

Hannah Yonas

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CWE: Who and What We Carry

### How Am I Seen?

Is people-pleasing genetic? Is it a malfunction of cells? It feels like one of those creepy things that doctors in the 50's would have used to breed domestic women. I've only recently begun to think it's genetic, because after all of the lessons I've learned, I haven't learned anything at all.

My grandmother, I call her Mimi, is a saint. She's incredible, strong. A role model if I've ever seen one. She raised three kids, one with severe cerebral palsy, in Addis Ababa while my grandfather was being persecuted by the Ethiopian military. She brought them to Texas without their father, hoping and praying that he'd make it across two oceans to find them again. She worked as a nurse most of her life, I have a faint memory of her retiring when I was little. She always smells good, and she's always cooking the way that grandmothers do. She hasn't aged a day in 30 years. She looks like the older sister of the woman in her wedding photo. And when I say she's strong, she's really strong — my uncle Joey, the one with cerebral palsy, weighs maybe 100 pounds. But she lifts him from his spot in front of Family Feud reruns every single day to get him to bed. Her kitchen is always clean and she believes in God.

Motherhood isn't where or how I learned people-pleasing from her. Or maybe I did, because she raised me for a year when my dad was deployed, but I don't think so. After a long day with our extended family and their little kids running around my grandparent's amazing house, we sat with two cups of tea and a plate of injera I wasn't really hungry for, but ate anyway. She was the youngest of her family, and usually it's the eldest daughter who takes on

more responsibility than she should have to. Mimi spent her younger days cooking, cleaning, tutoring, fetching water. She took care of her older siblings, and she fed her parents. I asked her why she did it, or rather if she felt okay doing it, because in many traditional Ethiopian families the youngest are expected to show their respect this way. But she said making sure her family was taken care of made her happy. She didn't resent them for it. It was her way of showing love.

Hearing her story felt like a punch to the gut because as a grandmother, even in her old (granted, *young* old) age, she still does all of the caretaking. She doesn't let me in the kitchen unless I promise her it's because I want to learn, not just to help. She brings the food she spent hours making to us at the table, and still tries to give up her seat for me. I felt as though I had been taking advantage of her my entire life. But when she said doing these things as a child made her happy, I understood her. It wasn't out of responsibility or necessity, but out of care. The love in her eyes was not made just out of love for a grandchild, but out of care. She is the most caring person I will ever meet in my life.

My father raised me with manners; we let our grandparents sit and eat first. But he took care of me, not the other way around. I think it's normal for kids to do cute things sometimes. My favorite thing to do as a kid was to make whatever breakfast I knew how at the time, maybe it was just toast and orange juice, or maybe cereal. I'd put it on a tray, and bring it to him in bed. As a kid I understood how hard he was working to raise my brother and I without my mom, even though I didn't really know why my mom didn't live with us anymore. I did want to care for him, but it was his reaction every time that made me love doing it. I wanted to make him happy, and I wanted him to see that he was doing a good job raising me. How does he see me?

In high school, there was a boy. I mean, there's always a boy, but for me there was *the* boy. They boy and I were somewhere between friends and more. He kissed me in the back of the

hallways, but wouldn't call me his girlfriend. He wasn't that great with grammar or spelling, but he knew that I was. When he asked me to edit his paper, I couldn't say no because it was my chance. I'd prove to him that I'm worthy of the girlfriend title by editing his paper and getting him an A. It was some of my best work. But when he turned it in and our English teacher knew my writing style too well, it was an F that he got. My grade only got taken down to a C because when I told her what happened, that it was a genuine mistake, she told me that a boy is never worth compromising my integrity. I still regret trying to write myself into his analysis of Hamlet, because I compromised my integrity for him for two more years. How does he see me?

Caring doesn't necessarily mean you're a people-pleaser. But what does it mean when I can't stop caring? I'm thinking I might just have chronic boundary issues. I'm withering away while pieces of me are floating around out there, building things. Pieces of me have seen boys be perfect for their next girlfriend, colleagues win awards, friends sleep peacefully at night. People can float through me, and I can see them floating through me, but I still hold on for dear life. I can't tell if I'm just a group of parts up for grabs, and I wonder if Mimi feels less than whole these days.