would become a helicopter mom; I would sterilize every surface; I would watch her sleep or find a way to pay someone to do so, come hell or high-water.

My daughter prevailed and as we left the NICU, we were caught in an embrace of friendship more loving and generous than I ever dared fathom. My friends had rallied around us, organizing someone to literally watch my daughter sleep while I recovered from childbirth and, far worse, the terror of losing her. Thanks to the generosity and care they provided, I was able to breathe and heal...and become the mother I was always bound to be, a fairly relaxed one. After all: we skirted past those spiky worst case scenarios and it's been impossible to ignore how good we have it every single instant since.

Much has been said about the challenges of being a single mother—being the only one who sleeps with one ear cocked; the only one with a go-go gadget hand to reach out before the baby face plants; to grab the water glass that's left too close to the table edge as it flies toward the floor; to remember to pack a full change of clothes at all times or always carry milk and snacks; the only one to go back in every time the baby fusses in the night and to figure out what to do when she's unwell. The only one to bring home the bacon. But, though I certainly lie there in the 3:30am darkness praying she's finally back down, I've also found myself smiling as I felt spit up run down the nape of my neck and between my shoulder blades: the warm milk hitting the floor by my ankles faster than I can blink in the dark, affirming the fact of it: I am a Mother. I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life, even though it looks nothing like I pictured.

Though it's mostly she and I, Viva and me, the ready presence of friends—on Friday nights to unwind, on Sundays to hold the baby while I cook, to sit and talk to me for hours, even just over the telephone as I push her on our long walks in the thawing city—save me. Never more have I needed the people I love, and never clearer has it been whom I can count on in addition to my parents and aunt. My friends forgive me my foibles and my baby brain when I forget our rendezvous or the simple meals I serve to them with no less love than my former more elaborate ones.

Though I can make the baby purées and occasionally carry home firewood under one arm while pushing the stroller with the other, feeling proud and worn out in equal measure, there is indeed a limit to what I can do with only two hands. Yes, it's stressful and exhausting (though isn't all parenting no matter what shape it comes in?), but most challenging for me is that becoming a mother has forced me to face my reluctance to ask for help, to admit my limits, to refuse work because I simply cannot function after 8pm once the baby's asleep to write an article or a book proposal or a restaurant strategy.

That I actually thought I'd be able to type while breastfeeding exhibits my naiveté in a nutshell. Breastfeeding, like most of parenting at this stage, is at least a one- but usually two-handed job! More hands, you see, are the thing I most want. If only there were a gadget (other than a partner) that could help me carry the child, the groceries, the stuff.

"It's wonderful that you can manage," an older woman said to me yesterday when she learned I was parenting alone.

"There's no choice but to manage," I tell her sincerely with a smile. There's not. And the fact of that has given my life intention where before there was only space. I avoid climbing tall ladders. I always buckle up, even in the backseat. I wouldn't dream of riding my bicycle through city traffic. My life, you see, is essential to keeping my daughter's on track. A sprained ankle would derail our precarious rhythm entirely. I must stay well and intact to provide for her. The responsibility that comes with procreating is obvious, of course, but it's also a welcome balm of purpose for someone who believes the only thing that matters in life is love in all its forms.

So I ask for help, because I must. I call on one dear friend who's comfortable with power tools to hang the fixtures in my bathroom. Another spry young one replaces high up light bulbs and I make him a snack. I invite my core crew over and force them to help me hang a wall of artwork salon style. We listen to Otis and

drink Gamay and I feed them roast chicken as an expression of my gratitude. Friends come for brunch. I offer them a frittata with herbs and ricotta and then implore them to hang an enormous old poster, which they do with smiles. My daughter holds the long graceful finger of an Egyptian friend and though he's not one for babies, I see it happen: I watch him begin to love her and my heart is full. Soon I will beg my beloved gang to help me start my garden with the promise of rosé and laughter and that I will host them in it all season long, and they know I will because I've always shown my love this way: with food and drink and Nature Boy on the speakers.

Would they still love me without the roast pork shoulder and Pet Nat? I hope so; I think so. But I'll keep feeding them if they keep caring for me, caring for my daughter, being there for both of us, no matter what. It's how I was taught to say, I love you, so I suppose it's what I am modeling for her. But now it's not I, it's We...

We love you. We need you.

*Tarajia Morrell is author of [Soul of New York: A Guide To 30 Exceptional Experiences](#) and a journalist whose work has appeared in *WSJ. Magazine*, *T Magazine*, *Food & Wine*, *Departures*, *Cherry Bombe* et al. She's a native New Yorker who grew up at the table and who lives with her daughter in Manhattan.*

Soul of New York is available via [Bookshop.org](#)

In Features

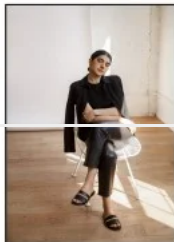
Tags Tarajia Morrell, children

FROM THE ARCHIVES

This or That



american



or



française?



Style

THIS OR THAT / JDAL EDITION

Style

THIS OR THAT: AMERICAN OR FRANÇAISE?

Style

THIS OR THAT / LINGERIE EDITION

Beauty

THIS OR THAT / BLUSH VS. BRONZER

ALL ARCHIVES

