
Senior Projects Spring 2015

Bard Undergraduate Senior Projects

Spring 2015

Flashbacks, Lies and Butterflies

Theresa Q. Holmes
Bard College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2015

 Part of the Fiction Commons



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).

Recommended Citation

Holmes, Theresa Q., "Flashbacks, Lies and Butterflies" (2015). *Senior Projects Spring 2015*. 248.
https://digitalcommons.bard.edu/senproj_s2015/248

This Open Access work is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been provided to you by Bard College's Stevenson Library with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this work in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@bard.edu.

Flashbacks, Lies and Butterflies

A collection of short stories

A Senior Project submitted to

The Division of Languages and Literature

Of Bard College

By

Theresa Holmes

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2015

For Saraya, Dakayla and Derrick

Table of Contents

Mother May I? 1

Interrupted 22

Dirty Laundry 41

A Fraction of the Family 53

Mother May I?

“No”

Growing up, this was something my three siblings and I heard often. After my father left this was a word my mother began to use painfully. Chronic yes's turned into consistent no's, and my mother was forced into what I now know to be “the struggle.” My mother, having grown up in poverty herself, tried all she could to remove her children from that life: after working her way up in the world she no longer needed public assistance and was doing pretty well for herself, working for the NYPD. Charlotte, with a now failed marriage and a recently deceased father, only had her children to live for, and knew that she did not want her children to fall stereotype to the community into which she'd unfortunately planted them.

Cinnamon and apples. My little apartment smelled like an apple tree had exploded right dead in the center of the house. Clandestine air fresheners were placed perfectly around the house in order to mask the smells of the outdoors. My mother took pride in her home, and always said that just because it looked fucked up on the outside didn't mean it had to look that way on the inside. My apartment sat, or rather leaned, on the corner of Bedford and avenue D, and on that corner sat the permanently posted cop car. Mark, our local patrol cop, was parked right

outside of my building daily; he was a cool guy, and he knew my mom, although no one on the block knew that. The building was a mere five floors, with four apartments per floor, with a community backyard and a stoop all the kids on the street loved to play on. There were two doors to the building that locked automatically when closed, so keyless people and trespassers could not enter. Entering the building was like entering a twilight zone. Cigarette and marijuana smoke filled the air, the yells of the Caribbean tenants and the smacks of dominoes made the building echo.

On the second floor lived my aunt Tracey; she and her husband Kenneth were the oldest people living on that floor. At the time she was a middle school teacher and my uncle Kenneth owned the corner store across the street. The other three apartments were occupied by younger, more rowdy couples and some of the gangbangers. On their landing you'd see them rolling dice and money scatted all over the ground. Sometimes my sisters and I would slide our feet across the landing, hoping to catch some of the stray bills.

The third floor was the boring floor, that's where I lived: in Apartment 3A. Next door to us in 3B was Ms. Muriel: she had three kids and was going on her third husband. She babysat my little brother from time to time, but besides that we didn't like her very much. She seemed to always have her nose where it didn't belong, and whenever my sisters and I did something, good or bad, she always found a way to report it back to my mother — with lightning speed. Next to her lived Mrs. Francis, who I never saw much. She took care of her two grandchildren, and they ran all of her errands for her, so I'd see them every day on my way home from school. And next to Mrs. Francis in 3D lived... nobody. In all of my years of living in that building I'd neither seen nor heard anyone come out of that empty house.

My apartment was full: full of warmth, full of laughter, full of tough love, and most importantly full of children.

BROOKLYN 2007:

“Tamara, Sarah, Denise, Eric!” This is how my mother called our names, always in the order of oldest to youngest. I guess it helped her keep track of who she popped out first.

“Huh?” we all would yell in unison pointlessly. I say pointlessly because we all knew she wouldn’t reply. My mother had this strange habit of calling our names and then not answering when we’d reply to her. This was her way of expressing that she wanted us to come to her. We’d all run down the long hallway to see what she wanted, practically slipping on the pine soled floors. I remember one time this infamous call was followed by dinner. My mother didn’t cook most nights, but the nights she did my siblings and I ate like kings. There was fried chicken, mashed potatoes, corn and corn bread, Sarah’s favorite meal. We ate as if someone would come up from behind and snatch the plate from under our mouths. We loved not having to make sandwiches for dinner, and I hated hot pockets and microwavable TV dinners. But because of the long hours my mother worked at the station we were left with no choice.

I remember my mother coming home most nights so drained. The look of exhaustion on her face was frightening. Her light skin contrasted drastically with the dark circles under her eyes. Her lips that’d normally decorate her smile so beautifully seemed to lay in a permanent pout. These days my mother rarely smiled. She’d come home from work, with her uniform and her happiness both stuffed in a duffle bag.

With my father now out of the picture I was knighted as next in charge. This meant I had more responsibility than most thirteen year olds my age. I took care of my siblings when my

mother wasn't there. Heating up their food every evening, giving them baths, picking them up from school, and just filling in whenever my mother had to work. I didn't mind this much as a child. It made me feel like an adult...like a mom. I didn't think there was anything wrong with caring for my siblings — that was until I began to make friends.

There was a girl from my building, whose name at this moment escapes me, but for now we will call her Kimberly. Kimberly was one of Ms. Muriel's daughters, and she was one year older than I was. I remember bonding with her on the afternoon bus rides home and becoming pretty good friends with her, regardless of the fact that I cannot remember her name now and regardless of the fact that I had to keep the most important parts of my life a secret from her.

There was one time, we were on our way home from school and saw a pair of new Air Jordan Sneakers in the window. I remember Kimberly suggesting we ask our moms for the money on the first of the month because that's when the welfare checks came in the mail.

"Tamera, why don't you just ask her?" Kimberly pestered. I, knowing for a fact my mother didn't receive a check at the first of the month like most people living in my building, just brushed her comment off and proceeded to walk to the bus stop.

"Hello? Don't you want those sneakers?"

"I do, but my mother can't afford it right now." I replied, making sure not to give away the fact that my mom actually had a job. There were two reasons I kept my mother's occupation a secret from Kimberly. The first being simple: because my mother told me to. With the amount of crime that took place in that building and on that block, my mother being a cop would make our living there very difficult. In my neighborhood, cops weren't seen as protectors. In fact, they

were pretty much the enemy. The streets had its own system of protection and laws, none of which included the NYPD. For the safety of my mother, we kept her job a secret.

The following reason for keeping my mother's job a secret was a reason of my own: to protect my image. On the block there was an underlying stigma that went with your parents having high paying jobs. If the other kids found out that your parents had jobs they'd call you "stuck up," "high-saditty," "bougie," or my personal favorite, "white." Answering Kimberly with a tale of my family's financial struggle made me blacker, but if I ever came clean about my mother's actual income I'd somehow be considered affluent and whiter.

"Oh I hear you, girl, my mother don't be havin' it sometimes too. Just ask someone else," Kimberly refuted.

"Who will I ask Kim!?" I asked, growing annoyed by this line of conversation

"Why don't you just ask your da — " Kimberly was cut off by her recollection of my father's arrest. It was on the news again this morning and by now everyone in the building had either witnessed or heard that my father was currently incarcerated.

"I'm sorry yo; but look! If I get them, we can share, ok?"

Kimberly was always so cool to me, she had an older boyfriend and always got to go outside with everyone, even after the streetlights came on. She wore the newest gear and, if you haven't guessed already, her mom bought her those new Air Jordans at the first of the month. Each day after school she would race me upstairs to the third floor and suggest that I come outside with her after we changed out of our uniforms. I had my siblings to watch until my mother came home so my answer was always no.

“Tamera, you never ask your mom for anything! Don’t just guess her answer. You’ll never know until you try, right?” she coaxed.

“Um...”

“Hey, it’s up to you. You’re the one missing out on all of the fun. But I’ve got to hurry up and change before my man comes. See ya.”

So that day after another rare home-cooked meal, I finally decided to ask.

“Hey mama. Can I ask you a question?” I asked, knowing what she’d say next.

“I had a long day Tamera, and I came home and cooked. What is it?” she said putting her fork down.

“Can I hang out with Kimberly, from next door?”

“No.”

Although I wasn’t surprised to hear her say no, I guess I felt as though I deserved an explanation, as most children feel at that age. Kimberly was right; I never asked for anything. With this in mind I asked my mother why I couldn’t hang out with Kimberly, and made my case by explaining how responsible I was. But of course this did not work. My mother replied telling me that I was not allowed to hang out with Kimberly because we came from different worlds, and she did not want me influenced by her. She brought up Kimberly’s driving boyfriend Leon and the skimpy manner in which Kimberly wore her uniform. This struck me as odd. Kimberly lived next door, and we wore the same uniform. How was it that we could come from two different worlds? But I knew I was already pushing my luck with my mother, by questioning her

so I decided to leave the conversation at that, go into my room, and read a book, something I always loved to do.

BROOKLYN 2008:

I didn't sleep most nights. The walls between the apartments were paper thin and the sounds of Kimberly's new born baby penetrated the walls with a force like no other. I always wondered how something so small could make so much noise. I remember when my mother was pregnant with Eric, and how loving and maternal she was. I remember laughing at my mother and the way she constantly held her stomach as if she were literally holding him. My mother would sing to Eric, long before the twenty-four week mark when babies are known to detect outside sounds. When Kimberly was pregnant, however, she never acted this way. I always heard her complain about her body, especially her stretch marks, and she had lots of them given that she was only fifteen when she gave birth. Whenever I'd go over to her house she'd always end up crying about not wanting to keep her baby. Kimberly taught me about abortions, and wept to me about how badly she wanted one. I remember asking why she didn't just get one (not actually knowing the extent of the procedure at fourteen) and she told me that her mother wouldn't let her. I didn't think it was right for people to have babies they didn't truly want. After it was born, some nights I could swear I heard them crying, both Kimberly and her baby. And I don't remember seeing her boyfriend Leon come around much either.

