FLAVORS OF MY FAMILY: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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Lemon Meringue Pie

It is Friday afternoon and I am sitting in Miss Anne’s fifth grade class watching the clock slowly tick away until the final bell rings. Getting home to pack my overnight bag for my daddy’s visit is the only thing consuming my mind as Miss Anne stands at the chalkboard explaining fractions and integers. Daddy’s visits are like Christmas—they occur about once a year and last no more than twenty-four hours.

Finally the bell rings and I race off to the bus stop. As I sit on the Muni bus, head leaning against the window, I think about the last time my daddy picked me up. Me and my cousins were playing when I heard the sound of his unique horn. His horn did not toot like the horn of most cars; his sounded like a bugle. Initially I did not turn around because I did not want to be disappointed but then the horn goes off again and I slowly turn my head to look over my shoulder and to my surprise there is my daddy in his big shiny, baby blue Lincoln Continental with suicide doors. I remember the first time he opened the car door for me and my cousins looked on in amazement at the odd looking doors that appeared to be put on backwards.

Realizing that it is actually my daddy, I leap from the monkey bars and run over to the parking lot. My daddy steps out of the car, all six feet five of him, dressed in a brown suit with a purple shirt, purple crocodile Stacy Adams, and a matching purple hat. As my Grandma would say, “My daddy is casket sharp.” My cousin Sheila would say he looks like a pimp but she was always looking for something bad to say about my daddy. I run up and wrap my arms around him like a recently released hostage. Daddy twirls me
as my ponytails swirl around my head, barrettes slapping me in my face. “Daddy, what are you doing here? Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” I asks. “I tried to call but your phone is cut off again,” he replies. “Where are we going?” I asks. “I have a surprise for you so go upstairs and pack your bag. I will wait right here for you,” he replies. My daddy was never one to leave his car unattended in the projects. He knew there was a chance to come out to his car and a hub cap be missing or his hood ornament gone like the last time he visited.

By the time I reach the second floor my mama is already walking towards me. “So I guess you all excited since your daddy showed up,” she says. “He told me to pack my bag because he has a surprise for me,” I say. “Well get on in there and get your things together. Make sure you take your good clothes so he knows the few pennies he sends goes towards getting you some nice things,” she says sarcastically. Packing my bag in record speed, I blaze out the door almost knocking mama down. “Excuse you little girl, aren’t you going to at least give your mama a hug goodbye?” she says. “Oh yeah, bye mama, I love you,” as I give her a partial hug heading back out the door.

In the parking lot daddy is talking to a couple of dudes about his whip. “You ready to hit the road?” he asks as he opens the car door for me. I hop in and away we go. In forty-five minutes my world will transform from the concrete universe of the Westside Housing Development to the country-setting of Martinez with its white picket fences and quaint downtown where you can walk in the shops and be greeted with the cheeriest of faces and not some Asian liquor store clerk yelling, “Did your mama give you food
stamps to buy something?” I always hated counting out the purple and pink money that identified me as poor to total strangers. I would hang out in the rear of the store next to the ice cream freezer waiting for other customers to leave before I had to display my shame on the counter. Looking back, we were pretty much all in the same boat so why was I so embarrassed, sneaking around like I was dealing government contraband? A bunch of little fatherless refugees confined like prisoners of war at Guantanamo Bay.

So caught up in my flashback, I almost miss my stop. Pulling the rope to alert the bus driver, I impatiently wait for the doors to open. Finally back in my hood I run two blocks to my place and enter my apartment. Mama is sitting on the sofa watching Donahue interview her favorite actor, Robert DeNiro. A cigarette hangs out the corner of her mouth and her glass of rum sits on the coffee table. “Hi mama,” I say. “Hey baby, how was school?” she asks. “It was long mama. I am happy to be home,” I reply. “I am going to pack for my daddy’s house. He said he will be here tomorrow at 10:00,” I remind mama. “I would not get my hopes up too high baby girl. I have not heard from your daddy in over a month,” she says. Well that’s because we don’t have a phone mama,” I reply irritated at her comment. “I know that,” she says with an attitude. “But he knows he can always reach us at the neighbor’s house. He knows just as many folks up in here as we do,” she says while flicking her ashes into the ceramic ashtray I made her in first grade. “My daddy is coming mama,” I say in a low voice walking off into my room to pack my clothes.
After my bag is packed I spend the night reading *Nancy Drew* mysteries. My Grandma bought me the entire collection for my ninth birthday. I have read each book at least three times. Nancy Drew is so smart just like me. Maybe I will be a detective when I grow up. Without eating dinner, I drift off into a deep sleep and before I know it, the sun is making an appearance. I head to the kitchen for a bowl of my favorite cereal, Peanut Butter Crunch. The box is sealed tightly in a Ziploc bag to keep the roaches out. I turn on the television and sit down to watch Saturday morning cartoons. My favorite commercial comes on and I sing along, “I’m just a bill, yes I’m only a bill, and I’m sitting here on Capitol Hill…” Mama comes in about an hour later. “Mama, you can change the channel. I am going to get in the shower so I can get ready for daddy,” I say. “Okay baby,” she mumbles.

As I stand in the shower I cannot believe Saturday has finally arrived. I am looking forward to playing with Sara. Her family lives two houses over from my daddy and they have a big sheep dog named Maddie. Sara’s mom gardens and bakes cookies and her dad always wears a tie, even on weekends. Me and my daddy have joined them for dinner a few times and I helped Sara set the table. Before Sara’s house I had never seen so many forks on one table. I hop out the shower and get dressed. My bag is packed and sitting on the kitchen table. In the projects we can’t sit things on the floor because you may end up taking along some unwanted guests.

The sun is shining as I lean on the second floor balcony patiently awaiting my daddy’s arrival. Sheila comes out of her place which is right next door to mine and
without saying good morning or hi, she says, “Your daddy not coming.” “My daddy is coming,” I say to Sheila, always the consummate doubter. She is the same cousin who told me my parents were separating when I was five years old and she is also the one that told me my daddy had a girlfriend. Damn I hate big mouth Sheila.

“Let’s go play on the monkey bars until your daddy gets here,” Sheila says. “No, I don’t want to get dirty so I will just hang out here,” I say. Walking away I hear Sheila mumble, “That nigga not coming.”

Two hours later, the courtyard play structure is full of kids playing and screaming go faster, faster, as they spin around on the metal merry-go-round that used to be my favorite when we first moved into the projects. My cousin Kevin would push us so fast until it felt like our heads were going to fall off and twirl on the ground like spinning tops. I remember how bright and colorful the swing set was with blue and red poles but now most of the paint has chipped off and all you see is cold hard metal.

“Theresa, come inside and change your clothes so you can go play,” my mom yells down the walkway. “Oh no mama, my daddy is still coming, he is just running a little late,” I reply. “He was supposed to be here at 10:00 this morning and it is almost 1:00 now. Baby he is not coming,” she says. I turn my back to her and lean deeper into the concrete balcony, sulking and trying to fight back tears. “He is coming,” I mutter to myself.

Sheila runs up the stairs heading into her apartment to make some Top Ramen noodles, the staple food item found in every ghetto kitchen. “You want something to
“eat?” she hollers right before she crosses the threshold of her apartment. “No, I am not hungry,” I whisper feeling totally defeated. I need her to be wrong for a change. Every time Sheila says something about my daddy she is right and this one time I need her to be wrong!

Another thirty minutes passes and my mom suggests that I go upstairs to the third floor and ask Miss Eileen if I can use her phone to call my daddy. My mama never wants me to ask the neighbors for anything but this time she must be feeling real sorry for me to suggest such a thing. I run upstairs and knock hard on the door like I am the police there to serve a search warrant. Miss Eileen is nearly deaf and if she does not have her hearing aid turned all the way up she will not hear a herd of elephants trampling through her front room.

“Hey baby,” Miss Eileen says as she smiles through the door. “What can I do you for on this beautiful day?”

“Miss Eileen, I need to use your telephone to call my daddy,” I say.

“Oh is he running late again baby?” she asks.

Rolling my eyes in my head at her question, I respond “Yes ma’am and I need to call and see what time he is going to be here.”

Miss Eileen lets me into her apartment and I walk past the red leather kitchen chairs that used to be in Mr. Stewart’s diner down the block before it burned down. Everybody knew Miss Eileen’s grandson, Mikey, stole those chairs and other things that did not burn up in the fire. He was always stealing from folks. That’s why his butt stays
in and out of jail. Miss Eileen always smelled like a lethal mixture of Ben-gay and Jean Nate from the Walgreen’s drug store. She is so nice but always gossiping about folks.

“The phone is right over yonder baby. Don’t be talking for too long because you know your daddy live out there with them rich white folks and that is a long distance call.”

“Oh Miss Eileen, I will be fast. I am pretty sure he already left anyway” I respond.

I cannot believe Miss Eileen still has a rotary phone. I dial my daddy’s number and my heart is racing. Part of me wants him to answer and tell me he is sorry he is late but he is on his way while the other part of me wants him not to answer because he is about to be pulling up to get me. I allow the phone to ring so many times that I lose count around twenty or so. The smell of collard greens hangs in the air as I hear Miss Eileen fumbling around the kitchen cooking her dinner. Why do old people eat so early? It is barely 2:00.

“Baby, I don’t think he is there. Maybe you should go get changed and play with the other kids while the sun is still up,” she yells from the kitchen.

Just then I hear the sound of a bugle horn and I slam down the phone and race past Miss Eileen, bumping my knee on the stolen red chair. “Sorry Miss Eileen. Thanks for allowing me to use your phone,” I say as I rush out the front door. I do not stick around long enough to hear what she says to me. Running down three flights of stairs I finally make it to the bottom. I run through the clotheslines knocking some of the clothes
off, getting screamed at by neighbors who are sitting out in lawn chairs drinking and playing dominoes. I finally reach the parking lot only to find that it is Jenny’s boyfriend blowing his horn. Jenny lives in the west quad. She is sixteen years old, light-skinned with good hair. Jenny is fast. She wears a ton of make-up that does not match her skin tone and she is always fogging up the windows of some car with some random boy from the neighborhood.

