

TO CARL

LAURIE J. CANNADY

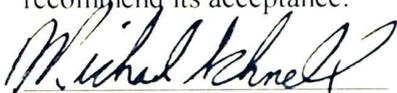
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Barry Kitterman, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and
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Date

April 29, 2002

To Carl

A Creative Thesis
Presented to the
Graduate and Research Council of
Austin Peay State University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Laurie J. Cannady
May 2002

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the person, who
held my hand through every adversity in my life.
As a child, I created this person in my mind and he grew to be
my imaginary father.
As an adult, I know that person, that being, is God.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I sincerely thank Barry Kitterman for helping me pull out years and years of pain, and letting me know that it was okay to hurt and even more okay to speak. I pray that every bruised heart and weary soul has someone like you to lean on. With all of me, I would like to thank my rock and my peace. Chico, you are not only my husband, but you are truly my best friend. Thank you for holding me, when these words made me cry and for congratulating me after I unveiled them for the entire world to see. I'd like to thank my children, Dereck, Tariq, and Sanaa for giving me quiet time when I needed it and going to bed eight o'clock every night. I would like to thank my mother for raising me to know that I am special. Because of you, I can make it through anything. Whether you believe it or not, you led by example. I am you. If you are proud of me, then you have to be proud of yourself. I'd also like to thank Dr. Calovini and Dr. Schnell for taking the time to read my work and show me the error of my grammatical ways, and Bethany Mitchell for listening to me whine through the hard times and patiently talking and walking me through them. Last, but certainly not least, I'd like to thank the Lord for carrying me through my roughest times and giving me the ability to turn very bad things into very good things.

FORWARD

This thesis is based on actual events that occurred in my life. Last year, I reunited with my father after twenty-six years of estrangement. After meeting with him, I felt cheated because I did not reveal much of the pain that I had experienced because of his absence. This thesis is in the format of a letter. It is used in order to give Carl a glimpse of the life that I lived without him.

The absence of a positive male role model sparks a downward spiral in my young life. This thesis highlights several different situations that force me to learn my worth, while making decisions that harm and help me. It shows the pain that constant conflict causes in one's life, but it also shows the strength that grows throughout life's struggles.

To Carl

To Carl with _____?

I watched you getting on the Greyhound bus today starting your twenty-eight hour journey back to Sedley, Virginia. The joy that you experienced in the last week beamed from behind your cheap sunglasses and wrinkled skin. As I left the bus station, I felt an urgency to do something. I couldn't decide whether to turn back into the station, give you a hug, and release the tears that had welled up for the last twenty-six years or run back to my car and drive away as fast as I could. I chose to walk to my car and wait until your bus drove off.

I was a little girl again, watching as you walked away. Back then, I was too innocent and ignorant to know that I would not see you for the next twenty-six years. Now ignorance offers no consolation. As I watched you boarding the bus, I wondered if it would be another twenty-six years before I'd see you again. I doubt it. Your broken life won't give you twenty-six more years and I won't be waiting around to see.

Rationale tells me that I should be happy. I should feel grateful. I was finally able to realize a dream that I have been visualizing all of my life. I got to meet you, my father, Carl Carter, my daddy. My heart beat loudly as the bus drove off. I prayed that the noise would not cause me to scream. I controlled my emotions all week. Now I am disappointed that I did not express myself by letting you know how I really feel. My heart is weighing heavily with the words that I should have brought to life. I hate you and I love you.

Your visit made me realize that it's harder to love a real person than it is a dream. Before, I'd always loved you for no reason at all. You never had to do anything because I was in love with the idea of you. Now that I know you, that idea has vanished. It has been replaced with the dark, corroded skin of the lanky, bent-over figure that stepped off the Greyhound bus and said, "Call me daddy." You invaded my life. You took the place of the light-skinned, dimpled face that smiled like me and used to belong to my imaginary father.

I hope I'm not hurting you with my words. I'm writing this more for me than I am for you. With this letter, I want to relive the past week. I want to give you my truth. I want you to see how much you have hurt me. I want you to know what you did was wrong and you will see who I have become without you. I don't want you to get on the bus with the feeling of completion. I don't want to see you glowing with pride because you have reunited with your long-lost daughter.

I want you to board the bus, heavy with my dark secrets. I want you to feel the same stress and violence that I felt over and over again. You will know what it feels like to be abandoned and left for dead. If you have any compassion, you will feel every tear that I cried for you. You are going to see the real me and not the painted one that you saw this week. I'm not just a happy young woman with a beautiful family. I'm also a scarred little girl searching for protection from the person who was supposed to love her most. That little girl is the me that I want you to see.

First, I would like to clear things up about why and how you left. You won't agree with all that I have to say because the story comes from my mother. You have to admit to some of her accusations. One truth is painfully evident. You left me. My mother told me a lot about you. Some of it was good and some of it bad. Because you weren't there to dispute anything that she said, I believed her side of the story.

You beat her constantly. You gave her black eyes, pulled out her hair, and pushed her down stairs. Since I was only two when you left, I can't remember any of the fights, but I have seen the scars that you left behind. There was great sincerity in her eyes as she told me about the time you choked her until she was unconscious. In her sixth month of pregnancy, you made her lose a baby when you knocked her down the stairs. I guess I should thank you for that. If that baby had been born, I would not be here. I used to believe that baby was me and I was just determined to get here. My mother always said I had your determination.

“When he got drunk, he got the devil in him.”

That's how she described your violence. When you weren't drinking, you were gentle and loving. I think it was noble of you to marry her even though she was pregnant with another man's child. You loved Champ as if he was your own, and you adored me when I was born. She said that you used to stare at me like I would disappear if you looked away. When my Uncle Barry insisted that you start drinking with him, that is when everything changed.

My mother blames him for the beginning of the end of your marriage. I'm not so generous. I blame you and you alone. I can understand that you and my mother had problems and at times those problems exploded into all-out altercations, but I can't

understand why you had to hurt Champ and me. My stomach turns when I think about how you got drunk and teased Champ with his bottle. I can't believe that you beat him when he cried. He was only doing what came natural to him. Was that what you were doing, too?

As I grew up, I tried to rationalize your abusing Champ with the fact that he was not your real son. This worked for me until I found out that you left me in the snow. I've often imagined my one-year-old legs wrapped around my mother's bulging belly. She was pregnant with your second child, Dathan. The snow was cutting our faces as we walked home from the store.

She was bent over, trying to hold Champ's hand while balancing me on her hip. Dangling from her fingers was a small bag with Pet milk inside. Both of us shivered within her grasp. Relief came across her face when she saw you coming toward her. She knew that you would take me and relieve the aching in her back. Her tears warmed her face, as she tried to persuade you to carry me so that she could walk faster and get us out of the snow. She pushed me into your arms, forcing you to take me. Disgust replaced her tears when she looked back and saw you covering my face with my blanket, setting me on the ground, and walking away.