One night I asked my mom if she had a problem with her own stretch marks; she gave me a side eye and said yeah, and that most women do. I then proceeded to ask her why she had so many kids if they gave her stretch marks that made her unhappy. She laughed and said that her kids made her more happy than her stretch marks made her unhappy. In retrospect I guess

that wasn't all that true, seeing as though she got her tubes tied right after she gave birth to Eric. However, I smiled knowing I was loved and valued, well, at least more loved and valued than stretch marks. I wondered how Kimberly's baby felt, not being valued more than an unmarked body. I remember at that age being put off by the idea of pregnancy and having babies. Although my mother loved her children dearly, I could see that she wasn't always pleased with us. And Kimberly, well... if having a baby was anything like Kimberly said, I definitely didn't want to have kids.

So between my vocal classes, school, homework, SAT prep, and making sure I didn't do anything that could lead to babies, I had absolutely no time to sleep or have a social life. My mother enrolled us into so many extracurricular activities being idle was never an option. Through these activities, although overwhelmingly exhausted, I found a love for music.

Saturday evenings were always a drag. My mother had this rule that every Saturday when we came home from our designated classes, we needed to do our chores. We'd come home, change out of our clothes and proceed to clean the house. My siblings and I would play rock paper scissors to determine who would clean the bathroom, and then the rest of the rooms would be divvied up randomly. I loved cleaning the hallway. It was a perfectly shellacked oak, hardwood floor. It was clearly the easiest job. But I remember pretending it was harder than it was in order to manipulate my younger siblings into giving me the job. Some nights when my mother worked late, my sisters and I would put flour on the floors and put on a pair of socks and "ice skate" down the hallways.

Saturdays and Sundays were music days. On Saturdays from ten to three I was perfecting a hobby I took pride in. And on Sundays in church I had the chance to perform with my church

choir. My family was very musical and even in the worst of situations a tune could always lighten the mood, even when you lost rock paper scissors and had to clean the bathroom. I remember wanting to make music more than just a hobby. I no longer wanted to simply sing in the shower, or while we cleaned the house on Saturday evenings. I remember wanting to be a musical icon like the women I saw on television. Each night at around ten there was a program on television that showed the lives of celebrities before the fame; I watched those frequently. I always believed that a little girl from the ghetto could rise above all stereotypes and adversities with just her voice and ambition. These days this very thought of mine was the storyline of every hot movie in the theaters, and little did I know this was easier said than done.

Around this time in my life I was in the eighth grade, and it was time to apply to high school. I had dreams of being a singer, one who performed in musicals on Broadway. I'd seen the Lion King twice, The Wizard of Oz and The Wiz about three times, and Annie more times than I can remember. So, it was only right that I attend a performing arts high school, right? LaGuardia High school. Back home in the city any and everyone knew that LaGuardia was where you went if you had any actual talent. This was the school I needed to go to. This was the school that I was sure would make my dreams come true. I remember coming home with a flyer about high school applications, and my mother turning her nose up when I mentioned LaGuardia.

"Mama, did you hear what I said?" I asked when she didn't verbally respond to my comment.

"I heard you, Tamera."

"I really love the school mama and you know I wanna be a singer."

"Well, you can hang that up."

“Huh?”

My mother, the woman I’d always admired, the same woman who told me I could do anything I put my mind to, was shutting down my dreams before they even began.

“But mom, I love to sing. And you were the one who put me in the vocal class.”

“Mmhm, to keep you away from those fast little girls around here.”

Of course my mother’s only reason for enrolling me into a weekend program in Manhattan (a city completely different from the one in which I lived) was to keep me away from Kimberly and everyone else in my neighborhood. Yes, Kimberly had a baby, but that could happen to anyone, and the others, well they were a little rowdy and my mother did have a point.

“Mama please, you always said I could go anything I put my mind to.”

“I said you could do anything you put your MIND to, not your voice. I don’t know why you want to do all that singing anyway. Use your brain!”

“I do! My grades are fine.”

Talking to my mother about this was completely hopeless, and I knew she wouldn’t sign the paper authorizing my audition. After giving up on my mother, I decided to sign the papers myself, and attend the audition without her knowing. I figured that if I got in she’d have to let me go, and if I didn’t, well, maybe she was right.

The morning of my audition I was jolted by the sound of my cell phone alarm. I was already awake, staring at the ceiling, and humming “Tomorrow” from *Annie*. That was the song I

would sing today. I removed the covers from atop my body and began to iron the clothes I'd picked out three nights ago. I didn't know whether or not I should dress formal (like I was going to an interview), or flashy (like a performer). I settled finally on a white button-down shirt, black slacks, and a pair of flat shoes, but I had a few flashy accessories in my bag just in case. It was times like this that I wished my mother was more supportive of me, at least when it came to singing. She'd know exactly what I should wear, and if she didn't, she'd know who to call to find out. My mother only supported me on things she felt would make me a better student or person. She was the loudest one at my graduations, and she sat in the front row at all of my award ceremonies and debates. But today my mother was at work.

Aunt Tracey had driven my siblings to their Saturday classes, which left me the day to attend my audition. I took my time showering, knowing I wouldn't have to share the hot water with anyone else. Once showered I got dressed, brushed my teeth and struggled with my hair. Normally, on occasions my mother would sit me down on the kitchen stool and hot comb my hair. She'd always straighten it for my debates and ceremonies, but today she was at work. I pulled my hair into a ponytail, my go-to style, and left the house with nervousness and anger flowing through me. Locking the door behind me, I practically ran down the stairs, hoping no one would see me. My building was lively at night, but in the mornings most people were sleeping. I just didn't want to take the chance of getting caught, especially not in these clothes. I made it to the bottom floor, through the two automatic door that clicked shut behind me and I was on the street free as a bird.

“Tammy!”

I stopped and looked behind me. No one. It was about 9 A.M and no one was on the block. I continued to walk toward Newkirk Avenue, hoping it was all in my head.

“Tamera!”

I stopped again, this time looking across the street.

“Look up!”

I look up, and lo and behold it was Ms. Muriel, waving at me from her third floor window. I waved back, and attempted to walk toward the train station.

“Where are you headed?” Ms. Muriel pestered.

“My Saturday program,” I lied.

“Okay, be careful now. And zip up your jacket; you know your mother doesn’t like you guys walking around like that.”

“Okay,” I replied as I zipped up my jacket annoyed.

I waved Ms. Muriel goodbye and hurriedly walked to the 2 train, unzipping my jacket as soon as I was out of sight.

I rode the train, humming the whole way there, being mindful of my bag and the people around me, as my mother always taught me. At 72nd street I got off the train and walked to LaGuardia high school to find a long line awaiting me. The auditions started at ten, and I’d luckily gotten there at 9:58, no thanks to Ms. Muriel’s jabbering.

The line went down the entire block, and then swung around the corner. I couldn't believe how many people were there. I also couldn't believe how many parents were there. Most of the students there were accompanied by a parent and I remember feeling left out. My mother was at work. I tussled with myself, barely managing to hold back tears as I watched a girl and her mother rehearse lines on the street to *A Raisin in the Sun*. My mama and I loved that movie. As I walked around the corner to find my place in line I heard singing and, laughter, I heard encouragement, and support: "Good job baby," "a little louder, sweet heart," "enunciate." By the time I got to the back of the line, I was more nervous than I'd been all morning, and the Asian boy in front of me singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" off key, didn't help calm my nerves, though it though it should have boosted my confidence. And before I knew It, I was singing it too. He was alone, like I was, and I wondered why.

At 10:00 sharp the line began to move, and we were led into a huge room where we were given numbers and asked which audition we were here for. I remember being so nervous that I couldn't answer, and the woman looking at me with a face of annoyance.

"Hello? What are you performing today?" she asked popping her gum loudly.

"We're both vocalists," the Asian kid called out.

"Thanks," she said as she popped her gum and handed me the letter H.

I looked at him and smiled. He squeezed my shoulder and wished me good luck, although he was really the one who needed it. It wasn't long before they called letters A-H and both he and I stood up and walked to the auditorium. We stood outside and tried to listen to the people who'd gone before us, but it was no use. We couldn't hear over the piano, and all the chatter going on around us.

“Oh my God, I’m so nervous. Distract me!” the Asian kid said as we waited.

I looked up from my phone.

“Um... where are your parents?” I asked blatantly.

“Oh they don’t like the whole singing thing, and they really didn’t want me to come today. So they said that if I wanted to go, I’d to go by myself.”

“Really?” I asked, multitasking between him and my phone.

“Yeah. They’re the worst. They even went so far as to tell me I couldn’t sing.”

I looked at him with a straight face and held back my commentary, reminding myself that if I had nothing nice to say, I should shut up.

“What about you?” he continued.

“Huh?”

“Where are your parents?”

Deciding to spare both him and myself the ridiculous story that answered that question, I settled for a simple one...

“At work.”

Just then a bald man poked his head out and called for the letter G. The Asian kid once again wished me misplaced luck, and headed into the auditorium. As the door slammed behind him I began to practice my favorite song, “Tomorrow” from Annie, But for some strange reason it didn’t sound as good to me now as it did back at home. I scrambled my brain for another song

I could sing, but the only one I could think of, of course, was that Asian kid's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow". I thought about "Good Morning Baltimore" from *Hairspray* and "In my own little corner" from *Cinderella*, but for some strange reason I could not remember the words to the songs of these movies that I'd seen countless times. The only song that I seemed to be able to recollect fully was from *The wizard of Oz*.

"Letter H."

I raised my hand and followed the bald man into the auditorium where I was greeted by four other people: three women and two men. There were five people who were going to watch me audition today. Audition a song I'd only sung for fun around the house a couple times before. I shook their hands and smiled confidently. They waved me onto the stage, and I walked on, stopping dead in the center under a huge bright light. They asked me my name and which school I went to at the time. I answered them squarely making sure to project my voice, and make eye contact with all five of them despite the blinding overhead light.

"What will you be singing today, Ms. Howard?" one of the women asked me.

"I will be singing "Somewhere over the Rainbow."

"By who, Ms. Howard?"

"Dorothy Gale."

The room went silent.

"Um, I think her real name is Judy Garland?" I tried again.

"Oh Yes, Honey," she snickered lightly.