Out of breath with tears trailing down my face like condensation on a soda can, I turn to head back upstairs when out of nowhere Sheila runs up to me and says, “I told you that nigga wasn’t coming. He with his new white family. Didn’t your mama tell you your daddy ‘bout to get married?” I stop in my tracks like I was playing red light/green light and someone just shouted out red light. My feet are frozen like they have been set in a block of cement. I instantly feel light-headed as Sheila’s words echo in my ears. “New white family?” I asks. “Yeah I heard your mama and my mama talking about this big wedding he having at some country club and he did not invite anybody from his family but all her family is going to be there. She works in the same office with him and her family has a lot of money.

Why does Sheila keep telling me these lies? Why wouldn’t my mama tell me if my daddy was getting married? Wouldn’t he want me to be there? Maybe he stopped to get me something special for his surprise announcement. Yeah that’s it. My daddy is late because he wants to bring me a present when he tells me his big news. Now that he is
going to have a wife maybe I can move in because I will have a stepmom to help take

care of me. We can go shopping and bake cookies together like Sara and her mom.

“Theresa, are you okay? Did you hear what I said?” she yells into my face.

“Yeah I heard you and I do not believe a word of it. My daddy is coming and you
do not know what you are talking about. You are just jealous because you do not have a
daddy. You do not even know who your daddy is so you need to just get out of my face
and leave me alone.”

Before I could utter another word, Sheila hauls off and socks me right out of my
cement block and I land face first into the bark that’s surrounds the swing set. Bark sticks
into the palms of my hands. My face is throbbing and I cannot tell if she hit me in my
nose or my mouth. Blood is spewing from both. Every time I rise up to my knees to get
up I hear the laughter of all the kids and I fall back down. Maybe if I act like I am really
hurt a grownup will come help me and make the other kids stop laughing. Maybe if I
don’t move I will scare them and they will think I am dead. Maybe this day is not
happening at all and it is still Friday night and this is really a bad dream.

“Theresa, get your ass up out that dirt,” my mama yells from the balcony. “Look
at your clothes now. Didn’t I tell you to change your clothes hours ago? I knew that nigga
was not coming and now you done messed up your good outfit. Hurry up and get up these
stairs.”

Not only are the kids laughing at me getting knocked out by my cousin but now
my mama has recited the phrase that I will hear for the next few years of my life, “That
nigga not coming.” Full of humiliation, I make my way through the crowd of taunting children and reach the balcony of my apartment. The smell of tuna and burnt boiled eggs smacks me in my face harder than Sheila’s blow. Mama been drinking and forgot she had something cooking on the stove and now I got to sit in our tiny apartment smelling canned fish and burnt eggs all damn night.

Making my way into the bathroom I look into the mirror and staring back at me is a one-eyed skinny girl with a popped blood vessel in her eye and bark stuck in her ponytails; Snot running from her nose to her lip with tinges of blood resembling the mosaic bowl on Miss Eileen’s coffee table. I look down and notice the rip in my jeans. I begged mama for these new bell-bottom jeans and now I know mama will not buy me any new ones because she told me to change my clothes and I would not listen because I believed my daddy was coming. I believed that one day he would take me out these raggedy, roach-infested projects and move me into his big house with the pool and I would have my own room decorated in hot pink and purple with Michael Jackson posters on the wall. I believed that I would be far away from Sheila and never have to look at her ugly rat face again. I believed that I would have a color television without needing pliers to change the channel or a foil paper wrapped antenna. I believed I would not have to hear Mr. Kim yell at me every time I walked into his store to buy something. I believed that I would never have to buy things with pink and purple money again. I believed my daddy would rescue me. I believed my daddy loved me.
Upset and saddened by another day of disappointment and rejection, I take in the contents of my room. My bed consists of a box spring on the floor with two mattresses on top to supposedly keep the rats away from me as I sleep. Sheer daisy covered curtains that used to hang in my grandma’s kitchen before she passed away two months ago now hang on my bar covered windows.

Memories of walking into Grandma’s tiny apartment and the sweet smell of vanilla extract and lemon curd invade my mind. Climbing on the step stool helping Grandma bake lemon meringue pies was the highlight of my day. Grandma’s place was always super hot because she was always baking. Grandma was known as the Pie Lady in my hood. She would sit out on her stoop with a basket full of lemon meringue tarts that she sold for $2 each and she would sell out every single day. I sure do miss my Grandma.

A rock hits my window jilting me out of my daydream. I walk over and look outside only to find Sheila taunting me and mouthing “I told you that nigga wasn’t coming.” Turning away from the window I throw myself onto my triple layer bed facedown into my faded yellow pillow. If I close my eyes tight enough maybe I can make this entire day go away. I squeeze my eyes tighter than a wrung out mop but all this does is make the tears flow faster. Maybe if I press my face harder into the pillow I will suffocate and die then everybody will feel bad about laughing at me, especially Sheila. If I die my daddy will feel horrible and know it is all his fault for leaving me behind while he starts a new life with his new family. Maybe he will even cancel his wedding because he is so sad about losing his only baby girl. Hell, who am I fooling? That nigga really
don’t care about me just like Sheila says. He only comes around when it is convenient for him and he wants to show off his little girl and play daddy for a day. Well if he does not care about me then I am not going to give a shit about him. That man is dead to me.

Hopping out of bed, I walk into the bathroom and click on the light; three roaches scatter across the floor. I turn on the water and watch it trickle from the rusty faucet. Grabbing one of the rags off the shower rod I begin to wash the dried blood that is caked on my face like cheap foundation. As my nostrils become unclogged so does my mind and I am back on the step stool in Grandma’s kitchen inhaling the scent of freshly squeezed lemons and vanilla extract.
I Got Nothing

Another rainy Monday; the sound of Teddy Pendergrass’s sultry, sexy voice resonates through the alarm clock singing “Wake up everybody no more sleeping in bed.” The cell phone glow faintly lights the room alerting me that it is four a.m. and time to get my butt up. I lay under my extra warm heating blanket surrounded by big fluffy pillows surveying the contents of my space as if I had awakened in a strange hotel room. The illuminated acrylic flowers on the nightstand bend in a way I have never noticed before. They appear to be drooping like two-week-old tulips. I hit the snooze button, roll over, and this is when I realize, he has been here. Shutting my eyes I try to make it not be true but there is no escaping the fragrance of Acqua di Gio emanating from my sheets. After six months of no communication have I really allowed this man back into my life?

Teddy is singing again. My five minutes of snoozing is up. Stepping out of bed I notice my slippers are not where they should be. “Shit, did I even let him resume his side of the bed?” I walk to the opposite side and slide my feet into my slippers. Disgracefully, I head down my hallway to the bathroom like Sean Penn in Dead Man Walking. The room is still dark except for the illuminating droopy flowers. I refuse to turn on the light because I am not quite ready to face myself. Memories of him consume my brain like a wildfire. Turning on the shower, I have hopes of dousing this full-blown blaze that is quickly growing out of control.

The pelts of water crashing from the rainforest showerhead are cold and hard as they hit the palm of my hand. I do not allow it time to warm up before stepping into the
icy cold water. Maybe this is my personal form of shock therapy. The full moon peaks through my blinds casting the faintest bit of light. The shower is heating up and I stand there soaking in the warmth reminding me how secure and safe I felt back in his embrace.

Oh hell no! I am not allowing myself to go down that path again. Grabbing the shower gel and loofah I frantically scrub my body from head to toe trying to remove all traces of him ever being in my space. “Six months!” I yell out into the darkness which echoes off the shower walls reverberating like a stereo with too much bass. Why is everything so amplified?

The shower is off and I hear the loudness of silence. Droplets of water whisper in the stillness reminding me that there is still movement although I feel paralyzed. Sitting on the edge of the bathtub I close my eyes to meditate. Tune everything out. No thoughts of him. Shut it all down for at least fifteen minutes. You need this time, I tell myself. You have to regroup and pull it back together. Stop thinking and just sit in the moment and listen. I take in a long deep breath and exhale with a slow rhythmic motion. My shoulders slump and I am instantly relaxed. Two more breaths and I will be exactly where I need to be. The sound of the showerhead is almost nonexistent as it gets down to the last few trickles. I count the time in between drops but like counting sheep to fall asleep, it is not working to quiet my mind. Recollections flood my brain taking me back to the many times he and I shared this bathtub that I am perched upon. Oh well, that’s it for meditating.
Snap out of it and get dressed so you can make it to work fool. You have already wasted enough time and have fallen ten minutes behind schedule. I step into the dress that I laid out the night before and when I go to zip it up either my arms have gotten shorter or my torso has gotten longer. I struggle to get the zipper up and before I can catch myself I look up into the mirror and envision him standing behind me zipping up my dress like he had done on so many occasions.

Screw it! I will put on my blazer until I see my girl Karina at work and have her zip up the damn dress. Time to accessorize; draping my charm bracelet around my wrist I notice the damn thing is snug. What has happened that I can no longer reach my damn zipper and my wrist is so thick I can barely get my bracelet around it? I waste another five minutes trying to fasten it as each charm taunts me.

“Remember me?” the stiletto charm asks, “he surprised you with me when you were sharing scoops of black walnut ice cream at Fentons.” Then the pink heart charm chimes in, “I know you remember me from that cute little boutique on Main Street in Napa. Yeah that’s the day the two of you played hooky from work and had sex in that winery bathroom. One leg on the handicap bar and the other flung over his shoulder. Oh yeah I was there dangling from your wrist as you used every core muscle to stay hoisted upon Mandingo.” God, did I really give it that name?

To hell with this stupid ass bracelet! Tossing it onto the dresser I pick up my briefcase and head towards the bedroom door trying not to feel defeated for allowing myself to end up here again.
Reaching the bottom of the stairs, the stony cold tile reminds me that I am still in my bare feet. I can do nothing but laugh at myself. Is my head so messed up that I was headed to work shoeless? I drop everything and head upstairs to grab some boots and socks. Finally I am fully dressed, with the exception of my partially zipped dress, and I am ready to hop in my car and zone out to some good beats to clear my head.