That day is vivid to me. I tried to use your covering my face as a symbol of the love that you felt for me. I have clung to that moment every day of my life. It showed that you loved me. How pitiful is that? I had to use that despicable and disgusting moment for evidence that you loved me. I'm ashamed of myself for this. You should be ashamed, too. I don't understand what could be so important that you had to leave my mother to carry me and Champ home alone. I can't understand why you would leave me

sitting in the snow. What if she hadn't looked back? What would have happened to me? Did you know? Did you care?

I often wondered if you left because you didn't want to fight anymore and you thought that we would be better off without you. That was what I hoped. I believed that you were such a good person on the inside that you sacrificed being with your children so that we could have a better life. Imagine my disappointment when you came here and dispelled that theory by telling me that the reason you left is because your mother told you to. She felt it was better for you not to deal with the fussing and fighting. You surprised me even more when you boasted that for the last twenty-six years you have been partying and drinking. The only reason that you slowed down long enough for me to find you was because you got sick. I believe that you were already sick when you decided to leave.

Even though I'm upset that my fairy tale visions of you turned out to be false, they got me through some rough times in my life. When I felt my lowest, I would think about how much fun we would have when we found each other. You would dote over me and be possessive over my time. I could see you staring at me, afraid that if you looked away, I would disappear again. After all our years of searching, we had finally found each other and it would be good. The only problem with this dream is that you weren't looking for me like I was looking for you, and I didn't find the father in my dreams. I found a broken man torn apart by what he chose to love the most, his women, his drugs, and his liquor.

It would have been nice if all of the adversities in my life could have gone with you. When you left, my mother felt true peace. There was no arguing, no fighting, and none of your stealing money in order to support your alcoholism. We had the means to get everything we needed once you left. My mother explained that the State was more willing to help a woman with three kids when she was not with her husband. It had a problem with feeding and clothing grown men.

When we didn't have money, we drank Pet evaporated milk instead of formula. It's a sick joke that we laugh about now, but it was hard for my mother to feed us something that she knew wasn't healthy. Sometimes, she was so hungry that her nursing breasts were unable to make milk to satisfy me. I would suckle on her dry nipples in order to calm my cries. After you left, we finally got some assistance.

Your leaving also opened the door for my mother to find another love. This became important to her. I understand why. I, too, would be starving for affection after being involved in the type of relationship you two had. Peewee whetted her appetite.

My mother told me that you walked in on her with Peewee after you two had been apart for six months. You were angry about him being there. You went into my bedroom and sat with Champ, Dathan, and me for an hour. It surprised her that you didn't get violent with her or Peewee. She admired that you put all of your attention into us children that day. She had no idea that would be the last time that we would see you.

My mother could see that you were angry at Peewee's presence, but you controlled yourself. I often thought that you were angry because you felt that something wasn't right with that man. I thought that you could sense that something horrible would

come out of him being there with your kids. That thought makes me angry. You knew that something wasn't right and yet you left us there. You left me at his mercy.

I might as well be as blunt as possible, so as to save myself from any embarrassment and no longer delay your shame. He molested me. That's the nice word that they use when an adult rapes a child. I have no idea how long it went on. I only know that my first real memory is of him lying on top of my stiff body as I looked down at his penis going in and out of me. I didn't know that it was a penis then. I didn't even know what he was doing. All I know was that he told me if I told my mother, he would kill her.

He hurt me badly. For all I know, he might have been doing it even before you left. Maybe that's why you were so angry. You might have felt me. Or maybe it was just that you were jealous that another man was with your woman and your thoughts were only with me as I served as an excuse for you to see my mother again. I don't know and I really don't care. What I do know and care about is that you weren't there to save me.

I became the other woman in my mother's bed. It was a secret that he and I would share for two years. Two years that saw me cry out in pain, two years that saw me smile at the attention he gave me. This was attention that you were supposed to give. Your needed affection was replaced with his groping hands and erect penis. He was my father. He was the father of my fears. He was the father of my body. I silently cried out. My cries were not just to you but to anyone who could deliver me from the filth that

surrounded me and lay on my body every time my mother went to the store, to work, or to sleep.

You should have been there for me to tell you what was happening. You should have been there to teach me what my mother had not. You should have taught me that no one should ever touch me there. You should have told me that you would protect me so that I could have protected myself from that thief. I used to cry in between the times that I was acting as if everything was okay. I was a good actress. In the daytime, I was my mother's good little girl and at night, I was all that he needed. Who was what I needed for me?

Don't think that I don't place some blame on my mother. She should have known what was going on. She was there with me and she should have seen me bleeding either in my private area or in my heart. No, I don't make her blameless. But I blame you more, because you were supposed to pick up where she left off. You were supposed to be the ears when she couldn't hear. You were supposed to be the eyes when she couldn't see. We were supposed to have intimate talks between father and daughter in which I could reveal to you my darkest secrets. Then I could have revealed this to you. You were supposed to be my Superman, my savior, and my daddy. But you were none of those things. I had to do it on my own. I had to keep my secret between him and me.

Those years were just a blur. On the outside he was the perfect man for my mother. He kissed her every chance he got. He constantly held her and told her how much she meant to him. Behind closed doors, he held me the way that he held her, without the words of love. They were replaced by his moans and groans as he dirtied me with his sweat and as his warm breathing caressed my hair. What was worse than his

raping my body was what he did to my mind. By the time our meetings ended, he didn't have to threaten me anymore. He didn't have to tell me that he would kill my mother. I just did what he wanted me to because I was supposed to and part of me liked it. I didn't like the sexual part of it, but I liked the attention. I liked being held in a way that I felt protected. I was only six years old and I already knew how to accept abuse as a part of love. I was so smart and yet so ignorant.

The only thing that saved me from his continuous abuse was his greed. Isn't it ironic? Neither my mother nor I was enough to quell his sickness. He raped a young girl from our neighborhood. I remember lying on the living room floor on the mattress we slept on and seeing the red and blue lights flickering on the wall. The cops were questioning my mother about where she thought he might be. He was on the lam. As he ran from the cops, he ran from us. I remember my mother crying out and screaming that it couldn't have been him and that he wouldn't do anything like that. If she only knew that he could do that and more, she might not have been crying so hard. It was at that moment that I wanted you there the most. I wanted you to be there to hold her as she cried out in pain at the loss of him. I wanted you to replace that ache in her heart so that she wouldn't feel so bad. I knew her pains and I knew her fears. What would we do now for the love and affection that we craved? Who would hold us now that we were alone again? Maybe you? Maybe not.

I listened to my mother's cries for two days. At times I cried with her, showing that I understood. As time passed, she got better. The police apprehended him and I was no more in danger of his love. According to what you told me, you were also getting arrested around this time for stabbing your second wife and her lover.

After his arrest, things got better. My mother had already added two new children to our three. That didn't change things much around the house, but it changed things for me. The new babies, Mary and Thomas, became the new objects of my love. I gave them hugs and kisses every time I thought about it. I held them tightly to let them know how much I loved them. It replaced what I had been so quick to accept as love from Peewee. The only difference is that it felt good all the time. I didn't have to give up anything physical. I just had to give my heart and that was therapeutic, even to a six-year-old. I needed that love from Thomas and Mary because I still hadn't told anyone what had happened to me. It wasn't until I was eight years old that I revealed my secret.