“She means the Arlen and Harburg piece from The Wizard of Oz. Okay, whenever you’re ready. This song is quite popular today.”

I stood on stage guiltily, firstly, for not knowing the name of the composer of the song I was about to sing, and secondly for having stolen the song from the guy in front of me, but I smirked confidently, knowing I’d sing it a whole lot better than he did.

As I stood on stage I began to give it my all, bellowing out each word with what I thought to be impeccable enunciation. I didn’t quiver, I didn’t miss a single word, and I smiled as I sang. I thought I was doing well; then suddenly out of nowhere someone yelled stop. The piano stopped, playing and no one clapped.

“Okay, Tamera, so now we just need to see your range. The piano is going to play your starting note and from there you will begin the song again. I’ll raise my hand when you can stop,” the woman said.

But how was I to know when she raised her hand? The stage light was literally blinding. Just then the piano played my note. I hummed it twice to make sure it was correct, and then began to sing the song again. After about the first line, the woman yelled for me to stop again and I apologized for my disobedience, telling her about the lights. She chuckled lightly and told me it was no problem. Then we proceeded with the audition, going an entire octave up on the piano, to calculate my “range.” It was all pretty okay until my voice gave way and cracked toward the end. I hadn’t practice singing the song this high. I didn’t even know I was going to have to do more than sing one time today. I felt beaten.

My voice was my strength, and evidently it wasn't strong enough. I couldn't even get through a high school audition. How did I expect to become famous? At that moment I knew my mother was right. She always was.

“Would you like to try it again, Tamera?”

“Um, no thank you. It's... it's out of my range.”

“Okay thank you. You can exit stage left, and there's a door on your right.”

I smiled big and thanked them all for the opportunity. I exited the auditorium to the door and was led to the street, where I cried the whole way home.

Months passed and I continued participating in the boring routine that was my life. My circle of friends dwindled, and I was down to just my siblings, my mother, and the letters I'd receive from my father every once in a while. Everyone else in my life was capricious and I honestly didn't have time outside of vocal classes and my studies to make actual friends. And that's how my mother liked it. It wasn't until I received my letter of high school acceptance that I was able to hope for a more liberating teenage existence. I'd been accepted into LaGuardia along with some other high school I'd taken an entrance exam for, one which my mother had chosen. After that terrible audition, I hadn't expected to get it, and I'd been preparing myself for a life of academics. But now, there was hope for me yet. I couldn't wait to show her that I was good enough to receive entrance into any kind of school, and so I rushed home that day, or at least I attempted to. The ride home from school was longer than it had ever been before. It seemed like the bus driver purposely made unnecessary stops, just to ensure my late arrival. Once reaching

my apartment, I ran to the living room and was greeted by my mother and siblings, who all seemed to already be having a pretty intense conversation themselves. Completely interrupting their discussion, I hurriedly opened my bag and fished for the letter. I handed it to my mother and watched as her face slowly took on the shape of three emotions: surprise, excitement and anger.

“When — who gave you permission to audition for this school?” my mother asked, pointing at the letter.

I just looked at her. The question was clearly hypothetical and I knew I couldn’t wiggle my way out of this one.

“Tamera, I want you to... I want you to get out of here!” she continued, flapping her hands. It was like my mother was pleading with me. It was as if she could somehow see the future and was trying so hard to thwart some undisclosed prophecy.

“Everyone always expects a black girl to entertain. You have so much more than a pretty voice.”

I tried my hardest to stop my eyes from rolling. Every time my mother wanted to convince me of something, race always found a way to play a factor: like I was somehow the spokesperson for the entire black community. Whenever we’d act up, or behave in a manner that was “beneath us,” she’d remind us of the overbearing stereotypes that hung above the heads of blacks, and make us feel as though we were perpetuating them. It was as if we were supposed to always be aware of what our actions depicted about our ethnicity. We lived in some way fearful of this condescending colorless person. As a child I always saw this as an incredibly paranoid

way of thinking, but as I got older, I realized what my mother meant by my actions involuntarily perpetuating stereotypes, regardless of how manipulating her lesson might have been.

“I want you to break this cycle, Tamera. I’m sorry you can’t go to LaGuardia, but this is something you won’t understand until you’re older.”

“No, please, I’ll do anything you want. I don’t want to go to Bard! Please. I won’t hang out with any of the people around here, mom, not even Kimberly! I promise!”

“Stop it. I’ve made my decision.”

“You can’t just think about it, mama? Please,” I pleaded, beginning to cry.

“Tamera Howard, I’m not going to tell you again. No.”

It was quiet in the living room after that, and after a few beats my mother got up from the couch and went into her room.

“Psst.”

I turned around to see Sarah, Denise and Eric on the far side of the leather sectional, each doing their homework.

“Yea?” I asked, realizing Sarah was the mouth behind the “psst”.

“Mommy said we’re moving.”

“Where?”

“New Jersey.”

At this moment things weren't okay, and I couldn't think of a single tune that would make it better.

Female Friction

“All things within this fading world hath end, /Adversity doth still our joys attend; /No ties so strong, no friends so dear...” (Anne Bradstreet)

I remember Savannah. We had a connection deeper than any marriage. No paper could strengthen that bond. We loved one another in a way no one could really understand, and that was okay. She'd start and I'd finish; she'd mess up and I'd clean up. I was rational, but she... not so much. She pushed me out of my comfort zone, and I'd push her into one. Together, we made two parts of a whole. We were friends, comrades, sisters, and partners.

Savannah was what one would call my irrational friend, but I loved her for it. She was that friend that does the senseless things that you are forced to correct. We met in high school, and from then on we could never seem to part ways — dying our hair different shades of pink, and piercing parts of our bodies we'd never disclose to our parents, Savannah and I each satisfying what the other lacked. We enjoyed each other's company. We even laughed about the possibility of us having a separation anxiety disorder. It was funny at the time, but as we got older, I started to see it. The dependency was there, and like all good things our friendship came to an end.

I remember one day, immediately after school, we ran to the 7 train, well she ran, and I was dragged. Walking down the hill with unsteady legs and doubtful eyes, I shook my head in disbelief, another bright idea from Savannah had us yet again skipping softball practice and going to the piercing shop on Fordham road. With three holes in each ear and a freshly healed navel I wondered what she had in store for my body today.

“Savannah! Please! Is this necessary? Coach is going to be so mad!” I yelled.

“Definitely. Coach will live. But I need to show Christopher that I am my own woman and that I will pierce whatever the hell I like.”

I figured there was a guy behind this, Savannah had the worst luck with boys and each one she picked seemed to be worse than the last. I didn't mind Savannah standing up for herself and piercing whatever the hell she liked; I just didn't understand why I had to pierce whatever the hell she liked too. We hurried to the train station nonetheless, hoping that none of our teammates would see us cutting practice. We caught the 7 train to Grand central station, and transferred to the 4 train, getting off at Fordham road. Shimmying through the traffic of people on the sidewalk, we finally made it to Hector's Tattoos and piercings. We walked up the three flights of stairs signed our names in the book and sat in our usual chairs, by the body jewelry.

“Don't you just love that smell?” she asked taking a deep breath in.

“What smell?”

“That sterile smell, it's like alcohol, and fresh paper towels. Like a doctor's office.”

“I hate that smell,” I replied, just when Hector called our names.

Entering his lair of bodily art was always scary to me, simply because Hector was a pathological liar. Each time I'd step in, he'd tell me that the piercing I was going to get wouldn't hurt at all, but each time I stepped out I was red-eyed and runny-nosed. So if I count each time I'd been to him that would be approximately nine lies, way beyond the "fool me once" mantra. I remember all of the blown up photographs on the wall mocking me. About a hundred pictures of people Hector had pierced were pinned to the wall and those hole-infested people taunted me each visit. Spiked nipples, punctured faces, and tattooed bodies surrounded us, and the loud bachata music compromised my hearing. I had no more room on my ears to pierce, and my nipples and face were out of the question. At a loss for words, I knew this would be the first time I'd have to tell Savannah no.

"What can I do for you mamis today?" he asked loudly, in his heavy Puerto Rican accent, motioning us to lift our shirt so he could check the healing of our navels. I looked at Savannah and she looked at me. Waiting for an answer, Hector proudly waved his hand above him, pointing to the photo montage on his wall. Savannah pensively followed his gesture and eyed the wall carefully.

"Well?" Hector asked, growing a tad impatient.

"Tongues!" Savannah blurted out.

Hector looked over at me with a face I'd never seen him use in our last nine encounters. Sympathy. Hector, the liar, actually felt sorry for me. Nevertheless, he reached over in his drawer and pulled out two sets of tools. Turning on the faucet, Hector began to wash his hands, and with two pumps of Dial soap, and three squirts of hand sanitizer, he was ready.

“So are you sure you want your tongues pierced? I’m running out of space on you guy,” He said looking directly at me as he put his gloves on. Savannah, now sitting in the chair smiling, nodded her head, and flicked her tongue as confirmation. I remained quiet. Hector removed the tools from their perspective wrappers and then began to pierce Savannah’s tongue. In just twenty seconds Hector was done and Savannah was satisfied, already taking selfies to patronize Christopher.

“Mi amor, it’s your turn!” Hector said as he spun his chair to face me. I sat down where Savannah had sat just moments ago, but none of her confidence transferred. My knees began to wobble and I gnawed at my lip, as I always did when I was nervous. Swallowing hard, I looked over at Savvy with pained eyes.

“I don’t want to pierce my tongue,” I said assertively. Looking up at Hector for the sympathy I saw early. He looked proud. Savannah, however, did not.

“I, I just won’t be able to hide that from my mom,” I lied.

“Then just get something else!” she said with temporarily impaired speech, and pointing once again to the wall of photos. I looked up in awe. I didn’t see anything acceptable, and I felt bad for wasting Hector’s time.

“Dios Mio, Sit down, I’m going to pierce your web, okay.” Hector said exasperatedly.

“MY WHAT?”

“It’s the little piece under your tongue, no one will see it unless you actually lift your tongue,” he said, lifting his own tongue, showing me his web piercing. I nodded and tilted my head back.

“Will it hurt?” I asked nervously.