Tuning into XM radio urban music station will provide some feel good music and get me focused. The first song blaring out the radio is At Your Best by Aaliyah. At your best you are love/ you’re a positive motivating force within my life... Nope! Wrong station. Next! Baby, Baby, Baby, I got so much love in me/Cause if you’re gonna get me off/You got to love me deep, Wow! Really? Next! So I gotta find my way back, way back to you baby/Gotta find my way back, way back to you, to us, to lovvve. Well goddamnit! I guess I will not be listening to this station.

Just about to hit the freeway and the rain goes from a light drizzle to a full on storm. I flip my windshield wipers on and try not to get hypnotized as they swish-swash from left to right trying to keep up with the downpour of rain. A big rig drives past shooting water up onto my car startling me out of my comatose-like state. Starting to think I probably should not be behind the wheel so damn confused and agitated.

I know what will help me. The Steve Harvey morning show. He always has tons of laughs and silly skits going on to make for a lighter commute. I switch from satellite to FM radio to listen to my boy Steve Harvey. I know if no one else can get me through this little setback, my man Steve Harvey can. Well what the hell else would be on but the
introduction of a new segment of his show called *Love Lines*. Are you fucking kidding me Universe?

What have I done to receive all these reminders? I know I sold my soul to the devil to be with this man. There is no need to beat me over the head with it. I was duplicitous in my actions with no sense of loyalty or scruples. Yeah, yeah I get it. But honestly she was not my friend she is Karina’s friend. He has been my friend since the first day we met.

It was summer 2010 and I was hosting a luau in my backyard. Noah and his wife Celeste were invited to my party by our mutual friend Karina. I won’t be as cheesy to say that it was love at first sight but trust me it was certainly lust at first sight.

“Hello Taryn. So you are the woman I been hearing all these stories about who hosts all the great parties with the expansive wine collection,” Noah says.

I look up and standing before me is this extremely handsome man with the smoothest skin the color of a Starbucks’ mocha, teeth as white as new chalk and a smile that would embarrass the Mona Lisa.

“Guilty as charged. And you must be the one with the assortment of cigars that would rival Fidel Castro himself,” I say with a flirtatious smile.

“Um hello,” Celeste says with a light-hearted grin, “Let me break up this little compliment fest and introduce myself since my husband has seemed to forget I am here.”

“Oh my bad, but you know I been dying to get over here to one of Taryn’s parties,” Noah responds.
“He even took off work to attend your party tonight. We are both glad to finally meet you. Here is a bottle of wine to add to your collection,” she says, handing me a beautiful purple satin wine bag with silver sparkles.

Karina walks up, “Hey, I see you two finally made it.”

“Wild horses could not keep him away. Apparently he is really into wine now,” Celeste says sarcastically.

Many more guests arrive and throughout the evening, Noah is complimenting me on everything from my toenail polish to my food presentation. He considers himself to be a great home chef and under the premise of swapping recipes he solicits my phone number which I reluctantly give him because I sense he has ulterior motives. He exudes so much confidence which I am instantly attracted to. This has all the signs of ending up somewhere prohibited.

Three months later we find ourselves submerged in a full-fledged, hot and sultry, clandestine affair that we carry out right under everyone’s noses for over two years. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention Justin. He is the guy I have been dating for three years. Justin is a really nice guy but not at all exciting and distinguished like Noah. For the duration of this affair with Noah, all of us would go on these couples’ vacations with Karina and her husband, Noah and Celeste, and Justin and I, along with three or four other couples. No one ever questioned when Noah volunteered to help me in the kitchen or we would take off to the store together.
Part of the excitement was the possibility of getting discovered but truthfully we were both so caught up in one another that the chance of that happening did not even exist in the realm of our reality which of course was not real at all. What also was not real was the belief I bought into that he loved me and only me and he was only with her until he could figure out an “exit strategy.” Yep, that is what I bought into; the great exit strategy plan. Harvard and Columbia educated and I still believed he was going to leave her for me.

Wait a minute, let me back up a bit. That is not wholly the truth. He initially told me that he was never going to leave his wife. I suppose I should have taken his words at face value but instead I responded with I do not want you to leave her; I like us just how we are. Total crock of bullshit on my part but I tried to make myself accept it so I could justify staying in this relationship.

For two years we went on one adventure after another: Winery trips, foodie events, picnics in the Rose Garden, plays, the symphony, and even a few overnight trips. Those were the best. His company would put him up in nice hotels for four or five days. I would take off work and for those days no one existed but us. Sure, Justin asked a lot of questions but I would just tell him I was traveling for my job. I accepted things as they were as long as we had our stolen moments. Nothing could have prepared me for what lie ahead.

It was Labor Day weekend and Noah and Celeste invited me and Justin and a few other friends over for a barbecue. The first thing I noticed was Celeste was wearing
glasses. I commented that I had never seen her in glasses and they looked very cute on her. She said she was reading a recipe and put them on to see. Okay sounds legit to me. I did not give it a second thought. The evening goes on and we all eat, dance, drink, and have a great time. Justin and I leave the party around 1:00 a.m. He stays over my house and we pass right out.

September 3, 2012 at 8:15 a.m., my phone vibrates on the nightstand. I pick it up and there is a text message from Noah. It reads “Ugh! She found out about us. All bad rite now. TTYL.” I stupidly reply, “What do you mean? OMG talk to me.”

I sit up in bed; heart racing like I ran a hundred yard dash. I peek over at Justin who is still sound asleep. Sliding out of bed, I walk to the bathroom and my fingers cannot hit the keys fast enough. The ensuing text read as follows:

Noah: Just what i said. she got in my phone. saw old emails of us. saw the vegas flight confirmations. saw old pics of us in SF. saw videos. i forgot them in my email.

Taryn: Noooo. where r u?

Noah: home dealing with this. dealing with her.

Taryn: what was her first response? what have you told her?

Noah: she found old stuff of me messing around with other females. found my condoms. letters. cards. shit i forgot i had.

Taryn: how? where?

Noah: my phone. ttyl.

Taryn: she wanna talk to me?
Noah: i’ve hurt her badly.

Taryn: u tell her bout us?

Noah: yes she does. but not really. yes i did sortta. not completely just some stuff.

Taryn: i know u can’t talk now but we need to talk.

Noah: didn’t tell her we fucked. yes we do. ttyl

Taryn: ugh hit me soon as u can. this is really fucked up. u say u hurt her badly but u know I was there to witness all the hurt and neglect u endured from her. i knew when this day came u would toss out everything we were about and beg for forgiveness instead of being up front with everything. what was lacking and why you strayed. u and i are not the only guilty parties here. she owns a part in this as well. i was hoping you would handle this differently if it ever came to light. guess i was wrong.

Noah: i did say all that.

Taryn: i just need to see u. talk to u. i know she’s hurting but she’s not the only one who has feelings.

Noah: it’s gonna be a while.

Taryn: i never wanted us to end up here.

Noah: i know. its only gonna get worse before it gets better.

Taryn: but why? i’m not understanding.

Noah: ttyl. ok.

Taryn: i need to know what she’s saying.
Noah: she embarrassed. disappointed and hurt. betrayed by u and me. disrespected. she
doesn’t wanna talk with you right now.
Taryn: u feeling guilty now?
Noah: nope.
Taryn: ok thats all i needed to hear. we good? anyone else know? can you tell me
 anything? i’m completely in the dark here. what she saying? who else knows?
Noah: she talked to karina. thats all i know.
Taryn: what’s happening now?
Noah: nothing.
Taryn: what’s she doing? how did u allow this to happen? i know you have a passcode on
your phone. didn’t come out right. sorry. not pointing fingers. we in this together.
Noah: she said she watched me and saw it and used the passcode.
Taryn: wow. so that is why she was wearing her glasses at the barbecue. what does she
know?
Noah: basically everything.
Taryn: and u said?
Noah: some is true.
Taryn: some of what her own eyes have seen is true? WTF! why not own it? she’s seen
the proof. whats to hide now? she already hurt. it can’t get any worse. what she gon do?
Noah: u and i did have a relationship. it just happened. u were going to vegas anyway.
don’t know. it’s just bad.
Taryn: so u still lying?
Noah: yeah i guess.
Taryn: of course it’s bad but now it’s out there.
Noah: yes.
Taryn: it don’t get no better with more lies.
Noah: true.
Taryn: what she doin now?
Noah: ok tty a lil later
Taryn: i’ll be here.
Noah: ok

Walking back to the room I am surprised when I see Justin sitting up in bed. I honestly forgot he was even here.

“Is everything okay,” Justin asks?

“Yeah, I’m cool. Just a little hungover from the party I guess,” I respond as I slip my phone into my pajama pants pocket.

Justin is talking but I am not hearing a word he is saying. The text conversation is playing over and over in my head. Did he say I just happened to be going to Vegas? Did he say she found out about other women? Did he say we never fucked? Condoms! We don’t even use condoms. Hold up! Wait a mutha-fuckin minute. Is Noah cheating on me as well? Feeling light-headed and confused, I take a seat on the bench at the foot of the bed. Justin places his hand on my shoulder. His touch startles me.
“Tell me what’s going on Taryn. You are visibly shaken up about something,” he says.

“I’m just really tired, didn’t sleep all that well. It’s nothing a cup of coffee won’t fix. Be right back.”

I head downstairs to the kitchen so I can whip out my phone and re-read these fucking text messages. My head is spinning like a tornado and gathering just as much collateral damage as I think of all the people that will be affected by this news once it comes out. Celeste has already told Karina and everyone knows telling Karina is the same as posting the shit on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. What am I going to tell Justin? He will be crushed. He has never been anything but nice to me but let’s face it he is boring as watching glue dry.

On autopilot, I start a pot of coffee and open the fridge in search of something, anything. I have no appetite but I feel the need to do something with my hands. As the chill from the fridge greets my face I pull out my cell phone and start re-reading the long trail of messages. Anger erupts inside of me. “I hurt her bad,” he says. Has he already forgotten all of the trips we went on as couples when she spoke down to him and chastised him like a child or belittled him or disrespected him by drinking too much then trying to fight him? How about all those times when he was excited about a new venture and she totally shot him down while I acted as his number one cheerleader and president of his fucking fan club? Has he forgotten everything we were about?
Justin walks into the kitchen with a big, dumb smile on his face and says, “Get out the fridge and go get dressed. I’m taking you to breakfast.”