I was in Mrs. Roundtree's second-grade class. We had a special speaker come in that day. She was the tallest woman that I had ever seen in my life. Her brown, stringy hair lay over her shoulders. She had a pale white face that calmed me. I sat in the front row of class and listened as she showed us, on a drawing of a little girl, the no-no places on our bodies.

"No one should touch you where you don't feel comfortable. If anyone does, you need to tell a grownup as soon as possible."

She told us how bad it was for someone to do this and it made me feel guilty. I tried not to look in her face as she explained that we should not keep this secret and that it was wrong. I began to feel at ease when she said that if this happened to us, it wasn't our fault, but that we needed to tell someone no matter how long ago it had happened. I was excited. I could not wait for school to be over. I hurried through my spelling test and Social Studies lesson, wishing that I was home telling my mother my secret. After

school. I rushed home, ready to tell my mother. She was sitting in front of the stove straightening her hair.

The sun shined in from the screen door. She sat at the kitchen table with the mirror propped up on her legs. A blue comb hung in her hair as she guided the hot comb from her scalp to her ends.

“Mommy, is Peewee still in jail” I asked.

“Yes.”

“How long will he be there?”

“A long time, baby.”

“But how long?” I asked again.

“Eight years.”

I did the math in my head. That would be long enough for him to forget about me.

“Peewee used to do the nasty to me.”

She slammed the straightening comb down on the flames. The stovetop shook violently. She began to loudly curse. I walked into the bathroom and closed the door. I sat on the tub with a sick smile on my face. I could not see my face but it didn't feel like a real smile. It felt like sickness being released. It felt like the face that I used to put on every day two years before.

She came into the bathroom and sat on the tub beside me. She asked me what had happened. I told her how he used to take me in the room and say that he would kill her if I told. I told her when she'd go to work he'd take me into her room. I saw her heart break all over again. This was new to me because there was no man involved in

this pain. I wanted to hold her and tell her it would be okay, but I couldn't. I just sat there with that stupid smile, hating myself for hurting her, but loving the fact that she cared.

I wish that the pain that Peewee had caused had ended there. Two months later, I found a letter that he had written to my mother. He was denying that he had ever molested me. I felt betrayed and scared because he knew that I had told. I was upset because I thought that she believed me and then I found that she needed him to corroborate my story. He called me a liar and repeatedly expressed his love for her. I was mortified. With his words, he was abusing me again.

It wasn't until many years later that I had enough courage to ask her about the letter. I needed courage because I was afraid of the answer that I would get. She told me that she had believed me. It was shock that had prompted her to write and question him about his actions. I accept that answer now, but when I was eight, it hurt to think that she didn't believe me.

After Peewee's arrest, we moved a lot. Moving didn't affect me much. We were together and we were happy, minus the nights when food ran out and we as a family collectively "fasted." We lived with Aunt Della and her four kids for five months. Then, we stayed with Uncle Barry for three months. When I was nine, we settled in Academy Park. I don't know why it was called that. It was every bit of what seemed to be an academy, but it was nothing like a park. All of the one-story, white houses lined along the street in uniformity. The houses looked so much alike that a veteran resident could

easily get lost in the maze. The housing authority got creative when they made some badly needed renovations on the apartments. They decided to paint them different colors. The houses would either be pale green, baby blue, or soft yellow. My favorite color was green and to my delight our house was to be painted green. We moved before it was painted. Whenever my mother and I drove past the house, my regret was renewed because I did not live in the green house.

When we left Academy Park, it was supposed to be a joyous occasion. My mother was getting remarried. The lucky man's name was Mr. Todd. He was the darkest man I'd ever seen in my life. His skin looked like the icing off of a dark chocolate cake. He had red eyes and they always looked watery. He was a weightlifter and his muscles looked like massive knots protruding from his shirt. He'd been lifting weights for the six years that he spent in prison for killing a man.

He and my mother married. They had a pretty wedding. She wore a black dress with white flowers and he wore a brown suit. During their wedding, I thought about the day you and my mother married. She wore a yellow dress that her mother had lent her and Champ had just begun to grow in her belly. My grandmother and Aunt Della were the only ones who came to the wedding. You two were excited to be starting your lives together. My grandmother walked up to you both and pulled you close to her.

“You make a handsome couple. You will be happy.”

She was wrong.

Even though my mother was as beautiful at her second wedding as she was at her first, the new husband and wife did not make a handsome couple. My mother seemed happy and that was all that mattered to me.

Mr. Todd moved us out of Academy Park into a beautiful brick house on Helms Drive. It had the thickest blue carpet I had ever seen. In the kitchen, there was a dishwasher and a gigantic brown refrigerator with the freezer on the bottom. The windows were high up and that made me feel secure. We had navy-blue, suede furniture that was soft to sleep on. I'd sit on it and let it envelop my tiny body. I was happy and we always had food. He worked and my mother worked. As far as I knew, they were happy. Then something changed.

He started coming home later and thanks to my eavesdropping skills, I learned that he was bleeding from the rectum. I'm not sure what he was into, but it all boiled down to the fact that he was using drugs and a lot of them. I would hear my mother, to no avail, pleading with him about his habit. As his addiction grew worse, so did his behavior. He became violent. That violence spilled over to my mother.

He began to fight my mother. He would push her into their bedroom and we kids would stand outside of the door listening to her screams. We wanted to help, but we didn't know how. The police often visited our home. The cops would give her the option of going to a shelter or staying at the house. She always opted to stay. By the end of the night, I could hear them making love and whispering apologies. In the morning, they'd rise bruised, but renewed. I learned to forgive him like my mother did and we continued building our happy home.

But it wasn't long before the happiness became non-existent. His drug use caused him to lose his job. That meant he had more time to spend with us kids. In the beginning, I enjoyed him telling us stories and playing games with us. This changed when I realized he wanted to spend more than time with me.

When I was ten, all of us kids were playing in the living room. Mr. Todd was in our bedroom watching television. He called me into the room and told me to close the door. He was lying on the bottom bunk of our bunk bed.

“Close the door and get in the closet,” he said. He stared at the top bunk. I went to the closet and saw a blanket and pillow on the floor. I turned to him with my mouth hanging open. My eyes were as wide as I could open them. He looked at me and saw that I knew what he was about to do. His attitude quickly changed.

“I need you to adjust the color on the television for me,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

There was a knock at the door. Mary’s voice floated in.

“Come back out and play, Laurie.”

She knew what was about to happen, too.

He looked at me. The anger grew on his face.

“Go,” he ordered. He had found that I wouldn’t be an easy prey.

Without having to say a word, I stopped something terrible from happening. I felt liberated. I finally had control. I didn’t have to wait for you to rescue me. I rescued myself.

After that episode, he was always upset with me. He beat me every chance he got. If I didn’t jump as soon as he barked an order, he gave me a whipping. I often imagined you bursting into our house during one of my beatings and pummeling him to submission. That never happened, so I endured his discipline and thanked God it wasn’t worse. He put me under restriction every other day. I felt that punishment was a small price to pay, considering what he could have done to me. I would rather have been

beaten and punished every day of the week than to have him enter me in a way that would scar me forever again.