“No mami, just breathe” he replied, clamping my tongue and lifting it up. I exhaled as the needle penetrated the thin rubber-like tissue underneath my tongue, all the while cursing myself for allowing Hector to fool me for the tenth time.

Afterward, we walked out of the piercing room, and went into the bathroom. It was for one person only and it was a tight fit. Breast to breast, we took selfies, but this time together. We stuck out tongues out and laughed about how angry Christopher would be.

“Wait!” Savannah then said, still laughing hysterically

“What?”

“How am I supposed to kiss, with my fucked-up tongue?”

We laughed harder as Savannah began twirling her tongue, simulating how she’d kiss.

“How do I look?” she mumbled

“Stupid,” I responded, quite out of breath.

“If ever two were one, then surely we...” (Anne Bradstreet).

I was the passive one, I cared about how I was perceived by the public. My mother always taught me to be mindful of who was watching, and I carried that with me everywhere. Savannah, on the other hand was free-spirited, saying and doing whatever she thought and felt. It

was weird because no one expected us to be friends, since of course our personalities would clash.

I remember the time we went to McDonald's for a quick bite. We ordered our usual, "A number two's without pickles, barbeque sauce for the fries, and a medium raspberry iced tea." We got our food and went upstairs to the second floor to eat it. We always sat upstairs because we had a really nice view of Court street and didn't have to listen to all the guys that would enter the McDonald's and try to get Savannah's number. Sitting upstairs was peaceful, and didn't remind me that I was the ugly friend. We sat down at our traditional table in the corner, and separated our food out of the bag. We laughed about how many calories are meal was and how we would never eat that much in front of our boyfriends. We were having a good time until Savannah noticed that I had a small drink instead of a medium one.

"Tamera, don't drink that. Take that back downstairs to the counter, and tell them you ordered a medium," Savannah said.

"Savvy, it's really okay, I'm hungry. Let's just leave it alone" I responded.

"But you paid for the medium, that's not right."

Savannah was very righteous, and when it came down to right and wrong there was never a grey area for her. She stood up and grabbed my drink, and before I knew it she was back with not a medium, but a large drink.

"How'd you manage that one?" I asked puzzled.

"I just told him he fucked up."

I remember wishing I could be like her. Just the way she was so confident, and how literally everyone she came in contact with seemed to really love her. And so did I.

During my sophomore year of high school I experienced body image issues. I was unhappy with the weight I gained, and after a bad break up with my boyfriend I began to feel hopeless. And with a beautiful friend like Savannah around, I wasn't feeling better about myself. Watching her, day in and day out, walk down the school hallways with her long hair black hair swaying as she moved. Seeing the way she rocked her hips and stared at people with her toffee colored eyes always brought me down. How could someone so breathtakingly beautiful exist, while I was forced to look so bad? I began separating myself from her at that point, and our dates to McDonald's came to an abrupt end. Giving her excuses about "watching my figure" instead of telling her the truth, I became an introvert. It wasn't until one day after school that she'd finally caught up with me. I was on the train station platform, waiting for the notoriously late 7 train. Cursing her wit and impeccable use of the element of surprise, I was forced to tell her why I'd been ignoring her for nearly a month. I remember her crying on the platform as the train pulled into the station.

"Why are *you* crying?!" I yelled over the sounds of the train, both concerned and slightly annoyed. Everything was about Savannah, even when it was about me.

"You, you're my best friend, and I can't believe that you feel this way. I've always been so jealous of you, and here you are feeling bad about yourself, because of me!" she yelled back.

We entered the crowded train then, and I found a space to squeeze into. With sweaty palms and a partially gnawed bottom lip I opened my book and held it tightly in one hand, and the pole in the other, as I always did on New York City public transportation, and began to read.

A few seconds later I looked over to see Savannah had also found a space to jam into and held her expensive bag tightly as she always did on New York City public transportation. The train began to pull off and Savannah spread her legs and bent her knees, imitating the moves of a surfer, as she fished for a napkin in her purse.

“Savvy! You’re going to fall. Just hold on,” I yelled to her, unintentionally drawing attention to myself, and creating a slight scene.

“No!” she replied, still shuffling through her purse for a napkin.

Sighing, I unzipped my bag and waddled over to her with a wrinkled tissue. She gave me a look that indicated her gratitude, and I waddled back hurriedly to my former space on the train, thankful no one had already claimed it. I turned back to see Savannah smoothing out the napkin and placing it around the pole as she always did. I was surprised she didn’t have napkins in her purse; she always carried tissues when we rode the train. I shook my head at her and watched as others did too. I remember a little girl asking her mom why Savannah needed a napkin to hold the pole, and her mother shushing her to stay quiet.

I tried to ignore her. Turning around, I looked out the train window, seeing my faint reflection stare me right in the face. I hated how I looked after school... actually, I hated how I looked before school too. At least in the beginning of the day I looked fresh, and new. But after a full day of classes I was completely burned out. The train rocked hard, and I held onto the pole tighter trying not to lose the stare battle I’d began with myself. My brown skin glowed as the sun beamed upon me through the train window. I watched the reflection of my kinky curls bounce with the train, and I smiled awkwardly, trying to check my teeth for any indication of today’s lunch. I was sweating, and as usual my hair was shrinking and my make-up was smearing. I

wiped my face with my hand and proceeded to look at myself. My cheekbones were high, and my lips were a bit too full. My neck was freakishly long, and my nose was larger than average. I opened my eyes wide to get a better look at myself, only to see that my forehead was now two-toned, thanks to my bright idea to wipe my sweaty forehead with my hand. I pushed my hair forward, letting my curls obscure the patch of missing concealer, and reapplied more lipstick for good measure. The train then went underground, eclipsing the sun and darkening my reflection. Sweat still trickled down my forehead, and I swore I could literally feel each hair follicle losing the definition I'd worked so hard this morning to create. I dabbed my face lightly with the last remaining tissue I had in my purse, and tried to salvage what was left of my perfectly painted face.

“Excuse me?”

I looked up into the eyes of a perfectly beautiful stranger.

“Yes?” I replied

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I love your necklace. Where did you get it?” she said, reaching over to touch my pendant. Her fingers were stubby, and I was slightly weirded out by how comfortable she was.

“Um, actually my father bought it for me when I was much younger,” I replied, leaning back, hoping to regain some personal space.

“Smart man. It’s much harder to find ones like this; nowadays you have to have it personally engraved, and that costs more.”

“Oh.”

“Oh well, flashy stuff like that never looks good on me anyway. But of course you’re so beautiful you make it work.”

I opened my mouth, not sure of what to say. I contemplated reassuring the woman of her own beauty, and then I thought about saying thank you; I also considered saying nothing at all. But then, like clockwork, Savannah came over and saved me from having to respond.

“This is our stop. Come on” she said, and she dragged me off of the train.

The doors closed then, and I looked back stealing one last look.

“Who was that woman?” Savannah asked curiously.

“I don’t know.”

We got off at the 5th avenue station and walked to Crumbs. We talked through our problems in “depth” and ate red velvet cupcakes as we patched up some of the holes in our friendship. But little did we know there was so much more to come.

The next day, while Savannah and I were changing in the locker room before practice, I decided to finally come clean about how I truly felt about all of the shenanigans she’d had put me through. Sure, our insecurity talk yesterday was alleviating, but there were other matters that needed to be addressed. I’d become fed up with the piercings, and missing practice; I was tired of cutting class, and always doing whatever she wanted to do. We’d gone into a stall together, as we always did, to avoid being self-conscious about who else would see us naked. We undressed, and I considered how to tell Savannah what I hadn’t told her yesterday. I slid off my jeans, and jumped as I was suddenly struck on the butt.

“Savannah!” I yelped

“Don’t get mad at me! You’re the one in the granny panties! You deserve to be smacked,” she said, laughing hysterically.

I laughed at her ridiculous commentary. We were going to practice! There was no need to look like a Victoria Secret model. I never wore underwear like that anyway: my butt would literally swallow those lacey panties, and I’d have a wedgie all day! I eyed myself in the mirror, and twisted to see what she saw.

“You’re crazy; you can’t possibly be comfortable in those,” I responded, pointing at the blue lace that barely covered her behind.

Savannah stuck her pierced tongue out at me, twisting in the mirror to mimic my earlier motion.

“If anyone should be smacked for their inappropriate undergarments, it should be *you!*” I yelled mimicking her earlier gesture.

“My boyfriend would disagree,” she replied, smirking.

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. She always had boy on the brain.

“You’re not even into him, Savannah!”

“So what? He’s into me! And if you stopped wearing those granny panties, maybe Raymond wouldn’t look so miserable! I’m gonna take you shopping!”

I hated when she did that. I figured now was a better time than ever to tell her what was on my mind; I couldn’t continue being her lapdog.

“Savannah. I’m not shopping for pointless underwear, and you know what, why am I supposed to do everything you want. Can’t we for once compromise and do things I’m interested in too.

Savannah looked at me slyly, as if she had an idea that would work in her favor.

“Okay Tam, what do you suggest we do instead?”

And with those nine words, I was truly stumped. Savannah was always the mastermind behind our excursions, whether that be day trips to Albany, or weekend trips to college parties. I didn’t *do* anything really, besides, go to school, read, play softball, and go to church. I mean, I loved to write, and I enjoyed knitting and watching telenovelas, but we couldn’t really do that together. Pulling up my long red softball socks, and tying my dirty cleats, I was truly at a loss.

“That’s what I thought,” she replied under her breath, as she pulled out a wet nap and a wiped her cleats.

“No, no! We could always hang out by my house,” I shouted.

“Tamera, you live all the way in Jersey, that’s a long ride.

“Well, we can go to church together, my church is still in Brooklyn!” I yelled defensively, determined to finally get what I wanted.

“Really? Church? That’s your idea of fun?”

“Yeah, why not? There’s a “Friday night service” today!

“Because I am not Christian!”

“Savannah, you never want to do anything unless it benefits you in some way, shape, or form,” I said to her, brushing my kinky hair back into a haphazard ponytail.

“Yes! Exactly! And that’s how everyone should live their lives! Why do something if it won’t benefit you in the slightest? Isn’t that jus common sense?”