His voice is way too cheery and instantly I am annoyed and irritated by his presence.

“I am not really hungry this morning. Why don’t you go pick something up while I try to lie back down for a minute? I have a splitting headache.”

Never making eye contact, I shut the fridge. I can feel Justin’s eyes on me as I depart the kitchen and ascend up the stairs.

“Are you sure you don’t want to go out and get some fresh air? You are looking a little pale,” he says.

“No, I will be fine. Actually, I have a bunch of cases to review. You mind if I lock myself in the room today so I can get some work done?”

“Are you asking me to leave Taryn? Please talk to me. I know something happened this morning. I noticed your phone was not on the nightstand so I’m guessing you received a phone call that upset you. Taryn, you can talk to me. Please don’t shut me out” he pleads.

Words will not come to me. Grasping the handrail I try to gather my thoughts. Say something Taryn. The man is standing here waiting.

“I’m not happy in this relationship Justin. I haven’t been for a very long time. My career is just starting to go in the direction I want and I need to focus more on me.”

Then I say the most ridiculous thing ever, “It’s not you, it’s me.”
Justin looks up at me, face full of shock and confusion.

“Where is all this coming from Taryn? You have never let on for one minute that you were unhappy. Let’s sit down and talk. I do not know what I have done to upset you but I know we can work this out. We were meant for one another.”

“I am not in the mood to talk about anything right now Justin. Can you just leave? Please!”

Justin walks towards the door. My hand is clenching the railing while every part of my being is just hoping he will evaporate into thin air and I will never have to explain or deal with him again.

“Wait, my wallet and my phone are in your room. Can I at least get my things?”

“I’ll grab them,” I reply.

Walking from my room with Justin’s property in my hands, I am still hoping that when I go downstairs he will be gone but of course no luck there. As I hand Justin the items he grabs me into a full on bear hug, both the phone and wallet crash to the floor.

“Justin, please let go of me. We will talk later,” I lie.

“Taryn, you cannot throw everything away. We have built this relationship for over three years and I know you are the woman for me.”

“Please Justin. I cannot do this right now. I’ll call you later.”

“Let’s do counseling Taryn. I do not know what has happened but I am sure once we talk about it we can get through it.”

“Justin, for the last time, please leave!”
Justin reluctantly releases me from his clutches, picks his wallet and phone up and exits out the door. I collapse right there at the base of the stairs. I do not even have the energy to move. Where do I go from here? Did I just get dumped by my lover and break up with my boyfriend all within the past hour? Who does that? Surely, I am having a terrible nightmare because this is some straight soap opera shit.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Is it Noah I wonder before revealing the text message? Oh boy here we go. It is Karina. The news has already hit the airwaves.

Karina: Wow. I just heard. How r u? I can’t say I am surprised. I noticed how the two of you were around one another. I cannot believe it took her this long to figure it out.

Taryn: what did she tell you?

Karina: She said she was curious because of all of his late night excursions and how protective he has been over his phone so she decided to see what he has been up to.

Taryn: and what else?

Karina: U sure u want to hear this?

Taryn: yes

Karina: She kept yelling that bitch acted like she was my friend. We went on girl trips together and the entire time that bitch was fucking my husband. I welcomed her into my home. She said there were multiple pix of you sucking his dick and pix of ur titties. Emails about you guys fucking
outdoors. She even saw the airline confirmation for Vegas that listed both ur name and his as the passengers. She said he is spending our money on that bitch! She found pix of other women as well and said he talked to some chick named Marie and he frequently used the “L” word with her.

Taryn: what? marie! he was still seeing marie. he told me he was madly in love with her about ten years ago but it ended because she wanted kids. that mother fucker was cheating on me. smdh

Karina: Yeah and apparently there were three or four others. This fool even kept receipts of flowers he purchased for women and get this, before she let him know she had gotten into his phone, she tore up the garage and went through his work bag and trunk and found condoms, sex tapes and toys.

Taryn: i have heard enough. i gotta go Karina.

Karina: have you spoken with him yet?

Taryn: karina i gotta go. Ttyl

Karina: Okay girl, I am here if you need to talk.

Placing the phone beside me on the steps, I try to comprehend this morning, this weekend, this entire life but it is all blending together like berries in a smoothie. Out of nowhere it hits me that I need to make some moves. I head upstairs and hop in the shower, get dressed then I do what feels like the most natural thing to me. I get a big Hefty bag and I dump Justin’s clothes out of my bottom drawer; the drawer that I gave him after our first three months of dating. This drawer meant the world to him. Hell,
it meant the world to me. It meant we were taking things to the next level. Swooping my phone off the bottom of the stairs I hop into my car and unthinkingly I head to Justin’s place. As I am backing out my garage I notice Justin’s boombox. I hop out and toss it into the backseat alongside the Hefty bag. Before I know it I am at Justin’s security gate.

“Hello,” his voice says through the intercom.

“Justin, it’s Taryn.”

The bar lifts, the gate opens and I slowly drive into the complex. My phone is vibrating in the cup holder beside me. I pick it up and there are multiple messages from various people who I am sure have already heard the news. I do not even bother to read the messages. I am on a mission. Exactly what that mission is, I have no clue but for whatever reason I am being lead to do this.

I park the car and grab the big Hefty out the backseat. I put the boombox on top of the bag and attempt to make my way up Justin’s stairs. Just as the boombox topples over Justin opens the door.

“Taryn, what are you doing? Is that my stuff? Are you breaking up with me? What the hell are you doing?”

“Would you just take the damn bag?”

He takes the bag as I pick up the boombox from the stairs. As he enters his apartment I shove the boombox in the door and turn to walk to my car.

“Taryn, no, you can’t leave me. Come inside so we can talk about this,” he says as he grabs my arm.
“Justin, it is over. Please let go of my arm.

He let’s me go and sits at the top of his stairs as I make my way to my car. Refusing to look back at him, I take off out of the complex, hitting speed bumps, scraping the front of my car on every one. I am finally back home, sitting in my garage, listening to voicemails from nosy friends who allegedly are concerned about my well-being.

#1 “Taryn, it’s me, Chris. Please call me and let me know you are okay.”
#2 “Girl, where are you? I heard what happened. Call me.”
#3 “What the fuck have you gotten yourself into? I knew dude was no good. It never did sit well with me how close you two were. You know who this is. Hit me back.”

Without listening to the other five voicemails, I drop the phone back into the cup holder and head into my house. Over the next few months I lay low until the dust settles. Within this timeframe my friends tell me about Noah’s Facebook post of him and his wife at baseball games and wineries looking like the happiest couple on the planet. My response to them is, “Tell Noah and Celeste they owe me for bringing them closer together.”

A few folks have told me they have seen Justin around town with a new woman. This actually makes me smile knowing that he was able to move on. Funny thing is he never found out about Noah and me which is shocking based upon all the people that know about us.
Now I sit in my work parking lot, already late but consumed with what has transpired over the past twenty-four hours. How did a run-in at the Costco seafood counter get me back into this ugly space? I was there ordering shrimp for my crab boil when a very familiar voice approached me.

“Hello Taryn, how have you been?”

“Noah, wow, how are you?”

“I am well. Thanks for asking. How’s your practice coming?”

“No complaints here.”

“Ma’am, will there be anything else,” the clerk asks?

“No, that will be all. Thank you,” I say as I take my three pounds of shrimp.

“Good seeing you Noah. Take care.”

“You do the same. Peace be with you Taryn.”

Walking away, butterflies the size of Mothra flutter in my stomach. All the way home I am trying to figure out why there was no anger. Why was I so cordial to this man? I have not heard from him in six months and here we are chatting like soccer moms at a PTA meeting. As I unload my groceries my phone vibrates in my purse revealing a new text message.

“Taryn, you look amazing as always. Any chance we can sit down and talk sometimes? If you do not respond or not interested in talking to me, I completely understand. Again, you look amazing! 😊”

It takes me all of five seconds to reply, “My place or yours? 😊”
Funnel Cakes and Kool-Aid Smiles

While thumbing through the pages of O magazine, I stumble upon an article entitled, *Ten Exercises One Should Do to Write Their Own Memoir.*

Hmmm, only ten exercises, I think to myself. The notion to write my own memoir has crossed my mind a time or two so what the hell. I sit at my laptop and give this memoir writing thing a shot.

**Exercise One. Write two pages of something you can’t deny.**

I cannot deny that I am fat. My inner thighs rub together causing so much friction that I have Smokey the Bear on speed dial in case a fire breaks out. It feels like my ass and gut are playing Twister when I wear a dress. My arms resemble the red hot water bottle that used to hang on the back of Granny’s bathroom door. Well hell this is not fun. Why would I instantly go to a negative place? Let me try this again. *Something I can’t deny.* I cannot deny that I am a good cook. The last Taco Tuesday party I hosted was a super hit with the carne asada tacos, homemade guac and that Salvadoran sour cream from Mi Pueblo. I don’t know what they put in that stuff but it’s my latest addiction. Interesting that I first write about being overweight then I transition into writing about food. I think I know where this memoir is going.

The exercise calls for two pages and I can’t even come up with two paragraphs. *Think.* I can’t deny that I am lonely. Although I’m surrounded by people damn near every hour of the day, when I go to my room alone every night I feel…Forgotten? Abandoned? Unworthy? Unloved? Well shit what do I feel? I am loved. I know this.
Who abandoned me? What is going on here? I am sitting at my desk but I feel like I am lying on a therapist’s sofa. Is this what a memoir does? It makes you face your truth. I don’t think I’m up for all this. I just wanted to do a fun writing exercise. Oh what the hell I’ve started now so I may as well keep going and see how this ends up. Deny. I cannot deny that this exercise sucks! I was hoping to discover something wonderful about myself and so far all I’ve discovered is that I’m fat and lonely and apparently a terrible writer in need of a therapist. Haha. That’s kind of funny.

