

The Day I Became Aunt Tata

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MY BEST FRIEND JEN AND I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN TOGETHER since we were barely a year old. Even though we aren't related by blood or even marriage, we still saw each other as sisters. We went to the same elementary school, same middle school, even the same high school. The only time we were ever apart was when we went to college, she to Toledo and I to Ohio State. But even through that separation, we remained the best of friends. When her high school sweetheart Shane proposed to her in her freshman year of college, I was there for that as well. I got to take the engagement photo and see the love and appreciation on his face and hers. I have always been there with them and I told Jen that I would always remain by her side, no matter what happened. After all, isn't that what family is for?

I remember the day Jen told me she was pregnant. Her first pregnancy didn't do so well, so I could see the hesitancy on her face in telling me, afraid to get my hopes up on welcoming a new member to the family. A few weeks passed, and the doctor told her that she was safe, the baby was safe, and everything was going according to plan. When she relayed this news to me, I started crying. I was immediately seeing me playing with this small child and showing them the things their mother wouldn't want them to see. I wanted to be the best Aunt I could possibly be and give this child all the love that I was capable of. The only problem with this was the distance. Jen and Shane lived in California, where he was stationed, and I was still stuck in Ohio. I vowed that I would make sure to at least video message the little one twice a week, just so they would know who I was when they came to visit their family in Ohio. I wanted to be as much as part of their life as their blood relatives and I was willing to show that to Jen.

I had to fly out to California in the summer of 2011 to help Jen move back to Ohio. She was going to stay in California while Shane was deployed to Iraq, but all of us begged her to come back this way so she would have her family around her. I think it was my voice of reason that won her over, saying that Shane wouldn't want her to be alone with a new baby on the way. That she would need the help of her family to take care of the little one and that she'll be grateful for that help. So here I am, in sunny California, helping her pack up her apartment, handing her tissue after tissue because she couldn't stop the tears, the tears that were held in while she hugged her husband good-bye, unable to see him for the next 7 months. She wasn't really showing then, but I knew that I needed to keep her as calm as

much as I needed to so she wouldn't bring harm to herself or my future niece. It was a rough journey back from Cali to Ohio, but all of us made it in one piece.

The next several months into Jen's pregnancy were the worst. There were times where I could feel my love for her being tested, but I still stood by her. She was missing her husband, worrying about him and his safety, and becoming even larger by the day. When I would look at her, I could see her love coming through for her baby and for her missing husband. I would occasionally write to Shane, letting him know how we were all doing. Even if I never got a response back, I knew he appreciated my updates. I was doing the best that I could to keep Jen sane while she had so many things to deal with and I learned later how thankful everyone was to me for being there. The day my niece made her appearance, I was missing. It wasn't because I wanted to be, but I was in the ER with severe pain in my back and unable to be there. I knew I had upset Jen by not showing up during her birth, but I made it up to her as soon as I was able to. I drove to Jen's parents' house over on Curly Smart Circle to see my new family member, even if I was still a little loopy from my pain medicine. I will admit that I was very nervous about meeting my new niece for the fact that I have never really liked babies. It's not because I think they are ugly or anything, I just don't want to break them. They're so young and new that I'm always afraid of hurting them on accident. The first thing I did was ask, "Where's the baby?" Jen was shocked that I asked such a question, but she handed her over for me to hold. Everyone else around me looked like I had grown a second head, but they figured I was still loopy from my pain medicine.

The second I laid eyes on Audrey, I fell in love. She was the most perfect and

precious baby I had ever seen, and I couldn't get enough of her. Her round, little face was all squished up from being a newborn, but she still looked beautiful to me. Sitting on the couch, I started talking to Audrey, telling her I was sorry for not meeting her sooner, but that I was here now. I wanted to tell this little bundle of joy all the things I wanted to do with her, but I didn't know where to start. There was so much to tell her that I was at a loss for words, not sure how to begin or even where to begin. Luckily, I would have her entire life to share my wisdom with her, even if her mom and dad wouldn't see it all as wisdom. Around me everyone was shocked at how I was handling a newborn baby, but they didn't do anything to break the spell I was in. Jen's family could see how much I loved this baby already and they didn't want to take this moment away from me. Audrey was precious to me and my love for her has grown with each passing day. Watching her grow, even if it was on Facebook photos and FaceTime, has been a great joy to me and I can't wait to see the kind of person she becomes in the future.

Looking back at that fateful day, Jen's father will still tell the story how I demanded to see Audrey over Jen. Even when Jen, Shane, and Audrey would come home to visit for the holidays, I would still ask, "Where's the baby?" because of how much I care for my niece. Audrey may not be my niece by blood or even marriage, but these aren't the only two things that make up a family. Love, compassion, trust, honesty all are good traits to have with anyone, and I have all of those with Jen. She is just as much as a part of my family as my own brother, but it's by choice I made her family and she made me her family. Audrey will never have to worry about someone not loving her because I will always be there to love her.