It was times like this that I knew why she was my friend; she was so headstrong and knew exactly what she wanted and exactly what she didn’t. But today, I knew what I wanted as well.

“Okay, then call someone else when you need someone to cut class with, since we all know that doesn’t benefit *me* in the slightest,” I said, swinging my duffle bag over my shoulder, and confidently walking out of the locker room.

“Tamera! Wait.”

I turned around to see her quickly tiptoeing behind me in her seemingly unsullied uniform, although we’d already had four games. With her cleats in one hand, and her softball bag in the other, she caught up, and embraced me. She smelled like strawberries and Tide.

“Yes?” I asked, happy I called her bluff.

“I’ll go!”

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah, who knows, maybe I’ll find a new guy there, because Christopher and I are done,” she said, holding on to my shoulder as she put on her cleats.

It's funny looking back on it now, because Savannah *did* find herself a guy at my church, and he ended up being best friends with my boyfriend too. Savannah met Jacob: as soon as she walked through the door, he escorted her to her seat, and it was instant chemistry. I'd met Raymond a month prior, and we were hitting it off pretty well ourselves. Every Friday, Savannah and I would finish our classes, go to softball practice, and rush over to my nana's house in time to shower, change and catch a ride with her to church. Even on Sunday mornings, Savannah and I would meet up and travel to church, arms locked, with Bibles in hand. Everyone loved her, as they did at school. "Oh Savannah, your hair is gorgeous," "I love your dress," "oh sweetheart, your shoes are perfec." Savannah was complimented on any and everything people could see. At first I found it to be nice. My entire church was accepting, and I enjoyed having her next to me. But after a while I began feeling a bit weird and left out. People would compliment her and not me, and most of the time we wore the same thing. And on the Sundays she didn't show, I was bombarded with questions about where she was.

Even our double dates with Raymond and Jacob weren't as fun as they used to be. It seemed like Raymond was comparing me to Savannah, and expected me to do the things she did. Because we were all best friends, anything the other did was known amongst the entire group. If Savvy did something, Jacob would tell Raymond, and then Raymond would tell me. Nothing was sacred, personal, or special. At first Raymond began asking me to do things subtly, like straighten my kinky hair. He'd twirl my curls in his hands and frame his assertion as a hypothetical question: "Have you ever considered straightening your hair, love?" I remember going home that night and spending three hours straightening my hair. The smell of burnt hair and oil sheen filled my entire room. I'll never forget the smile he gave me the following day, when my normally short fro was finally shoulder length and bone straight. Although the constant

straightening of my hair was slightly annoying I got used to it, and began going to Savannah's hair salon weekly to have it done professionally. It wasn't until later that his subtle, hypothetical assertions began to make me uncomfortable.

One day Raymond, Jacob, Savannah and I went to the movies together. We watched *The Last House on the Left*, a sorry excuse for a scary movie. When it was over, Savannah and I went to the bathroom and Raymond and Jacob waited for us outside. After we'd finished we walked as couples to the subway, but Raymond was acting a bit unusual.

"What's up, Ray?" I asked, a bit puzzled, kissing him on the cheek.

"Babe, you know what Savannah did to Jake in the theater?"

"Um no..." I was slightly confused, and bit annoyed. I was pretty sure I could guess what she did with him in the theater, but I definitely didn't want to talk about it with my boyfriend on our way home from our pg-13 date. Raymond then leaned in and whispered to me what they did, and of course I'd guessed correctly. I looked up at him and he looked down at me with the girlish grin I loved so much.

"No!" I said to him and he laughed.

"Babe, it's not really sex though," he replied.

I looked up at him, embarrassed by my prudish ways.

"I knew you'd say no, but I had to ask, don't worry, honey," he said as he took my hand and laced his fingers with mine.

"Raymond, do you think Savannah's sexier than me?" I asked.

“What!” My boyfriend laughed at my insecure question.

“You’re freaking gorgeous,” he said, pulling me in and embracing me.

Although Raymond tried his best not to make me feel pressured, I was. And little did he know, telling me I was gorgeous, when I asked whether or not I was sexy, was the wrong thing to do. I was a senior in high school, and Raymond and I had not had sex yet. I was waiting until things felt right. But evidently Savannah and Jacob weren’t waiting as long as I was. I hated being compared to Savannah, I hated straightening my hair, I hated feeling second, I hated being her friend. I finally knew what it meant to be “too close for comfort.”

That night I went home and contemplated my feelings. Was I just jealous? Could I truly be overreacting? I wondered what I’d say to Savannah when we finally spoke but I knew that I didn’t want to wait to see her in person. I was nervous, and decided I’d call her, right after I took nice hot shower. From the moment I turned on the shower I rehearsed how I’d break up with Savannah. By the time my straight hair had reverted back to its natural bounce, I realized that my shower rehearsal had exceeded my mother’s acceptable limits. Her loud banging, affirmed this notion.

“Tamera, I told you about talking to Savvy in the shower, I promise you I’m not buying you a new phone!” I snickered at her approximate knowledge of the situation as I rinsed off, grabbed a towel and headed to my room.

Once in the room I proceeded to get dressed and comfortable on my bed.

I picked up the phone and called Savannah. The phone went straight to voicemail, and then I tried again, and then again. Savannah's phone was clearly off, and I considered leaving her a voicemail, and then thought better of it. I assumed I'd see her tomorrow.

I woke up early the next morning in order to ensure that I had all the time I needed to do my damaged hair. After another thorough conditioning, I let it air dry and settled for a high bun. I threw on some sweats and a pair of sneakers; it was Friday after all. I texted Savannah to see if she wanted to meet up before school, but again no reply. When I finally reached school, I didn't see her by her locker or in any of my classes either. The day was peaceful. I walked to every class alone, and I enjoyed my lunch silently with *The Poems of Ms. Anne Bradstreet*.

"Hey Tamera, where's Savvy?"

"Home, I suppose," I replied to almost everyone I'd come in contact with that day. I was happy to finally have some time to myself, and I couldn't wait for softball practice. After school I changed in the stall Savannah and I usually shared, and it was pretty weird to see how much roomier it seemed without her. I threw my duffle bag in the middle of the floor and practically danced into my softball clothes. And once I was actually on the field, my positive attitude from a Savannah-free day helped my game tremendously.

"Good Job, Howard! Keep it up! If Savvy misses another practice you just might be short stop!"

"Thanks, coach!"

"By the way, where's Savvy at? She usually calls and makes an excuse for missing practice."

“I don’t know.”

Coming home from softball was the greatest feeling ever; having had the most blissful day of the semester followed by the best practice of the season, I was overjoyed to finally get to church.

As I walked down the block of my church, I could already hear the music playing. There was something especially warm about this particular song on this particular day. I walked into the church with a smile stamped on my face. I clapped my hands and sang louder than I believe I ever had before. I was practically blushing, and seeing Raymond sitting in the pew in front of me made me glow even more.

Once church was over, Ray and I went outside and talked as we always did. We kissed and for some reason today, his lips felt like freshly unbagged marshmallows. He was soft, and comforting; he smelled like peace.

“Tamera!”

I turned around to see Jacob walking briskly toward me.

“Yeah?”

“Do you know where Savannah is? I haven’t spoken to her all day, and she went M.I.A early last night.”

“I think she’s at home, I replied and turned back to the big brown eyes of my boyfriend.

“No really, Tamera, do you think she’s sick?”

“No,” I replied, becoming annoyed. I hadn’t seen Raymond all week, and somehow Savvy found a way to weasel into our moment.

“Did she call you?”

I sighed and looked for my cell phone. With all the excitement of my day, I hadn’t realized that hadn’t checked my phone since this morning. I dug in my purse and scrambled through my books to find my phone and thirteen new notifications: seven of which were from my mother, and none from Savvy.

“No, Jake, she hasn’t called.” I replied.

“Ok, later” he sighed, and then walked away.

Once Jake was out of sight , I picked up the phone and called my mother back, gesturing for Raymond to stay quiet.

“Hey mama, is everything okay?”

Dirty Laundry

After a long four hours at choir rehearsal, I was drained. It was Friday and I'd run from school, straight to church. Softball season was over, and the free time I'd managed to salvage for myself was now gone and being replaced by choir practice. My church was four blocks from my nana's house and six blocks from the building; I used to live in, down by Bedford. I missed my old building, traveling from Queens to New Jersey daily was extremely time-consuming. But today, I'd spend the night by my nana in order to avoid the commute. I hugged my pastor, and said goodbye to the other members of the choir as I put on my jacket and left the church.

I walked toward my nana's house practically stumbling over my own feet, when I was suddenly hit with a pang of nostalgia, passing my old elementary school, where I didn't have too many fond memories, and passing the old park my father used to tell my mother he took us to on the weekends he was home. It reminded me of my childhood. Smiling at the children in the park, and making silly faces at babies in strollers; I crossed the street and made a left. Only two more blocks to go, I thought to myself, as my book bag began to feel heavier. I walked hurriedly, listening to the sound of my sweatpants swish as my thighs rubbed against each other. I waited

for the light. Snapping my fingers fast as if that would somehow ignite whatever switch was needed to make the light turn red.

“Yo, what the Hell is wrong with this machine!”

I turned around to see, through the open door, a man in the laundromat yelling at the Middle Eastern owner over the counter.

“I put in five dollars and this thing gave me back sixteen quarters!” he said, slamming all sixteen of his quarters on the counter.

“What machine?” the man asked in a heavy accent.

“That one!” he yelled, pointing at the machine.

I laughed to myself. My mother took us to that laundromat for years, and everyone knew never to use that machine.

I remember the first time we did and when we came back with the wrong amount of quarters my mother got mad and accused us of taking them. She lined us up in the laundromat and asked us three times who had the rest of the quarters? I remember her standing there waiting for one of us to snitch on the other. But as siblings we had a code: “Snitches get stitches.” So if you told on anyone of your siblings you’d have to deal with the rest of us. It’s funny because my mother lived by a different code; she’d say, “If you lie you’ll cheat, if you cheat you’ll steal, and if you steal you’ll kill,” so under no circumstance did she ever condone lying. But little did she know, that the code wasn’t being implemented in this instance, and that we’d literally been gypped by what we called “the money machine.”

We had so many crazy times in that laundromat; we were there literally every Saturday. This laundromat was even the place where my mother first told us that our father was locked up. It was raining outside. I remember because my sisters and I would play this game on the window where we'd pick a raindrop and compete to see whose raindrop would slide down the glass the fastest. I was winning, just as my mother called me over to the washing machine.

"Pass me the Tide," she said, pointing to her basket on the floor.

I did as I was told and handed her the detergent, looking back at my two sisters who seemed to be enjoying the water race without me.

"Is that it, mama?" I asked, already inching toward the window.

"No, I've gotta tell you something."

I waited. Noticing my mother's face growing red, I realized something was wrong, and I sat down on the chair next to her. By this time, my grandfather, her father, had been dead for about seven months and my father had been in jail for the last three months, I was used to seeing her break down — just never in public. Deciding to spare her the pain of having to tell me that my father was gone, I came clean about already knowing. Eavesdropping on my mother's telephone call one evening (from under a very dusty bed), made things quite clear to me; I'd already known where my father was, and most importantly I already knew *who* my father was.

"Mama, it's okay. I already know dad's in jail," I blurted out, eerily airing our dirty laundry in the laundromat.

She sniffled and blinked rapidly.

"How long's he going away? A couple more months?" I asked naïvely?

“Seven years,” she responded.

In that moment, the water race no longer mattered, and at ten, although I was very mature for my age, I could not fathom my father being gone for that long. I stood up, and poured the detergent into the opening of the washing machine, then I put ten quarters into to the coin slot and pressed start.

“So, I’m gunna be one of those kids, huh?”

“What are you talking about, Tamera?” my mother began to twist her face up in the manner she often did when she thought I was being dramatic.

“I’m going to be one of those kids without a father. One of those kids who drops out of school and becomes a teen mom!”

At only the age of ten I was well versed in the world around me and television Networks like BET, and MTV occupied a lot of my time. I thought I knew what fatherless children turned into; I mean, I’d seen them in my building. I was afraid of what *not* having a dad would mean for my future. It’s kind of funny now because looking back on it, I probably should have been more worried about what *having* a father like that would do to my future.

“Tamera, you sound stupid,” my mother replied, ending my sad song.

“Those things don’t come from not having a father; they come from not having a strong enough mother. Listen to me. I don’t know about those other kids’ parents, but I do know that if you drop out of school, you can’t stay here. And I also know that if you have a baby, you can’t stay here either. So you go ahead and live in a cardboard box if you want to.”

And that was somehow her way of providing me with motherly love. Affection wasn't my mother's strong suit, so instead of giving me a normal response about being there for me and having my back, she held a cardboard box over my head and threatened to kick my ass out.

And you know what, it worked.

Here I was on the street corner, on my way from church, with a book bag on my back and no stroller in my hands, occupying that corner only momentarily and not as a place of business. But, however, none of that being as urgent as my full bladder. The light had luckily turned red, and the cars had come to a stop; I ran across the street and made it to my nana's house. I rang the doorbell three times, and stood back so she could see me from her window.

"Who is it?"

"It's Tamera, Nana,"

"Tam-Tam, where's your key?"

"Nana, I gotta pee, please open the door!" I responded loudly. I hated when she called me Tam-Tam, and I clearly didn't have my key, or else I would have used it.

A few moments passed and my nana was downstairs opening the door.

"Tam-Tam, what did I tell you about having your key; I'm still recovering from this new hip. I can't be walking up and down those stairs.

I nodded and then ran upstairs to her apartment, relieving myself and washing my hands before she made it back up.

I sat on her perfectly made bed and crossed my legs, watching her plopped on the bed too. My nana's bed was always so plush. That was probably because she had one of those fancy mattresses that altered to accommodate the person who was lying in it. She also had a mattress pad of feathers and like three comforters, and a quilt that sat at the bottom of the bed, in case she got cold.

“So Tam-Tam,” she said in between grandmotherly groans.

“How's your little friend?”

“Raymond is fine, nana.” I hated the way any guy that my nana thought I was relatively interested in, was deemed “my little friend”.

“Yall two aren't datin' or anything, right?” her leading question irked me.

“No, Nana, Ray's my friend,” I answered dishonestly. We'd been dating for almost a year at this time, and everyone knew it. I loved him, and everyone knew that too.

“You know his dad's the elder at the church, don't ya?”

I nodded; my nana wanted to make sure I wouldn't embarrass her, and quite frankly I didn't care.

“Okay, and make sure you don't be tellin him nothing about your life neither,” she added, tapping me on the hand to make sure I was listening.

“If anyone asks about your dad you say he's away on business. Nobody needs to know where he really is.”

“Nana, I’m not ashamed of my life. Raymond knows about Dad; he’s my friend, I told you!”

“So you just went and told the whole church our business, huh?” she responded dramatically. One person was hardly the entire church.

My entire life was full of secrets. Since I was a little girl, everyone in my family had told me to always tell the truth while simultaneously asking me to lie. My father, the criminal, who told me to always be authentic and straightforward, otherwise people wouldn’t like me, also asked me every day to lie to my mother about what I’d see or hear him do. My mother, the cop, who always reminded me that my moral duty as a citizen was to be honest and upstanding, also everyday reminded me not to tell my New York city school that I was a New Jersey resident. And lastly my nana, who was a minister at my church, taught me that lying was sinful, while instantaneously asking me to lie about my father’s whereabouts in church every Sunday. It seemed like everyone was so comfortable asking me to lie about things that they themselves weren’t comfortable about. All my life I’d been the chamber of secrets and the keeper of the dirty laundry. Fed up with the lies, I held on to my pendent, took a deep breath and decided that it was time.

“Nana, Raymond is my boyfriend,” I confessed, overwhelmed by the lies that seemed to be consuming my life.

“What? Tamera Howard, what have I told you about lying!”

“We’ve been together for a while, and honestly, he and I have no secrets,” I continued confidently.

“I told you about dating in the church; no matter how innocent it might be church folk will always make it into something it’s not.”

“Nana, Ray and I don’t care about that stuff.”

“You should, Tam-Tam,” she replied shaking her head.

I felt bad for lying to my nana for so long, but it was necessary. Her judgement and criticism wouldn’t have done anything to prolong our relationship, and I refused to have outside interferences mess up what Raymond and I were working toward. I bit my lip guiltily and twirled the pendant that hung from my necklace. Hopefully my nana wouldn’t be too mad about the fact that I lied.

“So nana, what do you wanna watch?” I asked, as she flipped through the channels on the television, trying to change the subject.

But instead of answering she raised her hand, silently motioning me to be quiet. I then picked up my phone and began to text Ray. He was happy that I could cross one more lie off of my list, and I was relieved that someone was on my side. Smiling at my phone as if it were Ray himself, I was beginning to feel better about my decision to tell my grandmother the truth.

“Who are you texting?” my nana probed, looking away from the television and directly at me.

I looked at her in a way that gave my answer away, and she shook her head some more.

“Should I leave, nana? You don’t seem to want me here, and I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

My mother always told me never to beg for anyone's acceptance, and never to stay where I wasn't wanted. So before my nana could answer I stood up and began searching for my bag.

"Tamera, where are you going to go? Back to Jersey?"

"Yes, the trains run all night."

"I'm not going to send my granddaughter all the way to Jersey; it's getting dark"

I nodded and realized that it *was* getting a bit too dark to head home.

"I'm going to the living room for a bit," I told her, needing some space.

Leaving my nana's room, I maneuvered my way through all of the junk in the hallway. My nana was a packrat and held on to just about every memory. Photo albums, baby blankets, church dresses I could no longer fit into that she swore someone else could use one day: my nana was what one might call a hoarder. I hopped over her things and took notice of the art on the walls. My nana had lots of black art on the walls, paintings by famous African American artists, and photographs of influential black leaders. I remember as a kid, the black and white photo of Malcom X used to scare me. This was the picture of him in a suit; he wore glasses, and had his pointer finger on his temple. I remember always thinking that he was watching me. Now as I walked through the hallway I could see the beauty and the strength in the once-so-scary photo.

"Tamera, I thought you said you were going to the living room. I see you in the hallway."

"I'm going! I was just looking at the pictures!" I replied, rolling my eyes.

Sitting in the living room, I crossed my legs on the couch and began to unwind. I had such a long day, and I wished that could just call Savannah. She'd know exactly what to say to make me feel better. Deciding to pull myself together, I searched for the remote in hopes of watching a bit of television before I fell asleep, but of course in my nana's cluttered house, finding anything was impossible. I scavenged through laundry, papers, toys, and magazines until finally I gave up. Reaching for one of the books on the coffee table, I noticed a blank black and white composition notebook. I picked it up and deemed it mine, as I picked up a conveniently misplaced black marker from the floor and wrote my name on it. I opened the new notebook, hearing it cackle as I bent the binding for the first time. I remember writing in capital letter "LIST OF LIES," and then proceeding to expel every lie I'd ever told from my brain. Half of the list was comprised of lies I was asked to tell, and the other half, well, those were my own white lies. This list, at first, started out very structured. It was numbered and chronological, but soon turned into a prose of some sort. From the day my father introduced me to drugs to the time I lied to Raymond about not seeing a movie I'd actually seen without him. I began telling the stories of these lies, and their origins, and the way one lie turned into another. Remembering the day I fell asleep in class, and my teacher scolding me about paying attention, not knowing the commute I endured daily. And the time, my pastor asked me how my father was doing, and I felt forced to lie and say he was fine, knowing full well he wasn't. Writing them down was frightening at first but then somehow, it became beautiful. That stupid little lie I told to my mother about my father taking me to the park— when he was actually taking me around the city to conduct his business— turned into a comical story, twisted and fabricated for humorous effect. I was pregnant with the dishonesties from my childhood, and giving birth to these deceptions gave me a sense of release and pleasure. For some strange reason writing them on paper literally removed

them from my mental state, and I enjoyed the power that black marker gave me. I had the authority to essentially change the happenings of my past and turn fucked up stories about a little girl who grew up too soon, into crazy tales about a girl who simply encounters a succession of quirky events. I wondered if this was how it felt to be a writer. To eject your pain and hardship onto a page until it no longer hurt or felt like a hardship.