I cannot deny that I am a procrastinator. I set out with the best of intentions. I organize whatever tasks I have, make notes and create deadlines for myself but somewhere, somehow I always end up cramming at the very last minute to get shit done. What’s that about? Well I’m done with this topic. It’s definitely time to move on to the next exercise.

Exercise two. Write two pages of what got left behind.

What the hell does this mean? “What got left behind?” Let me ponder this one for a moment… My youth got left behind. Yes, that’s it! Senior year of high school and instead of hanging out with my friends I’m at weekly doctor’s appointments at County Hospital with all the smelly, homeless people because I got knocked up by the captain of the hoop team. Guess he slam dunked my ass. One minute it’s all about who I will take to the prom and the next minute I am clipping coupons for Pampers and baby wipes. I miss the first day of senior year because I’m at County Hospital delivering an eight pound baby boy exactly one month after my eighteenth birthday. No more planning for
Spain with the Spanish Club. No more trying out for cheerleader. No more hanging out at Park Bowl with my friends. No more two-piece swimsuits. My boobs are leaking through my shirt and they are fucking huge. I mean like the size of the globe that sits on Mr. Peterson’s desk in Geography class. My senior year is supposed to be all about me: partying and college tours; but instead I am home changing shitty diapers, pumping milk and washing baby bottles. No longer a teenager, I am somebody’s momma and I will be for the rest of my life. Damn, this memoir shit really brings up some tough memories.

Oh I got it. I cannot deny that I am a good mom. Though he didn’t come along at the best time, my son has been a true blessing in my life. I complain about what I missed out on in my youth but being a mom is the best thing ever. Of course we had some challenges and we basically grew up together but I can proudly say that I have an amazing kid and I wouldn’t change my past for anything. This feels good; something positive that I can’t deny. What is exercise two again? Oh yeah, what got left behind. Dreams. I put them on hold to raise my son so I have yet to travel to Europe or graduate college or even write my first novel. I thought for sure by now my best-selling novel would be sitting alongside Toni Morrison at the local Barnes and Noble. It’s not too late. I know this. I haven’t even hit forty yet but my reality is I spend way too much time playing and not enough time working but hell that’s just who I am.

Exercise three. Write a page of something you did but no longer understand.
Oh this is an easy one. I got engaged to a man after dating him for only sixteen days. *What the hell was I thinking?* At the time it made perfect sense to me. I had known him for five years and there was always chemistry between us but for whatever reason we never hooked up until one day he finally asked me out and we dated for two weeks straight and on day sixteen he told me he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. Now here’s the thing; I know that I am not interested in marriage. I know that I do not really love this man. It has only been sixteen days but I convince myself that these last two weeks have been so phenomenal that we can make this work and live happily ever after. *How cliché is that?*

The plan is for Christmas; we will load our kids (his daughter and my son) into the Tahoe and drive to Tahoe to get hitched. “Tahoe in a Tahoe.” *Why is this so funny to me?* Anyway, it is the weekend before Christmas and I sit down and write my fiancé a list of things I like and dislike about him (probably another concept I got from reading O magazine). I leave him a blank sheet of paper with instructions to write out his likes and dislikes about me. I think this will be a fun exercise to cultivate our relationship. The next morning I go to church and when I return a few hours later, his shit is gone. He has moved out. Guess he didn’t enjoy the exercise. Okay maybe this writing stuff is not so bad after all. That flowed out of me like diarrhea. *Haha, I made another funny.*

Exercise four. Write a page apologizing for something I didn’t do.

I apologize for not bringing my mom RC Cola, Lay’s potato chips, and cigarettes every time she asked me to. At the age of fifty-five she went into a nursing facility with
dementia and by sixty-five she was completely depressed and begging for me to take her home. Yeah I know I could not look after her as she reverted to a child: playing with her food, messing on herself, disappearing from her room in the middle of the night, but still I apologize for not bringing her those little treats she requested when I visited her. Those things brought her so much joy but instead I listened to doctors and dieticians who told me she did not need those things because of her diabetes and high blood pressure. If I were fifty-five and losing my mind I would hope my loved ones did everything in their power to comfort me and bring me joy. Those Lay’s always put a huge smile on her face.

Did I really believe a damn bag of chips was going to kill her or make her situation worse? Hell no! I just didn’t want to give into the spoiled demanding child that dementia turned her into. Was I angry with my mom so I punished her tantrum throwing by cutting her off from her fix? Maybe I was angry because she left me at such a young age. I mean she was in her fifties and full of life. We went on cruises together, bus trips to the Indian casinos and boy could we drink some Bacardi and Coke. In such a short time mom went from dropping chips on the tables to dropping chips in her diaper. What the hell is going on? Do I have mommy issues? How did I not know this until now? I thought I was always there for my mom and she was my best friend but
apparently I may hold some resentment towards her. So far I’m not digging this memoir stuff one bit.

Exercise five. Write a page of a physical characteristic you’re proud to have inherited or passed on.

Easy! I am proud of my big, beautiful smile with my pearly white teeth, dimples, and hazel eyes. I inherited all of these from my father. Pops was never around much but when he was, we would go on outings and people would stop us on the streets to comment on our eyes. In every picture, there I am with my huge Kool-Aid smile so big you can see my gold-capped molars. But my favorite physical attribute and the one that gets the most attention are my dimples. Dimples so deep you can stick an entire knuckle into them; and I know this from experience.

My son did not get my smile or dimples but he did inherit my hazel eyes. Thinking of my handsome son and how far we’ve come from standing in food stamp lines and waiting for government cheese to living in our own home lets me know that I did something right. Damnit I have strayed from the exercise again. The exercise only asks for one physical characteristic but I have many that I am proud of and this makes me smile.

Exercise six. Write of something I had to have.

No brainer. Designer shoes and good wine are my must haves. These things are like crack to me; the more I possess the more I want. I am on a constant mission to obtain more shoes whether I can afford them or not. I am convinced that I cannot live without
them. The feel of a Giuseppe Zanotti sandal encrusted with Swarovski crystals is my ultimate high. The moment I squeeze my freshly pedicured foot into that piece of art I know there is no way I am leaving the store without them. So what I have to divide the purchase amongst three different credit cards. So what the leather is cutting into the flesh of my fluffy foot looking like a can of Pillsbury Grands. I don’t care! All that matters is at the end of the day, these masterpieces end up in my closet.

Once I get the shoes home I celebrate with a bottle of my favorite Malbec. Oh the Malbec. I canceled my gym membership so I could join the wine club. Man, that sounds really crazy and shallow. I complain about my fat and needing to drop some lb’s but I traded the health club for a wine club. Now that gym membership fee pays for one bottle of wine. Oh that makes sense. Yet another poor choice I have made along my journey. Still not feeling the direction of this memoir but I suppose the point is to stay true to yourself and let it all out. Maybe what makes most memoirs so fascinating is that they unlock so many truths into one’s soul and the courage it takes to bear that for others to see and judge. Not feeling great with all this clarity but I admit I am enjoying this process. Who knew I could be so honest with myself.

Exercise seven. Write of a humiliating experience.

My son’s tenth birthday at Great America. We are on the Grizzly rollercoaster and I lower the safety bar down onto my shoulders but it refuses to lock. Two pimple-faced boys dressed like park rangers lean over and put all their body weight onto the bar
pressing it into my stomach rolls. My son looks in horror as kids waiting on the platform begin to point and giggle. Finally, I relieve the pimple-faced park rangers of their duty to secure me in this seat and exit the ride. My son refuses to ride without me and as we walk past the snickering children, not only am I exposed and humiliated for being a fat ass but my son has to endure the shame and my heart breaks in two. But guess what? I have something that will make all that pain and humiliation go away. *Son, how would you like a funnel cake topped with strawberries and whipped cream?* Yep, that was my solution; go from being forced to exit a ride because I’m obese to stuffing my face with fried dough slathered in strawberries and cream and doused with powdered sugar. *Strawberries are fruit.*

Exercise eight. Write about a time when you felt compassion.

I actually felt compassion for my lover’s wife when she found out about us. She was so hurt, broken, and betrayed and truly considered me to be her friend. “I don’t know how it happened, it just did,” I told her. That alone deserved a slap across the face. When she discovered our affair I expected her to call and cuss me out but instead she invited me to meet for tea. Is this some type of ploy, I thought? Will she shoot me, stab me, try to beat me up? No, we are grown women. She would never stoop to the Jerry Springer level.

I agreed to meet with her and to my surprise she greeted me with a hug and asked how I’d been since my indiscretions had been revealed. I did not know how to
respond. How this woman could sit across the table from me and have a cordial conversation was beyond me. So we talked and she calmly told me how my betrayal was more difficult on her than that of her husband. She said she would expect something like this from him but never from me because we are “sisters” and we should always have one another’s backs as women. I was perplexed. Did she not take vows with him over twenty-five years ago? How did I become the one that should have been faithful to her? She sat there and told me how much she missed our girls’ trips to Vegas, spa days and couples vacations. Oh yeah, I did have a fiancé at that time.

Listening to her stirred feelings in me that I could never have imagined. This woman really cared about me. She thought I was a genuine friend to her when all along I was enjoying her husband behind her back. I sat there feeling compassion for her. I sat there speechless as my emotions outran my words. With tear-filled eyes I apologized for all the hurt I caused her but what I could not promise her was that it would never happen again. Well that was tough. Moving on…

Exercise nine. Write of something you have too much of.

Clearly I have too much idle time. Why else would I be sitting here working on this exercise that is dredging up all these difficult memories? *Idle time is the devil’s playground* and I have spent many hours frolicking with Lucifer.
Exercise eight has me thinking about my affair and all the fun and adventure I had being so deceptive right under everyone’s noses. When I was with him, it was the Fourth of July, Halloween, and Christmas all rolled into one. He was my hardcore addiction. I risked everything to be with him. It didn’t matter what people would say about me or how others would feel. As long as I was with him everything and everyone else were non-factors. I miss him. Is that when all my loneliness set in? Is that who abandoned me? Interesting how I never took the time to think about the effect the loss of our relationship had on me.