Mr. Todd also made me fear for my family's safety. He began to use more drugs and became more erratic. He stole from my mother to support his habit. Soon after, we were again wanting for the bare necessities. Money was limited and food was scarce. Things were quickly getting worse.

One day he announced that we were going to visit his sister. When we arrived his nephew, Mike, was there with his fiancé. Her name was Carmen. We children played outside while they were in the house playing cards and drinking. Carmen was the prettiest girl that I'd ever seen. She had caramel skin. Her hair was long and wavy and she smiled every time she looked at me. She had a cast on her leg. Regardless of the cast, she was still pretty. I understood why her fiancé wanted to marry her. She was beautiful on the outside and the inside. I could tell all of this within minutes of meeting her. I remember her letting us look at my favorite music group, New Edition, on *Soul Train*. They were singing the song "Cool It Now." She laughed at us as we breakdanced on the porch. She rewarded us with soda and chips.

A week later, I was listening to the radio while ironing my clothes for school. A newsman came on the radio.

"Last night on Dekalb Road, Carmen Ratcliffe was found slain in her home."

My mother gasped. It was Mr. Todd's nephew's fiancé. I was sad that someone so beautiful was gone from the world. After the announcement, the song "Cool It Now" came on the radio.

Mr. Todd came home later that day and the cops came to our house. They wanted to question him about the murder. He hadn't been home that night. My mother didn't lie and say that he had. He did have an alibi though. A local woman, who was also hooked on drugs, said that he was with her. After the cops left, my mother asked him about Carmen. He denied having any thing to do with the murder. There were several things that made my mother believe that he was lying.

When he came home, there was blood on his clothes. He had scratches on his arms and neck. When we had visited his sister's, my mother had seen that he was attracted to Carmen. She asked him over and over again but he continued to deny any involvement in the crime.

The cops established that the killer was someone that Carmen knew. She had willingly let the culprit in the house. She and the killer shared drinks before he raped and strangled her with a coat hanger. The cops never charged anyone with the crime and my mother never told what she knew. She feared him and did not want to believe that she had someone like him around her children. Eventually, he left the house. He took the pretty furniture and the food with him. He sold it all for drugs. Soon after, we had to move out of the beautiful house with the thick blue carpet.

Six years later, Mr. Todd was shot in the chest by a bootlegger he had robbed. My mother took us to the funeral home to see him. His hair was grayer than I remembered. His face was bloated and his skin looked like a dark leather coat. I kept expecting his chest to fall and rise or his eyes to pop open and give me the angry stare that had covered his face when he looked at me. My mother stood next to me holding my hand. She showed no emotion. She looked at him as if she'd never seen him before. In

the back of my mind, I thought that he had gotten what he deserved. I believed that Carmen was happy now that he was no longer living. I felt vindicated for her and myself.

After we left the house on Helms Drive, we moved to Constitution Avenue, and I found peace that I'd never known before. We drove up to the new house with new hopes. We were alone again. It was just the five of us with our mother. We would have her to ourselves.

The little yellow house looked like a square sun sitting in the middle of a forest of brown trees. We ran up the stairs, falling over each other, trying to be the first to claim the best corner in the one bedroom that we five would share. There was a window on both sides of the room. The sunlight made it look like we were all standing outside of the house. I got the spot next to the window that stared out to the highway and Champ got the window that stared into the neighbor's house. By process of elimination, and the fact that Mary and I were the only girls, Mary joined me in my bed. Dathan and Thomas were stuck in the middle of the room.

The house was tiny, but it felt like a mansion to us. The carpet was a sick brown that resembled the bark of a tree. It had long been trampled from the point of fluffiness that would have distinguished it as a new carpet. My mother's room was on the other side of the house and was as big as our room. The spacious living room separated our room from our mother's. All five of us could have lain in a straight line across the floor and we still wouldn't have reached her room. We had no furniture, except for the beds that we got from the Salvation Army. They were all full-sized beds. Once they were

placed in our bedroom, they made the room seem crowded. The living room remained empty except for the antique stereo that my grandmother had left my mother. It stretched across the mantelpiece. It covered the fake fireplace that had obviously been built to make the room look rich. It worked.

The walls were a pale yellow that made the entire house radiate sunshine even when it was night. They made me think of gold. They were like a pale weathered gold that had lost its luster due to strenuous wear and tear. This house felt to me like an old soul waiting to be revived by our life and laughter. We had a lot of work to do.

Our first task to make this house home was to paint it. I didn't want to paint. I loved the rugged look of the yellow paint waking me to its silent rays. I argued to keep the yellow, but I was outvoted four to two. Mary voted with me. We settled on a soft blue that made the sun look like a clear blue sky. With the bark-colored rug, the contrast was too much for me to bear. The blueness always lent to the fear that the blue sky would gray over as soon as the opportunity came.

After painting the sun blue, we worked on the bathroom. It was the most peculiar bathroom I'd ever seen. The toilet sat inside a square wall that had been built to offer privacy to someone using the toilet while someone else was taking a bath. The bathtub was an old-fashioned one that sat up on four feet that looked like lion paws. It sat diagonally in the small corner. In the diagonal space between the tub and the wall sat a washing machine. It was an old-fashioned wringer washer. When the clothes finished washing, they had to be taken out of the machine and run through the wringer. A hose ran from inside the washer into the tub. This made it impossible for us to take baths. We had to stand up in the tub to wash ourselves.

My mother bought baby blue rugs to cover the yellow, cracked-tile floor. She put up curtains to match the rugs and to block out prying neighbors. We scrubbed the tub and sink until we could see our reflection in both. This room stayed yellow. There would be no painting in the bathroom and I relished that fact. It would be the place that I could enjoy the sun greeting me at every angle. We couldn't move the washing machine. It became a permanent fixture in the bathroom. We kids played with it running clothes, food and toys through the wringer, making toy and clothes soup.

The yellow house was far from perfect but it was the happiest time that I remember. It was fun with all of us sleeping in the same room. Some nights we'd get in the same bed and have a feet fight. It would be the girls against the boys. Our heels would become weapons. We would stab each other's legs with heels and scratch each other with our naturally manicured toes. Occasionally, one of us would connect, sending sharp pains up the thighs of the victim and then we'd all erupt in laughter.

We'd wake in the morning to 1350 AM playing Run DMC's "My Adidas" and jump around beat-boxing and break-dancing along with my mother singing the chorus. We were closer than we'd ever been before. On the weekends, my mother bundled us up and walked us downtown to the waterfront. She bought us a 7-11 Slurpee and two McDonald's cheeseburgers. We ran up and down the waterfront, hanging on the rails and looking out at the Norfolk Waterside with all of its bright lights. We never had enough money to take the ferry to Norfolk Waterside, but it was nice to imagine what the people with money were doing or buying over there. I used to wonder if you were there, buying something for me.