A Fraction of the Family

“Daddy!”

After not seeing my father for seven years that word was quite foreign to me but to my siblings, it was oh so familiar. I'd just gotten out of school and my mother and my siblings were waiting for me at the door, my mother claiming to have a surprise for all of us. I myself, hoping it was a vacation, looked up at her skeptically. I hadn't packed, but Lord knows I didn't care. These past few months had been rough for me and I was ready to get away. We walked outside of the building and there in a big white coat stood my father. He was six foot four, medium build with dark brown skin and an unruly fro. He was a lot paler than he'd looked last time I'd seen him, and a lot bigger too. The last time I'd seen my father he was half asleep in bed. He was supposed to walk both me and Sarah to the bus stop but instead he told us to go alone and not to tell my mother. I told. But this time he looked less relaxed and even kind of nervous.

“Daddy!” they yelled in unison as they ran to him. Their yells mimicked my exact thoughts. But I'd remain loyal to my mother. Standing by her side like her first lady, like the companion I'd been to her for the last seven years. But for some reason this strange feeling of envy crept up on me. I could feel the jealousy crawling down my face as I cried. As they

shrieked and ran to reunite with their father, my little brother, who was just eleven months at the time of my father's departure, looked up at my mother for confirmation.

"That's Daddy?" he asked, looking slightly confused. At the age of seven my brother did not know who his father was and was being introduced to him for what he thought was the first time ever.

"Yes baby, that's your father," my mother practically whispered.

And that was all Eric needed to hear; he then followed suit and sprinted into our father's arms, emulating the heart-wrenching scene he'd just witnessed. It all reminded me of that scene in the movie, *The Color Purple* when Celie reunites with her sister Nettie. Thinking of that made me cry more. I wiped away my tears so my mother wouldn't see. After about five minutes of "Hellos" and tears of joy, my father realized the absence of one of his children, and began to walk toward me. My heart began to flutter with an unspeakable amount of emotions. I looked at my mother for support but she didn't say a word.

"Hey, Caterpillar!" he said as he pulled me in for a hug. He'd called me Caterpillar for as long as I could remember, saying that my eyebrows reminded him of the hairy Caterpillars he'd seen back in Texas. He squeezed me hard, making my breasts ache, and me slightly uncomfortable. He was cold, and taller up close than he seemed from afar. I noticed this as my feet were lifted off the ground, and I was suddenly being spun around in circles. I tried to allot him time to embrace me, but that time was dwindling as I began to feel nauseous. He needed to stop. My dad has been gone for seven years, and that ten-year-old girl he'd left behind was now seventeen. He just couldn't do the things he used to.

“Ow! Dad, stop!” I cried out, looking for my mom to back me up, but she was nowhere in sight. She’d left me to fend for myself against this familiar stranger.

“What? You didn’t miss your dad?” he asked.

“Stop. Just stop,” I replied, and with that he put me down.

After being placed back on the safe, still ground and regaining my balance, I was able to really look at my father for the first time in seven years. Finally being able to put a face to the monster my mother had told me about, I looked at him and shook my head. My envy and my tears were short-lived and were now being replaced with new feelings of disgust and anger.

“Please don’t ever touch me again,” I said sternly, pulling out my phone to text my mother. She needed to know that her disappearing act was not warranted or appreciated.

“What’s wrong, Caterpillar? Didn’t you miss me?”

“Don’t call me Caterpillar! I’m not ten!”

“Where is *this* coming from?”

“To answer your question, *no one* missed you. And I know what you did,” I blurted out, hoping to hurt his feelings.

“Don’t let your mother brain wash you. There are lots of things you don’t know, that you were too young to understand. You were my little Caterpillar!”

“I’m seventeen, for crying out loud! I’m not your little caterpillar. I’ve grown up!”

My father laughed in my face then. Not a little chuckle, but a good hardy laugh, that came straight from the belly.

“Yo, you’re seventeen, and now you think you’ve undergone some kind of metamorphosis? What? Should I start calling you butterfly now?”

My father was trying to turn me against my mother, but the smug look on his face and the way he persisted to invalidate my feelings prevented that from happening. I didn’t trust him. I wanted to get as far away from him as possible but of course this was impossible; if I left I’d have to take all of the kids with me, and they were less inclined to go. After about a half hour of small talk and catching up I was beginning to get bored. I was ready to go.

“I heard about your friend by the way. Your nana told me,” he said bluntly.

My nana, his mother, never knew when to keep things to herself. My best friend had been gone for almost five months now, and everyone new I’d been taking it hard.

“I’ve had a few friends die. You know people get shot every day in the hood.”

“Savannah didn’t die in the hood. She killed herself at home,” I replied coldly.

It got quiet after that; I guess I made the situation awkward talking about my dead friend and all.

“Um, can we go now?”

“No, we are going to go to the park for a little while,” he replied cheerfully, completely letting the previous conversation, well... die, for a lack of a better word.

And so we walked. The park was a long way from my high school, and the cold wasn't helping the walk go by any faster. Who takes their kids to the park in this weather?

"Daddy, where's your car?" Eric asked

"He doesn't have one," I responded spitefully.

When we finally reached the park the kids all ran towards the jungle gym; my father, this time, ran behind them. The park was surprisingly pretty full for a cool day, and I had a hard time keeping an eye out for my siblings. I never took them to crowded parks out of fear that something bad might happen. I'd heard enough stories from my mom about abducted children, so whenever I'd leave the house with my siblings, especially Denise and Eric, I paid special attention to my surroundings. But of course my father wasn't; he was too busy playing with Eric to actually pay attention to Denise. And Sarah was on another bench texting; she was bored, as most fourteen year olds are at a children's park.

I looked over at Eric who looked so happy to be "Superman" as my father picked him up and pretended he was flying. It was so awkward to see my brother in the hands of a man and being tossed in the air and shaken like a doll; he was enjoying his father. I then scanned the park for Denise, she was no longer by the monkey bars, and I stood up to get a better look. I was getting worried that she'd left the park, until I saw her talking to a kneeling woman over by the slides. I ran over to inspect the situation.

"Hello, I'm her sister. Can I help you with something?" I asked the woman.

She was a white woman, in a short sleeved shirt and running shorts, completely defying the forecast. She looked strange to me, and I wondered what business she had with my sister.

“Oh no, I was doing laps around the park when I noticed her trip. I was just tying her shoe for her.”

“She knows how to tie her shoes, she’s ten. Thanks though,” I said firmly, hoping she’d leave.

She took the hint, stood up, dusted her knees and jogged away.

“What did I tell you about talking to people you don’t know?” I yelled at Denise.

“But she was a lady.”

“So what! You don’t know her. I’m gunna tell mom when we get home. That was dangerous, Denise.”

“Hey, hey, hey.”

Denise and I turned around to see my father and Eric Jr. standing behind us.

“You’re not telling your mother nothing; Denise is safe and that’s all that matters.”

Blatantly asking me to lie in order to cover up his own incompetence, I could see that my father hadn’t changed much.

“More secrets, huh?”

“You guys go play, and stay by the jungle gym next to Sarah,” my father told the kids.

“Denise! Don’t let Eric climb on the high – “

“They’re fine! Let’s go talk,” my father yelled over my warning.

“About?”

“Your brainwashing.”

Sitting with my father made me nauseous, and talking to him gave me a headache. My father had the gift of gab, as my mother would say. He could talk just about anyone into doing just about anything. He'd talk in circles, and say a whole bunch of nothing until you either agreed with him or figured the whole thing was your idea in the first place. We sat down on one of the benches and he began to jabber, telling me *his* version of the story.

“You know, I ... I did what I did for you guys. We didn't have much money so I had to sell some... things to make sure you guys could eat. If it wasn't for me, man, you guys wouldn't have had clothes or nothing. Remember all those days I'd come home with new sneakers for yall and stuff. Come on, Tammy. You think I did all that for me? Why you think I only got seven years? You're a smart girl. If I'm as bad as they say, I'd still be in there.”

He had a point but I'd watched enough *Law and Order* to know how easy it was to make a deal.

“You snitched!”

“Nope, that was always your thing. You think I could walk around here with you guys if I did? Plus I'm smarter than that; if I snitched I would have done less than *seven*. What kind of deal is that?”

He had another point. But it didn't change the fact that he was lying. My mother told me that we never saw any of his drug money. She also explained how he almost made her lose her

job and that the day before the police raided our house she'd found a mountain of drugs in my father's cabinet that could have easily gotten her taken away as well.

I remember hearing my mother screaming on the phone "Eric! If you don't come home and get this shit out of my house in the next fifteen minutes, I swear to God, I will flush it all!" My father was there in five, bagging it and taking it with him to wherever he spent most of his nights, exonerating my mother from having any true connection to his drug escapades. It scares me to think of what would have happened that day if she hadn't found those drugs the day before. I could have lost my mother and my father, just months after losing my grandfather and being introduced to my baby brother.

"Whatever, man," I said to him as I raised my hand in dismissal. It crossed my mind at that moment that I was being quite disrespectful, but I didn't care.

"All you cared about were those drugs. You left Denise and Eric in the house and then the cops caught you. How do you leave a three-year-old and a baby in the house alone to sell drugs! You're horrible. I could have lost my mom and my siblings, you know!"

"That wasn't my fault. First of all, I was set up. You think I wanted to go to prison? And second of all like I said before, I needed to sell drugs; if I didn't my kids would've gone without so..."

"You didn't seem to have a problem letting your kids go without a father," I interrupted.

"Tamera, do you hear yourself?" he replied, freeing me from the name Caterpillar.

"I ain't no murderer; I ain't a thief, and I damn sure ain't no rapist! I sold drugs to provide for my family; I did my time and you're treating me like I was America's most wanted."

“None of that matters! You can’t justify your wrongs with someone else’s!”