Now I have forgotten what exercise I’m on and what I’m supposed to be writing about. I scroll up on the screen to redirect my thoughts. Oh that’s right, something I have too much of.

I have too much fat! Yeah I’m going there again. Obviously this is an issue for me and has been for many, many years but rather than deal with it I find other ways to distract and sabotage myself. I use food, wine, retail therapy, and other women’s husbands to keep my mind off what is really bothering me. Do I really want to know what that is? The answer is a resounding HELL NO! I am happy but I am lonely. So what! Who isn’t? Nobody’s life is perfect and in the big scheme of things I live pretty damn well. I may have left some roadkill along the way or maybe I am the roadkill.
Whatever! Either way I am still standing and I am using some of my idle time to complete this exercise and *soul search*. Haha, another funny.

I have finally reached the final exercise, number ten. I hope this is something good.

Exercise ten. Write of when you knew you were in trouble.

Are you kidding me? I have hundreds of pages of when I knew I was in trouble. I have to take a moment and figure out how I am going to sift through all my madness and tell this story. I got it. I will separate it starting with my teen years, then my twenties, and lastly my thirties.

Sitting in the back of a patrol car with my hands cuffed behind my back was a pretty good indication that I was in trouble. I was sixteen years old and my boyfriend was thirty-three. He drove a Porsche and was home all day and *worked* all night. I never questioned him about how he got his money or his fancy apartment; but growing up in my hood, it was no secret how guys like him made their money. So why was I surprised when I was cooking French fries in his apartment and suddenly heard loud footsteps stampeding down the hallway? Next thing I knew the side of my face was kissing the hard, cold, tile as some cop was yelling at me not to move, ramming his knee into my back. My ass got hauled off to juvenile hall and that was all I needed to know to get my ass back in school and stop screwing around.

My twenties were not too troubling. I mean I may have smoked a little weed or tried a line of coke but none of that was really my style. I’d rather spend my money on
shoes and wine coolers. Not much has changed now except my elevated taste when it comes to shoes and wine. Back then it was Leeds and Chandler’s shoe stores as opposed to Bloomies and Nordys; and instead of Bartles and Jaymes I’ve graduated to Darioush and Jessup Cellars. I guess at heart I am still that same little girl with big dreams. But I digress. Back to the exercise chick.

I knew I was in trouble when I walked up to my apartment and saw a piece of paper taped to the front door. The letter read, “Due to delinquent rent payments, you are being ordered to vacate the premises by the end of the month.” That’s when it hit me that I had spent all my rent money on trips to Vegas, hitting designer outlets, dropping a couple hundred dollars on roulette and dining at five star restaurants. Why I never thought of the consequences of my actions is beyond me but hey this is what I do.

I don’t recall getting into too much trouble in my thirties other than sleeping with that woman’s husband; well maybe a couple of women’s husbands but I only got into trouble for one. Why is that funny to me? Anyway I knew I was in trouble when I received his text that read “She found out about us.” After the initial shock, the replays of all the events we attended together as couples, he and her, me and mine filled my head and I became dizzy. I knew I had crossed the line sleeping with a friend’s husband but just like with the rent in my twenties, I never thought about the consequences of my actions. Once the affair came to light many of my friends shied away from me. It was like the Scarlett letter was tattooed on my face like Mike Tyson’s. I took it all in stride though because who are they to judge me? Everyone makes a mistake sometimes.
Am I done? Did I complete all ten exercises? Reading over the memoir I feel a sense of accomplishment. I faced some demons that I had buried in the recesses of my mind but confronting them is not as horrible as one would expect. I think this calls for a celebration. I save my memoir and shutdown my computer. Walking into my kitchen I go into the drawer and grab my corkscrew thinking this bottle has truly been earned.
A Christmas Tale

Christmas Eve, 1974. *The Way You Do the Things You Do* by the Temptations is playing on the record player. The house is decorated with red, green, gold, and silver garland and lights are twinkling everywhere. Even the big wooden spoon and fork that hang on the kitchen wall have garland twisted around them. The aluminum silver Christmas tree stands six feet tall and it’s covered with hot pink, purple, and silver glass ornaments. Mommy has made our house the prettiest on the block.

Mommy and I have been cooking food and baking cakes and pies all day. We have a huge ham, turkey, roast, buttermilk cornbread (daddy’s favorite), dressing, rum cake, sweet potato pie, and my favorite, lemon meringue pie. If daddy finds out how much money mommy spent at the market, he’ll be madder than Uncle Willie when somebody takes his favorite parking space in front of the house.

Uncle Willie is mommy’s brother that lives in our basement. For somebody that doesn’t have a job, he’s always busy and never has time to help out around the house. My daddy says he’s a poor excuse for a man but mommy says he just needs time to get his affairs in order. I’m not sure what affairs are or how long they take to *get in order* but Uncle Willie has been living here since my fifth birthday and I’m about to be nine next year.

The doorbell rings and I race to answer it. It’s mommy’s sister, Auntie Amelia, and her daughter Sheila.

“Hi Auntie Amelia,” I say as I take a stack of gifts from her arms.
“Hey Tee, don’t you look pretty,” she says.

“Hi Tee, you’re going to be so surprised when you see the gift I picked for you,” says Sheila.

A big smile comes over my face as I anticipate the night of fun and laughs we’re about to have. We make our way into the kitchen. Mommy hugs the family and immediately puts them to work. It’s me and Sheila’s job to arrange the gifts under the tree and hang more decorations throughout the house because mommy says you can never have too many decorations.

The house is completely decorated and all the food is done. Mommy goes in to change into her party clothes.

“I wonder what your mom is going to wear this year,” says Sheila.

“Oh wait until you see her dress, I say, it’s the prettiest dress I’ve ever seen. We shopped for hours to find it and the matching shoes and earrings.”

Mommy makes an entrance from her bedroom. She’s wearing a long, purple and orange silky dress that drags the floor and she has on at least 5 inch wooden platform sandals. Between the combination of the sandals and mommy’s big afro, she’s grown from 5’2” to at least 5’9”.

“Mommy, you look so pretty,” I say.

“Auntie Pat, I want to look just like you when I grow up,” says Sheila.

“Girl, where did you find those shoes? Those things are fly!” says Auntie Amelia.

Mommy and Auntie Amelia are talking about their outfits when the doorbell rings.
“I’ll get it!” I yell. Sheila and I race down the hallway to the front door. It’s the Joneses from down the block. They bring more food and gifts and before long the house is full of friends and family.

Uncle Denny, the family deejay, decked out in his red and green plaid bell bottom pants and black leather vest (no shirt of course) puts on a slow song. It’s *Break Up to Make Up* by the Stylistics. I have no idea what this song means at the time but I am sure to find out in the coming months.

The grownups are dancing close together and they look so funny and stupid. Sheila takes my hand and we twirl around mimicking the grownups. Just as the song ends, I hear my Uncle Denny’s voice, “Hey Jimmy, welcome to the party.”

Hearing my daddy’s name, I barrel my way through the crowd, leap into his arms and give him a big hug. I nuzzle my face close to his and inhale his special fragrance cherry tobacco and Pierre Cardin cologne.

“What are you doing awake little lady?” daddy asks.

“I was waiting for you to get home and I’ve been helping mommy with the party,” I answer.

“Well you know Santa Claus can’t come to the house if you’re still awake,” he says.

“Daddy, are you making me go to bed? Can’t I stay up a little longer?”
The truth is I’ve never believed in Santa Claus because we don’t even have a chimney so I know there’s no way he could drop anything off at our house plus my Sheila already told me last year that there is no Santa Claus.

“No Santa Claus!” I remember yelling at her. How could you be so mean to say such a thing?” I asked her. I cried and cried and ran to my daddy and asked him and he said of course there is a Santa Claus just like there is a tooth fairy and an Easter Bunny. Well that confirmed it because earlier that year I had caught my daddy placing a quarter up under my pillow one night when he thought I was asleep and then soon after that I was looking for something in mommy’s night stand and found all my teeth that the tooth fairy had supposedly taken away and replaced with a quarter so that secret was already out of the bag. There was no Santa Claus, Easter Bunny or Tooth Fairy.

Daddy walks me to my room without speaking to mommy or any of the other guests.

“Daddy, did you see how pretty mommy looks in her new dress?”

“I’m very tired little one. I didn’t even notice.”

“Are you going to dance with mommy tonight daddy?”

“I’m going to take a shower and go to bed because I know you will be up bright and early to open gifts.”

“Why do I have to go to bed and Sheila gets to stay up?”

“Good night little one.”

“Good night daddy.”
I lay in my bed staring at the ceiling, listening to my daddy’s footsteps trail away from the door. I can’t believe he didn’t see mommy’s pretty dress. I remember when daddy used to come home and he’d give me a big hug then he’d give mommy a big hug. I haven’t seen daddy give mommy a hug or kiss in a very long time. I’m humming *Break Up to Make Up* in my head. I can’t seem to turn it off. Why do those words stand out to me? Is it because of the fights I hear coming from down the hallway in mommy and daddy’s room when they think I’m asleep? Can they possibly have these fights on purpose so they can kiss and make up later? I am so confused trying to figure this out. It makes no sense to pick a fight with someone just so you can kiss and make up later. Grownups are supposed to be smart and know everything so why in the heck would mommy and daddy do something so stupid?

The sudden sound of glass breaking and people shouting awakens me from my daze. I jump out the bed and streak down the hallway to see what’s going on. People are yelling and cussing. I can’t find mommy or daddy. Two guys are being pulled apart. My uncle is telling everyone they have to leave. My aunt tells me to go back to my room but I don’t move. I’m frozen in place. I can feel myself trembling. My eyes dart across every corner of the room trying to locate mommy and daddy. Where could they be? Why is this happening? We have parties all the time and no one has ever started a fight before. My cousin Sheila grabs my hand and pulls me into the kitchen.

“Did you see what happened to your mom?” she asks.

“No, where is she? I can’t find her or daddy,” I answer.
“I saw them talking in the corner and then your mom started to get loud and I saw your dad take her by her arm and pull her outside on the porch. Uncle Willie saw them and he followed them outside. Next thing I know your dad and Uncle Willie are pushing and shoving one another outside and then for some reason people start fighting inside. It was crazy.”

I’m so upset and I want to tell her to stop lying but I can’t form any words in my mouth. My daddy would never put his hands on mommy.

“Where are they now?” I finally blurt out.

“I don’t know. My mom says they got in the car and drove off,” says Sheila.

The police pull up just as I walk out onto the porch. Everyone is scurrying in all directions. The blending of the police car lights and Christmas lights from the neighborhood houses creates an incredibly festive and chaotic scene.

“Get back in the house Tee. Everything is going to be okay,” says Auntie Amelia.

“Where are mommy and daddy?”

“They went for a drive to talk things out. They’ll be back soon. You go back in the house now you hear,” says Auntie Amelia.

Wading pool tears form in my eyes. It’s Christmas Eve. This can’t be happening. Where are mommy and daddy? Why did they leave without me? I just want these stupid people to go home.

The police talk to Uncle Denny and I hear him tell the policeman that he will look after me and the house until my parents return. I go to daddy’s favorite chair and tuck my
knees under my chin and rock back and forth. I’m so afraid and confused. I can’t get that stupid song out of my head. *Break up to make up, that’s all we do. First you love me then you hate me. That’s a game for fools."

“Are you okay Tee?” asks Uncle Denny.


“Sometimes grownups get upset and lose control but everything is going to be okay once they all have time to simmer down.”

“Where’s Uncle Willie? Sheila said he was fighting Daddy. Sheila said Daddy grabbed mommy’s arm. Did Daddy hurt mommy?”

“No one got hurt Tee. Why don’t you go back to bed and I’ll have your parents wake you when they get home.”

“I don’t wanna go to bed Uncle Denny. I want my Daddy. I want to see mommy,” I whine.

Auntie Amelia comes in and tells Uncle Denny that she and Sheila are going to clean up the broken glass and straighten up around the house before they leave. Uncle Denny walks me down the hall to my room. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling again. I cry so hard that my head begins to hurt. I want my Daddy.

Daylight peeks through my pink lace curtains. Rubbing my eyes, I sit up in bed not realizing I had fallen asleep. I inhale deeply noticing the scent of cherry tobacco floating into my room. I leap to my feet, slide on my slippers and scurry down the
hallway. I walk into the kitchen and find Daddy sitting in his usual chair drinking his usual morning cup of coffee.

“Merry Christmas little lady,” says Daddy.

“Merry Christmas Daddy. Where’s mommy?”

“She’s going to be staying at Aunt Amelia’s for a few nights,” he says.

“But today is Christmas. Mommy can’t miss Christmas.”

“It’s okay. We’ll give her a call later so you can talk to her.”

None of this is making any sense to me. There is no way mommy would miss watching me open my presents.

“Daddy, I’m going to brush my teeth and wash my face before I open my presents. I’ll be right back.”

I tiptoe into the den and dial my Auntie Amelia’s number.

“Hello.”

“Sheila, is that you?”

“Tee, are you okay? Your mom is here at my house.”

“Can I talk to her?”

“She’s still asleep. I heard my mom talking on the phone and she said your mommy is never coming home.”

A lump the size of a boulder forms in my throat as I hear Sheila’s words. I know this cannot be true. Mommy would never leave me and Daddy.

“What else did you hear Sheila?”
“My mom said your mother is not happy and she’s wanted to leave for a long time.”

“I don’t believe you. Stop telling tales Sheila. Why are you being so mean to me?”

“I’m just telling you what I heard Tee. I really don’t think your mom is coming back. I heard her last night and she couldn’t stop crying and she said she hates your dad.”

“I don’t want to hear anymore of this Sheila. Good-bye.”

I hang up the phone and run to my bathroom. Plunging my face into my hands, I sit on the side of the bath tub, crying so hard my head pounds like someone beating drums.

“Is everything okay in there,” asks Daddy.

“I’m okay,” I whimper.

“Are you sure? Unlock the door.”

I open the door and fall into Daddy’s arms.

“Sheila said mommy is never coming back. Sheila said mommy hates you. Sheila said mommy is unhappy.”

Daddy can barely understand me between the sobbing and hysterical crying.

“It’s going to be okay baby girl. Let’s get you cleaned up and go open your gifts.”

We go into the living room and I plop down on the brown shag carpet in front of the Christmas tree. Suddenly the tree and decorations are not as pretty as they once were. Daddy passes me a gift to unwrap. I sit there looking at his extended arms.
“Here baby girl, open this one.”

“Daddy, can I please call mommy? I know she wouldn’t want to miss Christmas.”

“I’m sure your mommy is not even awake yet. How about you just open a few gifts then we’ll save the others for when mommy gets here.”

“Okay Daddy.”

I take the gift from his hands and unwrap it as slowly as possible thinking at any moment mommy will burst through the door. I finally get it unwrapped and it’s a Baby Drowsy doll. Normally this would make me so happy because I’ve wanted this doll since last summer but now I just sit here staring at her in the box dressed in her pink and white polka dot pajamas. She has a sad look on her face that mirrors how I feel. I look up at Daddy and give him a half smile.

“That’s the one you wanted isn’t it?”

“Yes Daddy. It is.”

“Well hold it up so I can take a picture.”

Daddy picks up the camera to take my picture but I can’t even begin to pose and look cheerful. I don’t know if I’m more upset about mommy not being here or the fact that daddy is trying to pretend that everything is okay. Sheila’s words are swirling around in my head. Your mom hates your dad. She’s never coming back. She’s wanted to leave for a long time.

Memories of last night and many nights before flood my brain. Daddy didn’t kiss mommy when he came into the party. He didn’t kiss her the other night when he came
home from work. When was the last time I saw them kiss? When was the last time we all went out to the park?

“Hey baby girl, how about that picture?”

Vision blurred from my tear-filled pupils, I attempt to get up from the floor and make way to my room. Daddy puts out his hand to assist me but I weakly push it away and rise up from the floor. Using the walls as my guide, I slide my palms until I reach my bedroom door opening. I wearily lower myself upon my bed and pull the covers over my head as if to make myself invisible.

Mommy never showed up for Christmas. Auntie Amelia came over and picked up some of mommy’s things. I finally saw mommy on New Year’s Day. By this time I was so confused and upset with her that I didn’t have much to say.

“Hi Tee, how are you?” mommy says.

I look at her with a blank expression on my face. I think to myself, are you serious? How am I? How do you think I am? I haven’t seen you in a week and you won’t talk to me when I call so how do you think I am?

“Fine,” I answer.

“I’m going to stay with Aunt Amelia for a while until your dad and I sort things out. I’m sorry that I missed Christmas. I love you very much and I want you to know this is not your fault.”
I have no idea what she is talking about. Why would I think any of this is my fault? She’s the one that left. She’s the one that was screaming at Daddy. She’s the one that wouldn’t answer when I called to speak to her.

Without saying a word I walk away from my mother and go into my room, shutting the door behind me. Part of me wants her to chase after me but the other part of me just wants her gone.

My mother eventually moves out. I never inquire as to what happened between her and my Daddy. My cousin Sheila calls to tell me about conversations she overhears between her mom and mine but I’m not interested. I don’t know much about anything that caused my family to fall apart but what I do know is that there is no Santa Claus. There is no Tooth Fairy. There is no Easter Bunny. And most importantly grownups don’t break up to make up, they just break up.
Flavors of My Family

The lease to the four-unit flat was in my mom, Ruth’s name. For the first year it was just me, mom, and my little brother Max. Max was ten years younger than me so he was more like the son I never had and hoped to never have. Mom worked a lot so I was stuck babysitting Max on most days. Max wasn’t a bad kid but he was super clingy and very demanding. He was pretty spoiled and I guess that blame can’t be placed on him being the only male in a house full of females.

One day mom came home from work and announced that Aunt Betty and her two daughters, Gia and Shonny, were moving in with us for a short time. Though I didn’t know how the three of them were going to fit into our tiny two bedroom apartment, I was excited that Aunt Betty was moving in. She is the funniest woman I’ve ever known. This woman’s cussing skills should be taught as a university course. She would put any sailor to shame. Aunt Betty stood all of five feet nothing but she took shit from no one. Always about her money, Aunt Betty worked two full-time jobs. I suppose she had to in order to support her gambling addiction. You could find Aunt Betty at bingo and Miss Sally’s gambling hole at least three nights a week.
Last summer, at our family barbecue Aunt Betty was playing dominoes with three of my male cousins. They got into this heated discussion on who was smarter – men or women. Well I knew this debate could go on forever so I copped a squat right next to Aunt Betty. There was no one better at orchestrating an argument than Aunt Betty. Her response to my cousins was, “Mutha-fucka, if you had any kind of sense you would know that women are smarter than men based on the simple fact that God gave us the power to birth life you dumb son-of-a-bitch.” Mutha-fucka was her favorite word. She could use it as a noun, verb, and adjective. The way the word rolled off her tongue was like a rum-soaked melody. She emphasized every single letter in the word stressing how heartfelt she was when directing it at her subject.

Aunt Betty and my mom were polar opposites. Mom rarely ever swore and if she did it was so tame that it had no effect. Mom may cut a damn loose if she dropped something or stubbed her toe but I don’t think I ever heard her direct a curse word at anyone. Cussing and cursing are two totally different things. Aunt Betty could cuss her ass off and she did this often because someone was always pissing her off or getting on her damn nerves so they earned a good cussing out. Mom only cursed every now and again if she was really upset about
something and on a rare occasion she would say *damn it all to hell* if she was frustrated. As different as they were, they had one thing in common and that was bingo. Aunt Betty would roll up in her red Dodge Neon and toot her horn twice. She was a very impatient woman so mom knew when she heard that horn she better hightail it down the stairs because Aunty wasn’t waiting longer than 2.5 minutes for anyone. As she would say, “If a mutha-fucka wanna catch this train, he better light a fire under his ass.”