After she let us run ourselves to the point of exhaustion, we began our two-mile walk back to the sun with the sky on the inside. We only lived in that house for two months. I never suspected that my mother had ever wanted to leave it.

One chilly morning, while I was getting dressed for school, my mother announced that she had good news. We were moving to Lincoln Park. It was a Project on the other side of town. The rent would be low and we wouldn't have to pay utilities. She was excited.

"It has four bedrooms, a shower, and air conditioning," she said.

Everyone was jumping around in a circle, taking turns hugging her. I went into the bathroom and closed the door. I didn't understand why they wanted to leave the best house we ever had. I wanted to stay, but by the celebration going on in the other room, I knew that I was outvoted. I sat in the middle of the floor and let the sunrays emanating from the walls overcome me for the last time.

Later that day, we loaded Uncle Barry's truck with our belongings and drove away from the yellow house. I saw the house disappear behind the horizon. It looked like the sun was setting for the last time.

When we drove into the brick community, Lincoln Park looked like nothing but trouble. The contrast between those ugly brick buildings and my beautiful sun house brought about an ache in my heart. The narrow street leading to 21 Lexington Drive was littered with people standing on corners. As we drove to the new house, three boys ran alongside the truck. They looked dirty, wearing no shoes and frayed shorts that used to

be pants. They didn't even let us get off of the truck before they were asking Thomas and Dathan if they wanted to play. Since they were only ten and seven at the time, my mother decided she could do without their help and let them play. Mary joined them. My mother and uncle began to unload the truck. Moving our things into the house was easy. Champ helped my mother and uncle with the mattresses while I carried the bed frames. All we had left were our clothes. The neighbors watched us as we moved. I was embarrassed because we had no furniture. They knew that all we had was the clothes on our backs and beds to sleep in. I was embarrassed for my family and I hated my mother for moving us to such an unwelcoming place. The people sat on their porches staring at us as if we were aliens from another planet. Except for the kids playing with my brothers and sister, no one said hello or offered a smile. They looked at us as if we didn't belong there. I agreed with them. I didn't believe that we belonged there either.

We moved the beds into the bedrooms. My mother took the room on the first floor and put all of us kids upstairs. Since we only had three beds, Champ had to stay in the room with Dathan and Tom-Tom. Mary and I got the room in the front of the house and the boys got the bigger room in the back. When I looked out of my window, all I could see were the leaves from the gigantic tree planted in front of our house. There was no sun that leaked into my room. The walls of the house were concrete, painted over with an eggshell colored paint. There were non-uniform slabs chiseled into the wall that were supposed to make it look decorative. I imagined the wall being yellow and wanted to vomit. I lay on my mattress and looked up at the cement ceiling. With the shadowy light flowing in from the window, the cement walls and cold cafeteria-like floors, it was a prison. I didn't know where to begin on my journey to break out.

Our first night in Lincoln Park began with my mother cooking us a fried shrimp and potato log dinner. It was the best dinner we'd had since I could remember. It was supposed to be a symbol of the fact that things were better. My brothers and sister were fooled. I was not. I remember swallowing the big potatoes and having to force them past the lump in my throat. We got ready for bed after dinner. My mother instructed all of us to say our prayers before we went to bed and thank the Lord for our new house. I couldn't bring myself to do that. I prayed that I could enjoy the new house like everyone else. I lay in the bed beside Mary, noticing how big the room felt without my brothers in it. I listened to Mary's calm breathing and waited for sleep to capture me as it had done her. Instead, I heard three loud pops. I sat up in the bed, almost waking Mary from her slumber. There followed screeching tires and two more pops. I jumped up to the window, trying to find the noise. I heard my mother running up the stairs to my room.

"Get away from that window" she yelled.

I flopped backwards onto the bed. Champ came into the room.

"Ma, what was that?" he asked.

"You lay down, too," she ordered, "Somebody's shooting." She whispered those last words.

She slowly stuck her head out of the window. I began to hear sirens. It sounded like thousands of them. As they got louder I sat up on my elbows.

"Did anybody get shot, Ma?" I asked.

I don't know why I asked her that. I guess it's because kids think that their parents know everything. She kept looking out of the window.

"I can't see anything. The tree is in the way," she said.

She and Champ went into the empty room. I followed them and we three looked out of the window. The EMTs were working on somebody.

I heard some guy yell. "It's Jermaine. He's shot in the head."

Then I heard a woman scream.

We stood in the window and watched people chaotically running around the dark figure on the ground. The scene was lit by a dim streetlight. I couldn't see the faces of the people. Everything was dark. I imagined Jermaine lying on the ground, bleeding from his head, knowing that he was dying. I didn't want him to die without a face, so I gave him one. He was brown-skinned with dark mysterious eyes and wavy hair. He was someone I would have dated if I had been allowed to date. He had a dimple on the tip of his mouth that only showed if he smiled shyly. That was Jermaine to me.

I don't know what happened to him. My brother later said that he'd stolen somebody's drug money and that was why he had been shot. Rumors traveled through the Park that he had died, but there was always a part of me that hoped he had pulled through.

Jermaine's shooting marked our first night in Lincoln Park. The image of my mother looking out the window, crying as she asked God, "What have I brought my children to?" will never leave my mind.

That violent night was just an appetizer for what was to come. Literally every weekend there was a fight, a shooting, or a fight that turned into a shooting. There was the murder of Ponytail, a Jamaican drug dealer who was invading the New York Boys' "territory." There was the shooting of Keyone, a fourteen-year-old friend of my sister, who didn't heed my warnings to stop selling drugs. There was the shooting between the

New York Boys and the Portsmouth Boys that left a three-year-old girl dead. There was the early morning killing of Victor, who was shot while trying to hide under a car. He died at our bus stop.

The morning he was killed, all of the kids who rode my bus lined up at the curb. A puddle of his blood ran down the curb to the storm sewer. We stared at the remnants of Victor as if they were exhibits in a museum. It wasn't shocking or gruesome to us anymore. It was interesting.

There were other shootings in which someone was maimed but not murdered. Those were the ones that we thanked God for.

Lincoln Park was declared a war zone. Every night, there was something about it on the news. We didn't walk in front of the windows after dark. We were trained to drop the moment someone yelled "gun" or the music of gunshots played their tune. No one was safe and nothing was promised. It didn't matter who you knew or who you were. You could be there today and dead tomorrow. Living in Lincoln Park was like playing Russian roulette; sooner or later the violence was going to hit you.

One day my mother woke up and said that we would be spring-cleaning. She made all of us clean our rooms. We hated it but we loved that the house was so clean. The bathrooms smelled of Pine Sol. All of the beds were neatly made. Through the house floated the flowery smell of Pledge. It was beginning to feel like home. We opened all of the windows and let the sun shine through the house. It ricocheted off of the concrete walls. I breathed the clean air in my lungs and closed my eyes. I pictured myself in the yellow house again and I felt good. That feeling didn't last long.