“You see, that’s all your mother’s doing. You’re forgetting about all the good times. I may have been gone for the last seven but I was there for the first ten. You don’t remember me making sure those kids didn’t beat you up every day, or helping you with your math? And I see you’re still wearing that pendant I gave you.”

This was true, and I had not forgotten; however, the way he remembered it was a bit different from how I remembered it. My father taught me how to count fractions, yes, and he taught me how to defend myself when I was being wronged. At first glance I’m sure that looks very fatherly; however, you’d have to know the entire story to truly see how fucked up this all actually was.

In elementary school I was bullied. Everyday a girl named Kiara would push me around and call me ugly, and because my mother was a cop and believed in nonviolent solutions I was the school snitch. Whenever Kiara did something to me I’d tell my teacher and she would get detention; however, this never deterred her from messing with me again the next day. I remember on my tenth birthday my mother sent me to school with my hair done beautifully in loose curls, and in a white spaghetti-strapped dress decorated with hot pink butterflies. This was the day Kiara and her friends ripped the buttons of my dress and put gum in my hair. I remember going to the administrative office and having the assistant principal put peanut butter in my hair in order to remove the gum. This was also the day I went home with a bloody lip, and my dress stapled shut.

I remember walking down the block of my home and Ms. Muriel calling for me out of her window.

“Did you get into a fight?!” she called out, resulting in everyone on the block looking at me.

I nodded and ran upstairs to my third floor apartment where I thought I’d be safe. However, by the time I made it upstairs Ms. Muriel was in the hallway already telling my father that I’d been in a fight. That’s when he waved me inside the house, ushered me into the living room and slid the coffee table to the side. I was confused at first and I thought I was going to get a whopping. I looked up at him and he looked down at me.

“Hit me!” he said.

“What?” I replied as he smacked me upside the head.

“Hit me! You’re gunna learn how to fight. You’re not gunna come home embarrassing me. Look at yourself.”

I looked down at my now stapled dress, and touched my frizzy hair. If my mother would have seen me she’d have called me a “wild child.” I balled up my fists in anger and cried as I punched my father, and cried harder as he pushed me back. We “fought” until he felt I’d gotten the hang of it.

“Good job, Caterpillar; now the next time she comes at you hit er’ with that one-two,” he said moving his fists in a punching motion.

“But what if she’s bigger than me?” I asked.

“The bigger they are, the harder they fall. And when in doubt you always have your pencils.”

I remember the next morning sharpening my pencils, in case Kiara got the best of me that day. My mother, who normally was at work by the time I woke up, was forced to stay home because my father was nowhere to be found. Normally she'd leave for work and he'd stay home with Denise and the baby, but not today.

“Tamera, what do you need so many pencils for,” my mother asked me, snatching the pencils from my hand. She was clearly upset about having to miss work, and I was unfortunately in her line of fire.

“Um...They're for my friends,” I lied.

She then squinted her eyes, as she always did when she thought I was lying.

“Are your friends orphans?”

“Huh?” I replied, missing the point.

“Do they have parents of their own?” she continued.

“Um... yes.”

“Then they don't need your pencils. Go to school.”

Kiara and I fought once more after my father's lesson, and after that she never bothered me again; the only disadvantage was that *this* time, I too ended up in detention.

On another day I'd come home from school with a low grade in my math; I was in jeopardy of being demoted from the accelerated class my mother had worked so hard to put me in, and I brought the letter home to my father, who was at the dining room table "working." He was in the middle of measuring his substances and handed the letter back to me, uninterested. Whenever my father was working, Sarah and I knew to steer clear of him. He'd normally sit at the head of the table in the clothes from the night before. He'd sit there completely still, counting and calculating numbers in his head, occasionally tapping at the calculator for confirmation, and scribbling names down on the yellow legal pad in his illegible hand writing. Knowing how disconnected my father was during this time of the day, I discreetly slid the letter onto a small empty space on the mahogany table and began to walk away.

"Read it to me," he said in a monotone voice.

I read the letter and watched as his eyebrow rose attentively. He was upset. Scrawling down a name and number onto the legal pad, he finally looked at me from the first time since I'd been home.

"Why are you having an issue with decimals and fractions? That stuff is easy; sit down," he commanded.

My father was very big on math. He'd always say that a person who wasn't good at math would always get played in this world. I obediently sat down at the table pulling out the text book my mother had bought weeks ago, in hopes of helping me with my math. I turned to the appropriate chapter as my father emptied the jumbo Ziploc bag of pot onto the dining room table. He then calibrated the scale and began to teach me using the marijuana: my seemingly useless textbook became my "Math" station as I worked atop it. Decorated with cocaine, a variety of

pills, and different strains of weed, my dining room table was an addict's dream come true, and my mother's worst nightmare. The funny thing about that dining room table was that it was used all day for almost everything except actual food.

"Dad, why can't we use the white bag?" I asked, pointing to the bags of cocaine on the table. He laughed and was suddenly interrupted by the doorbell. With what seemed at the time to be impeccable clairvoyance, my father picked up a few pills and walked to the door; he was back momentarily with bills in his hand. The doorbell rang everyday nonstop between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 6:00p.m; this I found out during a week I stayed home sick with the flu. Somehow all of my father's clients knew when all of us would be home and seldom rang the bell when my mother was in. After my father was arrested and before everyone had caught wind of it, however, the doorbell rang all day long. That noise drove my mother crazy to the point where one day she purposely popped off the button of the bell. But all that did was encourage people to knock. I'm convinced, to this day, that this was the reason she moved out of the state.

"Dad, you were telling me about the white bag..." I said, urging him to continue. He explained to me how much just a single smidge of that stuff actually costs, and warned me for the umpteenth time not to touch it. Passing me small nuggets of weed, my father instructed me on how to efficiently crush, weigh and transfer the drugs from the jumbo Ziplocs into miniature more sellable baggies, all the while simultaneously teaching and quizzing me in math. I passed my test the following week, yes. But still to this very day I can estimate the weight of most drugs with just a single glance, and I still know that approximately 3.5 grams make an eighth and that eight eighths make an ounce (all knowledge I'd never have to use).

And lastly my pendant, the gold necklace I always wore around my neck, was given to me by my father. When I was younger this necklace was my prized possession. I'd never had anything made of real gold before and it made me feel cool. Kimberly, although her mom was on welfare, somehow always managed to get the newest and most expensive things, while my mother, who actually had a job, was unable to buy me the luxury things I wanted i.e. a gold necklace.

One week I stayed home sick with the flu and my father was working from home as he always did. The doorbell rang nonstop, and I remember my head pounding. I called for him to bring me medicine but for some reason he didn't answer. Soon after the doorbell rang, I got out of bed to meet my dad in the hallway. I figured he had to hear me now.

"Daddy, I don't feel good!" I told him, pointing at my head.

"Hold up, Caterpillar; let me do this real quick and then I'll get you some medicine.

I stood there in pain and watched as he answered the door.

A jittery woman stood on the other side, with her arms folded across her chest. She looked terribly pale and her blonde hair looked visibly dirty, but not as dirty as her clothes.

"Eric man, I need some more."

"Okay, give me the fifty," my father responded, not seeming alarmed by her disheveled state.

"E, you know I don't have it man, come on hook me up,"

"Nah Gwen, you hook *me* up. You gotta give me something,"

That's when the woman at the door shuffled in her pockets and pulled out a ten dollar bill. My father laughed at her and said goodbye, dismissing her inadequate gesture completely, and beginning to close the door.

"Wait, wait," Gwen replied, using her foot to stop the door.

"Take this," Just then, the woman removed the necklace from around her neck with a little oval pendant dangling from it.

My father looked at it for a second, and then told her to hold on. Closing and locking the door behind him, my father ran to the dining room and moments later came back with a white bag for the woman.

"Here you go," he said to her.

"I'll be back in a day or two with the money, so take care of my chain," she replied.

"Yeah, yeah," my father responded, closing the door.

He then turned to me, who by this time was on the brink on death, using the wall to hold myself up. He picked me up and took me into my parents' room. He then placed me on the bed and gave me the medicine my mother had left on the nightstand. I took it, and fought hard to keep it down; I hated Motrin.

"Dad, why did that lady give you her necklace?" I asked, completely blinded by the necklace and forgetting to ask why she looked so crazy.

"Because she couldn't pay me my money."

"Oh, and you have to give it back to her, right?" I asked in between coughs.

“Technically yes, but not really,” he said, lying in bed next to me.

“I don’t get it.”

“If she comes back with the money she owes me, then yes, I will give her the necklace back. But she isn’t coming back with the money, so it’s mine.”

“How do you know she’s not coming back?”

“Because she’s a crackhead, Tammy. Look, check this out.” My father stood up and left the room, and returned momentarily with his cup of jewelry cleaner. He sat on the bed, pulled the necklace from the cup, and patted it dry with his t-shirt. He then began to place the necklace around my neck. He was apparently so confident that the woman wouldn’t be back for her necklace that he had no compunction about simply giving it to me. I lifted the pendant to see what was engraved on it. It read *In God We Trust*. I showed it to my father and he smiled.

“Your nana will like that,” he said.

“But dad, what if she *does* come back for the necklace?”

He sighed, realizing I was still missing the point.

“I’ll buy you another one,” he replied as he got back in the bed.

“Just don’t tell your mama,” he continued, as he drifted off to sleep.

Shivering on the park bench I looked at my father painstakingly. How could I have adored this man so much as a child? I held on to my pendant and raised my eyebrow at my father.

“You really are delusional if you think teaching your daughter how to fight and package weed is commendable. And you’re even more messed up if you think giving me a crackhead’s hand-me-downs earns you any kind of respect.”

“Well, then give it back. I’m sure I could definitely sell it,” he replied with a smirk, holding his hand out.

I stared at my father blankly. *Give it back?*

“Tamera! Let’s go!”

I turned around to see my mother standing by her van, waving us to come on. I felt frozen between my mother’s insistent wave and my father’s greedy palm. I felt my own palm graze the cool surface of the pendant, but I couldn’t bring myself to remove it. Again my mother shouted for me, and without a word I stood up, gathered the kids and walked toward her.