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Moving day arrived and Aunt Betty showed up with two truckloads of OGs that she hangs out with at Miss Sally’s. Big Al drove a beat up blue pickup truck reminiscent of *Sanford and Son*. In fact Big Al was Fred Sanford, dressed in worn out overalls like it was 1952, looking like he spent his days on a Mississippi farm slopping hogs and feeding chickens. Big Al had about twelve teeth in his mouth and four of them had gold trim like the gold-plating on momma’s good china. His moving crew consisted of his brother Arnold who Aunt Betty described as *special as two retarded jackasses*, Arnold Jr. who thought he was a body builder but the only thing big on him was his chest from throwing up weights in the yard when he was incarcerated for strong armed robbery, and
some other old raggedy looking man they called Scat, that reminded me of a child molester. Something wasn’t right about the way he peered through me.

In the truck behind them were some of Aunt Betty’s bid whist buddies. I used to see them at Miss Sally’s. I liked them because they were big time gamblers and they were always throwing around a dollar here or there to us kids that hungout while our supposed caretakers gambled. Mr. Leon drove the second truck. He was about forty years old but he looked sixty due to his unkempt played-out afro and salt and pepper beard that completely concealed all but a hint of his lips. Mr. Leon was always dressed in stiffly creased jeans and dress shoes, shined up like a new copper penny. His passenger was Old Hayes from Hayes Valley projects down the hill from us. Everyone called him Old Hayes because folks say that he lived in Hayes Valley projects longer than any other tenant. Old Hayes wasn’t old at all. In fact I would venture to guess that he was around my mom’s age which is thirty-seven but Old Hayes lived in those projects his entire life which made him grow up really fast. Aunt Betty said Old Hayes had an old soul like he’s been here before. Old Hayes was really smart and could count cards so he was always accused of cheating at Miss Sally’s.
I stood perplexed on the sidewalk looking at all of Aunt Betty’s junk piled atop these two pickup trucks wondering how this mess was going to fit into our tiny apartment. Max shared a room with momma but because she worked many graveyard shifts I had already become accustomed to him sleeping in the room with me. It’s not the coolest thing to be a senior in high school and sharing a room with your little brother but hey it’s home. Momma was going to sleep on the sofa in the living room which wasn’t even a let out bed. Aunt Betty and her two daughters were going to move into momma’s old room. I sure hope they have bunkbeds because there is no way three beds can fit into that room with momma’s queen-sized bed. Why didn’t Aunt Betty put all this mess into storage, I wondered. They could have moved in with just their clothes since this is only supposed to be for a “short time” according to momma. But I know better than to ask any questions because Aunt Betty made it very clear that children are to be seen but not heard.

One time her super stuck-up and very opinionated thirteen year old daughter Gia thought it wise to speak up for herself when Aunt Betty was telling a department store clerk at Meryvn’s why Gia was not old enough to be wearing a mini skirt. I recall the scene going something like this:
Mervyn’s clerk: But ma’am all the girls her age are wearing mini skirts. It’s the new style for the 80s.

Aunt Betty: That may be the new style for them little fast gals but it ain’t the style for no daughter of mine.

Gia: But momma, I’m a teenager and going to high school after the summer. I should be able to pick my own clothes by now.

And that’s when the assault took place. Aunt Betty lit Gia up like an AK47.

The downpour of tears from Gia’s eyes could fill up a two liter bottle. The salesclerk stood with her mouth gaping open and the hangered mini skirt barely dangling from her fingers. I stood so silent hoping that my presence could not be detected. When all was said and done Gia walked out of Mervyn’s with a few pair of new underwear and socks and that was the last time I went school shopping with Aunt Betty.

Fortunately I have never been the victim of one of Aunt Betty’s drive-bys. I guess I learned from seeing her explode on so many other family members over the years. Now we were all going to be living in the same apartment and I knew I would make it a point to speak only when spoken to as I am not the least bit interested in an Aunt Betty beatdown.

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By sundown, the movers had made two trips to the other side of town to pick-up all of Aunty’s property from her house in Lakeview. Boxes and furniture were everywhere you turned. The majority of her things found a home on the back porch. Much of Aunty’s furniture was in much better condition than ours so
momma moved out our Goodwill Formica top table with three chairs in exchange for Aunty’s oak set with six chairs. We were going to need extra seating for all the folks we had living in this place now.

It was like Christmas when we got around to unpacking Aunty’s food boxes. I never seen so many good cereals: Frosted Flakes, Captain Crunch, Cookie Crisp, and other cereals that have never graced our pantry shelves. Momma was on W.I.C. so we had Kix and Chex, neither of which were pre-sweetened and both tasted like Styrofoam. Aunty brought steaks, shrimp, chicken breasts and piled them in the freezer with our chicken thighs and ground beef. I never knew black folks could eat so good. It was going to be a treat having Aunty here. With everything finally crammed into the apartment, Aunt Betty began cooking up a dinner of smothered pork chops, yams, cabbage, and hot water cornbread for dinner. I thought it was Thanksgiving as the smell of fried pork filled the tiny apartment.

Aunt Betty’s older daughter Shonny came in from work around 9:00 p.m. She works part-time at the beauty shop on Geary where momma and Aunty get their hair done. Shonny is career-oriented. She attends classes at Healds Business College and she plans to be a court stenographer when she graduates. Aunty
says Gia got all the looks and Shonny got all the brains. I never had much of a
relationship with either girls because they spent a lot of time at their dad’s house.
Their dad worked at the post office with my momma and he was fine, like super
fine, like Denzel Washington fine. I remember he dropped them off at our house
one day and I really thought it was Denzel. Aunty still teases me about that ‘til
this day.

Aunty announced that it was time to eat. Me and Max were the first to hit
the kitchen. “Did you wash your nasty hands?” Aunty asks. “Oh yeah,” Max and
I both reply. Heading back towards the kitchen we walk into Gia. “Hey watch
where you’re going,” she says to Max. “If you look up from your pager you
would have seen Max before almost running him down,” I snap back at her.
Instantly I know Miss Thang is going to give us problems so I make up my mind
that I better set some ground rules and let her know this is my house and she is a
guest.

I fix a plate for Max and he digs in immediately as if he was a prisoner on
death row and this was his last supper. I wrap up a plate for momma since she’s
at work and finally I make a plate for myself. The brown-sugar glazed yams
glisten on my plate like a piece of candy, the cabbage still has some crunch to it
unlike that mushy stuff momma cooks, and the pork chops are a beautiful, crispy golden auburn with specks of black pepper and paprika. I almost don’t want to eat it because I want this plate to last for a lifetime. Before I take my first bite Max is all done and asking for more.

“Goddamn, that little mutha-fucka wolfed that down like he ain’t never ate before,” says Aunty.

“That was super good,” Max exclaims. “Can I have some more?”

Aunty waves her hand for Max to go up for seconds just as Miss Thang enters the kitchen.

“Aw momma, did you make more fried food for dinner? You know that’s not healthy. Do you know more than half the black population suffers from hypertension because of all the salty fried food they eat?” Gia protests.

“Gia, don’t start that shit with me. Not tonight girlfriend. You know how tired I am right now and yo mutha-fuckin ass wanna come in here with that bullshit after I done slaved over the goddamn stove to fix you a mutha-fuckin meal. You know what? You ain’t got to eat. As a matter of fact, get up out this kitchen. I ain’t even trying to look at yo silly ass right now,” Aunty contorts with a furrowed brow.
Me and Max sit there stunned looking at Gia as she exits the kitchen. I cannot believe she is dumb enough to criticize her momma’s cooking, but not only that, the foolish girl still talks back to her momma after that Mervyn’s confrontation when we went school shopping last year. Some people never learn their lessons.

I hear the phone ring from the hallway and just as I reach it and put my hand on the receiver, Miss Thang snatches it from me.

“That’s for me,” Gia says looking at me as if I got shit on my face.

I stand there thinking did this heifa really just snatch this phone out my hand? She must think I’m a punk. I snatch the phone from her ear just as she is speaking the words hello.

“Who is this,” I ask into the receiver. The voice on the other end of the line asks “Is Gia there?”

“No one here by that name,” I respond as I slam the phone down back on its base.

“What the hell are you doing?” Gia yells. “Was that Thomas? Why would you take the phone out my hand? I told you the phone was for me.”
I walk away from her in the midst of her tirade not caring one bit about any of the words coming out of her mouth. Next thing I know I am being pulled backwards by my ponytail. I think to myself I know this cannot be prissy Miss Thang starting no shit. Reaching over my shoulder, I grab her arm and flip her ass to the hardwood floor. I knew watching all that WWF with Max would come in handy someday. I pounce on top of Gia, glaring into her stunned eyes and in my best Aunt Betty voice, I say through clenched teeth, “This-the-first-and-only-time-I’m-going-to-tell-you-this-is-my-mutha-fuckin-house-and-you-are-a-guest.-Don’t-you-ever-ever-ever-disrespect-me-in-my-house-like-that-or-you-will-get-dealt-with.”

Gia’s eyes are staring up at me. No words come from her mouth. Max, Shonny, and Aunty rush into the hallway.

“What the hell is going on out here?” Aunty asks. “How the hell you already fighting and we ain’t even been here 24 hours? Gia, what the fuck you done said to piss off Tee? You and yo goddamn mouth always starting shit you can’t back up.”
Gia still lies there speechless with me straddling her as I start to explain the situation. I don’t know if Aunty is about to assault me with her words or whip out a belt and whoop my ass.

“So let me get this straight. The phone rang and you answered it, then Gia snatched it out your hand. Is that right?” Aunty asks.

“Yes Aunty, that’s exactly what happened and I can’t be letting nobody come up in my house treating me like that. She already bumped into Max and looked at him like he was crazy. I gotta set some boundaries Aunty. You know how Gia be acting like she all high and mighty and running things,” I say as if I’m on the stand pleading my case.

“Well let the girl get up Tee. Gia you had no business snatching nothing out of nobody’s hand. If the phone was for you then Tee would have handed it to you. Tee, you did the right thing setting Gia straight because you know if you let a mutha-fucka slide, he will take off figure skating.”

Everyone in the hallway burst into laughter...Even Gia.