That night a flashlight, shining in my face, woke me. I yelled out for my mother. The man with the flashlight told me that my mother had fallen down the stairs and broken her foot. He was a police officer. He got all five of us together and took us to our next-door neighbor's house. I went back to sleep listening to Mrs. Delois talking to Champ. I couldn't understand how my mother had fallen down the stairs and broken her foot in the middle of the night. That question remained in my head as I went back to sleep. The next morning Mrs. Delois sent us home to get ready for school.

A friend of my mother's was sitting on her bed. My mom was taking a shower upstairs. I couldn't understand how she was able to stand in the shower alone with a broken foot. I also wondered how she could take a shower with a cast on. The shower cut off and she came out of the bathroom cloaked in a big towel. I watched her feet as she walked down the stairs. There was no cast and she was walking fine. I wanted to know how her foot had gotten better over night. She walked past my siblings and me and sat on her bed. She was sobbing uncontrollably. We made a circle of five around her and asked what happened. She just kept asking who left the door unlocked last night. She asked that over and over again.

"Somebody came in and raped me last night," she finally shouted.

My world began to spin around. I cried. All of us cried. I wanted to hit something. I wanted to hit somebody. How could someone come into our home and take my mother's body? The thought of somebody walking around our house, checking to see if anyone was awake, finding my mother alone in her room, angered me. I wanted to murder someone. They could have killed her. They could have killed us. It hurt so

much that I can't describe the pain without my eyes filling with tears. A feeling of vulnerability and instability never left that house after that day.

That night, my mother moved her bed upstairs with us kids. She cried for three days straight. She made us clean the house again. There were no usual moans about cleaning. Nobody said anything, because we all knew why we needed to clean. Champ and I tried to scrub the police officer's fingerprint dust off of the doors, walls and windows. It was no use. It wouldn't come off. It served as a constant reminder of that night.

Everybody in the Park knew what had happened. They probably knew who did it. When I walked to the bus stop that morning, the other kids stared at me and whispered. I knew what they were saying. "Her mother was raped last night." They never found the man. The only information that my mother could give the police was that he was a lanky man and the words he kept saying.

"This was the only way that I could have you. I'm sorry."

After my mother's rape, I began to seclude myself. I could not stand any more of the violence. I filled my days with gruesome books that made my complicated life seem trivial. I read any Stephen King book that I could find. *The Stand* and *Pet Cemetery* demanded all of my attention. Short stories, like "The Long Walk" and "The Body," took me out of the confines of Lincoln Park. I would rush home from school each day, only to immerse myself into my reading. Even though the books were filled with the same horror and gore that I saw each day, I found solace in them.

When I wasn't consumed with reading, I would lie in bed and imagine you and I reuniting. I created several scenarios in which we would meet. In one, I was an

actress/dancer and you were a rich theater owner, who was looking for the perfect woman to play the lead in one of your productions. You were immediately drawn to me, and demanded that I play the part. Not long after our meeting, we talked and eventually realize that I was your long-lost daughter.

In another scenario, I was an undercover FBI agent. I was supposed to be investigating you and a young man named Dante for being major drug distributors on the East Coast. The FBI found that you were my father and helped us to reunite so that I could bust you. I blew the operation, because I fell in love with Dante and I began to love you. I finally told you of the sting and allowed you to clean up your drug activity. I had to report back to the FBI empty handed and they fired me. Afterwards, I married Dante and you brought me into your home and heart. We lived happily ever after.

These dreams carried me through my lowest moments. They allowed me to escape the sound of gunshots and junkies screaming for their medicine. Each time I concocted a scenario in my mind, I was given another chance, to see you, know you and love you. I never gave up the hope that we would be together again. It didn't matter how it happened. It just mattered that it did.

With all of the bad things that happened in Lincoln Park, there were still some good times. Every Christmas, we kids would sing the Temptations' version of "Silent Night, Holy Night" to my mother. Even though we never had enough money to get gifts, we always had a delicious Christmas dinner. I remember playing the card game "Go Fish" with my brothers and sister in order to decide who would have to clean the kitchen. There were also incidents that are funny now, but they weren't back then.

We were always without money. There was rarely enough money to buy food. My mother worked at the Woolworth. We lived from check to check. Each Friday, we would run home from school excited that Mom was getting paid and we would be able to buy some food. Since we were in high school, Champ and I were always the first ones home. We ran off of the bus to the house. My mother was sitting on the porch waiting for us.

“Ma, how much did you get paid?” he asked.

Before she could answer, I added to the inquiry.

“Can we go to Murry’s Steakhouse and get some of those pizzas?” I asked.

She stared at the two of us with a distressed look on her face.

“I only got paid a dime,” she said.

Champ and I looked at each other, stunned.

“You’re joking. Right, Ma?” Champ asked.

She wasn’t joking. She pulled out the check with the ten cents printed out on the dollars line.

“What happened Ma?” I asked.

She explained that she had charged sheets, curtains, and clothes on her account at the store. She hadn’t realized that she had spent so much. We looked at her with disappointment in our eyes, but with understanding. She’d bought those things for us. The curtains made the house look better and we needed sheets for our beds. The clothes were a necessity that we had oftentimes forgone. She didn’t waste the money. She just misused it. With all of our understanding, we would have traded those clothes and sheets for a nice big cheeseburger. One by one, Dathan, Mary, and Thomas came home with the

look of excitement mixed with hunger, only to be saddened by the realization that we would not have money or food until the next week. Like Champ and me, all of them needed to see the ten-cent check in order to believe my mother's story.

That night, she called my Uncle Barry and he brought some food from his refrigerator. Half-full jars of jelly and peanut butter, dried half-eaten meatloaf and a loaf of bread, sustained us for that week. My mother didn't eat so that we could have more food. She told us that she was fasting. She kept the ten-cent check as a reminder of her blunder. She never charged anything at the store again. I guess she didn't want to see five disappointed faces staring at her again, silently crying, "I'm hungry. Feed me."

After Mom's rape, she sheltered Mary and me. We weren't allowed to date or even talk to boys. If she caught one of us talking to a guy, she wouldn't hesitate to walk outside and hit us up side the head. Since I couldn't stay away from boys, I received a lot of slaps. When I turned fifteen, she finally agreed to let me have a boyfriend. The condition was that I couldn't date anyone from Lincoln Park or any other project. That made my social life difficult since most of the kids at my school lived in the projects and everyone that I wanted to date lived in Lincoln Park.

For four months after I was allowed to date, I remained dateless, until I met Sanford. Sanford was in my homeroom class. He was two years older than me and much bigger than most of the boys in my school. He brought caramel candy to me every day and said, "Your eyes look like this candy."

I would blush at his comment, but I never considered dating him. He wasn't my type. He was very dark and had a head shaped like a light bulb. His nose was shaped like an arrow that pointed to his thick lips. Everything he wore had Michael Jordan on it.

He only wore Air Jordan shoes. It wasn't unusual to see him wearing a shirt with Jordan flying through the Air, tongue hanging out of his mouth with the words "Just Do It" stretched in front of him. He idolized the man and that was how we began to talk.

"Do you like Jordan, Laurie?" he asked me one day in homeroom.

"I don't watch basketball," I answered.

That was his opportunity to school me on how great the sport was. I listened because I wanted to be nice. At the end of his instruction, he asked me out to the movies.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Prentis Avenue."

I was good to go. He didn't live in the projects so I could go out with him. It didn't matter that I didn't like him. I just wanted to go on my first date.

My mother let me go, but I had to take my sister with me. Sanford was a gentleman about it. He even paid for Mary. It was my first time ever going to a movie. We saw *Boys in The Hood*. Since I'd never been on a date before, I didn't know what to expect. He gave me compliment after compliment. My hair was pretty. My shirt was pretty. Even my sister was pretty. Afterwards, he wanted to take us out to eat, but I could not do that knowing that my mother and brothers were at home hungry. So, he took us to the corner store and brought us hoagie sandwiches, chips and sodas. He didn't even make us eat with him. He took us home and waved goodbye at the door. Mary and I split our food with my mother and brothers.

While we were eating, all I could think about was how nice Sanford was. I could not wait to see him in homeroom the next day. When I got to school, he was waiting at

my locker. He was carrying a gigantic bag of mixed candies. There was gum, caramels, and Jolly Rancher sour apple candies, my favorite.

We became inseparable. I told him everything about my life. I told him how I'd been molested. I told him about my mother never having money. I told him about not having a father.

He returned my honesty by telling me about his family. His mother was addicted to drugs. He had two sisters whom he had never met. He had a brother who lived down the street from him. His mother had left that boy with his father. Like me, Sanford didn't have a father, so his two younger brothers and sisters lived with his grandmother and grandfather. They had a good life and never wanted for anything other than their mother.

He was a good person. We'd take walks to the waterfront and, unlike my mother, he was able to take me to the Norfolk Waterside. I became the person I used to watch as a young girl. We were only fifteen and seventeen and I already knew that I wanted to marry him.

The happy times soon ended. He became angry because I was talking to a classmate about homework. John had always been my friend. We were going over our math homework. Sanford saw us talking, came over and asked if he could talk to me. He asked me about going to the movies that night. I couldn't tell that he was angry. I went through the rest of the school day thinking about how much fun we would have that night. He came to get me at six. Anger, which I had never seen on him before, covered his face. His fist immediately connected with the side of my face. The shock did not allow me to react. After my eye began to swell, he realized what he had done and began

to apologize. I forgave him. I blamed myself for making him angry. I knew that he loved me because he'd always treated me so good. We both agreed to tell my mother that he had dropped me off at my best friend, Vel's house, after the movie and she had hit me by mistake. That incident marked the moment when our love became full of secret tears and secret apologies for crimes to be committed over and over again.

After the first time Sanford hit me, he was in power. He would hit me for anything. If I talked back to him, I could expect a push. If I was late meeting him, he would whisper threats of what he would do to me later. If I was caught talking to someone he didn't like, male or female, I could get punched in the face. He would bite me on my arms, forming blue imprints of his perfect teeth on my body. I received three black eyes from Sanford. Two of them I wore at the same time.

Not only did he become physically abusive, he was mentally abusive. He began to flirt with other girls in school. I'd find lipstick in his car and letters from other girls. He began to date other people and forbid me to see anyone else. I was forced to watch him hug and kiss other girls and say nothing. Everyone who knew me told me that I had changed. They were right. I looked tired and stressed. I sank into a depression.

The black eyes formed a ring from both sides of the bridge of my nose. One day I stared in the mirror with tears in my eyes looking at the beaten reflection staring back at me. I asked myself why this was happening. At times, I didn't have the will or the want to even comb my hair. I started to thank the girls who were cheating with Sanford because they left time for me to be free of him. He forced me to have sex with him whenever he wanted me to. The only good thing about him was that he kept me fed and clothes on my back. Those were the things that you should have done. For so long, I

watched my mother be a victim to men like you. Sanford was just like you, so I readily accepted my preordained position for two long years.

I did well hiding the signs of Sanford's love. To hide the dark blue imprints of Sanford's teeth on my arms, I wore long sleeved shirts. If it was summer, I explained the long sleeves by saying that I was cold-blooded. When Sanford slipped up and gave me a black eye, I claimed that Vel and I were playing around and she mistakenly elbowed me in the eye. When my hair came out in clumps as my mother straightened it, I explained that I had split ends that were causing my hair to break off.

My mother never knew of the bruises hidden under long sleeves. She never knew of the times that Sanford's closed fist struck my fragile face. She could never have imagined my head being violently shaken from side to side when Sanford grabbed hold of my hair as if it were a mop head. She was too involved in her own life to notice anything other than an obvious physical change in me. Mary, on the other hand, knew everything.

When I lied about spending the night with Vel and came home with a black eye, Mary knew that Sanford was the guilty party. When I hid the bruises on my arms with long shirts, Mary sneaked into the bedroom as I undressed and saw my war wounds in their entirety. She woke in the morning to find hair that no longer belonged to me on my pillow and asked why I let him do this to me. She quickly grew tired of seeing me hurt.

Mary came downstairs one day as Sanford was holding me down on the floor. She ran into the kitchen, picked up a cheese-cutting knife, the closest thing to a weapon that she could find, and brandished it in front of him.

“You better leave or I’ll cut you,” she said. He walked out of the door, looking back at me with hurt in his eyes.

“Why did you let him do this?” she asked.

“I love him,” was all that I could say. It was enough for her to keep our secret but not enough for her to allow him to be in the house again.

“If he comes back here, I’m going to tell Mom.”

I dropped my head. “Okay,” I said. I felt like a child being scolded. It didn’t matter that she was twelve and I was sixteen. She had earned the authoritative role when she became my protector.

Mary took her role seriously. Whenever I came home from school, she asked if he had touched me. When I told my mother that I was spending the night with Vel, she would tell my mother to call and check on me. She knew that I could not sneak out to see Sanford when she did this. Her attempts offered relief.

Sanford would get tired of my sister interfering. He would order me to come to his house. If I didn’t come, he threatened to kill me. I found a way to escape Mary’s scrutiny and sneak to see him. Mary didn’t know about the threats and would become impatient with my “determination” to be with Sanford. I told her that everything would be okay. I was able to pacify her until she found the letter that Sanford had written to me. After she read the letter, there was nothing I could do to stop her from going to my mother.

Watching Mary hand the letter over to my mother made my stomach curl into knots of fear. I tried to suppress my anger as my rage was released in tiny sweat beads running down my back. My mother’s facial expression changed from serious curiosity,

to distressed shock, then to resentful anger. Mary stood alongside her with her arms folded over her barely developed chest. She looked at me with satisfaction. I mouthed to her, "I'm going to get you." She rolled her eyes and moved closer to my mother. *Snitch*, I thought.

I knew that my mother was going to be upset with the letter, but that wasn't my primary concern. I had not told her about the letter so that I could protect us. Now the secret was out. I knew what would happen next. She would go to Sanford's house, confront him about his threats, and tell him to stay away from me. Her confronting him would mesh well with our never-ending cycle of his loving me, beating me, and leaving me.

My mother stared at the letter. She looked at me with disbelief. "Why didn't you give this to me?" she asked.

"He's not serious, Ma. He was just mad because I told him I couldn't spend time with him this weekend."

"He's not serious?" She held the letter in front of my face, shaking it as if the breeze emanating from it would transmit the severity of Sanford's words to my brain.

"He writes things like that sometimes. He never does anything."

"What?" That was Mary's opportunity. She was not going to let me talk my way out of this one. "Look at her arms, Mommy. He bit her."

"Stop lying," I shouted, evidently not loud enough for my mother to hear. She ordered me to take off my shirt. The blue imprints of Sanford's teeth screamed at her. My mother gasped.

"Put on your shoes. We're going to his house."

Those were the words that I had dreaded. I walked up the stairs saying a prayer for my family. I knew that there was no way to get us out of this. Everything that he had said in that letter would happen now. He would shoot me, my mother, my sister and then himself. He had warned me if my mother ever approached him that it would be over and he really meant over. I wanted to tell her all of this before we went to the Dowell home. If I thought that it would have deterred her, I would have told her. I knew that it would only make her angrier and I couldn't allow things to get worse than they were.

On the way to Sanford's house, I remembered the times that Sanford and I used to take the same walk, holding hands and looking at the trees blowing in the wind. I used to think he was handsome, even though my mother and sister joked about him being ugly. I looked past the acne that littered his dark skin and the nose that looked like an arrow in the middle of his face. His imperfections had not mattered then, because he was beautiful on the inside. He was gentle and loving.

He bought food when my mother could not afford any. He bought school clothes for me when my mother didn't. He helped me to escape the violent streets of Lincoln Park. He gave me a safe and quiet place to rest. That was why I always went back. Our love had been before the punches, the bites, and the threatening words. I had always hoped and believed that he would regain his gentle and loving self. Now that he was ugly on the inside, he looked like a monster to me. I looked for a hint that he was going to be better. The more I looked, I found the monster in him growing, and rapidly taking over the Sanford I once knew.

My mother didn't speak to me during the twenty-minute walk. She looked at me every five minutes, shook her head and clenched her fist. I hoped that he wouldn't be

home, that his family had moved or maybe his house had burned down. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. I had a plan to get away from Sanford. It would just take some time. I would wait until I graduated, which was only a year away, and sneak off to the army. I'd already told my mother I wanted to go into the army. I never said why. I'd leave right after my graduation and then he'd never be able to find me. The military would protect me and I'd be safe from him.

That plan was destroyed. The letter had ruined everything. I'd be lucky if I even made it to basic training. We walked up the long sidewalk that led to Sanford's door. His brother, Shawn, and cousin, Troy sat on the porch. They must have felt that something was about to happen. They ran into the house to get Sanford. Sanford came to the door flashing the smile that had convinced my mother he was a good guy.

"Hi, Miss Lois."

My mother walked up to him and stared in his eyes.

"I want to talk to your grandmother."

Sanford's expression immediately changed, but he managed to maintain his usual smile. He walked into the house and my mother followed. When she saw his grandmother, she pushed past Sanford.

"Mrs. Dowell, I want you to see what Sanford wrote to Laurie."

Mrs. Dowell read the letter aloud for her husband to hear. The threats floated from her lips as if they were sweet nothings. *I'll kill you if you leave. Your sister needs to stay out of our business before I shut her up forever. Your mother is asking for trouble if she doesn't let you come over here this weekend. I'll kill everybody if they keep pissing me off. I'll get Troy's gun and shoot them, you, and me.* After reciting Sanford's words

so eloquently, she looked at my mother as if to say, "What's the problem?" My mother answered her look with force.

"Look at my daughter's arm." I was sitting in the chair closest to the door hoping that I would melt out of existence. She pulled my shirt up to the bruise on my arm, inadvertently showing my bra in her haste. Sanford's grandmother was expressionless.

"Sanford," she called. He walked into the room glaring at me. "You didn't do this? Did you?"

"Grandma, you know I would never hit Laurie." That satisfied her. My mother was furious. She stood in the middle of the floor, surrounded by Sanford's suppressed rage, his grandmother's disbelief, and his brother and cousin's readiness to pounce as soon as Sanford gave the word. She stood there and looked at all of them.

"You are all crazy," she said.

"Crazy," his grandmother raised her voice. "Your daughter is nothing but trouble."

"You raised a woman beater," my mother flung back at her.

As their argument continued, Sanford slipped out of the living room to the kitchen where he could get my attention and give me all of his. He stood in the door of the kitchen. His broad shoulders centered in the door. He pointed his finger at me as he whispered the words, "I am going to get you."

He left the kitchen door and paced back and forth from the den to the kitchen. It was like watching a mad scientist trying to stop his brain from exploding. He banged his right fist into his open hand. He grabbed his head in between his hands. In between his paced steps, he stopped and bent over with his hands covering his face. He looked as if

he were screaming in pain. We were both deaf to the exchange of words between my mother and his grandmother. It was me and him again in our own little world of dysfunction. My mother's last words invaded our secret world.

"Keep him away from my daughter or I'll have his ass put in jail." She snatched the letter out of his grandmother's hand. "Come on Laurie." She stormed out of the door as I quietly shrank away feeling Sanford's eyes burning into my back. I was happy to get out of the stifling house filled with Sanford's livid eyes. I walked alongside my mother trying to keep up with her infuriated steps. We made it to the corner when the commotion that had erupted in Sanford's house spilled onto the street. My mother and I looked back as Sanford, Shawn, and Troy came barreling down the street after us. The cries that I had bravely held in Sanford's house burst out of me in ludicrous fear. I grabbed my mother.

"Let's run," I screamed. I knew that we could make it home if we ran all the way there. My mother grabbed her arm away from me. She bent down and fumbled with her shoe. "Ma, please fix your shoe later. We have to run."

She looked up from her shoe into my eyes, holding a small knife that she had pulled from her sock. "You are not running anymore," she said. She stood up just in time for Sanford and his comrades to enclose us in their circle of hate. She grabbed my arm and pulled me behind her. They rotated their circle around us, attempting to reach past my mother and grab me.

"I'll kill you," Troy said.

"You're not getting away from me," Sanford kept saying.

“I’ll gut all of you. You’re never touching my daughter again,” my mother replied.

It was like one of those old gang fights seen on television. Our movements were so precise that they looked choreographed. Sanford, Shawn and Troy moved around us, maintaining their circle. My mother moved as they moved, keeping herself as a shield between them and me.

All of a sudden, Sanford realized that he had dropped his mask. My mother had finally seen firsthand what he was. He called off his posse.

“Shawn, Troy, stop. Leave them alone. We can’t do this.” His voice was calm. “Miss Lois, I’m sorry. You can go home. We’re not going to do anything. I’ll stay away from Laurie. I’m sorry.”

He opened his part of the circle and allowed us to walk through. My mother started through the circle holding my arm and quickly grabbed me, placing me in front of her, using herself as a shield. She dragged me by my arm, not knowing that she need not have dragged me. If she had let me go, I would have run. When we got home, she immediately called the cops. