A Quiet October: A Black Woman's Reflection of Mothering in a Racist Society

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A QUIET OCTOBER:
A BLACK WOMAN’S REFLECTION OF MOTHERING IN A RACIST SOCIETY

By

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A Quiet October is a collection of essays which reflect one mother's journey of navigating the lives of her children through the waves of disquieting oppressive racialized systems in the United States of America. Her journey exposes established systems of oppression in education, medical care and employment, and the failure of the organizations created to provide oversight to protect the rights of people like her children and herself - people of color. But most importantly, it reflects a determination to overcome.
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Prologue: Tina Rogers

Friday, February 29, 2020, I receive an anonymous phone call. My first mind says don’t answer because I don’t recognize the number, but I remember that I have an Idaho cell number living in Memphis, Tennessee, and how often people ignore my calls until I send text messages explaining that it’s me. I answer the call.

“Hello,”

“Hi, you don’t know me, but I saw a story on Facebook about you and your daughter.”

“Ok…”

“There’s a Mom at the Med who needs help. I can’t get involved. I’ve read about the medical error that disabled your daughter, Robyn.”

“What happened to her child?”

“It didn’t happen at the Med. Her son was transferred there. It happened at a Hospital in Desoto County. Her son was in a car accident and should have walked away from it. But something went terribly wrong in that hospital, and he was transferred to the Med. Would you be willing to call her?”

“Sure, I’d call her, but she’s probably bombarded with a lot of stuff right now. Give her my number and let her know I’m willing to help in any way I can.”

“Thank you so much.”

I hang the phone up. Close my eyes and for a moment, the memories of Robyn’s incident force their way to the forefront of my mind. A meeting with the doctors after they removed the right side of Robyn’s skull. They gave us an option; they could either drill a small hole in her head to relieve the pressure because her brain was swelling or take the skull off (bone flap). If
the small hole doesn’t relieve the pressure the skull will need to be removed. We elect to have the skull removed.

I fight to keep an emotional distance from my memories. I have my thesis to complete. While my thesis focuses on the aftermath, and it reflects on some moments of Robyn’s tragedy, there are some doors I don’t open, memories I tip toe around to leave them dormant. I know they’re there. I remember the pain, but I don’t want to stir them. I don’t want to feel it. It’s too distracting and time consuming pulling myself back. I need to work on material for a summer youth program, have lesson plans and a syllabus to complete for Monday. What do I tell this mom if she calls? Maybe she won’t call. Not that I don’t want to help her but going back to those memories is overwhelming. I pray for her and decide not to stress myself wondering about the unknown. I can’t concentrate now so I decide to watch TV with Robyn. We decide to watch a marathon of *Blackish* episodes on Hulu.

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Saturday morning, I arise early. The anonymous caller and the mother at the Med in my thoughts. I wake Robyn because Saturday mornings are her days to spend time with her Dad. He takes her to hair appointments. They go to a shop with both a barber and beautician – their bonding time. I plead with her several times to get up. I’m still stressing from the call and somewhat short with her.

“Robyn,” I yell, “Get up!”

“Mom, I’m up. Just not out of bed. Stop yelling at me.”

“Get out of bed.”
She does the same thing every Saturday and every Saturday I fuss with her. Get your stuff out the night before. You need to be ready when he gets here. Your Dad is always running late. I hear my phone ping.

“Hello.”

“Can you bring Robyn to the shop? I forgot to charge my phone. It’s about to die. I may not have enough juice to call the security gate to get into the complex.”

“No, I can’t because I am trying to complete my thesis. I set aside this morning to make revisions.”

A few minutes later, I see him from my balcony sauntering up the walkway. I yell for Robyn again. “Your Dad is outside.” She gathers her stuff. I open the door.

“Heyyyyy, you’re working on your PHD, huh?”

“No, I’m working on my MFA.” I think to myself; I probably shouldn’t even respond. He knows a thesis is not for a PHD.

“So, what is your thesis on?”

“Black women…Black mothers and their struggles”

“Awww…”

I can see his wheels turning. I was married to him fifteen years. I’m pretty good at reading him. I know he has more questions, wanting to know if he’s in the book. Robyn will be drilled for information when she gets to the car, but she knows not to give information about me.

Saturday mornings are my only me time, for about four hours, and most times I elect to just stay in my pajamas, but this morning I get up and get my shower and dress. Once dressed, I try to focus on my thesis. Just as I sit down, my cell phone rings.

“Hello.”
“Hi, my name is Tina Rogers. You don’t know me. Someone at the hospital gave me your name.” Her voice cracks a bit. “They said you may be able to help me. So much has happened I don’t even remember who gave me your name.”

“That’s OK. I was expecting your call.”

“I don’t know what to do. My son is in the hospital unconscious. I thought he was coming home last Monday. I don’t know how we got to this point.”

“Can you tell me what you know?”

Tina’s son was in a car accident. The paramedics who brought him to the hospital said he should have walked away with only a few bruises, instead he is now hospitalized with an anoxic brain injury. The paramedics transported him to a hospital in Mississippi from the accident. It was at that hospital that something went awfully wrong. When Tina initially saw her son, he had a few bruises but didn’t appear to have any major issues. She stepped outside of his room to make a call, but when she returned a nurse blocked her from entering. After a while, a doctor informed her that her son was very ill and needed to be transferred to the Regional Med in Memphis, but no one told her what transpired in those few minutes that she stepped out to make a phone call. When she was allowed in the room again, a nurse informed her that blood was everywhere, but it wasn’t her son’s. It wasn’t until she spoke with a neurologist at The Regional Med that she discovered he now had a severe brain injury.

“I’m so sorry. I have a daughter who had a brain injury. Have you requested the medical records?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Is this your cell number that showed up on my phone?”

“Yes, it is.”
“I am a member of a National Patient Safety group. I want to get more information on requesting the medical records. May I call you back?”

“Yes, you can. I hope you can help us. I was told that you could.”

“I’m not sure what I can do but I’ll do whatever I can.”

I hang up the phone, take a deep breath, sit down on my couch. look at my computer screen and log out. I know her fear. I’m familiar with the road ahead. It takes a while to fully realize the trajectory of a brain injury, but it’s far reaching and some of the damage is permanent. My heart feels strange, like the feelings I had when I stayed in the ICU for thirty days with Robyn, watching severely ill children, some lived, and some died. Some went back to almost normal lives; some were noticeably disabled like Robyn.

I am too distracted to write. I decide to take a nap, but I can’t sleep. I lay on my couch and consider Tina Rogers and her family’s struggle. The days ahead will be almost unbearable. The realization of the damage doesn’t set in immediately. But I will never tell a mother to give up hope. When I was told that Robyn was brain dead, the medical team almost stripped me of all hope. I had to do a lot of talking to God to maintain any hope of Robyn’s survival, but I prayed a lot before she had the stroke, and I was constantly beckoning God on Robyn’s behalf during our stay at the hospital. Every morning I awoke, every time a procedure was done, I prayed that he touched the hand that touched her. Every time someone questioned my faith, I asked God if I was crazy. Every brain injury is different. There are no certainties as to whether someone will come out of an unconscious state when a brain injury has occurred, and this is what I tell Tina Rogers. No one knows, don’t give up hope.

I tell Tina Rogers I will call her back, but I am drained by our first conversation. When Robyn returns, I say, “Let’s go to Cato’s to find Granny a birthday gift. My Mom’s birthday is
the next day, March 1st. I need something to lift my spirits before I call Tina Rogers back. Robyn and I find my mother a silver necklace and earrings. When we return home, Robyn and I watch a movie, I can’t remember the name because I was looking for another distraction, but it didn’t help. About 11:07 pm, I send Tina Rogers a text message

“I am sorry, I got back home late. I want to go over some things with you before you request the records.”

“Can I talk to you tomorrow? My son is not doing well.”

“Can you talk now?”

***

Sunday morning, I call my mom and tell her about Tina Rogers and her son. I promised Tina Rogers, I would meet her at the hospital because her son wasn’t doing well. I can’t make church with my mom on her birthday. My mom understands. She’s not feeling well herself and plans to stay home. She encourages me to help Tina Rogers and her son. She remembers the trauma of Robyn’s brain injury. She too knows that Tina Rogers has a difficult road ahead.

I am tormented by what’s ahead. It’s not just Tina Rogers son’s brain that was compromised. Tina Rogers will now struggle every day. She will wake up in the mornings with regrets. She will go through the day wishing that that Monday hadn’t come. If he had been a few minutes later, if this, if that. She will go through her own mental anguish. She’ll regret walking out of the hospital room for just a few minutes, but how could she have known. She’ll reminisce until the memories almost drive her insane because they will solidify that this day happened. It’s real. That the little boy she watched grow into a man and had hopes of becoming a rap artist now lies in a hospital bed and will never be the person he once was.
His sister will struggle with losing the brother she once knew. All the childhood memories between them – she now carries alone. The secrets between siblings she now carries alone. The brother that she confided in, the brother that she thought she had many more years with may have no memory of her and may never wake from the coma. His children will never know the vibrant man their father was. His aunts, cousins, everybody will struggle, and their brains will not let them forget their loss. Charlie Rogers existence has a profound effect on many lives.

The hospital will probably count the cost of their error and send it to Charlie Rogers. They won’t forget not one item. Every syringe, every person that touched him, the beds, the equipment and the blood, they’ll tally, but they won’t count the error. No one will count the cost to him. No one will consider his children’s loss nor his mother’s loss.

When Charlie Rogers entered the ER, the emergency team was there with their doctors and nurses ready to help an unfortunate patient in a car accident. They were going to patch him up and send him on his way. They started out with good intentions. They went to school for years to do this job to patch up humanity when sickness and trauma attacks the body, but sometimes just like it’s unnatural for a mother to lose a child, the unnatural thing happens in a hospital – they wound the patient.

At the intersection of the medical error, ethics and humanity are required to exit the ER; sadly, silence and denial, which are their understudies, step up. Tina Rogers is now a fiend of those who were cordial and concerned when she first entered the doors of the ER. She’s asking questions that will incriminate and place blame - no one wants that cloak. Tina Rogers knows where the answers to her questions lie, but HIPPA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) and its policies to supposedly protect the patient’s privacy also robs the
patient’s family of information in situations like these. It’s disconcerting that policies purportedly created to protect the patient seem to create spaces for giants to hide.

Sunday, March 1st, I drop Robyn off at church, and ask my pastor to pray for Tina Rogers and her son. I proceed to the Med to meet Tina Rogers. My stomach feels taut; the closer I get to the Med the further my memories reach into the past and the more apprehensive I am.

What can I possibly say to Tina Rogers? What is her son’s prognosis? What? What? What? When I pull onto the parking look, I receive a text, “I’m here.” I text back “I’m here too.”

I step outside of my car and watch a few people pass. Tina Rogers parked in a lot below the one I parked in. One man stops and asks my name. He thought I was a friend of his family. I say, “No.” I see a casually dressed brown skinned lady in pants and a jacket a little over five feet, with a cap pulled over braids and sunglasses protecting her eyes approaching me. She could pass for a teenager.

“Ms. Rogers?” I ask. She nods her head. Stops. Looks towards the sky and the tears begin rolling around the corners of the glasses. I hug her. She wipes her eyes and we walk towards the hospital entrance as she reiterates what she told me on the phone earlier. It seems that everyone is avoiding her questions. Now that it’s obvious that she’s aware an error occurred everyone is careful to follow protocol. No one wants to get caught up in the complaint. Everybody is whispering around her. A few of the staff at the Med encouraged her to get the medical records and examine what happened before her son went into cardiac arrest, that’s where she’s told she’ll find the answers to her questions.

I tell her she needs to talk to a patient advocate at the hospital, request the medical records, file a complaint with the Mississippi medical board and the hospital. And she needs to retain an attorney. When we get to the ICU, she is told that she is the only person allowed
because visiting hours haven’t started. She tells them I need to be admitted with her that I am a patient safety advocate assisting her. They let us in. As we approach, a male nurse with a cart is stationed outside of Charlie Rogers’ room monitoring his vital signs. The nurse greets us and tells us nothing has changed. Another nurse approaches us and greets her.

“Hi, Ms. Rogers. Is there anything I can get you?”

“Yes, I want to speak to a patient advocate?”

“What kind of advocate? Do you have questions about care? Or insurance?

I interject, “No, she wants to file a complaint.”

“Oh,” she looked surprised. Which hospital do you want to file a complaint on?”

“That’s why I want the advocate. No one will tell me what happened to my son. I don’t know where to start.”

“Give me a moment and I’ll get someone to talk to you.”

When Tina Rogers and I walk into her son’s room, I don’t hear the loud sound of the respirator, it’s quieter now than when Robyn was in the hospital thirteen years ago. Her son has an intubation tube taped to his mouth that’s connected to the respirator and a feeding tube running through his nose. Tina Rogers says they disconnected the tube that was connected to a small hole drilled in his head to relieve the pressure from the swelling of the brain. His arms and legs are propped up on white pillows beside him. His eyes are open but are fixed. The doctors say there is nothing wrong with him other than the brain injury. If he doesn’t come out of the coma soon, Tina Rogers will need to plan for future care – long term care facility.

When Robyn was in the Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City, Utah, I too was told to consider a facility for long term care. That was not an option for me, but because my ex-husband had already filed a complaint with family court attempting to take my kids, and had said I
refused care for Robyn because I was trusting God to heal her, my sister and I visited a facility to appease the medical staff and to appease my ex-husband. When we were given a tour of the facility, I felt like I was in a horror movie. I don’t know if I’m being insensitive, but I saw young human beings left alone in rooms sentenced to bedrest, and I saw some sitting in wheelchairs in the hallways rocking and rambling – incoherently. There was no way I would admit Robyn to a facility. She was not born into this situation.

As I talk to Tina Rogers, I hesitate to tell her everything. I don’t want to scare her. If someone had told me of the road ahead of me in 2007, I don’t think I would have survived. She needs to take one day at a time.

The systems that Tina Rogers is up against have been created by men like Donald Trump who step on the weak, the poor, the marginalized to build their wealth with never a thought of the lives they destroy in the process. I don’t just blame Donald Trump, I blame his forefathers, the white men who created institutions that rob people of their very beings to build their own wealth. I blame this nation and institutions that were created to drain the blood out of marginalized people.
Code Blue

Code blue! Code blue! Code blue! Resounded over the intercom system in the hospital; my heart started to thump...thump...thump...thump! thump! I crossed my arms and began to rub my chilled limbs. Then I prayed. As the nurses ran to answer the call, an uncomfortable silence swathed the ICU for a few moments. Every mother knew that code and was probably grateful it wasn’t her child, at the same time probably feeling guilty of that thought. It was about thirty minutes or so before the nurses, who answered the code, returned to their station. I watched their expressions attempting to ascertain whether or not the child survived. If a nurse returned with glassy eyes or an unintended tear escaped, I knew the child hadn’t survived. Being in a Neuro Intensive Care Unit (NICU) for over a month, I heard the code many times, but never acclimated to the call. I was even forewarned by my daughter’s physicians, that first week in the NICU, that she too would code before the week was up. They even asked if my ex-husband and I wanted to sign a “Do Not Resuscitate” form. I said, “Absolutely not.”

About a week later, early one morning, as I sat by Robyn’s ICU bed reading, a mother rolled into the NICU in a wheelchair with her fairly newborn baby in her arms. I watched the nurses take the infant from the arms of his mother and transfer the child into the bed. They took vitals, it appeared that an IV was connected to the tiny arm of the child. Everything appeared stable. The nurses returned to their station while the mother stood at the bedside. I dozed off. I awakened to “Code blue! Code blue! Code blue!” over the intercom and saw the nurses and doctors sprinting towards the unit across from Robyn where the baby and mother had just entered. My heart started a fast pace thump and I started to pray. I saw a nurse pull out the small defibrillator pads. I watched as she placed them on the tiny doll sized body. She shocked the baby’s chest again and again. I saw the horror on the mother’s face. I wanted to go over to where
she was. After a few minutes, another nurse approached me and requested I leave until shift change was completed. They usually didn’t bother me for shift change even though it was protocol. As I left, I took another glance at the mother standing anxiously at the bedside of her lifeless baby, and the nurses and doctors working to resuscitate the baby. I wanted to reach out to the mother again, but I couldn’t. When I returned about thirty minutes later, I noticed all was quiet and one of my rockers was gone. Since I never left Robyn’s bedside at night, one of the nurses brought me an extra rocker to recline my feet. When I asked the nurse where the rocker was, she said the family across the hall needed it – their baby didn’t make it.

Sitting in an ICU with gravely ill children, can drive you batty, or to drink or to drugs or in my case to eat a lot of chocolate covered cashews that I purchased in the cafeteria. When I was offered meds to sleep or relax, I refused them. I was afraid. My mind and body wanted relief, but I needed to naturally adjust to the trauma. I didn’t want to become dependent on meds to comfort me – to relax me.

The first few days after Robyn’s surgery, we couldn’t touch her. The neurosurgeon wanted her brain in a complete state of rest. A touch would stimulate her. I stood as close and as quiet as possible – silently praying. When she returned to ICU, after her skull was removed on the right side, I noticed blood gushing from the side of her bandage. It soaked the side of her head and the pillow. I summoned the nurse. The nurse summoned the doctor. We were asked to leave. When we returned, Robyn’s bandage had been changed. While we were careful not to make any noise at her bedside, the noise of a bed rolling by caused her monitors to peak. We were soon moved to a private room within the NICU. It was a glassed-in room with curtains. During that first week, even with the private room, her vitals would not stabilize. If her blood pressure stabilized, the blood flow to her brain fell dangerously low and vice versa. When the
monitors started to beep, my heart started that unnatural thump and my breathing synced with Robyn’s; my chest rose and fell with hers. We both seemed to breathe with abnormal rhythms. When hers returned to normal, so did mine. The nurse observing me, as well as Robyn, suggested I stop watching the monitors. It was impossible to heed her suggestion. I continued to watch and measure the rise and fall of Robyn’s chest – up and down, up and down, up and down.

The doctors gave Robyn seventy-two hours for the swelling to recede and if it didn’t there would be irreversible brain damage. Robyn’s brain continued to swell. By the fourth day the doctors waived the white flag and requested we call in the family. I was devastated, but I refused to give up. I kept praying to God. I asked God if I was the crazy one. Did he really tell me she would live or was that me in desperation? During these crucial days, I never left the hospital and only left Robyn’s bedside if a family member or friend were visiting with her. I was fearful that she may code. I wondered how diligently they would be if she needed resuscitation. Late one night, her monitors started to go off – the blood flow to her brain was dangerously low. I summoned the nurse, who seemed indifferent to my concerns. She started to say:

“She is not expected…”

“I expect her to live and you need to get her a bolus of fluid,” I replied.

“I have to get the attending to approve it”

“I don’t care who has to approve it – you need to do it now!”

Before the neurosurgeon who performed the surgery left, he explained the issues with Robyn’s vitals and what they were doing to stabilize her. When her monitors measuring the blood flow to the brain started to beep signaling a decrease in blood flow, she needed more fluid.
After the medical team gave up hope of her survival, we were allowed to touch her again. The nights seemed the most challenging to my spirit, I often laid my head at her calf because of the many tubes running from her upper body, and I’d sing a call and response song I heard the mothers of my church sing in my youth:

Father I stretch my hands to thee

No other help I know

If thou withdraw thine self from me

O whether shall I go?

After about a week in the private room, and with the doctor’s proclamation of brain death, Robyn was moved back to the open NICU floor, another child needed a quiet space. When we returned to the floor, her bed was next to a small baby’s. While the baby was quiet, and may have been unconscious as Robyn was, the nurses frequently checked its vitals. I didn’t notice any family visiting the child. One afternoon I recall hearing the labored breathing of the infant, heard the monitors go off, and saw several nurses run to the bedside. They pulled the grey curtain that separated the beds; I couldn’t see, but I detected the urgency in their voices and rapid movement and pulling of equipment. Then I heard it, Code blue! Code blue! Code blue! My heart started to pound the walls of my chest; people filled the small space around the baby’s bed; I grasped Robyn’s hand and started to rub it and prayed for the baby. I’m not sure how much time elapsed before the swarm of nurses and doctors started to thin out, but it appeared that the baby was stabilized.

With Robyn in NICU over thirty days, I saw many children come and go and some return. The first week of Robyn’s stay, I met this young boy about six years old. Whenever he
saw me walk past his bed, he raised up with a wide grin and waved at me. I approached his mom one day and mentioned his cheerful disposition.

“He is so friendly. Every time I pass his bed he raises up and gives me a wide grin.

“You remind him of one of his aunts.

“Ohhh…”

“He has brain cancer.”

“Oh, I am so sorry to hear…”

“They’ve given up on him several times, but he’s still here.

“Same here. My daughter wasn’t expected to live through last week.”

Afterwards, when I passed his bed, I slowed down and returned the wave and talked to him. He received so much joy from one small gesture. It made my day too. They left about a two weeks after Robyn was admitted. With Robyn being in intensive care for about thirty days, I met a lot of families. I prayed with a mother whose infant was in need of a heart. They petitioned for approval to use an artificial heart that had been used in Europe, I think, just until a donor became available. I also remember another mother with a three-year-old who also had a brain injury. Her daughter appeared conscious, as in, she made sounds and noises but wouldn’t open her eyes, but her mom told me, “I know my baby is still in there. I’m not giving up.”

The day of Robyn’s surgery there was another girl about Robyn’s age who’d been admitted for a brain bleed. Her mom said she had come home from school and was sitting on the floor talking when she suddenly fell over. The doctors said she’d had a blood vessel to burst in her head. We all sat anxiously in the waiting area hoping for a positive outcome. She came out of
surgery before Robyn did. The doctors gave her a positive prognosis. She went home months before Robyn.

The nurses and staff started to become like an extended family to Robyn and me. I remember when my ex-husband had a court summons delivered to me when Robyn was in ICU. The ICU nurse refused to allow the man in the room and refused to summon me out to receive the petition. Robyn hadn’t too long regained consciousness. My sister and I were in her ICU room talking and laughing with her. We heard the nurse’s voice rise, “You can’t go in there.” I decided to walk outside. The nurse motion to stop me. “It’s OK,” I said. “I’m sorry,” the man said. He placed the summons in my hand and walked away.

After about two weeks, the little boy with cancer returned. One afternoon, I saw his mother on the parking lot, and she informed me that he was terminal. I was leaving for Memphis, Tennessee, because my ex-husband had filed a petition for custody of my children, but I promised as soon as I returned, I would come by and pray with her and visit her son.

I also made a promise to Robyn before she lost consciousness, that I would not leave her side. My first thought was to ignore the summons from the Shelby County Family Court. I considered the petition as unfounded. I was only in Memphis a day; there was nothing to substantiate the claims made against me. The ride back was uneventful. I was glad when we landed; my nervous system took a deep breath and I went back to the routine I’d adopted several weeks ago. The Children’s Hospital had become my home, when I walked through the doors, my muscles loosened, and I felt a cool sensation oozing through my veins. It felt good to be back. I started to stop in the cafeteria but instead headed to Neuro ICU to check on my young friend. When I made it to his bed, it was empty. I went to the nurses’ station and asked if he’d gone home.
“No, ma’am. He died yesterday.”

“What?” I stood there, staring at her, with my mouth hanging open, in utter silence.

“I’m sorry. His mother is supposed to give us the funeral arrangements. If you’d like I can make sure someone notifies you.”

I walked away. It had only been a day. He looked good before I left. I know that means nothing but had I no idea his time was that short, I would have tried to visit before I left. It just didn’t seem right. I felt like an emotional storm was brewing inside of me. Dying children were all around me, and mine had also been written off. I went back to Robyn’s room.

It doesn’t seem natural for a child to die. I know it happens, but when you’re in the middle of an ICU unit filled with seriously ill children, and you’ve been living in the midst of it for weeks, it just seems paranormal. Like I’d been transported into an altered reality, one that I didn’t want to know existed.

Every day that Robyn made it through without incident, I was thankful to God. The doctors predicted Robyn wouldn’t make it through the first week. I was told no one survived brain death. After their proclamation, I lost track of the days and weeks. I remember the third week because a friend from college visited me, and Robyn opened her eyes, but there was still no sign of life in them. Her eyes were dull and fixed. I was told by the medical team not to hope for more than that. About the fourth week of our stay, I noticed that sometimes her eyes appeared to track my movement around the room, but she never made any other movement or sign of consciousness. One morning a nurse asked her to blink twice if she could hear us, Robyn blinked. We gasped, cheered, and praised God! My sister and I joked with her and had her laughing in spite of the tubes, so much so that it hurt and we stopped. However, when the
doctors examined Robyn, she refused to respond. I assumed their loud voices frightened her. I appealed to Robyn to answer the doctors because my sanity was in question, and by now they were probably questioning the sanity of the nurses too. I suggested to the doctors that she was not deaf and maybe if they lowered their voices, she would respond, and she did. We were on the road to recovery – how much I had no clue. But I felt we were out of danger of her coding. After spending thirty plus days in NICU, the medical team was ready to move her to the neuro floor. The day she was transferred to the floor one of the doctors on the team met me outside of Robyn’s room.

“You know it’s inevitable that she will stroke again, probably code, and die.”

“And I could walk outside and be run over by a car and die,” I responded.

Robyn and I were glad she was moved to the neuro floor. It marked a positive improvement in her recovery. She was awake and alert but that was it. I now had a small couch that converted into a bed instead of two rocking chairs that I placed together in the ICU to stretch out at night. I could have registered to sleep in the beds off the NICU waiting room, but I was afraid to leave Robyn at night.

Robyn’s first goal was to eat again and have the feeding tubes removed. She began working on her muscles in her face and mouth. I began venturing out a bit. I found a Cheesecake Factory which I later frequented because Robyn and I love cheesecake. I also found a mall. I bought a pair of brown wedge heel boots for Robyn. I expected her to one day walk in them. I bought her exercise clothes because I expected she would meet the requirements to take part in the Children’s Hospital’s intensive physical therapy program. We had only a couple of weeks for her to show she had the stamina to meet their rigorous requirements.
Life began to take on a new normalcy. We lived on the fifth floor of the Children’s hospital for five months. The parents of children on the floor had access to a washer, dryer and a shower area. One morning, I forgot to lock the door before I stepped into the shower. As I stepped out of the shower, naked and wet, I saw a white man about to enter. He looked as horrified as I did. “Sorry.” He stepped back, closed the door. I don’t know that I saw him again. I hoped he didn’t remember my face either.

Robyn made friends with everyone that entered her room. There was an older lady who came in twice a day to clean Robyn’s room - she taught Robyn Spanish. A nurse who spoke Chinese taught her a few words in Chinese. A doctor from Austria taught her his language. Everyone she met – she learned about them.
A Quiet October

October is the month my daughter, Robyn, nearly died at the hands of a negligent neurologist in Idaho Falls, Idaho. The month that began the slow demise of my finances. The month that changed the trajectory of my son’s lives. The month that set the stage for our move from our three thousand square foot home with five bedrooms and three full baths, a separate kitchen, a separate living room, a dining room with a huge picture window in which I often sat and read my bible and drank my morning coffee; a den with a stone fireplace, and a sunroom I used as a writing room; a huge yard with apple trees, pear trees, plum trees and a front yard with colorful tulips in red, yellow, purple and orange surrounding the front of the brick house, that Robyn fell in love with, which convinced me to get the house, and a rose bush that sat in the corner leading to the front door. We moved to an eight hundred square foot apartment with three small bedrooms with a kitchen dining room combination and a small living area because I could no longer afford our home, but I was grateful. October, the month we won’t forget, when the chlorophyll breaks down and the green leaves become a beautiful orange, red and yellow before they dry up and die. Mostly, it’s a quiet month, one of reflection and thanksgiving.

Today, Robyn attends a community college in Memphis, Tennessee. She’s still not certain of her major, oscillating between public speaking, radio broadcasting, and once she even considered Thanatology – the study of death. It’s probably only natural for her to be curious about death. I was glad when she decided against Thanatology. It was just a bit unnerving for me because Robyn was declared braindead October 9, 2007. My sister says it was October the 8. She maybe be right, at some point I lost track of time.

I once asked Robyn if she recalled any bright lights or even if she could hear us talking while she was unconscious. “No,” she replied. The first week she regained consciousness, she
sang and sang and sang without ceasing - refusing to sleep. One day she admitted that she refused
to sleep because she was afraid of dying. Eventually, she was given medication to help her sleep.

I don’t always follow my memories. They sometimes lead me to dark places and hold me
hostage. I fight like a drowning victim to float above them. I blow and breathe while the
memories battle to pull me under. I feel myself descending as the abyss attempts to subdue me,
but with a quick neuro synaptic transmission, I avert my inner eye and remember that we
survived.

Dear Robyn,

I remember the day the doctor informed me that I was pregnant with you, I prayed for a
little girl. Somehow you all made my life easier and I could, for a moment, forget how unhappy
my marriage was. I know that’s not a good thing to say, but it’s the truth. You were a scheduled
c-section. I think your recorded birth is somewhere in a pile of pictures and other memorabilia on
a VHS tape. You were our little princess. Oh, how I enjoyed dressing you like I did my dolls
when I was a little girl. I would change your clothes many times in a day. Then prop you up on
pillows and take pictures of you and your brother.

You were a beautiful hazel eyed little girl. The sweet little Robyn who loved everybody.
The Robyn who mesmerized one of her kindergarten classmates so much so that he had his mom
buy a huge teddy bear for her on Valentine’s Day. Your teacher pleaded with me to let you keep
the bear because it was an innocent gesture on the part of your classmate. It was really a nice
bear and no one else in the class received such a gift. I thought it was a bit too much but your
kindergarten teacher convinced me to let you keep it.
Robyn, you were the friendliest of your siblings. On your first day of school, you were livid because you couldn’t ride the school bus home with the other kids. I tried to explain to you that we lived around the corner from the school and that the bus was for kids who lived miles away who were probably bused to our neighborhood. I often called you “Ms. Congeniality” because you loved people and have always been a social butterfly.

Robyn, you remember how much you loved to read. In fourth grade, your favorite book series was *Junie B Jones* by Barbara Park. I remember you even entered a contest in fourth grade where the contestants had to dress up like their favorite character in a book and give a short presentation. You were never shy and would try anything. You were a cheerleader in third and fourth grade for the little league football team at your school. You loved to cook and were cooking fried chicken better than I could by time you were in fourth grade. On Saturday mornings, you often made my favorite cheese and bacon omelet.

You ran track. I remember you trained for track season the spring before the stroke. You stopped drinking sodas and eating junk food. I accompanied you to the track field to clock your speed as you prepared and practiced for your seven-grade track season. You were focused and determined. The spring of 2007, you helped your team make the state conference. You ran the anchor on the girl’s relay team and you also ran the 100 and 200 dash and the medley.

There were so many memories that I suppressed, not intentionally, but because it was the only way to move forward once you awakened from the coma. October 9, 2007, you were declared braindead due to a medical error, and while you beat death, part of the Robyn that I knew did die that day. I realized while helping you through rehabilitation that it was better to start over without past expectations or comparisons, allowing you to find your way in the new world we’d been catapulted into. I allowed the memories to fade.
It’s times like these, when I try to remember, that I realize the affect those years had on me. Being a single mom, trying to guide you all through a traumatic situation, afraid that we wouldn’t all get through it, and overriding my own pain and emotions to make sure that you all survived. I suppressed a lot of pain, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to stand the storm.

One of the most difficult moments arose when I had to visit your junior high school when you were still in the hospital to pick up items you left in your locker. This was before anyone knew whether or not you would return to school. You had been in the hospital about three months and I returned home for a couple of days to take care of a business matter. Upon entering the school, I felt nauseated – saliva kept filling my mouth and I needed to spit but there was nowhere to release it; I swallowed it down and it refilled my mouth again. The noise of the teenagers in the hallway was too much stimulation, I wanted to scream and cry as I watched the happy go lucky teenagers signing up for spring activities. I remembered how excited you used to be at trying out and participating in sports.

As I walked through the hallways, I realized this was something that you wouldn’t be participating in anymore. When I made it to the counselor’s office, I took a deep breath, quickly retrieved the box of your belongings and headed out. By this time I started hyperventilating, and I walked faster to get away from the happy teenagers with so much life ahead of them; I walked faster to rid my head of the pain of remembering that my child who once had so many hopes and dreams was now struggling to sit upright; I walked faster to keep the pain from overtaking me because I was afraid if I let go I wouldn’t be able to pull it back together. When I made it to my car, I took a deep breath in and then out and then in again and then out.

While driving home, the tears started to flow like a broken dam whose barrier walls had been compromised. Once home, I took the box to your room – tears still flowing – and I sat on
your bed and opened the box. As I opened it, I realized that the contents were of a life that you’d once known, one that you wouldn’t return to. For a moment, while tears still flowed, I allowed my compromised emotional walls to decompress, I permitted myself one last time to look back to remember your dreams and my hopes for you, the Robyn before the stroke.

In the box, was a yellow folder that was supposed to be a time capsule. Robyn, you wrote your name in bubble letters on the outside and decorated it with scribbly lines. The first page was an introduction about you and a sketch you drew:

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My name is Robyn Olivia Edwards. I was born on 10/24/54 in Memphis, TN. Today is Jan 10, 2007.

I will never be this age again, so here is an account of ME, MYSELF, RIGHT NOW!

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Reflections of Me!

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I realized that this was something you started the previous semester, January of 2007. The time capsule included a personality assessment, an assessment by me that I didn’t remember, an
assessment by several of your peers, a career assessment and a page of journal entries by you – some had your teacher’s response.

The last page of the journal was an exercise, What is this Picture? An old man or a prince kissing a princess? Beneath the picture there was a statement, “When you have a problem, make sure you have really looked at the whole picture.” With a heavy heart, tears subsided, I placed the yellow folder back in the box with the other content, closed the box and placed it in the bottom of your closet.

On October 4, 2019, marked twelve years since our lives were turned upside down by the negligence of a neurologist who refused to send you on for further testing. His negligence took away any chance of you living a normal life. It’s not often that I look back and wonder about the Robyn before the stroke, but there are days when I see you on a dance floor attempting to do the wobble or when you sit at an easel attempting to draw a bird, that I wonder what that thirteen-year-old who created this time capsule would be doing now had she not been a victim of medical negligence. Would she have attended Yale? After you were inducted into the honor society
spring of 2007, you asked me, “Mom, you think I could attend Yale?” I replied, “Yes, indeed. You can do anything you put your mind to.”

I wasn’t surprised you selected playing basketball and becoming a sports broadcaster as aspirations. I find it interesting that you are in media writing now. It appears that things may be coming full circle. You surprised me in seventh grade when you came home from school and informed me you needed to change your diet because you were planning to run track. Actually, that same spirit that drove you to be the best at sports and academics, helped you beat the odds after the stroke in October of 2007. The prognosis given to us when you awakened from the coma in November of 2007, was that you would have no quality of life. But, the first question you asked your occupational therapist that November was, “What do I need to do to eat?” You were given instructions on muscle exercises for your facial muscles, mouth and tongue. By the middle of November, the occupational therapist requested a swallow study and by Thanksgiving 2007, you were eating. What that recovery looked like in 2007, I had no idea. Today, I still have no idea because you are still recovering.

I do remember vividly the week before the stroke, you were excited about the new school year - preparing for basketball tryouts, and you were excited about the honors classes that were to prepare you to enter the college of your choice. And you were ecstatic to have the same art teacher as your older brother, Robert. We talked about how the sky was the limit – all you needed to do was apply yourself.

Just when we thought all was well, your body started to defy us. I remember the practice session when you were on the basketball court warming up, and during a drill your left hand went numb. The coach threw the ball to you and it sailed through your hands.

“What are you doing Robyn?” he said.
“Coach my hand went numb.”

“Well, wake it up.”

I saw the fear in your eyes at the inability to move your arm. You were sweating. I motioned for you to come to me. I wiped away the sweat with a towel and handed you a bottle of water and you appeared to recover. I cancelled the rest of your practices until we saw the neurologist. I recall friends telling me that it was probably a pinched nerve. I remember how relieved we were after the visit to the neurologist - thinking this was something you were going to grow out of – “just take the meds when you feel the onset of the numbing sensations,” he said. Four days after taking the medication you had a massive stroke and five days later you were declared braindead. I later found out that it was the medication that exacerbated an underlying condition that would have been discovered had he just ordered the MRI as I requested. I discovered later that African Americans are often harmed because physicians refuse to send them on for further testing – even when they have insurance and you had two private insurances.

Doctors, like the neurologist who almost killed you, have experimented and harmed the Black female body since slavery. Dr. James Marion Sims, a white man praised as the pioneer of modern gynecology, experimented and abused Black female slaves to advance his studies in medical technology. This no doubt is where the myth that the black body can withstand unnatural amounts of pain and experiments originated. Myths concocted to justify the inhumane treatment of the black female body.

Today, I still question why the neurologist was adamantly against my request for an MRI. We had two private insurances – it wasn’t the cost. He was willing to prescribe high power drugs when he clearly had no clue what was going on within your body. He had no regard for your life. There was no reason for him not to refer you on for further testing. The pharmaceutical industry
is a billion-dollar market. I can only assume that he was attempting to create a long-standing account for you.

Nonetheless, I prayed for you every day, from the time I conceived you in my womb. I prayed to God to cover you with his grace before the doctors ever declared you brain dead, and he gave me his assurance that you would live. Naturally, when I was told you were brain dead, I went back to God and reminded him of his promise. When he confirmed you would live, I informed the medical team who said no one recovered from brain death, that indeed you would live because God said so. Naturally, everyone thought I was delusional.

There are two things, I’m absolutely certain of - that God is real, and that people do recover from brain death or maybe the people aren’t really dead. I often wondered was your declaration of brain death a cover to bury the grave error made by the neurologist in Idaho Falls. Did I ever tell you a woman came to our home after the news spread into the community that you were brain dead? She informed Granny that her granddaughter needed a heart. I thought that was odd, but I wasn’t angry – she did what any mother or grandmother would do to save their child.

So much was taken from you at an early age. You remember your dreams? I have never forgotten them. I wanted what you wanted. You would be in grad school now had that doctor not taken away your chances of living out your dreams. Maybe you would have tried out for the Olympics. I remember how fast you ran on the track team – always the anchor. Remember that was also one of your goals.

You must have realized that the Constitutional Laws of this nation have failed you. That the system which promises equal protection under the law often looks the other way when the Black female body is at risk. I often wondered, had you been a thirteen-year-old White girl, would we have gotten a different response when we reached out for assistance from the legal
community in Idaho and from the U.S Department of Justice in Washington D.C. I still have the letter from the Department of Justice – an incomplete form letter on their letter head. I also have the email from the person the letter stated our concerns were forwarded to at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). I found her on LinkedIn. She said she hadn’t worked for DHHS as of five years of the date of the letter. I figure crooked politicians have long reaching arms.

Malcolm X once said that America’s racist society influences the white man to act evil that it produces and nourishes a psychology which brings out the lowest, most base part of human beings. Remember, in April of 2012, when your lawyer attempted to force us to dismiss your medical malpractice case with prejudice -meaning we couldn’t refile. We knew he had committed a felony offense by introducing false information into your trial to undermine your case. The only way to file a complaint with the county prosecutor was via the police department. The Idaho Police department refused to take a written report. Remember you thought the Mayor was a just man because you had spent disability career day at his office. All we asked was for the police department to take a report. His office denied us the right because the city attorney didn’t feel they had any obligation to assist you. I still have that letter too. I don’t think we were meant to see that one.

Just a couple of months earlier, February 2012, Trayvon Martin was shot down and killed by George Zimmerman. Police didn’t even arrest Zimmerman. If the 911 operator instructed Zimmerman not to follow Martin, and Zimmerman disregarded her instructions, I would think that Zimmerman was the aggressor. But the laws of Florida, as interpreted by a mostly white jury, acquitted him. The law never seems to rule on the side of the Black victim.
When I attempted to file the police report against your doctor and your lawyer, it threatened their way of life. After the Civil War the South created the Jim Crow laws to protect their systems of inequality. They needed control over the Black body in order to continue to build their wealth which meant Blacks could not have a voice in the political process. To block the Black voice meant stop the Black vote. Literacy exams and the poll tax blocked many a Black voter, but the illiterate white voter was grandfather in – he wasn’t required to take a test. The officials in Idaho had to block our voices otherwise your case would expose them and not for their clean living.

Remember the murder of Emmet Till? The same legal system that allowed his murders to walk free allowed the neurologist who almost killed you to walk free. While your case was a civil court case and his case a criminal case, they both threatened to expose and convict White men of harming a black person. Many Whites don’t believe that it’s fitting to punish a White man for destroying the life of a Black person. The legal system that should have protected your and Till’s rights participated in the egregious violations of your rights. In both cases the right to equal protection under the law and due process were denied.

White people have been writing blatant lies into history books, literature and medical records about black people since they stole our ancestors from the shores of Africa, and it’s just as easy to rewrite a black child’s medical history as it is to shoot a black teenager down in the streets, or to convict five innocent teenagers of a crime they didn’t commit. It was easy for the neurologist to rewrite your medical history; I’m not talking about a few assertions to cover his error. In his records he portrayed you as a child with a history of illness. He did this with confidence because in a small city like Idaho Falls, Idaho, the Jim Crow laws that state black people have no rights when accusing a white man, especially a Mormon, were overtly enforced
there. In one of the medical records, he stated that you had a history of migraine headaches, that you missed days out of school, and what made it even worse is that I found the same lies added into your records from your White primary care physician. Now these lies could be refuted just by pulling your school records. You were an honor student, who ran track, had plans to play basketball, and you rarely missed days out of school. There are no records to substantiate his claims. Another reason he could not risk the case going to trial is because these were blatant lies. In addition to the records, you had teammates, classmates, church members, who saw you daily, very few even knew of the numbing sensations you had because even they were very rare. The sickly child the doctor portrayed in the medical records didn’t exist.

The White officials in Idaho Falls needed to shut me down. I would not go quietly. I remember the cold stares of the Police Chief when I finally was able to obtain an appointment with him. He looked at me as if I was something foreign, and I’m sure I was. He wasn’t accustomed to anyone pushing back against their corrupt practices. When he couldn’t convince me that the doctor was innocent, he called for a junior prosecuting attorney from the county prosecutor’s office. The prosecutor’s office was just down the hallway. He also attempted to dissuade me. I had the evidence spread out on a cherry wood table, but he never looked at it. He finally said that “Medical negligence was not a crime in Idaho Falls.” But that wasn’t my only complaint, your attorney had defrauded your medical malpractice case. They still didn’t hear me.

To your lawyer, the judge who refused to hear me, the policeman who refused to take my report, the Mayor who refused to intervene, I became an irritant that wouldn’t go away - they all gave me the same glazed, emotionless – vacant stare – nothing I said reached them because to them you had no rights. But I studied their laws and they were all committing fraud or accessories to fraud. When one official or office refused to hear me or take my complaint, I went
to the next level. I even wrote the Idaho Falls City Council for assistance when the Mayor refused to intervene because the Idaho Falls police refused to take a written report from me. I received a response from one City Council member, a woman, who inquired about the responsibilities of the Police Department. This may have been when the police finally started to respond to me via email, but still never took a report. My believe is that they didn’t want anything in writing because they had probably committed another offense by lying to Joint Commission about the doctor’s malpractice lawsuit (Edwards vs Garland) that was still active when he was awarded the gold seal for stroke prevention. While your attorney had filed a motion to withdraw, the case was still active. I refused to dismiss, and the court date for his motion to withdraw wasn’t heard until May 30, 2012. Joint Commission awarded the gold seal to the doctor in mid-April of 2012. Either Joint Commission was not aware of the lawsuit or they all participated in this conspiracy to defraud your case so that the doctor and the local hospital could receive this high honor.

These White men believed they were above the law. I am certain that your attorney was too arrogant to believe that I would possibly fight back and keep fighting for your rights which they blatantly violated and sacrificed for their capital gain. Now, why would it take an act from the City Council to get the Idaho Falls Police department to even respond to my request? But because they were white men who had control of the police and judicial processes in Idaho Falls, with no oversight provided by anyone with integrity, they were free to violate your rights, and they did.

I kept writing. I began to get paranoid after a while because I reached out to federal officials, but never heard anything form them until we moved to California. I wondered if they tampered with my mail in Idaho Falls. I recall once receiving a petition from the doctor’s lawyer
wanting to know every news station and official, I wrote to regarding their fraudulent activities. I presume they were attempting to do damage control and probably painted me as a misguided mother to distract from their unlawful acts, or do what lawyers do to the average citizen who’s not aware of their rights, intimidate them so that they will coward to their demands. I even attempted to file a complaint with the FBI in Boise, Idaho, but they too refused to hear me or investigate my complaint.

In August of 2019, I read an article from the Center for Public Integrity. It stated that in 2012 and 2015, Idaho received a grade of D. According to the article, “the State Integrity Investigation is a comprehensive assessment of state government accountability and transparency done in partnership with Global Integrity.” Idaho received a D in public access to information, an F in executive accountability, an F in legislative accountability, an F in judicial accountability, an F in State Civil Service Management, and an F in Ethics Enforcement Agencies. According to this report, Idaho has few ethical laws and no one to effectively enforce the ones that do exist. I can personally attest to this. When the officials in the City of Idaho Falls failed to protect your civil rights, I filed complaints with the Idaho Medical Board and the Idaho Bar Association. These are purportedly boards that provide oversight of the practitioners in those fields to ensure the integrity of their members. The problem arises when the ones that provide the oversight are also practitioners. Forgive the cliché, but that’s like having the wolf protect the hen house – Idaho Falls had a lot of wolves protecting the hen house.

What was most disconcerting, was that many of these men were purported Christian men, but many of the whites who lynched Black people during the Jim Crow era, were purportedly doing their Christian duty: lying, stealing, raping and lynching Black people. Their Christian duty consisted of lynch mobs that hung black men, shot holes into their bodies and then burned
them – this was their Christian responsibility. Often the Black men were innocent of any crime, but during this era it only took an accusation, and a Black man was lynched.

Remember when we watched *When They See Us*? The movie about the five Black male teens wrongfully charged and convicted in the assault of a New York jogger in 1989. It was vexing to watch the scene where Antron’s father was coerced to encourage his son to admit to the crime. That scene catapulted me back into your lawyer’s office the day your attorney attempted to force me to dismiss your case (Edwards vs. Garland) with prejudice. When I wouldn’t willing dismiss your case against the doctor, your attorney, who was purportedly representing your interest, tried to convince me that nothing happened. That there was nothing negligent about prescribing drugs to you for conditions you didn’t have and then changing your medical records.

The police threatened to inform Antron’s father’s employer of his past criminal activities even though he’d reformed. Your attorney attempted to paint me as an unreliable witness and threatened to come after me financially if I didn’t dismiss your case with prejudice – meaning that I wouldn’t refile the case. It was obvious that your attorneys were conspiring to defraud your case -why would they be interested in me refileing the case? If Antron was guilty, why did the police use the threat of exposing the father’s past to his employer, if he didn’t encourage Antron to admit to guilt – even though Antron was innocent?

While your case and the young men wrongly convicted were different, the systems that convicted them and robbed you are the same. Antron’s father didn’t realize he would lose either way. The police had no plans of releasing Antron. They took advantage of the relationship between father and son and used it to discourage Antron which made it easier for them to convict Antron – causing a wedge between father and son. When I refused to dismiss your case, your
attorney and the doctor’s attorney went on a crusade to ensure no one would help us. Malcolm X was right about the evil in our society – it’s created a White monster.

Robyn even though these White men in Idaho Falls robbed you, you have kept the faith and continued to regain as much of yourself as possible. Many of the basic human functions the medical team said you wouldn’t regain – you have gained back. You’re breathing, eating on your own, walking, and even attending college. I can’t imagine your angst or what it takes to greet each new day. I admire your determination, and each day you wake up ready to take on a new day, I am grateful. While these men took from you and left you at the mercy of the Social Security system, you are determined to live your life and on your terms. You have not allowed the disability to control you.

Robyn, today I watched a gold and orange leaf slowly fall from a tree. The leaf slowly sashayed through the air descending to the ground as if it knew this was its last chance to make an impression. One after the other, the leaves made their slow descension from the branches of the tree limbs. It’s October, trees must preserve nutrients for the winter so the leaves must fall, and I watched their silent departure – another quiet October.

Love,

Mom
Dear Rodrick

I remember your birth so well. I had a scheduled c-section delivery date, but you decided to come earlier. I had planned to record it, but the pain from the contractions and the rush to get to the hospital caused us to leave the video camera at home. I didn’t think about it until we were heading to the hospital, but there was no turning back because you were clearly about to make your unscheduled debut. You have never stopped challenging me since the unexpected contractions, and it has been a pleasure.

The first time they brought you to me in the hospital, the nurse did a second take; your eyes were greener then, and you were pale. I assured her, as she checked the bracelets, that you were mine. You and Robyn reached back in the gene pool for your eyes. Granny’s Dad had grey eyes. When you were younger, you favored him. I’m not certain if it was his father who was white or his grandfather, but that’s where the lightening of our hue derived from. I can’t even imagine the abuse that our foremother must have suffered at the hands of a White master.

Your hazel-green eyes came from the gene pool that more than likely resulted from the rape of one of our foremothers, I hoped that this nation had learned from their egregious acts against African Americans and that you were born into a better space and time than even I was born into in 1964. The year I was born President Lyndon B Johnson signed the Civil Rights Amendment; this was the amendment to stamp out Jim Crow and the horror it brought to Black bodies across this nation especially in the South. It was also the year of the War on Poverty. When I turned fifty-five July 26, 2019, black bodies were still being destroyed without cause and blight and poverty was still claiming many historical Black neighborhoods in Memphis, Tennessee and across this nation.
In 1996, the year of your birth, there were a lot of innovations hitting the market. Pokémon launched its first video game. In January of 1996, there were only 100,000 websites compared to billions today. Independence Day, with Will Smith, was the largest grossing movie in 1996. Oprah Winfrey launched her, now notorious, book club, DVD’s were just being launched that year, now we have videos in digital space; the average cost of a car was $16,300 – today it doubles that amount. Many innovative ideas and products hit the market and soared.

While we have seen many fantastic innovations that have made life more convenient for the fortunate, the War on Poverty has done little to help the unfortunate. I read that homelessness almost always involves people facing desperate situations and extreme hardship. They are usually forced to make selections with few options, often in the context of extreme duress, substance abuse disorders, untreated mental illness, or unintended consequences from well-intended policies. The answer to this conundrum is legislators dedicated to improving policies that address the underlying causes of the problem.

Rodrick, I was most fascinated by the suggestion that policy makers could alleviate these issues by being intentional in addressing them. I was most fascinated with the statement that the homeless are sometimes forced into these situations by the “unintended consequences from well-intended policies.” It reminded me of the Medical Malpractice torts that almost always makes it impossible for a victim of a preventable medical error from seeing justice. We almost lost Robyn. I had to resign my job to rehabilitate her after she was declared braindead because of a negligent neurologist in Idaho Falls whom the laws of well-intended legislators in Idaho, covered. Because Robyn needed cognitive rehabilitation, we found ourselves on the streets of Orange County, California – homeless, living in drug invested motels, spending a night in a
shelter, told we’d have to split up in order to qualify for assistance – well-meaning policies indeed.

I read where Russell O’Flaherty, a Columbia University economist, stated that homelessness is often a case of bad luck. I guess that would describe how we found ourselves homeless. It was unfortunate that we moved to a community where officials refused to recognize our humanity. It’s unfortunate that the doctor who almost killed Robyn was also leading a major initiative in the community - the focus – preventive stroke care. It was unfortunate that Joint Commission was awarding a gold seal for that initiative, and he couldn’t receive it with a pending medical malpractice case. It was unfortunate that Robyn’s attorney lacked integrity. It was unfortunate that Robyn became their sacrificial lamb. It was unfortunate for all of us – just bad luck – I guess.

When I looked into your beautiful hazel-green eyes, November 15, 1996, I never imagined that we’d fall prey to this predatory system. You were a Mama’s boy if there ever was one. After your birth, I returned to work as a real estate agent, and you were my assistant. I’d pack your bag, place you in a baby backpack and off we went. After you started walking, whenever we returned home in the evenings, you asked me, “Mommy are you taking your shoes off?” You wouldn’t take your shoes off until I took mine off in case I had another appointment. You were so funny.

You became the office baby. Mr. Hubbard, my broker, was crazy about you. He even made a designated area in the office for a naptime pallet. You were my assistant until I took a position at a relocation company. That was a challenge. Your first day of preschool was difficult, when I turned to leave, the tears in your hazel-green eyes caused me to waver, but I kept walking. The teacher had already given me orders. Drop him off and leave. After a couple of
days, you waved me off. In kindergarten, you thought I was supermom; you volunteered me for everything and anything. I was the classroom mom for your class. Remember the day your teacher sent home a note that stated. “Rodrick volunteered you to make a dinosaur costume.”

“Why did you tell your teacher I could make a dinosaur costume?”

“Because you can do anything!” you replied joyously.

With that said, you, your sister and I went searching in fabric stores around Memphis for a pattern of a dinosaur only to find that there were none in existence at that time. Being the supermom, you proclaimed me to be, I decided to do what my grandmother used to do – I created my own pattern. It was a sad looking dinosaur, green, with a tail that looked more like a hump. I was able to make the long neck, but the head looked like it might be a cousin of the dinosaur. I suggested to you to stop telling your teacher that I can do “anything” because I have limitations. Did you listen, no, but I enjoyed the moments.

You were a funny kid. You had moments when you became obsessed with things. Your first obsession was with binders, notebook paper and cities. You created your own cities and planned them out on paper and filed them away in binders. I remember thinking you would probably grow up to be a city official – maybe a planner. But then you started obsessing with dishes and decorating, and I thought you might be an interior designer. I finally just gave up and watched and enjoyed your expressions of creativity.

When you started to attend cub scouts in Moscow, Idaho, you developed a love of wolves. I remember you always asking if I’d take you to a red wolf reserve. That was one of the things we never made it to. I do remember the trip to Yellowstone. I’d promised you that we’d go but when Robyn got sick, I put it off. One summer day, when your brother was home on break from college, you kept asking, and we packed up and drove to Yellowstone. Robert was
stretched out in the back of the van because he wasn’t too enthused about going. He probably slept the entire trip. I think he may have awakened when we pulled up to a crowd of people observing and taking pictures of a bison who’d decided to take a seat and watch the visitors watch him. He was huge, laying out in an open area, looking as if he was posing. I remember thinking that the people were crazy for getting out of their cars. You wanted a picture too but wanted me to take it. I remember your directions as I exited the van with camera in hand, “Mom, if he gets up, just don’t be the last one running.”

You always loved music – it was no surprise to me that you loved playing the violin and piano. I remember in middle school how much time you put into practicing the violin. Your goal was to earn a first chair position, but no matter how much you practice or how well you played, the furthest you ever got was second chair.

You and Robyn were closer in age. When she developed an allergy to peanuts and fish, you thought you were allergic to it to. You refused to eat peanuts and fish for a long time, but I guess at some point you decided to try fish but the peanut allergy you held to and refused to eat anything with peanuts. Robyn taught you to cook, and to fry good southern fried chicken. You two were inseparable.

I also remember the trip Make A Wish Foundation gave Robyn to Disney World in Florida. It was the best trip we’d had together since Robyn’s stroke. You wanted to see the alligators, so we visited Gatorland. When you saw people taking pictures with alligators and snakes, you wanted one. I was the one selected to have the snake wrapped around my neck while you and your sister helped me hold the baby gator. Oh, the things you’ve talked me into.

I wish I had a photographic memory so that I could apologize for the many times I fail short of my responsibilities as a mom to you, but the emotional trauma was so overwhelming at
times that I find it difficult to recall. I apologize for all of my shortcomings. Even though, I don’t know how I could have done things differently, I feel like you and your brother deserved so much more. All I can say now is that I am proud of both of you. You survived. Your sister survived. We survived. For this, I am truly grateful to God. Because we had many close calls; more than I want to remember and probably more than any of us will ever admit.

I reflect now and I wonder how difficult it must have been for you. I never dealt with the potential loss of a sibling at nine years old. I can only imagine your pain. For you and your brother to be hundreds of miles away from us, had to make it even more unbearable. Today, I regret not waking you up the night that I took Robyn to the emergency room. I should have. I should have given you a kiss and a hug, and told you not to worry, we’d be back because that’s what I thought. I thought they’d give her something and send us back home. I can only imagine how fear must have gripped you when I told that Robyn was seriously ill. I do remember coming home to throw some clothes in a bag and telling you all that you were going to stay with Pastor Golden until I returned, but I don’t remember much more. I did tell you two, to pray for your sister because she was ill.

I was in shock. My body was functioning while my mind was attempting to digest the doctor’s prognosis. Robyn had had a severe stroke. She could stroke again and die. She needed to be airlifted to the Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City because the hospital in Idaho wasn’t equipped to care for her. The weather was bad. The Hospital’s helicopter in Idaho couldn’t fly because of the weather. Robyn was so serious they had to send a plane in from the Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City. She could die. She could die. She could die.

I don’t remember if we talked. I don’t remember if I told you I loved you, but I must have. I hope I hugged you before I left. I don’t remember. I don’t remember your face that day. I
just remember that I had to hold it together because Robyn could die. I couldn’t fall apart. I wanted to scream, but I couldn’t. But I know you know I love you. I just wish I could remember if I told you so. I wish I could see your face, but maybe it’s good I can’t because it would hunt me even more because I do feel like I failed you in that moment.

I remember when someone told you that your sister was going to die. I received a call at the hospital that you were upset. I needed to talk to you. I never told anyone that. Yes, the medical team had declared her braindead, but I always told anyone that asked, that we were trusting God to do something different. I wish they had told you that instead. That we were trusting God to bring Robyn through. I was so outraged, but I couldn’t do anything but call you and reassure you she would live. I know whoever told you meant no harm, but the damage was done. I remember being torn. I wished I could have held you then and assured you that it was going to be alright, but the many miles between us made it impossible.

I’ll never forget the week the medical team gave up on her, your father had flown in to Salt Lake City from Memphis, Tennessee, and when they told us she wouldn’t make it through the week, he drove to Idaho Falls to get you and your brother. I was so glad to see you two. It had been so difficult for me, but when I saw the two of you, I knew I could do it. I could endure. That night, I cuddled up on a cold couch in the ICU waiting room with you, and you fell asleep in my arms. I wished I could have taken all the pain away, but I couldn’t. All I could do was hold you and hoped that was enough to reassure you. It was painful when you and your brother had to leave without Robyn and me, but I wanted you to return to school, to friends and try as best you could to keep living.

I was afraid of the emotional trauma of seeing your sister in that condition. A representative from child life suggested taking pictures and explaining to you all why she was
connected to so much equipment: a large tube taped to her mouth running to a respirator, multiple bags of fluids in clear bags hanging from metal poles next to her bed connected to thin clear tubes connected to a micro thin tube forced into the brown skin on her hand allowing entrance into her blood stream, a gadget that looked like an antenna on her shaved head monitoring brain activity, the blood pressure cuff wrapped around her left arm, the clap taped to the left index finger measuring her heart rate and oxygen in her blood, her head swollen beyond recognition with a huge bandage wrapped around it because they’d taken her skull off and a catheter on the left side of her bed draining urine. She looked like an alien – not the Robyn we knew. You elected to still go in. After you saw her, a nurse asked if we had anything we wanted to place in her room that reflected Robyn’s personality, to give the medical staff an indication of who Robyn was – you wrote a poem and a song using the back of a religious track we found in the ICU waiting room, and the nurse taped it to the entrance of her ICU room.

The Poem:

My sister
You are nice
You are reliable
You are a great sister
You are a great friend
I love you my sister

The song: God is Working

God is working on you
He will heal you if you believe
Praise him, Praise him
Everything will come to pass
If you believe

God will watch over you
He will care
Everything will come to pass in time
God keeps you

God watches over you
God loves you and he cares
He won’t let anything happen
If you believe

Day after day, thirty days in ICU, cold, no bed to stretch out on, I read those words and was encouraged. Not only did it give me hope for Robyn’s recovery, but that we would soon be home with you and your brother. Many evenings, I would look out over the dark valley below the hospital and watch lights pop on in homes, close my eyes, and imagine being home again, the smell of coffee brewing, the chatter of you and Robyn going at each other, and Robert downstairs playing his video games. I wanted our lives back.

You were so excited to care for the dog someone gave Robyn that Christmas. Her Christmas wish was for a dog like the service dog that encouraged her in physical therapy. When someone heard about her wish, they brought her a gold Labrador Retriever. We slipped him into the hospital for Robyn to see. You named him Kernel after the service dog. After he pounced over her and scratched her up, she decided to give him to you. I remember when you two decided
that adoption papers should be drawn up to officially transfer custody over to you. That was a really special Christmas even though we couldn’t spend it at home. I am thankful to our community. I will never forget how they made our lives a lot more bearable that Christmas.

We were gone for five months but it seemed like forever. There were times I had to return home to take care business. Remember the day I came home, and it had snowed. I took you to school that morning. The schools parking lot looked like an ice rink. When we stepped out of the car, I fell and then you fell, and every time we attempted to stand up, we both fell back down. We laughed and laughed and laughed. It was these moments that gave me hope.

February 2008, we came home, but none of us had a clue what was ahead. When I pulled into the driveway. You ran outside to meet us. You were surprised to see the wheelchair, but happy to have your sister home again. None of us had any idea what it meant for Robyn to be disabled or what challenges we would face as a family - how our worlds were about to change and the difficulties in meeting each new day. I was glad Granny was still there because she made that initial transition easier. You could still go to school and do what fifth graders do, but I couldn’t be there as much even though I was home.

I often think about the book you wrote that year although I’ve forgotten the name. Granny and I waited for each new chapter. It was a magical story about children with special powers. Granny still talks about that book. I think you could have gotten it published. I still have the broken disc that you stored it on. Maybe one day we’ll investigate how to retrieve it off the broken disc.

When Robyn had to return to the hospital for a month in January of 2009, Granny called and told me you had won the Geography Bee at school. I was so proud of you. It was difficult to move on in our absence, and I know you probably shed many a tear, as I did, but you kept going.
You kept fighting. I was glad that Ms. Lorna could attend the Bee in my stead. She is a good friend. You’ll never know how many tears I shed every time I missed one your events or your brother’s events. It seemed like a lifetime, but your sister needed me. She had to fight for her life, for her very existence, and she needed me to be there to encourage her.

The Spring we returned, we were able to attend the state Geography Bee with you because Robyn could walk. I was so proud of you. It didn’t matter that you didn’t win. I was just happy to have all of you together again. What a celebration. We were together attending an event. It was almost like old times. She no longer needed the wheelchair.

After your brother left for college, you stopped playing basketball. Many of your extracurricular activities stopped. I planned for all of you to attend college and I didn’t want Robyn’s disabling to stop you two nor her. But I also didn’t count the cost for you when your brother left because he stepped in a lot to help you. You took on a great deal of responsibility. You cleaned in the afternoons after school while I was at physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy with Robyn. You cooked dinner in the evenings when I returned because I spent the evenings helping Robyn with homework. I felt guilty that you couldn’t play basketball anymore, and when the piano lessons ended, I felt even worst.

I can’t begin to explain my anguish at being a victim to the same institutionalized racism and bigotry that has destroyed black lives since the inception of slavery. I didn’t know then the history of the abuse of the black body by medical professionals. But we lived every day with how the negligence and greed of a white neurologist in Idaho Falls, and the manipulation of Robyn’s constitutional rights by Idaho Falls officials complicit in his cover-up completed disrupted and destroyed of our lives.

My heart deflated the day I walked in on you and Robyn arguing.
“I hate you Rodrick”

“Robyn, what did I do?”

“I hate you. I wish you were dead.”

“Robyn.”

The light in those green eyes became a dull glassed over green. The contorted confused look on your face, tore at my heart. You told me how you had shut yourself up in the bathroom and considered slicing your wrist. I remember that moment. We both cried. I cried because I didn’t want you carrying the same pain I struggled with. I needed you to have hope. I needed you to know that one day tomorrow would come for you and you’d be somewhere laying out plans for a city or producing music. I needed you to believe that you’d live past the trauma. I cried many nights and prayed for you. I asked God to show me how to help you. I needed you to more than survive, I needed you to conquer. I didn’t trust the medical community in Idaho Falls, or I would have gotten counseling for all us, but they had been culpable in covering for the negligent neurologist who’d almost killed your sister. I didn’t know of anyone I trusted, besides God, with our volatile mental state. I prayed, and I kept praying.

I didn’t tell you until years later that I confronted your sister. As much as I loved her, I loved you, and she couldn’t take her anger out on you. You made too many sacrifices to assist her. We made too many sacrifices to rehabilitate her. You didn’t deserve her anger. You didn’t destroy her life. It was the negligent doctor. It was not acceptable for her to tell you, “She hated you.” It was not acceptable, for her to tell you “she wished you were dead.” It was not OK. I told her if that behavior continued, she’d have to find herself another residence. I felt I was placed in an impossible position trying to navigate all of us through this horrific situation. My fear was that I would lose one of you. I think we were all considering death an option.
I was astonished when Robyn took your solo part in a song at church. You two were supposed to share the part. I remember wondering after it was over why you didn’t sing your part. You told me later she took both parts. She didn’t see just how painful that was for you. How you had also been robbed. When that avaricious doctor prescribed those drugs that destroyed Robyn’s dreams and stole the Robyn we once knew, it was like a hand grenade thrown in the center of our world the impact was an implosion of everyone’s dreams, relationships – everything was collapsing.

You and Robyn were so much alike in your interests and achievements. You both sang, danced, wrote, ran track and at that time both played basketball. You both excelled in school. The stroke took so much of this away from her, and when she saw you – she hated what happened to her and you were the closest target. The emotional weight was heavy. I can’t imagine it for you. I only know how heavy it was for me, but when you let me know it was unbearable, I did all I could to carry more of the weight, but sometimes I know I failed. I considered sending you to live with your father in Memphis. I really did. Today, I wonder if it was selfish of me not to, but my knowledge of what was in Memphis, made me more fearful to send you. If that’s selfish, I’m guilty.

I remember the day you came home with the information sheet about the trip your History class was taking to Washington D.C. I was determined you would go. I didn’t know how because I didn’t have the two thousand odd dollars it was going to take, but I made up my mind that you would go. I asked your father if he’d help, and at that time he was still bitter, he refused. I told him you deserved it and that you’d been through so much that you needed it. He asked, “What had you been through?” He didn’t mean it, but nonetheless he refused to help. But when I told your granny, aunts and uncles that I needed to send you on that trip, they understood. I knew
it was more than a trip. You needed a break. A time to be you. A time to get away from,

“Rodrick will you help with this? Rodrick help your sister with that?” I knew you needed a break before you broke. I was grateful to God to have such loving siblings.

You’ve made me so proud. You made it through school with honors. I know too well your challenges, I know too, your accomplishments. I am grateful to God! You and your brother can’t even imagine the many times I wanted to give up, but you both encouraged me to keep moving forward. I couldn’t have made it without you two.

When we moved to California so that Robyn could attend a brain injury program, I promised you we wouldn’t move again until you graduated high school. Remember when we lived in drug invested motels? Remember the night we spent in a shelter? You said you’d rather live in a car. Remember when I was ready to pack up and return to Memphis? You, Robert, and Robyn, were like, “No, Mom, we need to stay.” Remember when you asked, “Mom, where is your faith in the God you taught us about?” I couldn’t leave after that challenge. You made me proud. That you remembered. That you understood that God could bring us through anything. Even our then, homeless situation.

You were so determined. I remember when you tried out for a role in the school play. Remember that. Your instructor had assured you that you were selected for a part, but when you checked your name wasn’t on the list. I suggested you email her. You were so upset. You asked me, “What, you want me to get confirmation that I wasn’t selected.” I told you to calm down. I reassured you that if she said you were selected there must have been another list, remember that? It’s funny now. I remember the small rolls you started out with. I remember how humble you were, and how you made every small role a memorable one. I remember you telling me how you regretted not getting the lead role in Hairspray when we were in Idaho Falls because you
were too shy. They really wanted you for that role, but you didn’t give it your best in tryouts, and someone else was selected. You told me you made a promise to yourself that that would never happen again, and it hasn’t.

There are some events that are etched in my mind, like the excitement and angst in your voice the evening I picked you up from school after your school theater instructors announced the schools musical. You said, “Mom, we are presenting Seussical for the Spring musical. I know I would be great in the lead role, because it’s me, but I’ll be trying out against the White kid who gets all the lead roles in the plays.” My reply, “So what? If you think you can do it, try out?” You replied, “But mom.” I said, “Try out.”

The day they posted the cast you got in the car with this wide grin on your face. Your tinted green eyes were more bright than usual.

“Mom, guess what?”

“What?”

“I got one of the lead roles?”

“What do you mean one of the lead roles?”

“They split the lead role between me and the other kid I told you about?”

“What do you mean they split the role?”

“They do that a lot with the girl’s roles.”

“Oh.”

I was so happy for you. We laughed and had a good time reminiscing about all the roles you’d played, from the Idaho lesson to the Seussical lead role. But you’d worked hard, from the volunteer positions helping with the neighborhood kid’s theater to the supporting roles you’d played in your high school plays. I couldn’t have been any prouder. Then you explained to me
the one challenge. The Spring musicals are the ones that the school district send out judges to evaluate. Similar to the Tony awards. I said, “Hmmm…” But you said that your teachers had decided that it would be the luck of the draw. By the time the district announced the dates the judges would attend, the assignment dates for the actors would already be appointed. I didn’t feel good about it, but I said, “OK.”

You worked really hard during rehearsals. You stayed late teaching dance steps to the kid who split the role with you. I didn’t feel good about any of it. I remember you telling me how well your instructors said you were in the role, a natural for you because you enjoyed singing and dancing. I remember thinking White privilege never sees the talent of a Black male when he’s in competition with a White male, even if he teaches the White male how to play the role. I didn’t like it.

Remember when you got in the car, jumping with excitement. The school district released the dates the judges were coming, it was the date you were playing lead role. I was so thrilled for you. You deserved it. You were always so giving and willing to help. There was a foreboding in my spirit. But the teachers had promised that whatever dates were assigned would be honored. You can only imagine the horror, and the angst I felt the day you got in the car with a long face and the excitement in your eyes had disappeared. The White male advisor of the theater group had rearranged the dates so that your White male classmate would be playing lead role the date the judges attended. I wasn’t surprised. I was angry. You made me promise not to go to the school to address it. I promised I wouldn’t come to the school, but I didn’t promise I wouldn’t email your lead advisor. I hated you had to experience that, but times haven’t changed that much. Some White men still have a problem with Black people excelling and will do all they can to rob Black people of opportunities. I regretted you had to experience that.
I remember when you finally came to terms with it, attempting to comfort me. That’s funny, huh? But I was too angry. Too tired of seeing White people rob my children. You reminded me that they could take that role but couldn’t take the opportunity to study play writing at a top liberal arts school, Wesleyan University in Connecticut. You’d received a full four-year ride through Quest Bridge. It’s ironic that the unfortunate situations that were the consequences of unscrupulous acts on the part of people who compromised our economic wellbeing were in fact the reason why you qualified for the Quest Bridge scholarship - Robyn’s attorney, the negligent doctor and the officials in Idaho Falls robbing her of her equal rights, compromising my ability to financially provide for you all, and your father robbing me of my alimony and refusing to provide any support outside of child support.

The closer we got to you leaving, the more I struggled with your departure. I hadn’t realized how much emotional support and encouragement you had been to me. Our first stop was in Memphis so you could visit family and to drop Robyn off at Granny’s. You and I had little time alone since Robyn’s stroke, but the plane ride to Wesleyan was just you and me. As the plane soared into the clouds, I looked out at the snowy cotton shaped clouds and felt like we had escaped. That from that day everything would be different for you. Remember the ride to Wesleyan, the colonial styled houses, the hills, the beach? You were about to experience a totally new world, and I would have the pleasure of experiencing it through your eyes, each time you shared an experience, each time you crossed a new threshold and each time you learned a new lesson.

The visit to the beach felt like we entered a fairytale. We discovered a closed event center with a carousel inside. Remember the older gentleman allowed us inside even though it was closed? He took pictures of us on the carousel. We were like kids on an adventure, climbing
upon rocks in the water taking pictures. Remember the light house sitting atop the hill? Before I left you in Connecticut, I remember our last dinner at the Cheesecake Factory. You were more relaxed than I’d seen you in a while. The green shade was dominating your hazel eyes. Your excitement made me smile. I wanted to stay there and watch you take on college. The morning I left you, I remembered the instructions of your preschool teacher, but this time it was more for me, “drop him off and leave.”

I think my proudest moment was when I attended the opening of your play, *Blind Faith*, on Wesleyan campus. I remember the night of the opening, you met me outside the facility. You were concerned about how I might receive your adaption of our struggle. Even before it began, I remember fighting back tears, just the fact that you’d endured and not only survived but succeeded and now were able to tell your truth. You were afraid I would be offended of my role, but it was actually freeing. I always felt that I wasn’t there when you needed me most. The fact that you voiced it, brought me to tears. It was painful seeing parts of our pain played out on a stage. My tears were rolling before I let out the soft heave. It was painful, especially hearing the character voice the words of your struggle. The secret struggle that you and I shared, when death seemed a more viable solution. I remember holding your hand, I stopped fighting the tears. We both let out a soft heave.

After the play was over. You said, “I didn’t know how you were going to receive the play.” I said, “It’s your truth.” We hugged each other so tight and cried. Wow! We had come so close to, not only losing Robyn, but each other. We traveled a long distance from that excruciating pain, to the incident with your school musical, to all the things in between that challenged your mental and emotional wellbeing, and you more than survived. I am proud. I
hope you know that I love you. That you are more than enough. That no matter what the world
does or says, you are an exceptional human being.

Love always,

Mom
The Developing Artist

Being the fourth child of my parents, I was the one who asked why? I was the baby girl at that time and the most curious. I loved to explore. It’s never a good idea to leave a child alone in a car during their explorative years because they may become too curious and decide to drive or get bored and take out walking. Me, when I was about four years old, my mom left me in the car while she took my sister to class. It must have been the first day of classes and my sister’s first day of school. At first, it was entertaining rolling the windows up and down and waving at all the moms escorting their kids into school. Most were happy, but there were a few kids whose mom had to drag them along. I kept waving and smiling. I did my best to stay put, but when the crowd cleared my impatience and curiosity took over. The beige brick building with long windows looked too inviting. I grabbed the packed sack lunch my mom made for me and toddled up the walkway – clad in a blue and white and orange romper, matching bows accenting two ponytails, with white saddles – into the school I went. The door opened and my eyes scaled the body of a long lanky man with a smiling face.

“Good morning,” the nice man said. I happily waved. “Do you know where you’re supposed to be?”

“No,” I shook my head, I had no clue. The wide hallway with all the kids roaming about excited me. I was directed to the office where a kind lady volunteered to help me find my classroom. Luckily my mom showed up seconds later, looking exasperated and out of breath, and explained to the kind ladies in the office that I was not a student but her four-year-old who was supposed to stay put in the car until she returned.
As my mom learned never to leave me unattended, so did my dad. For whatever reason, I can’t remember, one day my mom left me in the care of my father. Now, I don’t believe my father was accustomed to caring for a child my age. He decided to take a trip to a parts store, he and another man who’d come to our house to work on a car. When my dad pulled into the parking space, he looked back at me, and said, “Stay in the car. I’ll be right back.” I nodded and watched him and the man, exit the car and enter the parts store. Being the kid that I was, I played with the windows for a brief moment and then looked around the car for something to keep me busy. I found nothing. I waited a while before opening the door and exiting the car. I dashed to the door and peeked in and then ran back to the car. I sat a while longer before pushing the door open again and was about to step out, when I saw my Dad in the doorway about to leave the store, but I couldn’t shut the door because he would know I disobeyed him. He and his friend settled back into the car; my dad started the engine, and as he backed up, he smiled at me and gave me a piece of gum, which I felt guilty and awkward because I was holding onto the open door. Cars were made of heavy metals back then; I held onto the door as long as I could before gravity pulled it open with me hanging on. I heard a woman scream and my dad hit brakes. I remember him being scared and taking me to the hospital. I was alright, just a bit shaken.

My mom stayed home with me my toddler years. She and I watched Love of Life, As the World Turns and Search for Tomorrow. She enrolled me in Kindergarten when I was five. I was excited about going until I realized that it wasn’t the same school my siblings attended. My mom must have dropped me off the first day, but I was placed on a bus to ride home. No one explained to me about the bus, which turned out to be traumatic. I watched as the driver passed my street several times dropping other children off; my child instincts told me something was amiss. I was near tears when he finally drove up to my house. When he stopped, I bolted off the bus never to
ride it again. The next morning, I refused to get out of bed; I was not returning to kindergarten.

By this time my mom was working, and I had a baby brother, I finagled my way out of attending kindergarten and back to the babysitter with my brother. I was informed later, that my mom had asked the driver to make me the last stop to ensure someone was home when he dropped me off. No one shared this bit of information with me. Yes, I expected to be informed on such matters.

Being the youngest girl and the fourth child of the five children between my Daddy and Mama, one of the things my Dad chastised me for, was allowing my siblings to use me. My older siblings would often send me to my parents when they wanted something, with a note that read:

Can we do blah…blah…blah?

_____yes or _____no

My parents responded by checking both boxes and sending me back, but before my Daddy let me go, he’d give me one of his lectures, and then threaten me if I returned. Yes, I often returned but not on the same occasion; I had some knowledge of my father’s wrath.

I was never afraid to tell my Daddy what I thought. He often said I was crazy as a road lizard. As I got older, I told him that the fruit didn’t fall far from the tree. He often got a big laugh from that. My Daddy was not the one to teach me my Christian values. He taught me how to play 21 and spades. He taught my brother’s how to rebuild car engines and other auto repairs. I wish he had taught me that too then I wouldn’t be at the mercy of auto mechanics. I did learn to change tires and boost a car off. I may have gotten some of my fiery temper from him too. He also told me to always pay my way – don’t allow anyone to make me feel indebted to them, that way I could walk away without feeling guilty.
Two years after I scared my mom, I walked into the halls of Alton Elementary as a first grader. I had finally made it to school with my older siblings. My sister and I attended Alton and my older siblings, a sister and brother, attended Longview Middle which was just a block away or just up a hill in back of our school. I enjoyed the walk home from school; it was the first time seeing the neighborhood as a walker. The small framed Black and white houses appeared a lot bigger, now, than when I passed them in cars. There were a few brown stone houses here and there. The streets were longer too, and I was hesitant about crossing Lauderdale because of the traffic. It seemed a lot wider walking across than riding down the street in car. With my oldest sister holding my hand, I soon overcame my fear.

My oldest sister cuddled and pampered me as child; I always had the best of times with her. She wrapped me up and carried me around, and she always attended my tea parties. I had a pink and white tea set with a matching pot. For my tea parties, I often used or wasted over my mom’s Lipton tea with lemon flavor. I only drank tea if it had lemon flavor. When my mom stopped buying the lemon-flavored tea my tea parties stopped. I then focused on my paper dolls. I loved my paper dolls and all I needed was one because I could produce more myself. When I graduated to Barbie dolls, I started designing my dolls clothes and making the dolls clothes myself.

One winter it got cold and my doll didn’t have a coat. I wanted her to have a beautiful winter coat, so I created a pattern that called for fur. My mom had a nice coat with a fur collar. I thought she should share the fur with my doll. I clipped a few sections off the collar of the coat. My mom also sewed, so I borrowed swatches of material out of her sewing box. That year I made my doll a beautiful royal blue coat with a black fur collar. After I witnessed my mom’s distress at the missing fur on her coat collar, I decided not to show her the beautiful coat I made
for my doll. I didn’t tell her until I was well into adulthood what happened to the collar of her coat.

The last summer we spent on Shawnee, my older siblings were left to watch me and my sister, who’s a year and a half older than me. We generally used this time to snoop and go through my parent’s things. Like, we found my dad’s gun in his drawer and dared the other one, to touch it. We never picked it up, just to touch it was a major feat. We also found my Dad’s Old Charter. We never drank it, just tasted it – it was burning hot to the tongue. I realized then, how he could walk outside on a cold day without an overcoat, after drinking Old Charter, he was warming up from the inside out. Although, my dad drank, and consumed the heavy stuff, I never saw him drunk. I probably witnessed him being high but thought this was just the fun side of him. On Fridays, he’d come home with a bag full of goodies from Dolly Madison: assorted pies, doughnuts and Susie Q’s. Sometimes he’d make us his famous hot spaghetti, or we’d have cheeseburger night with homemade French fries and coke or sprite. This was special and only happened on Fridays because my mom didn’t believe in feeding us junk food.

I never suffered from lack of attention or love in the early development of my life. While my siblings and I fought and had differences of opinion, I was raised with them and always had their companionship which helped to sensitize me to other people. I also had my mom at home with me during the early stages of my development.

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The second day of my eleventh-grade year in high school, I walked into my American History class late. I recall the familiar smell of pencil lead, paper, and human flesh mixing and lingering in the air, my head down looking at the ugly beige speckled tile floor, late again for my first class
of the day. I was an awkward long leg skinny kid with acne. My teacher, Coach Malone, never stopped lecturing. He usually smiled and nodded, acknowledging the late comer, but never stopped the lesson. I eased into my desk which was the first seat on the third-row middle ways of the class.

My attention was divided between the lecture and the young man sitting about three seats behind me. A friend informed me that he asked about me. I was by no means popular. I didn’t hang with a popular crowd and I felt like the least person he’d take an interest in – so why was he asking about me? He also made my morning entrance more complicated. I began to stumble over my feet and drop books as I entered the class. He may have been the reason I started pulling my hair out on the right side of my head – a nervous reaction to the unwanted attention I received from him each morning. He also caused me to get to class on time a lot more.

His name, Terrence Jones, a senior, intelligent-uninterested in school. He played bass guitar in a rock band. He smoked weed. His favorite band - Van Halen. Me, I had no clue about hard rock. I listened to R&B but couldn’t tell you who most of the artist were. I attended church every Sunday, choir rehearsal during the week. School was extremely boring to me, but I liked Terrence Jones. My friend Vickie, who had classes with him at the vo-tech. always talked about how fine he was – even before I met him.

Terrence was bold. I didn’t know any black teens playing in a rock band. He appeared to live life on his own terms and didn’t care about the opinions of others. I was an artsy kid but had long ago given up that part of me. I had long ago given up writing – even though I still journaled and wrote off and on. I never considered being a writer. I certainly never attempted to draw or paint even though I loved creating my own patterns and making my own doll clothes when I was younger – but as I got older, I took on more practical stuff like being a teenager and hanging out
with other teens. I believe this is what really captivated my attention towards Terrence. He was bold. A young black teenager, in a rock band, living his life on the edge, smoking weed – that thrilled me. This was 1980 -1981 school year. As I adjusted to my early morning American History class and my classmate seated several seats behind me, as long as I was on time for class, his presence didn’t bother me because once class started my focus was on the material. My attention peaked around information about civil rights and African American History.

I remember in grade school when the TV schedule was printed in the newspaper, I searched it for movies like the Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman or Roots. These were the only movies or pictures on TV that gave me any indication that my ancestors existed in time – even though it was limited. While most schools provided information during black history month, it was usually limited and didn’t reach further than the Civil Rights Movement and even then there was only time for focus on a few: Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, I don’t think Malcolm X was even mentioned.

In the early 70’s when the encyclopedia salesmen came a knocking, my mama ordered a set of green Encyclopedia Britannica. She also ordered a brown set of African American Encyclopedias. At the time, I didn’t realize how privileged we were to be able to purchase our history. I often pulled the African American set out and flipped through the pages. When I came upon Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, I attempted to memorize it. I read about George Washington Carver discovering the peanut. I’m not sure now how far reaching the five or six books went back, but I don’t recall a lot about the enslaved in it. That’s why when movies like The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman and Roots were aired, we waited with anticipation.
The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman was intriguing because she started the story when she was a girl near the end of the Civil War. For me, a little black girl, who wanted to know more about history and see more people like herself in history, it was amazing and horrifying watching young Jane’s progression from the of the end of the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movement, especially watching Big Laurel and the other freed slaves ambushed as Jane and Ned hid, watching the brutal slayings. While I always knew the movie was fictional, I also knew this was somebody’s truth.

Ms. Jane Pittman (Cicely Tyson) was always my favorite actor. My favorite scene, I’m not sure why, or maybe it’s just the most memorable moment when she asks the white man, “Can you kill my boy? Can you kill my boy?” and he replies, “Yes Miss Jane I can kill your boy.” This white man had been a friend to her. Fly fished with her. Ate at her table. He was a bounty hunter. Her son Ned had been run out of town when he was seventeen for organizing black resistance. He returned twenty years later with a wife and daughter to teach the people and the whites didn’t take to his interference with their oppressive ways. So a bounty was placed on Ned.

Whenever my siblings and I watched emotionally charged scenes, we’d watch each other – who was the weak link. Who would break into tears? We had to be strong. Even when Ned was shot down, and I hurt for Ms. Jane, I knew I couldn’t cry. When a lone tear escaped from my left eye, I wiped it away, quick, so no one saw me. Sometimes I’d get up and go to the bathroom so that no one would see me cry. Black girls had to learn to be strong, if you cried at a fictional scene in a movie – you surely couldn’t face the hard world, could you? In 1971, when this movie was released, I was about seven years old. My family had just taken part in integrating a white neighborhood in Memphis, Tennessee - Westwood. We were excited to watch the movie on a
black and white Magnavox TV with home cooked popcorn. The first time we saw a movie adaptation of slavery.

When Coach Malone began his lecture on the Emancipation Proclamation, I often thought about Miss Jane and the soldier who gave her that name. He questions her about how she’d been treated as a slave. Told her to come to Ohio as if he was gonna help her. I remember when she and Big Laura and the other blacks on the plantation took off for freedom – trying to be careful to avoid the pattirolers. But what is freedom – without protection from those who robbed you of it in the first place. It seems that the constitutional laws of the land have always failed Black people. They appear to work against us. Freed us to the brutal force of Jim Crow Laws.

When Terrence asked me out, it wasn’t my first date, but the first time that someone with whom I was infatuated with had asked for a date. I had to ask my mother. I had to prepare her for him. Unfortunately, one of my siblings knew of him because he had dated one of her classmates, and I think this information was passed on to my mother. Needless to say, my mother was not impressed with him, but she allowed me to go out with him.

The first meeting with him and my family, was disastrous. The evening of his first visit, I think all of my siblings were home, and some even had their significant other there. Our living room was furnished with a couch and two high back chairs. When Terrence knocked on the door, and I answered, he entered a room filled with my siblings and nowhere for him to sit. My mom had been in her bedroom napping. I introduced him to my siblings and called out to my mother. While awaiting her entrance, no one moved to give him a seat. We stood in the center of the room, as my siblings stared and sized him up. I never asked how he felt about the inquest, but I
was embarrassed by my sibling’s behavior. We had a den. They did not need to congregate in the living room.

When my mom finally entered the room, her hair was sticking straight up on her head. I could have just died, but I just stood there. I’d forgotten what time it was. It was already after nine. He was late. After passing pleasantries, my mom said, “You’re not trying to go anywhere this late, are you? You have to be back in by 11?” That didn’t bother Terrence he simply said, “No, ma’am.” I went back outside with him. We sat on the porch and talked for a while and then he left. He knew I was embarrassed, but he brushed it off. I think this is another reason he was so endearing; my rude family didn’t ruffle his feathers.

Terrence and I also were in drama together. We were in a play together. I can’t remember now the name of the play. I recall not wanting to be in the play and was so obstinate about playing the role that I didn’t learn the lines until the last minute, and then forgot one of my lines the day of the performance. I was so embarrassed that I couldn’t hear the person reading the lines and since I was talking to Terrence on stage, he improvised and saved me from a potentially embarrassing moment.

He and I went out for a while. There was never anything sexual between us. For one, I knew of his track record with other girls because I had a friend who made sure I was informed. While he definitely spiked my hormonal levels, I wasn’t ready for a sexual relationship. I was too young to take that dive. There were some challenging moments because I really liked him, but he was respectful of my decision and never forced the issue. The only thing that passed between us were some very hot kisses. We remained friends many years after I graduated college. As a matter of fact, when I left for college, he moved to Detroit with his band, and invited me to visit. I refused for many reasons – the main reason – I needed to stay focused.
When I graduated high school, a friend and I were enlisted in the Navy on the buddy system. She became pregnant and that left me without a buddy. I made my mind up to go alone but the program I enrolled in was backlogged; I was placed on delayed entry. During this time, several colleges sent information to me regarding their programs. Waiting an entire year to attend boot camp was too long. I asked my Mom if it was possible for me to attend Columbia College in Columbia, Missouri. I think the thought excited both of us. She and I got busy sending in information and preparing. I was accepted. My Mom worked a lot of overtime to help with expenses and fees. The summer of 1982, we went to visit and in the fall I enrolled.

Before I left for school, my mom took me shopping. She thought I needed more clothes. We went to a boutique and purchased suits and dressy outfits for my college attire; I wanted jeans and t-shirts. I asked her where she thought I was going. Her response was that I needed to look nice and this was how college students dressed. It took me a while before I made enough money from work-study to do a wardrobe makeover.

So, I grew up Baptist, but because my mother sent me to college in dresses several of the black students thought I was Pentecostal. While walking across campus one day, a male student approached me; I don’t recall now what he said, but I took offense and responded. His response to me was, “you’re not sanctified. “

“You wearin all those dresses, you’re not sanctified.”

“If the only reason you think I’m sanctified is because of my dresses you have no clue what it means.”

“My mother is sanctified and she …”

“She’s not perfect,” I replied
I exchanged words with him for a minute and then walked away. This was clearly my mom’s fault for sending me to school in dresses. I had disillusioned this boy because he based my sanctification on my dresses. I became angry at something he said and I said something that no Christian girl should have. I have no clue what I said, but it probably matched whatever crazy comment he made to me. I was getting better, but God’s work in the area of my thinking before responding in a like matter was still an area that needed much attention.

After the first month in college, I called home, “Mom I want to come home, I don’t like it.”

“What’s wrong,” she asked?

“I just want to come home.”

“Tell you what, why don’t you stay until the semester is over, and if you still feel that way, you don’t have to return.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When the winter break came, I was excited to return home. When it was over, I was excited to return to Columbia College. The following Spring, I was on the modeling board of my college. The Spring show was a presentation of wedding gowns, lingerie and swimsuits. My fittings with the lingerie and swimsuits went well, but during the fittings for the wedding gowns, I noticed that the black models were only fitted for the bridesmaid’s dresses. I questioned the attendant working with us why none of the black models were being fitting for the wedding gowns. When she could not give me a reasonable answer, I decide not to participate in that part of the fashion show. My friends thought I had lost my mind. They were like, “Are you really not participating?” No, I am not participating.” I changed from the bridesmaid gown and left.
walked back to campus. Went to the director of the modeling board. Told her what happened and that I would not take part in the wedding gown portion of the show because I thought it was racist. She was speechless. But when my midterm grade was posted, she gave me a “B” for not participating. I was outraged and insulted. I marched to her office, mad, and laughing to keep from blowing a gasket in my head. Her door was opened and she ushered me in. I entered and went straight to the purpose of my visit.

“Why did you give me a “B” after I told you what happened?”

“It’s just a midterm grade.”

“It’s my midterm grade.” I walked out of her office laughing, stood outside for a moment and then re-entered. She looked at me strange. She agreed to change the grade. In 1982, I attended a predominantly white Christian College. This was one of my first, in your face, racists’ experiences. I think the most disconcerting part, as a Black person, is to witness White people you know, draw the line in the sand and unite against you because they’re white. I had no respect for my professor afterwards, but I had to interact with her. It’s as my grandmother used to say, “Tread lightly while in the lion’s mouth.”

What I learned in my first years of college? Ramen noodles are a meal. It’s not necessary to eat three times a day, not even twice. Don’t eat Thursday’s meal because it’s a combination of whatever Monday – Wednesdays was ugh…a dangerous casserole of some sort. Be on time for Steak and Shrimp on Friday nights. People are often not what they appear to be – go home and meet the family. Being Black at a predominantly White college is...
Dear Robert,

I made your letter last even though you were the first born. I did it because you have always stayed behind with me to make sure your siblings crossed over. I owe you and your siblings’ apologies. I’ve made some bad decisions and you all have reaped the consequences. I knew before you were born that your father and I weren’t going to make it. Two years into the marriage I wanted, actually, I had decided to leave, but let someone talk me into staying. I stayed fifteen years too long and in that time you, especially, because you were the oldest, saw and heard a lot more than I ever wanted you too. I wish I could undo all the harm. I know you will never admit it and you always tell me, I did the best I could in the situations we encountered, but still I wanted so much more for you and your siblings. I wanted for you, what I didn’t have, a home with two loving parents.

You were my first baby. I had no clue what to do with you. You were a good baby before everyone started holding you. I remember one day your father’s mother (Granny Mable) called and you were screaming your head off. The doctor informed me, the only way to make you content with being in your crib again, was to let you cry. Well, she told everybody that I was abusing you because you looked like her. I told her I had no problem with distinguishing you from her. If I wanted to hurt her, it would be her that received my retribution, not my baby because regardless of who you looked like, I loved you. Plus, she was a good-looking lady, just had a bad attitude and that’s not inheritable.

You have always brought me so much joy. When you were a baby, you looked like a doll. I think I need to post a pic. You have always been so handsome. We differ in opinion as to how I dressed you. I thought it was very preppy. You thought it was girlish. Nonetheless, you were so precious to my heart then and still are now. I remember when you were just an arm baby, I was walking out of the Sears store in Whitehaven Mall, in Memphis, Tennessee, and a
woman came out of nowhere and asked if she could have you. That was so strange, and it frightened me to my core. I gave her a look that said “don’t F--- with me and my baby.” Forgive me my Christian friends but that was what I was thinking, and she walked away.

As bad parenting goes, I remember once putting you in the car and seat belting you in while I loaded the groceries in the car, but I forgot to unlock the doors. You can imagine when the door closed behind me, my response. A man in the parking lot saw what happened and unlocked the door with a hanger. I also remember you playing a joke on me once. I went to the mailbox and you closed the wrought iron door behind me. You laughed when I asked you to open the door, to your surprise and my horror, you couldn’t open the door.

I remember when you were about three or four years old. You and Granny were standing in the checkout line at a grocery store, and a lady said to you, “You are so handsome,” and you replied, “My name is Robert.” Granny tried to explain to you that the lady was complementing you, but you were adamant about both calling you by your name. When you and Granny returned to the car, she said to you, “Lil Robert you don’t understand, the lady was saying something nice to you.” I imagine it took you a moment to think it through because when Granny pulled up in the driveway at home, you looked at her and said, “Granny you don’t understand. My name is Robert.” You were too serious.

Most of the time, you were such a serious child I wasn’t sure what to think. You’d call me on the carpet about laughing so much, especially if you thought I was laughing at someone, which I wasn’t. “Mommy, why are you laughing?” I was like “Lord this child is so serious about life; he’s going to give himself a heart attack,” but you were such a delight. I remember when you turned five-years-old. You were a finicky eater. That weekend, after Sunday service, we decided to eat out. It was at an all you can eat restaurant. I refused to pay for you because I knew
you wouldn’t eat. Children under five ate free. When the lady at the register asked, “How old is he?” I said, “He’s four.” You looked at me, and then looked at her and replied, “I five. Mommy, you told me I was five.” Lesson learned.

You were such a happy child, serious, but happy. You loved Fozzie Bear from The Muppets Show. You attempted to emulate him by sharing his jokes.

“Why did the chicken cross the road?”

“I don’t know.”

“Because he wanted to get to the other side.”

While the joke wasn’t funny, the fact that you were attempting to be, and break that serious nature that you had, was hilarious. We would fall out laughing because it was so unlike the little serious boy who often called us on the carpet. I asked you, “Robert, did you notice that the other Muppets throw tomatoes at Fozzie Bear?” My question went totally over your head. You kept telling the jokes and made the jokes you attempted even funnier.

You remember your first day of school? We lived in a mixed neighborhood, but the neighbors around us were mostly White people. We had never discussed colorism or race. I’m sure now, after all we’ve endured, I should have, but back then I thought, not sure why, but we as a nation had progressed, and it was no need to. Anyway, you came home and told me, “Mommy, you and Robyn are White like my teacher. I’m Black like Dad?” I was so astonished. I wasn’t sure what to say. I couldn’t believe you didn’t know that we were Black too, but I hadn’t taught you about colorism or race. I think I had gotten too comfortable with my middle-class lifestyle, and or maybe the world around us seemed to have changed. My home life was so overwhelming I hadn’t taught you about race and colorism, but you learned it without me introducing you. Every time someone approached us and commented on your sibling’s eyes and how cute they
were but never said a word to you, you felt the pinch of colorism and that stuck with you longer than any compliment or encouragement ever did. I wish I had paid more attention to that then. It was only when you told me twenty plus years later that I realized your pain. I only wish you had known then that you didn’t need light colored eyes – you were always a light to me and your family.

It was such a joy to watch you grow. All the teachers loved you. They were so amazed at how smart you were. Remember your fourth-grade teacher, Mrs. Kessie? She couldn’t stop taking about you during the parent teacher conferences. When I became angry with your fifth-grade teacher Mrs. Lamars, because she suggested we have you tested for ADD. Mrs. Kessie convinced me not to withdraw you from her class because she was one of the best fifth grade teachers in the school. I told Mrs. Lamars, if your father and I felt you needed to be tested, we would make that decision. Then when you took the state achievement test and scored in the high ninety percentile in all of your subjects, Mrs. Lamars said, “I didn’t realize I had a genius in my class.”

When you caught pneumonia in the sixth grade, I realized my limits as a parent? The doctor said you only had it in one lung and that I could take you home. He would have hospitalized you had it been in both lungs. You were in so much pain that it hurt you to breathe. I was scared to leave you alone. I slept in your room at night to monitor your breathing until breathing became easy, without the pain. After that, I told you to take your coat off at school. You kept your coat on because you didn’t like the way I dressed you. By the time school let out you were hot and sweaty. That’s probably how you caught pneumonia. You won. I started to allow you to select your clothes. Lesson learned.
By this time, the tension between your Dad and I was pretty high. I was angry when he missed family events. I remember when you wanted to be a boy scout. It never failed that whenever he was supposed to attend a meeting with you, he missed it. You didn’t want me to attend because all the other boys had their Dads. I remember when you decided you didn’t want to be a boy scout anymore. I was offended too. I know your father didn’t mean any harm. He thought all he needed to do was provide financially. He didn’t realize what it meant for us to have him in attendance.

But then maybe being a boy scout wasn’t your thing. I remember when you started playing with a little league basketball team. You were so excited. Your arms appeared to be as long as your legs, and you were tall. The coach said you’d grow into your limbs. He was right. You turned out to be a great player. I had no clue about basketball, but you had found something you appeared to be passionate about, and I was glad.

I remember in 2002 or 2003, I wanted to enroll you and your sister in the optional school program because you both excelled in the regular school curriculum. I stood outside the board of education, on a dark cold rainy winter morning – it was about four o’clock. I had to get there early in order to get a number to register. I think they started giving numbers out at eight. It was first come first served. I remember when I arrived, people had camped outside, some left empty lawn chairs to hold their spaces in the line. It was crazy, but I got you and Robyn enrolled in the optional school program. I didn’t realize that that pressure along with those at home would be so overwhelming for you.

Your last year at the middle school became a challenge. Your father and I, by then, had decided to divorce. Your grades went south. Your disposition changed. I had no clue how to help you. You withdrew and nothing fazed you. The only thing I could leverage to get your attention
was to pull you off the basketball team, and I hated doing that, but I had to because you wouldn’t do your schoolwork. I felt like home life had become too overwhelming for you. As much as I tried to protect you from the casualty of divorce – I think I failed. I didn’t want you to stop being a child, living a carefree life.

I withdrew you from public school during that time to home school you? I was desperate. I had no clue how to help you. When I didn’t know what to do, I think I made it worse trying to fix it, but no matter what, you were never disrespectful. You didn’t raise your voice. You didn’t refuse to go to school. You didn’t cut school. You just couldn’t do it anymore and that’s why I pulled you out. I wanted to relieve some of the pressure. I may have made it worse. It was probably a bad idea to home school, but we survived. One day you came to me and said, “Peter Pan is ready to return.”

For a long time, I was concerned about the effect the divorce had on you. The oldest child sometimes gets a raw deal in divorces. The adults expect for them to understand more than a kid should. The younger siblings look to them as secondary parents while they themselves struggle to understand, :What the heck is happening?” I wasn’t the first born, but I remember my oldest sister always stepping up for us, and that’s exactly what you did for your siblings and they knew you would protect them.

You all were full of mischief. It wasn’t too bad. You didn’t burn the house down or anything. I remember you and Robyn using a twin mattress to slide down the steps. I remember the time you all made water balloons and water ran everywhere in the upstairs bathroom, as a matter of fact, I think it ran down to the downstairs bathroom too. I remember you all jumping up and down on my new bed and breaking one of the slats. Anything else you all kept it a secret. I imagine when you became teenagers it was probably a lot worse, but I wasn’t privy to any of it.
That’s the best part I think about having siblings, the secrets you keep from your parents and the bonds you make.

I do regret taking you to Idaho. Only because I think it did a lot more damage than good. I was trying to protect you all from being pawns in an ugly divorce and maybe took you to a worse environment. I actually liked Moscow, but you hated it. I wasn’t sure why. I thought it was more diverse than other places, especially since we were on the University’s campus. I was glad when we moved to Idaho Falls, you found friends or acquaintances, I won’t make assumptions, but you found people to hang out with. I had my reservations.

When you started drawing and painting in junior high school, I was like where did this kid get this ability from? I was crafty as a kid. I made patterns for my doll’s clothes, but never attempted to sketch and draw. Ok, kids have the ability to make their parents look really foolish, and I sometimes stepped right into that pothole. When your art teacher gave you low grades, it was because he knew you could do better, and you refused to take the challenge. I wasn’t sure who to be angry with, you or him, because that one piece of art was to me, then an observer, very good, but to your art teacher, who was more than an observer and knew your ability, done with very little effort on your part. I realize now, after taking an art class, he was probably right, you had the ability to do more than good work – it could have been exceptional.

You are so gifted. I am never too surprised at what you do. I think most artists have multiple talents and it’s sometimes difficult to decide which one to pour your passion into. For many years, I thought it was basketball because you were an exceptional player, but life happened. Robyn got sick and our worlds were turned upside down and I know it affected every part of you, as it did the rest of us, although you never voiced it or showed it – always our rock.

Before Robyn’s stroke, I was so excited about attending all of you all’s functions – it was the
highlight of my life. I’d leave work to make a track meet or basketball game, or whatever activity you all took part in.

We all enjoyed your high school basketball games. I wasn’t that knowledgeable of basketball, but you all pulled me in. Robyn was your greatest cheerleader, and when a referee called a foul on you, that she thought was unwarranted, she’d scream, “Why don’t you use your eyes Ref!” I’d admonish her to sit down before she got you thrown out of the game. She was always screaming and shouting on the sidelines or in the bleachers.

When the neurologist in Idaho Falls gave her that drug, he destroyed all of our lives. He took away more than I can ever voice. I didn’t know much about basketball but looked forward to learning about it through you all. That night I asked you to carry her to the van because she couldn’t walk, I didn’t realize that emergency room visit would change the rest of our lives. I thought we would be right back. When I returned the next morning, with the news that she was seriously ill and being flown to a Children’s Hospital in Salt Lake City, and that I needed you to call Pastor and stay with them until we returned, you like always, were calm. I can’t imagine your fear, I know it had to be difficult. I don’t remember a lot of that morning. Just asking you and your brother to go to Pastor’s because I knew they would care for you in my absence.

My heart hurts just writing this because I wasn’t there to help ease the hurt, anguish and confusion you and your bother must have felt. You had to have the same questions I had. How could this be? Just yesterday you were laughing and joking, or arguing over something that was so inconsequential, now, today, she’s being airlifted to a hospital and the prognosis is she could die enroute. The latter part I didn’t tell you, but I know you had questions that I couldn’t answer at that moment because I only had a few moments to gather clothes as I gave you instructions.
You are the greatest big brother. Your little brother often talks about how well you handle
difficult situations. The week the medical team gave up on Robyn and suggested the family make
their final visits, I was against them bringing you and Rodrick. I didn’t want you two to see her
that way: swollen head, swollen eye sockets, swollen mouth, swollen neck, everything swollen.
She did not look like the sister you’d last seen. Even though I was against it, when I saw you two
walk through the doors of the waiting room, you did my heart well. I needed to see you two to
give me hope. I understood when you decided not to see her in that condition. I would have
fought anyone who challenged your decision. You wanted to remember the sister that yelled at
your games, that challenged you, that made the best fried chicken at thirteen-years-old that any
adult could prepare. That’s the sister you wanted to see and remember.

When it was time for you two to return home, I was so torn, but Granny was going back
with you and I knew you’d be fine in her care. I wanted your lives to continue. I knew it would
be difficult without Robyn and me, but I needed for you to continue to live until we returned. I
needed you two to believe that we both would return. I told you we would, that God had
promised me we would and to trust that.

I realize now, why I don’t often write you and your brother into my essays because it
reminds me of the pain my heart endured at being separated from you two. No matter what had
happened in our lives up to the point of Robyn’s illness, we had never been separated. I had
always been there to protect all of you. Yet in one of the most traumatic times in all of our lives,
you all were hundreds of miles away. Remembering it all, all of the mind over matter that my
brain had to force my heart to work through to survive those moments, to keep from bashing my
head into a wall, the numbing pain was overwhelming then, and recalling it is still painful.
I missed so much of your last two years in high school. I am grateful for your coaches and parents who stepped in for me, to cover you. Christmas of 2007, your basketball coach reached out to me in the hospital and requested I get wish lists from you all, and they covered them. While our hearts were breaking, there were people who cared, who stood by our sides trying to keep us together, I am eternally grateful to them. Someone else reached out and also brought gifts, I can’t remember everyone. I know that Ms. Tamara organized a huge benefit which kept us floating financially for a while. Despite the horror the doctor caused and corrupt political system we faced in Idaho Falls, the people in our community were there in our most challenging moment.

I often sat by Robyn’s bedside in the hospital, especially when I knew you had games, and imagined you on the basketball court dunking, making free throws and stealing the ball from the other team. Granny would call me with updates and sometimes I could find articles about the games. It pained me to not be there, but I consoled myself by focusing on the improvements your sister was gaining each day. But there were times when I found it difficult to encourage and console myself. I remember the game when seniors and their parents were recognized, and I couldn’t be there for you. The mother of one of your friends stood in my stead. There are no words for my pain at that moment, missing that time with you. One of most important time periods of your life, I missed.

I also wonder about the yearbook incident, if I handled it right. If I should have filed a lawsuit. Was the advising teacher indeed that out of touch to allow a racial slur to appear in the yearbook under your name? Even if the students said they’d asked you about the statement, which they didn’t, shouldn’t she have consulted you since you would be the one offended. White people? Was an apology enough? Who cared about the refund? I considered requesting a
retraction of the yearbooks, but by the time I was informed they were distributed. I also scolded you about playing around in school with friends - playing the dozen. I still think they should have known better than publish something that was said between a friend and you. I honestly felt that the people pushing making a public example of the teacher were doing it more for political reasons. She was a white woman. She wasn’t Mormon. Since she didn’t appear to fall in that dominant group, they could use her as their sacrificial lamb. You said you wanted to forget about it. Let it go. I was angry, worn and tired from all our life issues. I let it go.

I was glad when you graduated. I wanted you to get out of Idaho. I was excited and sad you were leaving us for college, but I wanted you to experience the adventures of life. We enjoyed taking you to Massachusetts and seeing a part of what your world would be like. I loved the eastern coast. The colonial styled houses. It was awesome to see how the east has sustained the vintage atmosphere of the past. As an artist, I still love traveling through the eastern coast cities. Anyway, your first stop was an additional year of high school at Exeter, which I thought would be good in preparing you for college, but you are such a stubborn child. That’s all I’m gonna say about that. It was great to experience another graduation.

Oh, do you remember when we traveled to Boston to drop you off in New Hampshire? You and your brother almost got us evicted from our hotel room. It was partly my fault too. I was watching you two play. Jumping up and down and wrestling on the bed and falling on the floor. I hadn’t seen you too that playful and carefree in a while. It was like getting a small semblance of our lives back. We had been through so much, to be traveling together on such a happy adventurous occasion, I was thrilled watching your excitement. When the hotel manager knocked on the door, I couldn’t pretend ignorance at not knowing why he was there. I apologized and closed the door. We all laughed like guilty teenagers, and I instructed you two to stop.
I also remember getting lost after dropping you off at Regis College your freshman year. When we returned to the hotel, we decided to find the beach, which was supposedly a mile from the hotel, according to the hotel concierge. The GPS, which I had never used before, kept taking me through roundabouts, which I wasn’t familiar with, and I got tired and decided to find it myself, which I hadn’t a clue, but I figured if it was just a mile away, I could find it. We ended up on Harvard’s campus which was probably about fifteen miles from our hotel. We did find a hot wing place and decided that would be our dinner and adventure for the evening. I decided to follow the GPS back to the hotel.

I enjoyed reading the excerpts about your college team. I was so proud when you were awarded Rookie of the Year. It was a challenge sending you to Regis, but I wanted you to keep moving. It was difficult after Robyn’s stroke. The financial impact was severe. We had to move from our home into a small apartment. We had to give up some unnecessary pleasures that we once could afford. I hadn’t planned on it being that difficult when you went to college. I borrowed more money than I would have in student loans to finance my graduate degree, but I needed it to sustain us and to make sure I was able to support Robyn’s therapy and you and your brother.

I was disappointed when you decided not to return to Regis College your junior year, but later, I was glad that you were with us in California. I wouldn’t have been able to sustain us in California without you. I remember you saying, “Mom, you can’t go to California with them by yourself.” I only agreed if you promised to return to school once we were settled. Your siblings brag about you being a great big brother; you are also a great oldest child. There are so many moments that I know we wouldn’t have made it without you, and I am thankful to God for such a loving young man.
Parents error too. You have my admission in writing. I recall the morning of our last day in Idaho Falls, I had taken your siblings to Memphis about a month earlier, and you and I had to empty the apartment. You had enlisted the help of a few friends. Only one showed up, the one I wasn’t too happy with because it was his comment that appeared in the yearbook. You had often told me he was really a good friend. He was the only one. I was surprised he returned the second day. You both were so worn out. Yes, indeed, he proved to be a good friend.

As much as I regret you dropping out of college your junior year, you were a great moral and financial support to your siblings and me. I think we were all naïve about the move to California and the challenges we would meet. Homelessness was certainly not one we considered, but we lived through it together and worked our way out. You were determined not to return to Memphis. You never complained about anything and there was nothing that your siblings needed that you didn’t make sure they had. Yes, they had child support from your Dad, but he didn’t supply anything extra, and you were always there for any additional needs they had.

I think it’s amazing that the little serious boy who loved Fozzie Bear is now a stand-up comedian. When I look at your Facebook and Instagram accounts and see the many shows you’re invited to, I laugh remembering the little boy you once were. But really you haven’t changed that much. The hardship taught you humility, but basically, you’re still quite serious, kind and love comedy. I guess I’ll lay my pen down now. You all have made me a proud mother.

Love always,

Mom
The Struggles of the Women Who Influenced Me

I’ve often wondered if there was something wrong with me. Like, if there is some kind of chemical imbalance in my brain which would explain the reasons I find it difficult to back down. I’m not a bully or someone who would start a fight, but it is very difficult for me to walk away when I feel violated or when I see someone else violated. I am the fourth child – baby girl of a family of five children. My little brother came along six years later. My mom stayed at home with me for a while. We watched soap operas together: Love of Life, Search for Tomorrow and As the World Turns. I can’t recall anything on the soap operas that would cause my imbalance.

In 1964, the year of my birth, the country was going through a lot of unrest. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed into law. “The worst of white folks” as Kiese Laymon refer to them were now violating the law by discriminating against people based on their race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. But as we well know, laws do not detour the worst of white folks. Segregation continued to be a major problem throughout the South. Emmett Till would have just turned twenty-three July 25th, the day before my birth, had he not been lynched August 28, 1955. June 21, 1964, thirty-five days before my birth, three Freedom Riders, civil rights activists, were killed by the Klu Klux Klan (KKK).

Is it ironic that a White Baptist minister who’s also a member of the KKK organized the group of Klansmen who intercepted the three freedom riders, who had been held in jail on charges that warranted a fine, not jail time? Is it also not surprising that the deputy sheriff joined the group. It appears that this minister wasn’t aware or disregarded the requirement to do justly and love mercy and to walk humbly with his God. The worst of the white folks seem to believe they are above the laws of God and those of the nation.
Emmett Till, a young Black boy from Chicago, full of life and pranks had no clue about the rules of the Jim Crow South. In a perfect world he would have been safe to freely laugh, joke, and even whistle at a woman, certainly a whistle shouldn’t have brought a death sentence. But he was in the most segregated and dangerous part of the U.S for a Black boy. The cost was his disfigured body tied to a 75-pound cotton gin thrown into the Tallahatchie River. The cost to his mother and family can never be tallied and the white men who destroyed his body – his life, were tried and freed because the all-White jury couldn’t be certain that the mutilated body discovered in the river was that of the one the two White men had beat and mutilated. They also didn’t believe the crime of killing a black boy warranted the just punishment of jail time for the two White men.

I asked my mom was she concerned about raising children or giving birth to me at such a time in history, she said, “No, I was trying to navigate my way out of a bad marriage and every time I had a mind to leave, I was pregnant again.” She married my Dad when she was seventeen and pregnant with my sister – that was in 1960. My older three siblings and I are what some call stair step. We rolled in right behind each other. My Dad was dark and tall. He had big eyes, not scary big eyes but easy on the eyes, big eyes. He was probably considered a good catch, but the truth is nobody really ever caught him. He was not the settling down type, even with a wife and five children.

When my parents divorced, my Dad remarried. I think his second wife had the same problem as my mom had with him, a restless spirit. At his funeral, we found someone who we were told was a cousin is actually a brother. I have an older brother born near the time of my oldest sister, the brother I thought was a cousin was born about the time of my second oldest brother and my middle sister. Another sister born between my little brother and myself. The
latter sister grew up with us. Well not in the same house, but my mom allowed us to build a relationship with her. My mom’s logic was children shouldn’t pay for adult mistakes.

During the early part of the twentieth century the Black woman was still fighting for some semblance of agency. Oftentimes Black female literary writers during this time were censured for writing manuscripts that reflected the struggle of the black female instead of that of race relations, but the truth is the Black woman experienced more abuse from within the Black community at this time than without. She was still expected to hold up the race. To keep her pain silent to protect the Black man who’d switched places with the White plantation master. She pledged allegiance to her race and gave up her rights of life liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

When Zora Neale Hurston appeared on the scene in the twenties; she focused her writing on the lives of Black folks. Zora Neale Hurston bucked the system and wrote folk lore that exposed the abuse and struggles of the black woman. While her novel “There Eyes Were Watching God” was published in 1937, the struggles black women faced then were still prevalent when my mother was a teen. Black women were still used as workhorses, still denied their right to explore life. Their rights were still tied to those of the Black man. In Their Eyes the protagonist Janie is forced by her grandmother to marry a man she doesn’t love, but one whom her grandmother deems a good catch because he has a house and land. What her grandmother failed to realize is that the man had other plans for Janie. After Janie’s grandmother died, he purchased a horse for Janie so that she could help plow the fields. Janie, knowing his intentions, ran off with another man.

My grandmother was in her late teens when Hurston published Their Eyes. I wonder if she read Hurston. The character Janie replicated the struggles of many Southern Black women. My mom said my grandmother ranked high in her class; her principle even commended her on
her high scores in school. As much as I loved my grandfather, and I know he did all that he
could to provide for his family, for my grandmother, an educated woman, the cotton field had to
feel like a prison sentence. The character Janie, *In Their Eyes*, did what I imagine many Black
women trapped on farms dreamed of, she ran away to escape becoming a workhorse. I can only
imagine the mental anguish every morning my grandmother arose to a bright new day, knowing
she had abilities that far reached the acres of white cotton balls, yet, her lot had been set. She
arose before day break each morning preparing breakfast for her family, afterwards she and her
children marched to the cotton field and filled the bag attached to their waist with soft white
round balls pulled from the boll of the plant which pricked their fingers, cut their hands and
drained their souls.

Like many Black women who weren’t able to attend college, my grandmother used her
talents in other ways. My mom said she had the prettiest garden and that people often talked
about it when they visited. I remember my grandmother’s yard when I was a child. It was filled
with all sorts of flowers. I loved the mint sent of the lavender flower that grew around her porch
and the four o’clock flowers in shades of white, yellow, pink and red that opened about noon and
closed in the late evening.

My grandmother also made patch quilts. I imagine that if my uncle had allowed his
siblings to enter the house after her death, they would have found many air looms stored away.
But being foolish and selfish, he barred them from visiting and the house one day caught fire. It
didn’t burn the entire house, but no one returned to see if there was anything that survived the
fire. I’m sure she kept most of her valuables in trunks. But soon the weeds and trees overtook
what was left of the house. Finally, when the area started to become more gentrified the house
was abolished by developers.
One of my mother’s brothers died when he was a toddler. It was said that my grandmother went into a trance at this time. I know the initial pain and angst of being told my child was going to die, but I don’t know how it feels to actually lose a child. It had to be for her, an impossible burden to bear, and given the era when Black women were still looked upon as means to an economic end, she still had to rise each morning, tie a bag around her waist, greet the blazing sun, and fill her bag with the white cotton balls, while her heart hurt and the memories of her baby boy tormented her. I imagine the voice of a young child reminded her of her loss. The laugh of a young child reminded her of her loss. The very sight of a young boy probably sent her mentally into flight. I know because I lost parts of Robyn and the parts I lost when confronted by another child with those abilities, for a long time tormented my spirit.

The mind is a difficult thing to shut down. I decided in order to move forward with my kids, after Robyn’s near death, to shut the door to the memories, which was difficult because there was always something that reminded me of Robyn’s losses, and I’d wrestle with the flight or fight response often. I suspect my grandmother had to do the same. Sometimes it takes a while before the pleasant memories become pleasant again because at the moment of loss, they become reminders of what was taken from you, and there is no shut off valve to stop them. I had to create an intentional block to stop the brain from continuously reloading the memories.

I imagine for my grandmother the field labor may have become a welcome release because picking cotton probably exhausted her to the point of mindlessness. It was labor in the fields that writers like Fredrick Douglas said robbed the mind of the slave – it was so tedious that you’re too tired to think or consider freedom, and maybe the labor of the field was tedious enough that it kept her from thinking, from remembering, from focusing on her loss.
My grandmother had two sons with intellectual disabilities. She never hid her children which in the Black community it’s not unheard of to find that a family has a relative with a disability stored away in a back room. For a family with sons, the burden had to be heavier because they had to teach my uncles the horror of living in the South under Jim Crow rule. My grandmother had to be fearful each time my uncles ventured out because a smile, a look, or a comment was enough for a mob to kidnap and lynch a black boy. One of my uncles was born in 1939 the other in 1944.

Once, one of my uncles was jailed because he visited an old classmate when she returned home. The white woman had been kind to him when they were classmates. I’m not sure his age when this happened, but apparently my uncle thought they were close enough that he could visit her when she returned home. When he knocked on the family’s door to ask for her, the police were called. He was taken to jail, and my grandfather had to bail him out.

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My grandmother’s mother name is Nellie Jane Baptist (Lil Mama). Before she married my great grandfather, she was a Hill. Her mother was a Gray. She was a small framed person. Her Native American heritage was sketched into her facial bone structure and was very pronounced under her beautiful brown skin. She was born in 1897 and my Lil Daddy (Nedem Baptist) was born in 1899. He was tall and she was petite. My Lil Mama’s family was educated. Both families possessed quite a bit of land. I’ve heard that my Lil Mama’s father made the statement to my Lil Daddy, when he requested her hand in marriage, “That’s a mighty high kick for a low cow.” Nonetheless, she married my Lil Daddy and they had three children, which my grandmother was one of them.
As a child I heard many rumors about my Lil Daddy. I often wonder how it affected my grandmother’s development and choices as a young black woman in the late 20’s and 30’s. In the 1920’s, it was said that my Lil Daddy killed a White man in Mississippi. Some White men which he had associations with, helped him move his family to Arkansas. I am told they lived there until tensions around the murder diminished. He later returned to Mississippi with a white associate, whom it had been agreed would collect the bounty and later split it with him. I am not certain how much time he spent in jail – if any. I have often asked my mother if he was a member of organized crime. My mother’s father and her grandfather on her mother’s side had a business together – making moonshine.

I make some assumptions about my great grandparents. My great grandmother’s parents where educated, Christian people, and she married someone they thought was beneath them. It’s evident by the comment of her father. At this time of prohibition, churches were great supporters of the law prohibiting the sale of liquor because of the affect it had on its parishioners: abusive behaviors, drunkards, etc. I wonder what stigmas my grandmother and her siblings had to overcome because of my great grandfather’s behavior and actions, and I wonder how the church received them. Maybe there was no backlash. Maybe their family’s name, helped the community forgive their brother/ nephew for his sinfulness. My great grandfather’s family actually donated land to build a church in which one his uncles was the pastor. I found this out by searching through the records of land ownership in Mississippi. I do know this was a time when Northern Blacks, especially the church, were pushing respectability and modeling after the dominate culture and the dominate culture pushed prohibition.

As an adult, I have many questions I wish I could ask my grandmother or great grandmother. It had to be difficult to live in the wake of my great grandfather’s reputation. I
wonder how fearful it was for my grandmother as a child to live in a community that was knowledgeable of her father’s background. My mom told me once that when kids connected her to her grandfather, she didn’t have to worry about being picked on because people were afraid of my Lil Daddy. My own father seemed to have great reverence for him.

My mom said that her Dad, actually made the moonshine and was known for making some the best in the area. The years of prohibition started in 1920 and ended about 1933. This is the reason I question if my great grandfather was a part of organized crime and may explain why he was able to get protection from Whites at this time. He is also said to have killed a Black man too, and I am almost certain it had something to do with money and moonshine – almost certain – it may have not.

My mom remembers her father sharing a story about the revenuer’s surprise visit and almost discovery of the distillery. My grandfather saw them before they caught sight of him, and he jumped into the distillery to keep from being caught. I haven’t the privilege of seeing a 1920’s distillery but a google search brought up huge oak barrels that were used to ferment the liquid. I’m assuming my grandfather concealed himself inside the barrel. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives sent enforcement agents, revenuers, out to investigate sightings of distilleries which were prohibited after the passing of the eighteenth amendment. At some point my grandfather gave up the moonshine business and began farming cottoning and other produce. It may be when he married my grandmother.

As a child, my grandmother was larger than life to me – I never considered her as a person with needs. She seemed to be there for everyone else – I never considered she needed anyone – wow that sounds selfish. My mom asked me once, had I ever looked into my grandmother’s eyes. I couldn’t say that I had. I looked at her, but never looked to examine her
emotional state. I just assumed grandmothers were magical beings there to make their grandchildren’s lives bearable. But in closer observation she did appear to have a solemn look – her eyes looked sad even when she was smiling. My mom believes my grandmother never healed from the loss of her child. He became ill and according to my mom, my grandfather’s folks dissuaded her from taking him to the doctor, maybe giving him a potion, they created, and he later died. My mom was told that my grandmother went into a trance after his death.

My mom and I have concluded that she probably had an emotional break down. Losing a child, still living in an era where black women’s emotional health wasn’t regarding., still expected to help my grandfather in his cotton fields, she wasn’t given time to heal or mourn her son’s death. This was in the early nineteenth century, only sixty or seventy years from Emancipation. Black women were still treated as workhorses, especially in the South. But I thank God that she was a praying woman because somehow, she pulled it together. It had to be her belief in God that pulled her through. I imagine life for her was never the same – it couldn’t have been. It never is after losing or experiencing the destruction of a child’s life.

My great grandmother, my grandmother’s mother, would later lose her only son to a suspicious fire in 1972. I believe she was the first one on the scene of the fire. I think the purpose of her visit was to investigate why he wasn’t answering his phone. When she arrived the house was engulfed in flames. His burnt body was discovered near a door or window. I have heard different stories on how he might have died. One was someone robbed him because he had just gotten paid. The other was that he may have agitated someone with his stance on civil rights. I think about my grandmothers, now, their pain and how unbearable it must have been. The world and everything in it seem foreign after a mother loses a child. I didn’t lose all of Robyn. I lost a
part of her but every day I am aware that the thirteen-year-old that I took to the emergency room on October 5, 2007 was not the one I brought home February 22, 2008.

These were the women who made my life as a child special and today I wonder how they managed, especially growing up, living, making mistakes, experiencing trauma, in an Era when respectability politics required the strictest of behaviors and breaking them was cause for expulsion. My Lil Mama didn’t seem the type who’d be concerned with public opinion. She was the liveliest and most radical person I can remember as a child. She was a jokester. My mom often tells of how she embarrassed her once when she pretended to be a scarecrow at her bus stop. When I was in my adolescent years, I remember her drinking moonshine, and when we asked what it was, she replied, “Cow piss.” Of course, that was to discourage us from wanting a sip. I was also told that once a woman came on their property seeking my Lil Daddy, and she pushed the woman in the pond. I can safely say that she was not a woman to be concerned about public opinion.

It’s probable that my grandmother didn’t have the same sentiments as her mom. She taught my mother to be aware of public opinion. She was also aware of and adhered to the church’s social codes, which I’m sure was filtered through my Lil Mama, but I’m certain that it probably didn’t have a great bearing on my Lil Daddy’s household or maybe it did. I believe my grandmother married because she had to it was expected of her, like Janie.

She and my grandfather were very different. He was a farmer. I’m not sure of his education but I don’t think education weighed as heavily with him as did my grandmother. I think if my grandmother hadn’t married, she might have been a writer. My mom often talks of how she wrote poetry and their Easter speeches. She also sewed. I remember her as being very crafty. No doubt my creative skills came from her. She might even have been a nurse. As a youth
she traveled with her Grandma Polly, my Lil Daddy’s mother, delivering babies and she later became a midwife too in the early part of the twentieth century.

I believe my grandfather’s father was white or his father’s father was white. My mom has no knowledge of her father’s father, but they did speak of his mother. He and his siblings were very fair skinned, and some could probably pass for white. I loved both my grandparents, it’s only now that I’m older and that I examine my life and their lives and how their environments influenced their choices and manifested in my life. My mom often speaks of how she had to miss school during the harvest season because she had to pick cotton. She often resented her father for holding her back, but during this era, if a black man rented property from a white southerner who was also profiting from his harvest, it was often demanded that his children and wife be in the field with him. Whites thought very little of black women having the same advantages as white women. This was the South, and this was the Jim Crow Era.

My grandparents were magical beings to me. I never associated them with picking fields of cotton and farm labor. I do remember the old grey house with maybe three rooms and a wood burning stove/heater in the middle of the floor, but what I remember most is the porch. I remember visiting and eating watermelon on the porch and playing in the yard and skipping rocks across the pond and riding the pony. I still love porches and all the houses I’ve ever bought or rented have had porches. There’s something about sitting on a porch and watching the world pass by. I also remember the outhouses and the dark hole I was afraid a snake may reside in, and I was afraid it might bite me on the butt when I sat down. I also remember the spiders resting in their big webs in that small dark rectangle box, but it wasn’t enough to stop me from visiting.

My mom played basketball in high school and was voted most athletic at Geeter High School in 1960. Being the daughter of a farmer, and the fourth child of her parents seven
children, she often speaks of the struggle of attending school with kids who had more material possessions. One of the results of the politics of respectability because its goal was to replicate the dominate culture, was the creation of distinct classes of people – the haves and the have nots. When my mom was nominated to run for Miss Geeter in 1960, she didn’t have the financial backing that her opponent had. My mom’s opponent was surprised when she won with the support of teachers and students who thought my mom was the better person to represent the class of 1960.

My mom also grew up in church. She was taught the values handed down from the Black Women’s movement. She knew the established codes for girls. Girls wore dresses below their knees and depending on their ages, stockings. They knew the protocol in church. When services started there was no exiting or talking. All personal needs were met before service started. It was frowned upon to walk during service. One could tell if you weren’t raised in the church because these things were as natural as getting out of bed in the morning. They were a part of life.

When my mom became pregnant her last year in high school. She decided against marry my sister’s father. Instead she made the mistake in marrying my dad. The irony of the situation is she loved neither man, but she was not going to marrying someone because she was pregnant, yet at the same time, she needed a way out of living at home with her parents. My father, no doubt, presented a fantasy portrait of what life would be like with him, one she never got an opportunity to view before she took the leap or after. I loved my dad, but I think he looked more at her as someone to possess and not someone who had ambitions and dreams. Black women also had to fight, and still do, the negative image the African American male has of her, or his need to control and possess her.
Although my mother struggled in her marriage, I loved life and I think I kept my parents on their toes. My mom took us to parks in the summertime, and we went on picnics and she often took other neighborhood kids with us. I didn’t swim, but my siblings swam in Pinehill community pool while I played in the park. While it wasn’t but four years different between me and my eldest sister, three between my brother and me, and one and a half between my middle sister and me, I sometimes felt like it was a lifetime. The age restriction always landed on me.

I’m not sure the status of our neighborhood, Longview Community, in 1960, but I didn’t think we were poor, and I loved our neighborhood. It felt like home. It was a predominantly Black neighborhood of middle-class Black families. Moms knew each other, kids respected their elders and played together. We placed titles before grown-ups’ names: Mr., Mrs. and Miss. I couldn’t intervene in grownups conversation; I knew my place and it wasn’t exchanging words with adults.

I raised my children the same way. People today say it’s not necessary, but when my six feet plus, Black son with a dark brown hue, walked into a classroom, at Skyline High School, I think it was the 2007/2008 school year, it was the respect that I’d taught him that placed his White female teacher at ease when he entered her classroom and addressed her as Ms... At open house, she felt comfortable in telling me that she was intimidated by him the first day of class until she got to know him and realized he was a gentle giant. When he addressed her as Ms. that brought her guards down and her comfort level up. I should have asked if she felt the same way when a six feet plus White teen entered her classroom. People have often commented on how respectful my children are, but I raised them as I did, not with the White gaze over my shoulder, but because I believe that young people should be respectful of their elders and authoritative figures.
When I raised my children, I didn’t consider the dangers of the dominate culture in their early years. We lived in mixed neighborhoods most of their lives. When my eldest son was born, my ex-husband and I were living in the house that I grew up in – in a predominantly Black Community – Westwood. We decided to move there after living in an apartment in Midtown where the landlord failed to maintain the property and I believe the city condemn. I can’t remember now, but it may have been a gas leak or something because we had to move. We lived there a year before moving into Stage Park Estates in the Raleigh Bartlett area in 1992. When we moved there most of our neighbors were White. When we moved in 2004, our neighbors on either side of us were still White. Maybe that says something about Memphis because when my parents moved us to Westwood in 1970, by 1973 the neighborhood had made a drastic change in demographics.
On Crossing Bridges

On August 14, 1971, the last of everything was packed except us kids. I didn’t want to go. Didn’t want to leave the familiar faces. What could be better than the Longview Heights Community in South Memphis where we lived for five years? I wanted to say, “No, I don’t want to go.” But, that was unheard of in my house; children didn’t challenge their parents. Parents knew best. I acquiesced, followed the lead of my siblings, and climbed into the green station wagon. As we drove off, there was a strange feeling in my stomach. Something that as a six year old, I couldn’t really explain. It wasn’t painful but it hurt in a numbing sorta way.

On the trip to the new place in the Westwood Community, I made a mental note of all the houses and shopping areas that we’d frequented and wondered if I’d see them again: Woolco, Giants and Kents Dollar Store. Would I ever see my old friends again? Would they get new friends and forget about me? Would my parents bring us to visit them and allow them to visit us?

Soon all the familiar places faded from view. I watched as the road began to crisscross and was almost standing trying to see the huge metal that outlined and towered over the road ahead, it was a bridge. I’d never crossed a bridge so high. I sat back in my seat terrified. What if it falls? The Nonconnah Bridge marked a huge change in my life. On the other side of the bridge, life took on a different look. There were so many trees and the streets even looked different. The businesses appeared sparingly. I wondered where my parents were taking us. We turned off South Third Street onto Western Park. There were two stores that greeted us at the turn: McLemore’s Market on the left and Jump and Grab on the right. This all looked peculiar to my young eyes. The houses were bigger than the ones in my old neighborhood. There were more trees and I didn’t see many people out. I wondered which of these houses was ours. There were
two story houses, half stories and single stories. I’d never seen anything like it. Finally, my Dad turned into our driveway. A huge tree greeted us as we pulled up to a white house trimmed in black with black shutters on the three front windows. There was a red brick planter that stretched the distance of the walkway leading to the front door filled with flowers: red, yellow, and blue. We also had a huge tree sitting in the center of our front yard.

My mom was proud of the new house. I could see the joy in her smile as we danced around the den – it was huge. The house my parents had rented in Longview Heights only had about 800 square feet with two bedrooms, a bath, living room, and kitchen. It seemed that the new house was twice that size. My mom was so elated; she didn’t realize until we moved into the house that it only had one bathroom. That became a minor drawback. Now she could decorate her house without worrying about defacing a rental property. My parents were also no longer paying ninety dollars a month in rental fees. They were now homeowners paying 121 dollars a month into their own property.

For a brief moment, I forgot about the old house and followed my siblings as we ran through our new house. We had a den, living/dining room, breakfast room, three bedrooms and a bath. My two sisters and I shared a room and my brothers had theirs. The house was pretty cool but what about the people? It was late when we arrived. My parents had been moving all day. So there wasn’t time to check out the neighbors. My sister and I would do that the next morning.

When we woke the next morning, we hurried through breakfast to get outside. I wasn’t prepared for who we met. Initially we saw no black people. All around us were white people – adults. Surely, there were kids somewhere. Well school would start in a few weeks, giving us a chance to meet the kids in the neighborhood.
The first week of school was terrifying. There was one other black girl in my classroom, and she wasn’t too friendly. After school, my siblings and I met up and walked home together. I was afraid. One evening after school, my brother was outside playing in the front yard, when one of his classmates came riding down the street on a bike. She shouted something to my brother. He laughed and walked into the street. She was moving fast. The next thing I knew she was flying over the handlebars and landed face down. I heard her scream. I felt my heart leap. I saw my brother and her friends run to her. I attempted to move but the signals between my feet and brain must have crossed because my feet wouldn’t move, instead I watched everything from the front window of my house. I was afraid for my brother. The girl’s friends took her home. When my parents arrived home from work, my mother went to the girl’s house and I never heard anything else on the situation. Years later, I found out that my parents’ homeowners insurance took care of the incident.

There was one family on our block that I thought was rich. They had a black maid. She and her children lived together with my white friend Sadie. It was many years later that I realized that Sadie’s dad didn’t have a maid, but I guess it was less complicated to tell the neighbors that she was the maid. This was the early seventies and the mentality of people hadn’t changed that much.

After several years of living in the Westwood Community, the makeup of the neighborhood slowly changed, and I was once again in the company of people who looked like me.
In August 2004, I’d loaded my kids, my mom, her best friend, and everything that I could pack into my 1998 Chevrolet Venture. I took one glance back at my mom’s house before I stepped in – *life would be different but better.*

I wrecked my Dodge Caravan a few weeks earlier and had to purchase another van. My father, who was still alive then, was grateful that I wrecked it; he doubted it would make the long journey. I was determined to go. I needed a change of scenery. Whoever said divorce was like a death, was right except death actually represents the end, divorce is a death that seems to never end. I needed it to end. I decided to relocate. We moved to Moscow, Idaho.

My children seemed indifferent to the idea. I think they were still suffering from the shock of their parents’ divorce. I told them we were going on an adventure and that excited them.

We left Memphis later than expected; I planned to pull out at five in the morning, but we left about nine. It took me longer to empty the two-bedroom apartment that I’d been in only six months. Prior to the apartment, I emptied a four-bedroom house and crammed the apartment with as much of the ten years of stuff we accumulated while living in the house. The move to Idaho required scaling down to whatever could fit into the van.

The first day of the long journey we passed through three states: Arkansas, Missouri and Nebraska. By the time we entered Nebraska, Robyn was singing “I will never see a sunflower again”. The boys were quiet. When Robert, my oldest son, was fed up with her singing, he pleaded for her to stop. She kept singing until we all grew weary of not “seeing a sunflower again” and I asked her to give us a break. We stopped at a restaurant in Nebraska. When we strolled through the door, I was reminded of James Baldwin when he visited the South for the first time during the Jim Crow era; he walked into a White’s only restaurant and all eyes were on him. We entered the establishment and we were the only people of color there. The further north
we traveled black people were thinning out. We must have ended the first day near the tip of Iowa because I recall that we stopped in South Dakota on the second day. We drove across South Dakota most of that day; we were amazed as we passed the exit to Mount Rushmore. We could see the carved images of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln on the black hills of South Dakota.

When we entered the mountains of Montana, we were in awe of God’s creation. My mom was driving. As we descended one mountain, I remember the winding road and the appearance of a river below. It gave the illusion that we were driving into the water. It was beautiful and unnerving until we got to the bottom. I think between my mom and me, we each preferred to be the one driving through the mountains. She said I drove too fast. I thought she drove too slow.

Moving was a leap of faith. When we arrived in Moscow, Idaho, late on a Friday night, I had an unfurnished four-bedroom apartment waiting. I took my mom and her friend to a hotel because I didn’t think sleeping on a hard floor would be healthy for them. My kids and I decided to stay the night in our new home. The apartment was very spacious. The bedrooms were as big as the ones at our old house. There were two baths, both in the hallway- the boys shared one and Robyn and I shared one. There were two huge windows. One in the living room and one in the dining room. We decided to make pallets in the living room.

When I arose the next morning, Robyn was up tip toing through the house like she expected something to jump out at her. “What are you doing?” She jumped. “Mom, this place is old, Ewwww.” She turned her nose up. “You’ll get over it” I said. This is when she became OCD. She wouldn’t touch any surface in the Apartment, even after we cleaned and sanitized it. She said it was too old. I spent a lot of money on paper towels because anything she touched she
did it with a paper towel between her hand and the surface. It didn’t cross my mind to buy disposable gloves, which would have saved me money. Rodrick and Robert were glad to have their own rooms again. They took the first two bedrooms and the bathroom across from them. Robyn and I took the ones at the end of the hallway.

That first morning, I rose to the most spectacular view from my dining room window. The green hills looked as if they were rising and falling in sync. The mountain in the background directing - making a melodious scene, and the sun appeared to creep up over the mountain and took its place on the highest peak. The apartment wasn’t the most modern place, but I couldn’t have paid for the picturesque scene I arose to every morning.

We bought a newspaper and mapped out several garage sales. Our first stop was a church garage sale. I found dishes, a microwave, pots and pans, furniture and several other items. When I asked the price of the items, a lady insisted I pay what I was able to donate. My thought was, “Thank you Lord.” With my challenged budget, by the time I left this church I had just about furnished the apartment. We returned to the apartment, sanitized the apartment and our new furnishings, and settle in for the evening.

My mom and her best friend, Mrs. Lizbeth, were planning to stay two weeks with us, but something occurred back home, and they had to leave a week early. I knew they weren’t planning to stay, but their presence made it seem like I wasn’t far from home. I had brought home with me. The morning they left was also the first day of school for my children. I dropped Robyn and Rodrick off at school, and Robert took the bus. Then I drove them to Spokane, Washington to catch their flight.
My two younger children loved Moscow and so did I. Mornings after sending my children off to school, before I left the apartment, I prepared a cup of coffee and sat and looked out on the mountains that appeared close enough to touch, it was such a spirit calming sight.

The first snow was challenging for me; we must have gotten two or three feet of snow. I was prepared. I bought everyone a snowsuit. Imagine my surprise when my kids came home and informed me that kids didn’t wear snowsuits. I had overdressed them, but it was three feet of snow. My older son hated the snow and Moscow.

That fall I volunteered at the campus radio station. I had my own gospel program. Lady V was my on-air personality. I know, not too original but what can I say. It was all I could think of. I really hadn’t anticipated people taking to my show, but callers begin to call me and make requests. Some thanked me for being on the air. Others said they hadn’t heard this kind of music since they’d left the South. My theme song, was “I’m Walking in Authority” by Donnie McClurkin:

I’m walking in authority  
Living life without apology  
It’s not wrong dear  
I belong here  
So you might as well get use to me.

My mother may not be the queen  
But my father’s King of everything  
I’m adopted into the family  
So I guess that makes me royalty…

That’s the song that opened my show every morning. That really was a time of revival and renewal for me. I wanted to move to a place where nobody knew my name. Where I could be me and not apologize for who I was. No more explanations to divorce attorneys. I was tired of talking to them. Tired of defending myself against lies meant to defame me. I had a good walk to
the radio station the mornings I worked, but it was refreshing walking across the hills – there was freedom in the air - mine.

I enjoyed working at the radio stint until I was told that I was needed on election night to attend polls to solicit reactions from voters, democratic and republican. Ahhhh…man. I tried to get out of the assignment, but the station was short staffed. I arrived about an hour and half before the polls closed. Picked up my recorder and mic and off I went. I hadn’t interviewed anyone since my undergrad years at Memphis State University in 1985-87. I majored in journalism but gave up that part of me when I married my ex-husband.

In June of 2005, we moved to Idaho Falls. Something about Idaho Falls left a strange feeling in my stomach, similar to the one I had when I crossed the Noconnah Bridge when I was seven, except the feeling lingered within me the entire time I lived in Idaho Falls. It was like a dark spirit that hovered over the city. When I mentioned to one of my neighbors in Moscow, that I was considering moving to Idaho Falls, I was told that there was clean living in that town. I found it was just the opposite.

There was an oppressive majority religious group ruling Idaho Falls. I was shocked when I discovered that the buildings in Idaho Falls could not be built higher than the statue on the top of the temple located in downtown – their headquarters. I had very little dealings with them before Robyn had a stroke in 2007. Once a lady, who read a post I wrote on Facebook, wrote me back and forewarned about their tactics. She’d called the police on a neighbor who was a member of the group and instead of the policeman addressing her concern, he threatened her. As an African American, this was not surprising to me – I was very well acquainted with these tactics.
We lived in Idaho Falls seven years. When we first moved there, we counted the number of black people we saw when we were out about the town and some, no doubt, we counted twice. Robyn and I were friendly and always greeted them with smiles, glad to see others that looked like us, but a few people acted as if they took offense to our friendliness. We took note and since there weren’t many black people in Idaho Falls, if we saw them again, we didn’t speak either.

Living in Idaho Falls sometimes felt like we’d taken a step back into history. When Rodrick was in the third grade his teacher suggested that I have him tested for the gifted program. Since she suggested it at the end of his third grade year, I mentioned it to his fourth grade teacher at the start of the new school year, but she was hesitant to make the recommendation which I thought was strange. She didn’t feel he qualified for the program. When he was tested, and I was told that he didn’t qualify, I didn’t trust the process and pulled him out of the school – that is after I met with the principle and teacher and informed them that I felt the process was discriminatory.

During my oldest son’s senior year in high school, a racial slur was allowed under a photo of him and a friend in the yearbook. Before I was informed about it, several other black parents had seen it. I was livid. One of the parents, a male, was on the mayor’s action committee and wanted to use this incident to bring attention to the racial issues at my son’s high school and wanted a letter sent from the Mayor to the school addressing this issue and the teacher who allowed the offense. He’d already talked to the mayor and they were ready to send the letter.

When I spoke to the teacher, who was the advisor for the yearbook committee, she was near tears and apologized. She stated that she’d asked the kids on the staff of the yearbook if the comment was offensive and they said that it wasn’t and that they’d even cleared it with my son which they had not. I was placed in a precarious position one in which I resented. My son was
offended and so was I and many other students and parents. While the teacher was definitely responsible, I didn’t feel that this was an intentional offense and felt like the only reason the Mayor’s office was intent on crucifying her was because she was a woman and not a member of their religious group, and as offensive as it was, I had to decide whether it warranted placing a mark on this teacher’s career for something that, yes, was her fault but was not done maliciously. I refused to press charges, but instead requested the principal use this as a teaching moment to train her staff. I upset a few members of the African American community.

In 2010, I applied for a position at Idaho National Laboratory as a relocation specialist. I knew with my combination of real estate experience and experience as a relocation consultant, I had a good chance of at least getting an interview. Weeks past and I never heard from them. A friend had told me about a group formed to track the applications of African Americans and other minorities because of concerns with their hiring practices. I contacted a member of the group who tracked my resume. A week later, the hiring manager called me for a telephone interview. During the interview, I informed her of the national network for the relocation industry. She had no idea one existed. A week after the phone interview, I went for a formal interview. The formal interview was strange. While the Human Resource representative asked me questions, the hiring manager seemed preoccupied. She interrupted several times with comments unrelated to the interview. After the interview, the human resource representative walked me out and told me that I was the only candidate with relocation experience. I didn’t get the job. I filed an EEO complaint.

While living in Idaho Falls, I almost lost my daughter to a quack physician whom I believe was a member of the oppressive religious group. I filed a medical malpractice lawsuit against him in 2009. In April of 2012, six months before the trial date, the attorney retained to
represent Robyn’s interested informed me that he was withdrawing from the case and attempted to force me to dismiss. Three weeks later, a coworker showed me an article in the Idaho Falls newspaper. The neurologist whom we filed a complaint against for causing Robyn to have a massive stroke, was receiving a gold seal from Joint Commission for a stroke prevention initiative he was leading. There were several community stakeholders involved in this initiative. It was starting to make sense to me now. He couldn’t receive this recognition with a lawsuit pending for causing a thirteen-year-old to have a stroke. The day I crossed over – out of Idaho, I never wanted to look back.

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“Ma’am, Ma’am, you got three dollars?”

“No, I’m sorry. I don’t carry cash on me,” was my reply.

I was sitting in a coffee shop in Memphis, reading a book, when a man approached me for money. He said he needed it to get to the mission. He frequents the place often because I see him almost every time I visit. Not sure if he remembered me, but this is not the first time he’s asked and I’ve replied “I don’t carry cash on me.” I really don’t. Maybe the next time I come, I’ll bring cash in case he’s here asking.

As I sat and watched him, I was mindful that there are only a very few degrees of separation between living in a home and being homeless, or having money and being penniless. For a middle class American, it only takes a life event to drain your checking account, savings, or retirement account. I wondered what his story was. I also wondered what it took for him to approach me and the others. He came in and sat in a chair for a moment as if he was pondering, “Who do I ask?” I wondered how much of himself he gave up to meet with rejection.
He reminded me of when I moved to California for my daughter to attend a brain injury program in August of 2012. My money ran out before I found a job. We were sharing motels with large spiders and other bugs I can’t name. Many of the motels were drug invested; every time we drove up, I felt like someone was watching us, speculating if we were there to invade their turf. One evening, after we’d come in, there was a knock at the door. *Who would be visiting us?* I opened the door to a man with scraggly dirty blonde hair, no shirt and worn jeans. His forehead had deep wrinkles. There was a scar across his right cheek, and a permanent scowl on his face.

“Yes,” I said.

“Is your husband here?”

“You mean my son.”

“Yeah. Where is he?”

“Why do you want him?” By this time my son, Robert, was at the door.

“Can I speak to your son?”

“Yes, you can.” I stood there.

“Then he walked up on my son.”

They stood toe to toe for a brief moment, my son not retreating, standing at least ten inches over him. The man backed away and left. My son and I closed the door. “What was that,” I asked? Robert replied, “He was sizing me up.” The next day, I packed up and we found another motel. When Thanksgiving approached, my youngest son’s teacher gave our names to a local business that was giving out baskets. When the owner heard about our struggle he offered me a job cleaning his gym. It paid about fifty dollars a day – cash – three days a week. I had a Master’s degree in Curriculum Development and an Education Specialist Degree in
Organizational Learning and Leadership, which appeared to be of little assistance in finding a job, but it didn’t take either to clean up a gym. I knew how to clean bathrooms and mop floors, these were skills I learned as a child.

In the fall of 2012, my children and I were struggling to survive in one of the highest places in this nation to live, Orange County, California, and cleaning a gym didn’t seem bad at all. It provided frozen turkey dinners, frozen pizzas, and frozen chicken nuggets. I was able to buy bananas and grapes to counter the starches and processed foods that I didn’t feel were healthy. We didn’t have a stove but we did have a microwave and a small refrigerator in our room so frozen dinners were a staple for us.

The older gentleman, in the coffee shop, was maybe 5’7” with a slim build, neatly dressed with a white t-shirt under his buttoned down red, white and blue, multicolored shirt and khaki pants. I watched him approach each table, refused by one patron after the other. He soon sat down and began talking to himself. Me, I continued to observe through my peripheral vision, pretending to read, feeling his angst – not necessarily his situation. I wondered what his occupation was when he was younger. He didn’t look to be vagrant. I wondered if the mission was where he spent most of his nights. Did he have family? Was he totally alone? I also wondered about the people who refused him. Did they know how short the distance between homelessness and sitting at a table drinking coffee? It’s really a horribly short walk. A medical error or incident, a drunken driver, a stray bullet or a company shutting down. Any of these can land you in a cheap motel living off frozen dinners with only a small refrigerator and a microwave or worst it could land you on the streets seeking shelter, or in a coffee shop asking for money to get to the mission.
When money got dangerously low, I started reaching out to shelters. Everyone had a long list. I added my name to several. Each day, I dropped Robyn, my daughter, off to her brain injury program and took my youngest son, Rodrick, to school. Afterwards, I drove to the parking lot of the public library and waited for it to open. I spent the mornings applying for jobs – every job that I met the minimum qualifications for. When I left the library, I drove around the neighborhood of expensive homes with deep green trimmed lawns, rose bushes and flowers I couldn’t identify but nonetheless beautiful and exotic and palm trees that brushed the sky; they reminded me of the cover of a *Home and Garden* magazine. I’d browse the neighborhood, like I’d eye shop in Saks. When I’d see someone pulling out of a garage, I remembered when I had a garage with remotes, a place to call home. Robyn’s program was over at noon I browsed the neighborhood until it was time to pick her up. I picked her up and returned to the motel room. I tried not to dwell on our circumstances.

One morning, a shelter called for me to come in for an assessment. I felt a sense of relief. I picked Robyn up from her program at noon and headed to the appointment. When we entered the office, we were greeted by a young lady with a small build, olive colored skin, long black hair, and dark eyes. She sat behind a small desk a few feet from the door. I checked in and Robyn and I took the two seats along the windows near the entry. There were a few pamphlets lying around. I flipped through them; many were in Spanish. As I waited, I started to get anxious. Most shelters we’d contacted wouldn’t take all of us. Some refused both my sons and others would allow my son in high school, but not my oldest son who was twenty-years-old.

When my oldest son heard I was moving to California for his sister to attend a brain injury program, he postponed his return to college, refusing to allow me to move with his
siblings to California alone. When the lady doing the intake for this shelter walked out, she had a plastic container in her hand.

“We need a urine sample. It’s required of everyone we take in”

“That’s fine,” I said. I reached for the container, but she pulled back and directed me to the bathroom. I followed her. When I entered the bathroom, she entered with me and offered me the cup. I waited for her to leave.

“Oh, I have to remain with you - policy.”

“Well, that’s fine, but I have a question.”

“Yes…”

“Before I give up my pride and dignity, which I will do to qualify, I have two sons, will they be allowed to stay with us?”

“No, we don’t allow men or boys.”

“Thank you.” I handed her the cup and walked away.

I felt discouraged and deflated. I met Robyn’s gaze when I reached the receptionist desk. I ushered Robyn up from her seat. Her eyes were wide and brows furrowed, questioning whether we had a potential place to live. My heart fluttered to see the questioning look on her face. When we stepped outside she asked, “Are they going to help us?” I replied, “No, because they don’t accept boys or men.” We walked back to the car in silence. After I started the car and began to drive, Robyn, looked over and said, “Mom, we’ll be all right. We’ll find something.”

On the inside I was kicking and screaming, “Why? Why? Why? Does it have to be a struggle?” I smiled at Robyn and drove back to the motel.

About a week later, another agency called me for an assessment. I had actually applied for a job with this agency, but never heard from them. I was excited. I thought maybe they would
also give me the opportunity to do workforce development for their agency. Not sure why I thought that, but I was in a strange space, one that seemed unreal to me and so my reasoning was a little off. They had a vacancy, but my older son wouldn’t be able to stay. When I told my older son about it, he said, “Mom, take it. You don’t want to lose your space. You, Robyn and Rodrick take it. I’ll be all right, even if I have to sleep in the car” We still had one night left at the motel. No one was going to sleep in the car alone. If one slept in the car we all would sleep in the car. My older son stayed the night at the motel, and Robyn, Rodrick and I checked in at the shelter.

As part of the agreement for the shelter, I worked around the office. I was excited thinking they were going to take me up on my offer to assist with training and development. Instead when I arrived at the office, I was lead to a closet where the mop and bucket was stored. My duties were to clean the office. I took a deep breath and started cleaning. When I left that evening, I was determined not to stay in a shelter. I went back to the shelter and thanked the couple for being hospitable and told them that we wouldn’t be returning. I went back to the office the next day and thank them too. One of the ladies in the office, informed me, since we had been accepted into their program, that if I found an apartment and needed assistance with a down payment, they would assist.

I went to my car, almost in tears, and called my Mom. I told her how they led me to the storage closet where the mop and bucket were because my duties where to clean the office. She suggested I stay at the motel, and she would help with the costs. While I did have child support from my children’s father, it didn’t cover all of our expenses. By this time, I had started attending a support group for parents and families of children with disabilities. I had never considered attending one in Idaho, but Robyn encouraged me because several of her classmate’s families attended.
One of the most difficult spaces for me to navigate, was being a parent of a child with a disability. After Robyn’s stroke, the rules of engagement had changed, and I felt like I fumbled every play. Robyn was more sensitive and I had to learn to be conscious of trigger words that offended her. We were both adjusting to a new world, one in which neither of us knew how to navigate. I had no clue what I was doing – just prayed that I didn’t mess my kids up too bad. I was hesitant about attending the support group, but Robyn was excited. When we walked in, everyone greeted Robyn as if they’d know her all her life, which I wasn’t surprised because I often refer to her as Ms. Congeniality. From attending the support group, I realized I wasn’t alone. That there were others who spoke my language and understood my frustrations. Many of the parents shared information about other services that I should apply to. Since Robyn’s stroke, I hadn’t been able to work a nine to five job because of the demands of rehabilitating her and being her aid in school.

One mother asked me, “Have you applied to the State for compensation for being Robyn’s aid?”

“You can be compensated for what you do?”

“Well, I’m not looking for compensation for caring for my child.”

“If you weren’t doing it, they would have to pay someone else, and it could help financially.”

I took the information and applied. I was told that the process took a couple of months. I was a little dispirited because we were in desperate need of money. While waiting for that to start, my older son found a job. We found an apartment, and the shelter helped us with our down payment. We moved into our apartment December 24, 2012. It was a two-bedroom apartment.
with a small living and dining area, a tiny kitchenette and a balcony with a washer and dryer in
the storage room – that was a plus. What we didn’t realize was that apartments in California
didn’t automatically come with air, but we learned to live with the California heat. We were only
five minutes from the beach – so it wasn’t that bad. It was empty but we were so full of joy that
it seemed to be all that we needed.

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Spring break of 2012, Robyn, Rodrick, and I visited Costa Mesa Community College in
Costa Mesa California. Since Robyn’s stroke in October 2007, I anticipated the day she
graduated high school – I would find a program for cognitive rehabilitation and she would fulfill
her dream of attending college. The visit to Costa Mesa College was to evaluate whether this
program would be a fit for her. I had no sure plans of financing it, but after visiting and seeing
her excitement, I was determined that she would attend.

Robyn shared with me that she never thought she would be able to attend college because
of her stroke, but after walking across campus on that visit, she felt alive again. She too could
attend college, and she could tell all her classmates that she was moving to California to attend
school. When we returned home, I started preparing, not sure how I was going to make the
transition. Had she been a citizen of California, her fees would have been paid, but because she
wasn’t, we had tuition plus out of state fees to pay. I had no clue that the transition from Idaho to
California would land us in cheap motels living off of frozen dinners.

When I was in that space, there were days that I really had to dig deep and do a lot of
self-talk and encouragement to keep from drowning in hopelessness. One day, as I pulled out of
the sleazy motel we were residing in, I saw a woman pushing a basket filled with stuff. She
probably felt that she was better off than someone without one. At least she had something to
place her belongings in and could stroll the streets without trying to carry the load of her life on her back. She was just rolling along with her head in the air, and at that moment I felt blessed for the sleazy motel. Now, sitting at a table, in a coffee shop on Cooper Street, seeing the older gentleman ask strangers for money and watching the cars roll by, I feel the degrees of separation, and I know the struggle to stay on this side.
The Plunderers of Dreamers

How many court room walls across this nation can bear witness to black people being robbed of their youth, livelihood, and personhood?

How many gavel strikes have silenced the voices of innocent black people?

If the truth could be extricated from the walls, desk, chairs of interrogation rooms, backroom meetings, and other spaces where conspiracies were conceived to rob black bodies, who might it convict?

And how many white bodies would replace black bodies in jail cells if truth and justice prevailed?

It was February 3, 2013. We’d been in our apartment in Costa Mesa, California for about a month. I sometimes slept with the TV on and this particular morning I awaken to a news report of a young couple in Newport Beach found dead in the parking garage of their apartment complex. The young lady was Asian, and the young man was Black. My first thought, it was a racially motivated crime. But a few days later, it was reported that the suspect was a Black man, an ex-cop, who’d been fired from the Los Angeles Police Department. I sat up in bed wondering what went wrong with this young man’s life. What would provoke him to commit such a heinous crime? The ex-cop was a college graduate and a decorated veteran. There was a man hunt across several counties in Southern California with a monetary reward for the capture of the suspect, Christopher Dorner.

As the police hunt intensified, someone discovered a manifesto Dorner left on social media in which he gave a detailed account of what he felt was an unjust firing. It appears that he was disillusioned by our justice system. He thought that he was supposed to stand up for justice even if it meant reporting a superior who’d assaulted a mentally ill black man. I imagine the department weighed out whose life and reputation was most important. The mentally ill man,
whom they probably deemed to have little significance or the White female officer – their comrade whose career could be stained if this complaint was substantiated.

The young lady he killed was the daughter of a police official who presumably represented his interests during the investigation, but Dorner thought the man was a patsy for the system and that his rights were compromised. What could make a Black man take on an entire police department, knowing he had no chance to survive? One whose life had been destroyed and one who felt he had no chance to regain his respect or sustain himself. While reading through this young man’s statement, I felt an unsettling connection with him. It appears he relied on a system of justice that rarely shows up to justly defend and protect the rights of African Americans. Even the organization that was to provide oversight (internal affairs) to ensure those within the LAPD purportedly providing services to the community and acting in authoritative positions within the justice department, are often overpowered and subjected to the powerful connections of the criminal behaviors of those within the justice department, whom they are to provide surveillance. It is no wonder to me the mental duress upon Dorner – discovering, after he’d served in the military to protect the rights of all Americans, joined a police force (LAPD) known for its unjust practices and then became a victim, himself, of their prejudicial ways – what Black man, who’d grown up fighting the demons of racism and placed in this situation, wouldn’t snap. It’s amazing that the system can demonize a Black man they’ve destroyed. Yet white men such as Jared Loughner, James Holmes, and Adam Lanza are painted as mentally disturbed mass shooters.

The media portrayed Dorner as a domestic terrorist. He committed a horrible crime, but he was not randomly killing people. While I don’t condone his behavior, he was not a terrorist taking out Americans. He was a man who the LAPD system destroyed and refused to admit their
error. Unlike the police who were shooting at innocent citizens, a Hispanic lady and her mother were delivering newspapers when police mistook them for Dorner and sprayed their SUV with bullets, Dorner had methodically planned who he would kill and why, and this information was provided within the manifesto.

As I read through his manifesto, I understood his frustrations and desperation. Institutionalized racism is impossible to fight alone and not many people will stand against the corruption in the system, because they too may become casualties; even those placed in the positions to provide oversight often succumb to the criminals within the system. It hadn’t been but about nine months since my daughter’s lawyer met with us to inform us that her medical malpractice case was no longer viable. In order to force me to dismiss the case, he painted me as an unreliable witness. I recall during the deposition he and the doctor’s attorney attempted to find something in my background to discredit me. My attorney even pulled me aside at one point and said that the other attorney was attempting to paint me as an overprotective mother. It was as if he were asking me to not present myself as a caring mother. I realized later that they were searching for something incriminating in my background. I recall being questioned several times regarding my weekend activities and where I was on the night Robyn had the stroke. I was home. While my children were living with me, being a single mom, I was always home with them. I didn’t stay out late nor overnight anywhere leaving them alone. I think this left them in a pickle because they needed something – anything to stain my character.

One day in April of 2012, I sat in the office of my daughter’s malpractice attorney and got the feeling that what was transpiring was familiar. I had seen it on TV, when the police or public defenders coerced a black youth into pleading guilty to a crime he didn’t commit. But my daughter’s case was different, she was actually the plaintiff and the defendant was a white
doctor, who had almost killed her by poisoning her system with off label drugs and causing a massive stroke which caused a medical team of doctors at Primary Children’s Hospital in October 2007, to declare her brain dead. My daughter’s attorneys were trying to convince me that the doctor was innocent. That somehow I was delusional; that the lies in the medical records, where he added a diagnosis of migraine headaches, wasn’t really real; that the lies in the deposition where he stated she had been out of school for migraine headaches didn’t exist. This doctor was an upstanding citizen, and what happened to my daughter was unfortunate but not his fault.

It actually took attending graduate school and taking classes in African American studies that I found some resolve. I’d lived a middle-class lifestyle and really had no clue how easily the system could turn against me. Before Robyn’s situation, I had no idea the many ways racism manifests itself and destroys the lives of African Americans. Even now as I write, I’m reminded of a statement in class about history repeating itself. I found myself at the point where many of my ancestors stood. My child having been experimented on and almost killed and a system that is so inept that the processes in place to address the offenses were being administered by the associates of the white men who violated our rights. It was like being in the South after the Emancipation Proclamation and complaining of unjust inhumane treatment by whites to the local authorities administering the Jim Crow Laws.

My persistence pissed them all off, especially when I showed up at the police department asking to file a report. On my first attempt at filing the report, I was told by the policeman who assisted me, that he didn’t even know how to write up such a report or to whom it should be submitted. After I left the police department, I called the Idaho Attorney General’s office and was told that I needed to know which code was violated before I returned to the police station
and that it was the policeman’s responsibility to take the report and pass it on to the Bonneville County Prosecutor, who handles these issues.

Needless to say on my second attempt, the same officer came out, but this time he was rude, and I assume meant to intimidate me, but it only made me more determined.

“You’re just angry because your attorney withdrew from your case.”

“I am not angry because he withdrew. He lied and falsified documents and I have proof of what he did. According to Idaho Statutes that’s a felony offense. I want to file a report.”

He left, and I sat down next to my friend, Gloria, who’d accompanied me to the police department. She and I were both amazed at his behavior. He returned with someone from internal affairs, because his superior had already left for the day. The internal affairs officer said it would be better for me, if I didn’t return to the police department, that I should call first. I called for several days before I was finally referred to the chief of police. Robyn and I met with the Idaho Falls Police Chief in June of 2012. I brought all of my documentation. The letters where he lied about the expert witness; the documentation showing he lied about my handwriting on documents the doctor had filled in and tried to coerce me into identifying as my own during the deposition – showing that I was not making false accusations. We were led to his office and seated at a conference table. He too tried to dissuade me – refusing to take a report of my accusations against Robyn’s attorney and the doctor’s attorney. I could tell by his appearance, his face becoming flushed and rosy, that he was becoming flustered. He decided to get backup. He left and returned with a deputy attorney from the county prosecutor’s office. Mind you, we were in Idaho Falls, Idaho, they were just a few steps away from each other. The deputy attorney walked in, he was dressed in khaki pants, a white shirt, no necktie, unlike the chief who was dressed in what I call Mormon attire. The black suit, white shirt and black necktie.
The deputy sat down next to me, like all the others, attempting to patronize me and then redirect my concerns as if I were in denial. I pointed to the evidence on the table and he didn’t acknowledge it; just said that no crime had been committed and that they would not take a report. I told them that I knew what I was up against, White men, but that I wouldn’t give up the fight because my daughter’s life had been destroyed. Robyn and I walked out with them apologizing and expressing their sympathies. I wanted to turn around and spit on both of them and then maybe give them my middle figure, but I’m a Christian.

I recently read James Baldwin’s *No Name in the Street* in which he wrote about his first visit to Montgomery, Alabama. As he walked off the plane he approached three white men standing as if they were protecting something. I imagine that something was their way of life – their Jim Crow laws, that Baldwin no doubt was on assignment to write and report about and expose. I imagine my daughters’ lawyers and the policeman at the Idaho Falls Police Department felt the same way. My complaint was a threat to them – their way of life, and had it been investigated may have set off alarms on other issues of race discrimination and oppression in Idaho Falls.

Maybe a sane person would have stopped after the police refused to do their job, but I was aware of my constitutional rights and according to the Fourteenth Amendment, we had a right to file a police report against her attorney. We had a right to equal protection under the law, but it appeared that the law in Idaho didn’t apply to filing a complaint against a White man. Idaho has a code that states it is a felony offense to introduce fraudulent information into any court proceeding. The evidence was so blatant in Robyn’s case that the conspirators did not want anyone to view the files and the best way to ensure that was to paint me as a misguided mother. The day of the hearing to address the petition that Robyn’s lawyer filed to withdraw from the
case, I asked the judge to turn the case over for a criminal investigation of Robyn’s attorney and
the doctor’s attorney, but the judge refused my request. Consequently, Robyn’s lawyer asked if
he could leave before court was adjourned and almost fell leaving the courtroom. I think my
boldness in court surprised him. I wondered if his hurry to leave was to forewarn his cohorts in
the police department that I was probably coming there to file a report.

I called attorneys near and far in hopes of finding one that would help us fight the
injustice within Idaho Falls Civil Court but found no one. One attorney told me that if I took the
case on myself that they would just wait me out until I got frustrated and gave up. Others told me
it didn’t matter about the evidence; I couldn’t win against these men. What I couldn’t understand
is, if these attorneys knew that the system in Idaho Falls was corrupt, why someone hadn’t done
something to fight back.

When someone destroys your life because of their own selfish ambition – stripping you
of your livelihood – placing you in a compromised position with no hope of recovery – that’s a
dangerous place.

When I realized that my daughter’s attorney was conspiring with the doctor’s attorney to
undermine her case and that every road to recourse led to someone affiliated with them, I was so
angry. For a brief moment I could see myself doing exactly what this ex-cop, Christopher
Dorner, was doing.

I considered revenge for a brief moment. I really did. I wanted to inflict on the doctor what he’d
done to Robyn – left her permanently disabled and then stripped her of any financial restitution
for his negligence. I wanted his brain damaged. I wanted him to wake up one day and find his
dreams totally destroyed, but I realized I couldn’t do it. I was a single mother with three children
depending on me, and these morally corrupt individuals were a waste of my time, but
nonetheless, the thought crossed my mind and I understood what led this ex-cop to take matters into his own hands. The system had failed him. He felt he had nothing else to lose. They’d taken the job he loved, left a blotch on his employment record, affected his finances, but their lives moved on without a hitch.

I continued to watch the manhunt day after day. I knew they wouldn’t bring him in alive. He killed two civilians and two white policemen. There was no way he would live to tell his story. Orange County, California became a scary and dangerous place to live. The police were afraid and paranoid – in three incidents they fired upon civilians with vehicles that looked like Dorners.

The hunt ended with the police trapping Dorner in a cabin in Big Bear Lake. There was a shootout, the second cop was killed in this incident and Dorner was killed by a single bullet to the head in the burned-out cabin. According to their reports he killed himself, but I never believed they would bring him in alive. I never believed that anything would come of the investigation into his complaints. I do believe that he was used as a scape goat for the others. It was easy to demonize him. There was no one within the department to standup for him and he was dead. In the midst of corruption and deception, who’d risk their livelihood for the dead? I hated that he was driven to kill innocent people. I prayed for his mother because it had to be painful to watch her child, first being driven to kill and then watching the man hunt for him. I prayed for the innocent lives lost, caught between a hopeless victim and a system that is known for unjust practices and corruption.

According to a writer, Joe Domanick, LAPD has a history of corruption and abuse targeted at Black and Brown communities. LAPD was using the infamous “stop and frisk” before it became a purported way of curtailing criminal activity. It was used to target law abiding
citizens – probably middle class and working-class Black and Brown people. White men have used the law to cover their egregious acts leveled against Black people since the freeing of the enslaved as a way to maintain their superior status and ensuring that inferior status of those they fear, Black and Brown people.

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Eventually, I appealed to the Mayor of Idaho at Robyn’s request. She had met him during disability awareness month. Students with disabilities were allowed to select an occupation in which they desired to work and given the opportunity to spend a day shadowing a person in that position. Robyn selected the Mayor of Idaho Falls. After she witnessed the corruption and difficulties we had with the civil court process, the corrupt attorney’s and the Idaho Falls Police Department, she suggested I contact the Mayor. She said that during her day with him, he appeared to be someone who stood up for justice and she believed he would help us in getting a report taken by the police department.

Dear Mayor Fuhriman,

It is me, Robyn Edwards. I participated in the Disability Rights Mentoring Day in 2012 and selected to spend the day with you. I was really moved by your love for the people in Idaho Falls.

I am writing because I am seeking justice. Last year, I found out that Dr. Erich Garland changed my medical records the day of my stroke. He added migraine headaches to my files. I never had migraine headaches. My mom said he even stated that I had some that lasted all day. I cannot believe he did this.

There is no way my Mom could have told him I had headaches with the numbness I experienced because I did not have headaches, only numbness in my limbs. I know people make mistakes, but Dr. Garland needs to own up to his negligence and not continue to cover it up.

He destroyed my dreams. I had plans of running in the Olympics and attending Yale University. I had just been inducted into the honor society the spring before my stroke. I felt like I was at the peak of my life and in seconds everything was gone. I lost my friends.
In May of last year my Mom and I visited the Idaho Falls Police Department 3 times to file a police report on Dr. Garland for falsifying my medical records. We were turned away and no one would take the report.

I am writing because I want an official police report filed against Dr. Erich Garland for falsifying my medical records. I pray that you will help us.

Sincerely,
Robyn Edwards

I didn’t want to discourage her because from what I could tell the entire system was a product of “the good ole boy network.” A few weeks after sending the letter, I received two letters in the mail. One from the Mayor expressing his inability to assist and another which I don’t believe was intended for us, in which the city attorney, expressed that it wouldn’t be “proper” to prosecute the doctor. I thought to myself, how utterly racist and discriminatory that statement. As with Dorner, and the mentally disabled black man assaulted by the White police officer, when their lives are weighed against the white perpetrators, it does not matter the crime committed against a black body; black lives are expendable if they jeopardize the reputation or livelihood of a white person.

These plunderers who rob, destroy and manipulate black bodies usually abuse those who are in positions subordinate to them. What’s more frustrating than being the object of their contention is watching those who are purportedly the overseers turn their heads while these deviants destroy the lives of innocent people and in the case of the ex-policeman in Los Angeles, the lives of those connected to these people, whether employees or family members, suffered needlessly because the system failed to do what it was created to do, provide oversight and protect from corruption within.

When I was in the midst of the fight in Idaho, I had many people tell me that “that’s just the way it is” even a minister in whom I once had great respect until that conversation. I had a
friend who helped me search through court documents and even accompanied me to the courthouse to search through old court cases to try and tie Robyn’s attorney to the doctor and his attorney. But none of them would go public because they had to protect their own livelihoods, families and identities from future retaliation. I even had attorneys to turn me down because they were acquainted with this system of corruption. Some told me that even with evidence there was no way to win against these men. It infuriated me that people would so willingly give in to these plunderers. I am often reminded of a quote by Dr. King, “It may well be that we will have to repent in this generation. Not merely for the vitriolic words and the violent actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say, "Wait on time.” I’ve learned that people are afraid of the personal costs of standing up against toxic leaders in their communities. I had many people who supported me, and researched information to help me, but would not publicly stand with me, and I could not ask them to because I knew the costs I myself had to pay.
Alternate Reality

Our lives weren’t our lives. We didn’t live the lives I thought we’d lived. We lived on Ledbetter, a street with rows of ranch style homes, a street where mom’s took their children to Sunday school and cooked dinner instead of eating out – no McDonalds or Burger King having their way on our dinner tables. Children attended school regularly. Dads worked to provide for their families and mom’s sometimes pulled double duty – worked outside and inside the home, and all appeared well in the row homes on Ledbetter.

The house sitting on the northeastern corner of Ledbetter is where my childhood best friend, Denise, lived. She was found dead in a truck in Detroit in 2008. Her death was caused by a drug overdose. Before drugs gave Denise an alternate reality, she was a smart kid following me around to parties and places neither of us belonged. For me, it was a break from the strict Christian rules of my mother. For Denise, it was an escape from home.

Denise was allowed little company at her house, but she often visited mine. I may have been the only friend allowed inside hers, and I often felt uncomfortable. Her mom often wore an apron. She reminded of June Cleaver from Leave it to Beaver, except she was a beautiful dark skin black woman and the white flora apron often contrasted with her radiant dark skin. The house always smelled of lemon and Clorox. Nothing was ever out of place. When we played, we made sure to put everything back in its rightful space. I was usually gone before her Dad returned home, but a few times he came early, and I was in the house. Those times, her mom met him at the door. She announced, “Veverly is here. She and Denise are playing in the back.” It was like she was heading off something and signaling Denise to get me out. He’d murmur something. Denise and I would scramble to put everything away. I was fearful of him and always averted his gaze. He never smiled and always had a grimacing expression on his face. When we
passed each other in their hallway, I kept my head down, eyes focused on the brown and beige
tone shag carpet; I spoke and never waited for his response. Denise attempted to follow me, but
I’d hear him say, “Denise don’t you go nowhere.” She’d let me out, and for some reason when I
made it down the three steps of their porch and out of the driveway, I’d breathe a sigh of relief.
It’s like I made it through something. What? I don’t know.

The few times that I visited while he was there, Denise and I played in their backyard
making mud cakes or playing with her dolls. I recall on a few visits hearing her mom scream
“Stop, don’t.” Denise looked at me, and I continued to play not acknowledging that I heard the
scream or the explicit language that followed. Her Dad had a cruel tongue. A few minutes
passed, and her mom showed up at the back door, tears in her puffy eyes – our play time was
over. Denise reluctantly went into the house, and I returned home. I never told my mother about
these events, not until I was much older because she would have forbidden me to visit again.

The neighborhood kids used to gather at my house which was situated about midway of
the street just as it starts to incline. It was a black and white partially bricked ranch style home.
My mom couldn’t keep food in the cabinets because we fed the neighborhood. The new white
velvet couch and matching blue velvet high back chairs didn’t last long and the glass tables, well,
they went first. We were told to keep out of the living room. This was my mom’s pride and joy. I
was proud of it too. I often, before it was destroyed, told my mom when my siblings would bring
their friends in and allow them to sit on her white couch. But one day, my Dad, who, when he
wasn’t at his government job or partying, worked on cars because he was a licensed mechanic,
allowed one of his greasy friends to come in and sit on one of the blue velvet chairs. My mom
was livid.
My parents didn’t fight. They argued, but not before us. I somehow thought I was better off than some of my friends because their parents fought openly. My Dad was often summoned to the house across the street from us to stop the parents from fighting. I remember once, one of the children, knocking and screaming at our door, “Mr. Myers, please help. My dad is beating up my mom.” I didn’t want my dad going over there. I thought he might get hurt in the crossfire. When he returned, he said to my mom, “Hell, she didn’t need the help. He did. She had him hemmed in a corner with a hatchet.”

These were not frequent events but enough to be engrained in my young mind because it scared me for my father. He also had to go next door a couple of times when a young couple moved in with three young children, the man appeared to be very possessive and his wife suffered for it. I think my father liked being the go-to person or feel like he was the big man in the neighborhood. We learned how to make this benefit us because he was less prince charming at home. He was less likely to turn us down if we asked for something in front of neighbors. When we needed money we’d wait until he was with someone. Excuse me Dad, “Can you give me five dollars.” He’d looked under eyed at me with those big eyes, and then pull five dollars out.” He’d question me later and warn me not to ask him while he was with someone. But I knew what that meant, that meant he’d have the opportunity to say, “No.”

When I consider it now, my dad was not home very often. He’d come in late from work during the week. The weekends, he’d leave and return in the wee hours of the morning. If he was in a good frame of mind and we were still awake, he’d teach us how to play twenty-one and poker. If we wasn’t in a good frame of mind, and happened to pull a glass from the cabinet and saw a spec on it, he’d wake the entire house, and whosever turn it was to clean the kitchen had to
take all of the dishes out of the cabinets and rewash them. This didn’t happen often, but it did happen. My three older siblings and I usually helped and supported the one caught in his rage.

My father’s behavior was normal to me, I sometimes wished he was home more and maybe even attended church with us like I saw other fathers attending with their families, but that never happened, it too became normal. As a child you never attribute your parent’s behavior to something that may have occurred during their childhood. No, you are haunted and wonder if it has something to do with you or your siblings, maybe you’re not what he wanted or not good enough for their love and attention. It’s only privy to you when you are an adult that they had serious issues not resolved before you entered the world, unfortunately, you and your siblings had to endure their behaviors and consequently develop your own insecurities.

My father was born February 12, 1934. His father was born March 20, 1892, which I would think my grandmother, his birth mother, who died during childbirth, must have been near my grandfather’s age, around 42, when he was born. He was a surprise to his father and mother, and his birth jeopardize both, his life and his mother’s life. My father’s grandparents were either born in slavery or soon after Emancipation. His grandparents raised him after his mother’s death. Considering all of this, I just completed the first few chapters of Fredrick Douglas. One of my students asked why Douglas, when speaking of his mother spoke with such a detachment of love for her. I explained that he was separated from her at birth, this was intentional on the part of slave owners to destroy and ensure attachments were not made between mother and child. The only images or knowledge he had of her was when she would sneak in at night and hold him, but he never saw her in day light. Never even knew who she was until much later in his life. I wonder the effect on my father, losing his mother so early never knowing her touch
I read once that people should really get to know a person before marriage because everyone wasn’t taught love, some were only taught survival. Oftentimes they learn to survive abandonment, abuse and the hurt, as a result, the pain is never addressed. As a result, they are desensitized to other people’s pain. Survival skills need to be tempered with love. I wonder if my father only picked up the survival skills. I never met his grandparents who raised him, but I did know his father, my paternal grandfather and I knew his second wife, my grandmother, who loved me like I was her blood grandchild. I never knew she wasn’t my father’s birth mother until I was well into my late teens or young adulthood and she wasn’t the one who informed me.

In 2018, a cousin in Indianapolis sent my mom a photo of my father’s maternal grandmother, my great grandmother, who raised him. The background was a barbed wired fence enclosed around a field of brown grass. Two of my aunts, who were tall, dark skinned women with shoulder length hair, were standing beside her with wide grins on their faces. My great grandmother was a dark skin lady. She didn’t smile. I wouldn’t say that she frowned, she wore a very weary expression. Looking in her eyes, I could see the years of toil, and I wondered about her struggle. How difficult it must have been for her to raise my father. I wonder about life for them and the dangers they faced and how it may have manifested in my father’s life.

The year my grandfather was born, 1892 in the state of Mississippi, there was a presidential election year. After the Civil War and later passage of the fourteenth Amendment in 1868, Black people gained the rights of citizenship, but not necessarily voting rights. In 1870 with the passage of the fifteenth Amendment, the Black man gained the right to vote. White Mississippians viewed this as an affront by the Northerners to further weaken their hold on the Black population. To counter the insult of both Amendments they created the Jim Crow laws which succeeded in undermining the freedoms and rights granted by the Amendments.
My great grandfather, grandfather and father lived through one of the most horrific and dangerous time periods for black men in the history of this nation. A time when the lynching of Black people became a sport. A black man could be lynched for being intelligent, for being wealthy, for looking at a white woman, for false accusations, anything a white man or woman conjured up as an offense could get a black man lynched. Post cards of lynchings were created as souvenirs of the inhumane act, and white people celebrated the lynchings as entertainment for family picnics and community gatherings – many times taking pictures next to mutilated bodies of black people.

In 1892, the year of my grandfather’s birth, Thomas Moss, Henry Steward, and Calvin McDowell, black businessmen, were lynched in Memphis, Tennessee. Ida B. Wells, a Black journalist writing on the topic of lynching, had an article that caused riots afterwards and was run out of Memphis. The newspaper she co-owned was destroyed and whites threatened to lynch her if she returned. The future for a Black person in the South was volatile – whites were lynching Black people for sport as the nation watched. For a Black person to be born free at this time must have appeared much more a curse than a blessing.

While my grandfather did not experience the fear that these lynchings must have placed in the minds of Black people, his parents and my father’s mother’s parent’s, did. My father’s mother’s parents took custody of him, after the death of his mother, when he was about two months old. My father referred to his grandparents as Poppa Josh and Ma Bell. He always spoke of them in the strictest sense. When I consider his upbringing, I think of one of survival. They taught him how to survive a world that would consume him if he wasn’t careful. My father had to be somewhat of a wild curious child. I say this only because of his actions as an adult. He appeared to have a restless spirit – one that couldn’t find peace.
The new science of epigenetics reveals that while the DNA of the brain is not changed by a person’s environment, the genes are affected. According to Epigenetics studies, “epigenetic trauma” can leave a mark on a person’s genes which can affect future generations. My interpretation is that epigenetics influence how the genes respond to outside stimuli. Negative stimuli can alter the development or expression of the gene. From what I’m reading, it’s simply saying if you deprive a person who is capable of becoming a loving human being, of love, his ability to love is compromised. I’m not sure of all the biological and technical jargon about epigenetics, but I do know that if children are not shown love their capacity to love is compromised.

I wonder with my father, how the early separation of his mother affected him, especially being born in 1934. I wonder if he felt abandoned by his father, growing up with his grandparents. His other siblings grew up with their father, I’m not sure when my grandfather married my grandmother, but I wonder too if he somehow had a private resentment. As I think about his life and mine. I wonder if his early separation from both parents made it easy for him to father children and walk away. When my parents separated, I saw him on weekends when he picked my younger brother up. He was the only one allowed to go with him. This too became normal after a while and didn’t bother me.

Both my parents worked for the government. Together their incomes would have provided a very comfortable living for us, but my father often neglected his responsibilities and the buck of the responsibility for our necessities fell on my mother. Of course, I never knew this. I remember the year my siblings and me received bikes for Christmas. I was so happy and was so grateful to my parents, especially my dad, because of course he was Santa Clause, this was before I knew how he neglected his responsibilities. Well, after making the promise to us, he was
going to break it, but my mom refused to have us disappointed at Christmas. She bought them on credit. When my parents separated and eventually divorced, my mother allowed him to give her thirty-five dollars a month in child support for the five of us.

I’ve concluded that survival, untempered with love, can create a cruel, cold, callous human being – a narcissist.

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At a very early age, I learned to deal with stress my way. After telling God about his ill-fated world and the corrupt people within it, I would often drift away to a world I created. *I Dream of Jeannie* and *Bewitched* were my favorite TV shows. I wanted the magic they had. I wanted the ability to create a world of my own. Where everyone was happy and cared for and without want. I was often accused of being lazy and sleeping a lot as a kid. Actually, I wasn’t asleep, just dreaming. One of my aunts may have played into my ability to create imaginative places in my head. At a very young age, she introduced me to the money tree that grew in her backyard. Every time I visited her home, I would make a dash for her backyard for a glimpse of the magical tree before it disappeared. It always disappeared when I visited

My grandmother’s house was my place of refuge. I was very close to my maternal grandmother and my mom’s youngest sister. My mom’s youngest sister introduced me to the arts. I developed a love for plays. The times my aunt took me to plays and museum exhibit were very special moments for me.

After spending a weekend at my grandmother’s house when I was twelve, I returned home to find aliens had possessed the bodies of my family. The only one not affected appeared to be my little brother. When I walked through the door, my siblings were all sitting in the living room, quiet with solemn looks on their faces as if someone had died, and they appeared to be
waiting for me. This was strange because as the youngest girl, they usually were trying to get rid
of me or ignore my presence; so for them to be there in the living room when I arrived to greet
me, was very unnerving.

“Where’s mama,” I asked.

“She’s not here,” my older brother replied

“Where is she?”

“She’s gone?” my sister replied, as if I hadn’t noticed that already.

Where’s Daddy?

“Daddy is gone. Mama put him out,” one of my sisters stated.

I ignored the remark and walked through the house. Neither of my parents were home.
Although I did not take the comment to heart, I could feel something had changed. Our house
was never quiet; my older siblings were teenagers – there was always music playing,
conversations going, friends visiting – never this still quiet. When my Mom returned home, she
confirmed my Daddy’s and her separation. My mom was different, my siblings were defensive,
and I was clueless. I felt like an outsider in my own home. I don’t believe this was intended, but
what was probably meant to protect me actually alienated me.

A few years later, my Daddy moved into a rental house that he and my mom bought
while they were married. The house was down the street from use. It was on a large corner lot. It
was a three-bedroom home, smaller than the house we lived in, but it had covered parking. It was
across the street from my friend Denise. He remarried a short woman with short hair and wide
bow hips. She had five girls from previous marriages. As a teenager, I cannot explain the hurt of
having my father move another woman down the street; the appearance that your own dad is taking care of another woman and her children, while neglecting you is not a good feeling. It was the most damaging thing he could have ever done to my confidence and self-esteem.

Being one of the bolder of my siblings, I often had confrontations with his new family. I recall once, sitting at their dining room table in a heated discussion; someone had scratched the word ugly over the plastic covering of a photo of his wife. They thought I was the culprit. One of her daughter’s threatened to whip my ass. I encouraged her to bring it on. My Daddy reprimanded me which made me more resentful.

One of my stepsister’s made alliances with my friends. This was not good because when we had a fall out, which we did, my friends had to choose where their loyalties fell, and I had one deserter. I think there must have been wars between my Daddy’s new family and me up until they decided to return to their neighborhood to attend school. As an adult, I realized if my father had handled the situation better the outcome would have been better, but as a teenager, I blamed his new wife and her kids.

On Sunday mornings, we attended Sunday school and worship service. We seldom missed Sunday services. This was not an option in my home. As for my mom and her children we went to church on Sunday. Many of my neighbors attended church. Many of the children in the neighborhood that we were friends with went with us on Sunday mornings. My relationship with God, and my ability to escape to my grandmother’s house were my saving grace. I never felt a sense of desolation which I think Denise felt.

We were about fourteen or fifteen years old when we started attending parties. Denise’s Dad was doing a lot of work out of state. Denise’s mom trusted me because she’d heard about my mom and felt like Denise was safe with me. But I was just as mischievous as Denise or more
so. I was always going places I didn’t belong. If a party was going on, didn’t matter that it was for adults, I’d find my way there with Denise and two other friends in tow. I recall a couple of times, when we were at parties, looking for Denise and not being able to find her. Then near the end of the party, she’d reappear with some strange man. “Where have you been? I’m not bringing you anywhere else with me?” She’d wave me off, and I’d swear at her again.

I never drank at these parties or did drugs, but I believe it was at one of these parties that Denise met up with her end. Most of the places we went people knew my older siblings and heard of my mom through them. They would always make a disclaimer when I entered, “she is jail bait” followed by “this Ms. Shirley’s child, or Dale’s or Andrea’s lil sister.” And if that didn’t suffice and they saw a man attempting to flirt with me, they’d intervene. Denise didn’t have this relation with them, and she didn’t want their protection.

I’m not certain when she started doing drugs, but one day the timid, shy girl who was my best friend ever, became a hardcore stranger to me. In our eleventh-grade year in school her parents put her out and she eventually dropped out of school. The first time her parents put her out, I talked my mom into allowing her to stay with us. The first few days she did well. She attended classes, came home from school with me, and we did our homework – just like old times, but when Friday came it was like something was beckoning her and she couldn’t resist it. She left and didn’t return until late Saturday morning. I also found my wallet in the bath tub that night - ten dollars gone. My mom told me unless she could follow the rules, she had to return home.

My mom called her parents and she went back home for about two days before she was out in the street hustling. I felt responsible for her being in the streets and often risked my own safety trying to wheel her back in, but it was too late. One day she called me in tears. While I
was trying to assess what was going on and where she was, I heard a struggle on the other end of the phone, and then a man’s voice.

“Who is this?”

“Who are you? I exclaimed.

“You better stop calling her.”

“She needs to go home.”

“You better stay out of my business or I’ll kick your ass too.

He hung the phone up and I didn’t hear from her for a long while. I often reached out to her mom for information on her whereabouts but she finally gave up on Denise and Denise stopped calling her.

When I left for Columbia Christian College in Missouri in 1982, I hadn’t talked to her for about two years, and didn’t hear her voice again until her father’s death. While she was in jail in 1990, for stealing from the Saints of God, her father died. She reached out to me from jail. She’d been granted the opportunity to attend her father’s funeral. I was glad. I wanted to see her. A few days after our conversation, I was told that she was in an altercation in jail, and her temporary release was revoked.

During her father’s funeral, one of my childhood neighbors whispered to me, “she was not his biological daughter.” I found that hard to believe. She looked more like him than his biological sons: big forehead, big eyes, short, chubby stature and all. But considering all the rumors I heard over the years, of physical abuse and sexual abuse, it all made sense. I always thought her relationship with her parents was strange. She called them by their given names, something, as a child with a southern upbringing, I was taught was a major offense – to call an adult by their first name.
Before Denise chose street life, she was an A student – one year behind me in school because her birthday fell in December. Even now, as I look back, I often question how it happened. How did she slip away? I’m reminded of what I didn’t know. Those days when I was relieved after taking that last step off of their porch, what was I leaving her to? As we became teens, I realized that all of their relationships were volatile – especially between her and her mom. She and her brother appeared to pick up where their father left off – as far as the abuse of their mom was concerned. The first time I heard Denise spew a curse word at her mom, I was dumbfounded. We were about thirteen years old. I was standing in her kitchen, and she was arguing with her mom.

“Just get your ass out my face, bitch.”

“You don’t talk to me like that”

I stood there listening, feeling like I’d been transported into a foreign space, and it got worse from there. When we left, I told her she should never disrespect her mom like that, and she replied, “You just don’t know.”

I was surprised her mother didn’t reach out to me when she died, but I believe Denise had been dead to her many years before she actually died. Disturbing, because I thought Christians were supposed to be forgiving people. She could have been the prodigal daughter, but no one invited her back home nor considered preparing a feast in her honor. Instead she was banned from returning home; people in the neighborhood talked about her; and she showed them by being the best deviant she could be.

In my youth, respectability meant daughter’s had to present a certain image, free of promiscuity, dresses below the knees, stockings, and God forbid a teen pregnancy – then your house would be the one that all the parents banned their kids from visiting. Yet, many were so
focused on creating the image of respectability that they mistook the immoral leach within their midst for a respectable human. The uncle, friend, cousin, God forbid – even the father in some instances who was defiling their daughters. My friend Denise always reminded me of a Sears’s ad. She wore the Peter Pan collar blouses, flared skirts, bobby socks and saddle oxford shoes. She could have been their poster child but instead she was on the Memphis Police most wanted list.

Denise once told me that she wished she had my life, I was dumbfounded. I had four siblings – everything that entered our house had to be split five ways. She had one brother at that time. She always had money. I never had any unless, I was able to finagle some out of my Dad. He always wanted to know, “How much did you get from your mom?” So, excusing the few unsettling moments at her house, I still thought she had a better life than mine.

If epigenetics has any validity, then it must have been my mother’s genes that tempered those of the ones I received from my father. My father was a survivor of the worst time in history. I was born in July 26, 1964. The year President Lyndon B Johnson signed the Civil Rights Amendment, this was the amendment to stamp out Jim Crow and the horror it brought to Black bodies across this nation especially in the South. It was also the year of the War on Poverty. This was also the year Nina Simone released “Mississippi Goddamn.”

Alabama’s gotten me so upset
Tennessee made me lose my rest
And everybody knows about Mississippi goddamn

According to my mom, she and my father moved around a lot at this time because he couldn’t find work. My parents moved my three siblings and me to Milan, Tennessee the latter part of 1965. Milan is a small town in western Tennessee which has no main bypasses around it.
Highway 45E and HWY79 run through the city. Western Tennessee Railroad is also located there -which serves four railroad lines. My father rented a room from a man named Mr. Gentry, an older black man who once worked for the railroad. While I was too young to remember anything about the time spent living in Mr. Gentry’s home, I often hear my older siblings talk about the pies he made. From what I heard as the nutmeg, butter, sweet potatoes and other ingredients melted together in the oven, the aroma danced and swirled through the air, draining their salivary glands, so said my older brother who was then three-years-old.

My mom remembers Mr. Gentry as being a miser. Oftentimes Mr. Gentry would walk to the neighborhood store and buy two liver cheese sandwiches. He’d returned to the house and eat them before us. My mom said he never ever offered us any, not a crumb. But at dinner time, you couldn’t beat Mr. Gentry to the table to eat the meal my parents had worked hard to buy and prepare for us.

My older sister, whose memory can almost outline a moment like a camera, remembers Mr. Gentry as a dark-skinned black man, small in stature with a slow gait and a bend in his back that made him look like he was attempting to touch his toes. Although he had a rough exterior, she says he was a nice old man. It was probably because my parents were so young that he treated them as he did. Or I surmise that maybe he had picked up some of the habits of those who’d employed him and took advantage of him.

Mr. Gentry was a retired railroad Pullman Porter. After the Civil War a Chicago businessman named George Pullman started hiring black men as porters on expensive sleeping railroad cars -this revolutionized railroad travel. Pullman created “rolling hotels with invisible servants.” Black Pullman Porters worked long hours and endured rude harsh treatment from the white railroad clientele, even so, the Black Pullman were always dignified with their crisp white
shirts, ties and coats and hats. They gave the rolling rail a bit of soul. I imagine this is why Mr. Gentry was always so neatly dressed, he was accustomed to greeting every day in a crisp black suit.

Pullman Porters were well regarded in the Black community. They travelled across the country and often returned home with tales of meeting famous people. I imagine Mr. Gentry must have met a lot of people too. He must have had many stories to share – it is unfortunate that he never had the opportunity to pass them on. I’m not sure how my father met Mr. Gentry. I just know that in 1965, my father, in a rush to get out of Memphis because he had a baby on the way by another woman, decided to move my family to Milan, Tennessee. Mr. Gentry was no relation to us – just a retired black man with a home and money in the bank.

At the time of the initial move, I was a little over a year old and my sister next to me must have been almost three. My mom left us with my Aunt Kalie. I didn’t like her as a child, I’m not sure how I tolerated her as a baby – probably screamed my head off for my mama. My older siblings were about four and three at the time; they were left with my grandparents in Byhalia, Mississippi. This was just for a short time until they were able to find jobs in Milan. Well, a week led to a few weeks and so on and before long the Holiday Season was on and my mom told my dad she was going to retrieve her children. I’m not sure that Mr. Gentry was ready for the four of us.

At first my brother took to Mr. Gentry. He loved following Mr. Gentry around and watching him make his infamous sweet potato pies. While there was an electric stove in the house, the heaters burned coal. My brother would go out to the coal pile and help Mr. Gentry bring coal into the house for the heaters. He would then sit down to a piece of pie. That is until one day my brother sat at a table and watched Mr. Gentry make pies. Mr. Gentry must have had
an itch or sneeze because he pulled a towel from his back pocket and blew his nose. A few minutes later my brother watched him remove pies from the oven with the same towel. Afterwards my brother never accepted another piece of sweet potato pie from Mr. Gentry. This was probably the only thing that he offered freely to everyone. It appears that he was proud of his pies – maybe some special ingredient he put in or some special family recipe – I don’t know. I don’t like potato pies and even if I liked them, I was too young to remember, but Mr. Gentry was proud of his pies and I guess the neighbors were too. My brother thought they were pretty special for a while too.

We stayed with Mr. Gentry until the first of the New Year. My parents still hadn’t found permanent employment, so we returned to Memphis. I supposed my father felt it may have been safe to return or he had no choice. He had four mouths to feed and couldn’t do it dodging a pregnant woman. A friend had given my father a car and said he could keep it as long as he kept up the payments. Without a job that was difficult to do; the car was repossessed. I’m thinking it must have been repossessed after our move back to Memphis. Maybe when my dad went back to Milan for a short spell to wrap up loose ends.

When my dad left Milan to return to Memphis, the car had been repossessed. When he left Mr. Gentry’s house, my dad had a friend take him to the bus station. That was the second week in January. He finally found work the latter part of January and we moved into a house on Shawnee Street in South Memphis. My Dad returned to Milan the first of February to retrieve our furniture and to his surprise Mr. Gentry’s house was locked up. A neighbor met him as he walked down the short drive.

“You know they lookin for you”
“Lookin for who”

“You”

“Who’s lookin for me?’

“Don’t you know?”

“Know what?”

“Somebody kilt Mr. Gentry.”

“What?!”

“Yeah, it happen right afta you left. That’s why they lookin’ for you.”

“Man, Nawwwww…”

My Dad went straight way and retrieved his friend who’d driven him to the bus station the evening in question and took him to the Milan police station with him. He turned himself in for questioning. He was questioned and released because he had an alibi that checked out. His friend had driven him to the bus station, and he was on a bus back to Memphis when it all happened.

My Dad is dead now, and I recently learned about this event. I do wonder about his initial response to this, especially in 1965, in Milan, Tennessee. A small town – predominantly white at that time – I’m sure. The make up today of the population is about eight thousand more or less and about twenty -two percent Black. I’d expect the numbers were less in 1965 and 1966. The nation was still in an upheaval, I imagine the only reason he wasn’t hunted down was because Mr. Gentry was a black man. If it had been a White and a White man making the accusation, he wouldn’t have had the opportunity to clear himself. He probably would have been lynched.
The police eventually arrested Mr. Gentry’s nephew-in-law for the murder. A person Mr. Gentry trusted and placed on his bank account. Mr. Gentry had worked hard and saved for his retirement. His nephew had been making withdrawals from his account without his knowledge. He was aware that my family was living with Mr. Gentry. The day my father left, Mr. Gentry wanted to visit the bank. The nephew decided to kill him and make it appear that my father had committed the crime.

I found out about my father’s being “almost accused of murder” in the summer of 2019 – it came out during a casual conversation with my mom. I couldn’t believe no one had every shared this with me.

“Mama, didn’t you feel some kinda way, knowing that the person you stayed with only a few weeks earlier, had been murdered, and daddy had been accused?”

“I guess I did.”

“What do you mean, you guess you did?”

“It was so long ago. I don’t remember. It’s nothing that I think about.”

“But mama, wasn’t that too close for comfort.”

I questioned my mom about this for a few weeks and then she refused to talk about it anymore. She said, “I’m through talking about this.” So, I let it go. I found it interesting and I wondered how it may have affected my father. The murder happened in 1965.
The Artist Survived

When I realized in the land of the free and the home of the brave, the black body was still hanging from the tree of oppression, denied equal protection, robbed of economic progression, and experimented on by the medical profession, I knew I had to write. As unsettling as it was to record my story, brain recoiling from disquieting facts, it had to be done.

In fifth grade, my teacher put me out of class whenever she caught me passing around my short, short, short stories about how doomed we all were. Once I was in the hallway, I was tasked with disciplining myself, a smack on the face. Yes, I complied with her request, but only once because she was observing. I lightly patted the side of my face. The next time I was ordered out, I stood, looked around the hallway, ventured a few feet, and amazed myself at the beautiful artisanship of my fellow fifth graders. The bulletin boards in the galley hallway were filled with brown trees sprouting green leaves and red, yellow, pink and blue tulips looked as if they’d just pushed through the ground. Some students even incorporated depictions of houses, red brick. It amazed me. One can always tell the seasons by walking down the hallway of an elementary school. The deep voice of a male, probably the principal pulled me from my musing. I knocked on the door of my classroom and re-entered the class until the next time the creative spirit settled upon me.

Because I didn’t believe writing was a practical profession when I selected a major during my undergraduate years in college, I selected something practical – pre-med. My first three years of college, I focused on biology, anatomy, and chemistry classes. In time, I found it difficult to will myself to stay the course of medicine. The stench of formaldehyde and the sight of dead pigs were troubling, but the most unnerving thought was of dissecting cadavers. After my third year in college, I changed my major to Journalism, but it really wasn’t journalism that I
had a yearning for, it was creative writing. Regrettably, I didn’t have the courage to go for the impractical.

Dr. Pratt, my freshman English composition instructor saw the writer in Me, but it was after layers of years of survival had obscured my view and practicality became my norm. While I almost suffocated the writer in me, the activist in me was always just beneath the surface. When I attended college in Missouri during the early 80’s, I was on the modeling board of the college. I enjoyed the opportunity until one spring, we presented a wedding show with lingerie and swimsuits. My fittings with the lingerie and swimsuits went well, but during the fittings for the wedding gowns, I noticed that the black models were only fitted for the bridesmaid’s dresses.

Consequently, thirty-seven years later, I was sitting in a neurologist’s office with Robyn. While waiting to be seen by the doctor, I picked up a wedding magazine and flipped through the pages of the book. First, just noticing the pretty white gowns of lace: princess gowns, fish tail gowns, and see through lace gowns. I was amazed at the pearl lace jumpsuits replacing gowns. Times have changed. As I turned the pages, I started looking for Black faces. About midway through the book, I found one Black face and then near the end, I saw two more. I wondered why they didn’t appear in the first pages with the lineup of about six or seven White faces. Unfortunately, humanity has not made the advancements of fashion and technology.

I attended Columbia College three years, received an associate degree in Liberal Arts then transferred to Memphis State University. By this time, I realized that I couldn’t force feed myself practical careers. That being said, Journalism appeared the most practical career for writing. I had come to grips with not becoming the first doctor in my immediate family. I have no idea why I felt I needed to become a doctor. Maybe that was just what I thought was expected. I was the first in my family to actually attend college. I felt like my mom was banking
on me doing something. I didn’t realize at that time that just “doing me” would have been enough.

I am going to forge ahead a little and come back, but I just lost someone near and dear to my heart. My Aunt Phyllis. She died January 15, 2020. She introduced me to the arts. When I consider people, who may have had an inkling about my burning desires or the gifts within me, people who God placed in my life to feed and nurture the artist in me, she is the one:

My Cookie

Dear Aunt Phyllis,

Someone once told me
Every child needs
A Cookie Person
Someone who loves them
Without judgement
No matter what
Someone who sees them
You were my cookie
I know you saw me

You introduced me
To the Arts – theatre,
Poetry readings, art exhibits
You taught me
The importance of activism
And civic engagement
You showed me
How much you loved
Your family and your
African American people

When I put the paint brush
To the canvas, I’ll
Remember us walking
Through museums and art
Exhibits. When I place
Words on the page,
I’ll remember your voice
Of activism and the importance
Of exposing injustice
Little was I aware
The seed you planted
I saw you Aunt Phyllis
I thank God you saw me too
You taught me to Stay Woke!
I’ll never forget the many doors
I followed you through
Now we’ve come to a place where
Only You and God can travel
Rest my dear Aunt, Rest my Cookie, Rest.

***

I married, divorced, and completed two additional degrees. Neither degree was in creative writing, but I always incorporated creative writing courses into my academic programs because the desire was always there.

It wasn’t until I became a survivor of institutionalized racism in Idaho Falls, Idaho that I decided to write my first book God’s Miracle Among Corruption in Idaho. In April 2012, my daughter’s white Mormon attorney attempted to coerce me into dismissing her medical malpractice case. It may have worked but at the point he attempted to convince me of the doctor’s innocence, I was aware of the false information entered into my daughter’s medical records and had observed his unethical behavior at the deposition. His efforts to persuade me that either of them were men of integrity was futile. In a meeting that April, he stood before me and stated, “You’ll never win.” When I attempted to retain another attorney, I was told by many who refused to take the case that I couldn’t win against these men. Not because of the unviability of the case, but because I was fighting corrupt upstanding Mormon white men in Idaho Falls, Idaho. At that time, I didn’t realize their power – didn’t realize they could paint me invisible. I kept writing. Kept protesting but no one heard me.
In August of 2012, while visiting my brother in Atlanta, my disabled daughter and I decided to protest outside of the CNN offices in Atlanta. We were hoping that someone would tell our story; would give voice to what we experienced in Idaho. While several producers of news talk shows sent people out to speak with us about why we were protesting in front of CNN, no one ever picked up our story.

I write now because I know the enormous cost of freedom and someone has to pay. Someone has to stand and sound the alarm. As I meditate and try to make sense of it all, it seems like people have become comfortable and compromised by capitalism. Employer’s forbidding their employees to speak out. People’s voices quieted to maintain their lifestyles. I am by no means placing blame. I was comfortable once. I recall several of my employers having me sign documents that stated even when I was off their clock, away from their offices, I still represented the company and that I would be held accountable for any behaviors that cast a negative light on the company. Today, I view this as a repressive move by the oppressor to take away the power of their employees’ voices.

I consider Rosa Parks, who refused to give up her seat on a bus. That was prophetic rage and it ignited a movement that forever changed the lives of black people in this nation. I consider the mothers and fathers of all the young people, whose lives were brutally destroyed by white men for their vain glory and, yes, I am enraged that it could still happen today. That it happened to me. That black bodies are still disrespected, yes, this angers me. I write because we are still invisible.

The Tuskegee Experiment that transpired in the 1930’s may be happening somewhere today. It may not be allowing black bodies to die from Syphilis. It may be like Robyn’s case, attempting to start a young child on a regimen of drugs she doesn’t need, for capitalistic gain.
Instead of deceiving black men into thinking they are being treated for Syphilis and watching their demise, today, they may be amputating a leg unnecessarily, refusing to send the black patients on for further diagnostic testing, prescribing medications unwarranted. Who is providing oversight? Medical Boards? No, that’s like allowing the fox to watch over the hen house. The Tuskegee Experiment allowed for experimentation of the black body.

Once I took on the case myself, and the doctor’s attorney realized I reached outside of Idaho for assistance, he filed a motion requiring me to list everyone I contacted about the case. I responded, “I don’t remember everyone,” but gave him a few media outlets. I am positive now that my mail was censured after they realized I was contacting outside resources for assistance because I never received anything from the people we sent correspondence to regarding the case or the corruption within the justice department in Idaho.

In 2012, I sent letters to President Obama and the U.S Department of Justice in Washington, D.C., pleading for their assistance in addressing the unjust practices within the justice department in the State of Idaho. It occurred to me in 2016, when I received a letter from President Obama in regard to a letter I wrote to him after I relocated to California, that many of the letters I sent, priority overnight, while living within Idaho Falls were probably intercepted.

In October of 2013, I prayed to God and asked him, “What do I do with this information?” The spirit within me replied, “Put it in a book.” I started researching and writing. I recruited my sister-in-law, Wanda, and a friend, Linda, to keep me focused because it was a daunting task. Starting off, I wrote about my feelings and reactions to Robyn’s near death which was difficult to relive. I soon realized that the greatest challenge was reading through the documentation and discovering the lies in the legal files – realizing that my child’s life meant nothing to these people. I prayed for God to keep me sane through the process of writing the
book. The days when I thought *I just can’t do this*, I reached out to Wanda or Linda and they encouraged me on. Actually, they were the only two people able to read through the manuscript. My mom couldn’t take it. She said it was too difficult for her emotionally to continuously relive those moments.

It took me about six or seven months to write *God’s Miracle Among Corruption in Idaho*. During these months, there were times when I’d wake up and feel like my brain was recoiling—like something was crawling around in my head. Other times I’d wake up and it was like I was in another world. I thought my mind was slipping because I’d have illusions of being present in an unfamiliar space and wake up almost running. These were the times I was ready to walk away from the book, because mentally it was wearing on me.

When I wrote *God’s Miracle Among Corruption in Idaho*, I did it so that the world could see what happens when people like me are invisible. So they could see how easily a little black girl’s body could be destroyed. Trammeled by these white men whom I’m sure go to church on Sunday mornings—professing to be men of God yet destroying black bodies on Monday and discarding them and hiding their white hands. I wrote it and placed the lies written in letters and emails within the book for the world to see, I wasn’t lying and they had indeed committed an awful act against humanity, but it was only against a little black girl’s body. Who would want to read it? She too was invisible.

I wrote because I was enraged that my life could be so easily destroyed in the land of the free and the home of the brave. I wrote it because in the home of the brave there are cowards committing vicious acts against black and brown bodies and the law refuses to respond. Refuses to take a report. Refuses to recognize the humanity of a black body. Refuses to provide equal protection under the law. I wrote it because civil rights in the land of the free and the home of the
brave are just a list of nice words written upon a document but not enforced. The white Mormon men in Idaho knew this and educated me to this reality. I had no rights, if they said I had no rights. My daughter’s black body was subject to them and they destroyed it and blocked every road she had for redress.

While writing and researching Robyn’s case, I realized the tumorous nature of white privilege. As long as it’s benign, black and brown bodies are safe to move about and exercise their freedom without being slaughtered, but when it’s malignant and metastasizes no spaces are safe. After Robyn’s near death and my realization of what transpired, living within the confines of Idaho Falls resembled things I’d heard and read about in third world countries: heinous crimes against humanity, civil rights violations, killing and destroying lives and blocking intervention by controlling the media and any other outside interferences that would topple their regime. Better yet, Idaho Falls, to me, was like a replica of this nation before the civil rights movement. The black body was invisible then and today it’s still invisible.

Once my youngest son, Rodrick, said to me, “Mom, I’ve never seen you cry.” I think he meant in the midst of Robyn’s ordeal. I did cry, but never around them. I had to convince my children – we will survive, and everything will be fine. But I cried many times. I cried after I realized Robyn had been robbed of her dreams. I cried when I missed Rodrick’s geography bee. I cried when I missed my oldest son’s basketball team’s seniors’ parent night, and someone had to stand in for me. I cried for all of us – many times, but even as the memories tormented me, I kept writing.

Around November of 2014, I wrote the U.S. Department of Justice again. I sent a letter along with a copy of the book, priority overnight, to U.S. Attorney General Holder. I received a response in January of 2015. I’m sure Attorney General Holder knew nothing of the letter or the
return correspondence. I imagine if he had read the letter, he would have been as incensed by it as I was. I have concluded that these white men, whom I’ve been fighting in Idaho, have people everywhere doing their dirty work. As hard as we fight to wound the cords of justice, there is always one of them to unravel it. The letter is attached.
January 9, 2015

Veverly Myers-Edwards
2345 Newport Boulevard
JO-105
Costa Mesa, CA 92627-6530

Dear Ms. Myers-Edwards:

The Department of Justice received your correspondence addressed to Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. After reviewing your correspondence, a determination has been made that the issues raised in your letter can best be answered by the . Therefore, your letter has been forwarded to the at the address below for review and direct reply to you.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dan B. Gilge
Director

Enclosure(s)

cc: Ms. Ashley Files-Flory
Executive Secretary, Acting
Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20201-0907
I imagine after reading the letter, one may wonder, who would send this out to their constituent’s incomplete. That’s what I wondered. I also tried without success to contact the person who signed or whose signature is stamped on the letter and the one that it was purportedly forward to. It gets even better. The lady who is cc’d had not worked for the Department of Health and Human Services, as of five years of the date on the letter. I wrote to her on LinkedIn and she was amazed that she was included in the correspondence. Needless to say, I never heard from the Department of Health and Human Services. Had I been the one to give my child a high powered drug, a cocktail of drugs, not recommended for children that nearly killed her and left her permanently disabled, I’m sure the department of Health and Human Services would have left no stone unturned to parade me before the public as a negligent parent and the media would have been camped outside my door. But when I am the victim, no one shows up to my defense and I am rendered invisible.

In the letter to Attorney General Holder, I asked for an investigation of the doctor and my daughter’s attorney. I asked him to look into the children in Idaho who were being prescribed anti-psychotic drugs. Robyn was prescribed two drugs for which she had none of the symptoms the drugs were created to treat. Robyn’s only issue was an occasional numbing sensation in her limbs. The neurologist in Idaho prescribed two high powered drugs for numbing sensations without any further diagnostic testing. As a matter of fact, when I requested an MRI, he refused. When I pressed he ordered it, but as a parents request. She never made it to the appointment because one of the drugs caused a massive stroke. I write because of the inequities within the system.

As I reflect on Robyn’s case, I considered other children in the Idaho Falls area on prescribed anti-psychotic drugs and concluded that the doctor was not attempting to physically
disable her body. He was giving her a cocktail of drugs that would render her a slave to the system and pharmaceuticals. Why else would an experienced neurologist give a child a high-powered drug and an anti-psychotic for numbing sensations? Maybe because he didn’t see a 13-year-old child, but another body that he could use to experiment on and further his capitalistic ventures. Her black body made her invisible to him.

I wrote God’s Miracle Among Corruption in Idaho to empty my soul of the venomous poison that found its way into my heart after realizing that my child’s life could be destroyed by a reckless white man without any consequences, because the same white privilege that destroyed her life controls the justice system in this nation. I wrote because I refused to allow the white Mormon men in Idaho Falls to quiet my voice and continue to render me invisible.

When I enrolled as a candidate for the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Nonfiction Writing at the University of Memphis in 2016, I did it because I had a desire to be visible and to be heard.

Returning to school offered me the opportunity to study African American Literature, History, and Art History. Exploring the history of my ancestors, especially my foremothers, spoke to my spirit and inspired a talent I never knew existed. As a child, I wrote, I made patterns for my doll’s clothes, I read craft books and destroyed a lot of my mom’s stuff trying to feed the appetite of the creative in me, but I never attempted to draw or paint. I watched others, even my children draw, and I’ve always been in awe of their talent because while they actually draw real life pictures, my renderings at best were stick people, but as I read a book on the History of Black women, and meditated on the horrors endured by the body of my foremothers something spiritual happened – images formed in my head and I took out my pencil and began to sketch visions of the women – some hanging from trees with the US flag as a covering, one sitting on a bed with the US flag
draped over her naked body. Another standing on the map of the US with the map of Africa as a covering. I was astonished by my ability. My spirit connected in a way I hadn’t anticipated, and my mind began to explore scenery and encouraged my fingers to attempt to sketch the images.

The more I read, the more I sketched. My foremothers were saying they need to see more. Show them liberty and justice juxtaposed to their cruel acts. Show them their humanity. The first sketch is of an African woman, standing on the map of the US which is covered by the flag. She is bound by chains with the map of Africa covering her body. She was snatched from her village and native land. She survived the tumultuous passage. Can you imagine her in the land of the free and the brave?

After I completed the painting, I showed Robyn. Before Robyn’s stroke, she sketched and would have painted too. It was a natural ability she had. We were both amazed at my new talent. She encouraged me to keep drawing and painting. When I conjured the first sketch in my head, I imagined my foremother. A young girl snatched from her village. Crying out to her father who was away from the village or maybe he too snatched by the hands of greedy colonists. Betrayed by their own countrymen for a barrel of guns or cigarettes or whatever goods the colonies brought to tempt the Africans to sell their countrymen into chattel slavery.
I closed my eyes and could see the magnificent ocean surrounding the new land she was brought to. She was now considered an animal. When her foot left the sand of Africa and stepped upon the ship of the slave traders, her humanity slipped away like the sand that slid through her ebony toes. She tried to grip the sand as the chains around her feet and neck tugged her forward. She looked back to the cement wall that separated her from her world. She’d heard about these traders. She never imagined she’d become a victim, but no one was safe from the greed and selfish ambition of these White traders and the conceit of her countrymen who committed this cruel act of treachery.

When I completed the first painting, I was haunted by what it meant. The eyes that stared back at me. That survived the malevolent acts of White man upon the high sea. The eyes that saw women, men, and children destroyed. The eyes that saw the bodies of women used for the entertainment of the White men on the ship. Raped, abused, killed and thrown overboard. The eyes that asked, “How can another human inflict such pain against another?” The eyes that said to me, keep drawing and painting the story is not complete. I continued to read the book and to draw.

After the first image formed another came of an African Woman, standing with eyes set upon a distant shore. Attempting to retain what dignity she could as she stood naked on an auction block, the flag as a backdrop, and the bidders forcing their bids through liberty and justice to strip away her humanity, make her docile, to insure she feels inferior.
My initial reason for reading, *A Shining Thread of Hope*, was actually to read about my own pain. I was looking to learn how Black mothers survived after White men mutilated, killed and destroyed their children. I needed to read about women like me. How they survived it because I needed to survive. I needed to thrive again, and it was difficult to let go the past. It was still difficult to know that the White men that destroyed Robyn’s life, took away the financial stability that I was rebuilding for my children and myself after a bad divorce, were free to go on, building on the lives they’d destroyed – just as they did my foremothers. I was disturbed and I needed to know women like myself. Even though I had encouragement from people around me, they didn’t know my pain, my angst.

When I took an Art History class from Dr. Ernestine Jenkins, I told her I was looking to research Black women whose voices had not been heard. Women who’d fought back but that no one knew about. She suggested I read the book *Celia, A Slave*. Celia was a young slave girl who was sold, at fourteen-years-old, to a man named Robert Newsom in 1850 in Callaway County, Missouri. At fourteen-years-old she raped by Newsom and became an unwilling sex slave. After two children and a third on the way, she pleaded with Newsom to stay away from her. She’d met an enslaved man whom she wanted to make a life with, he refused her request. Frustrated and determined to free herself from his grasp, the last time he visited her cabin to take advantage of her body, she beat him over the head with a stick. Her intention wasn’t to kill him, but she did. Fearing the consequences of her actions, she rolled his body into the fireplace. The bones that didn’t disintegrate, she crushed once the ashes cooled. The next morning, she solicited help from Newsom’s grandson to clean the ashes from her fireplace. She paid him with a dozen walnuts.

Celia inspired the painting of the black woman hanging from a tree wearing a dress made of the US flag. Celia was a victim of the system. Some may have thought it cruel for her to have
his grandson to clear his ashes, but according to Harriet Jacobs in Incidents in *The Life of a Slave Girl*, the moral sense is educated by slavery. When the story hit the newspapers, the continuous rape of Celia by her master was never mentioned, only the brutal killing. This was to keep the abolitionist from getting knowledge of the rape and using it to promote their antislavery propaganda. After several attempts at pleas for the Supreme Court to intervene, the Supreme Court refused the stay of execution and Celia was hung.

As I continued to read the harrowing accounts of abuse inflicted upon enslaved women, I came across a reading about breeding quarters. Where enslaved women were forced to engage in sex with men against their wills for the cause of increasing the labor on the plantation. As I read the struggles of these women, a picture developed in my mind of a woman with haunting eyes, naked, with the US flag as her covering, sitting upon a cot. Where was liberty and justice for her?
I started to hear words form in my mind as I painted. I began to feel different – a connection with these women. While some survived, some died but died fighting for their liberty and looking to justice which never heard their voices. I’m familiar with the justice that never hears the pain of a Black mother. Women who struggle to raise children in a world that views them suspect at birth. That builds jails for them before they leave their mothers lap. Before they walk statistics have placed them in a secured cell.
The paintings inspired in me a new freedom. One that speaks without my voice. One that says more than the words I write. Astonished, I was. I am not a Picasso – just an artist who survived. Survival means for me to keep telling the story. History repeats itself often and often we are not prepared. The same system that snatched the freedom from my foremothers, snatched away part of Robyn. The tears a Black mother cry for her child are never counted nor the battles she must fight.

I can never get back what was taken from Robyn, like many mother’s I wish I could rewrite time. But the most I can do now is write, paint, and protest the unjust acts.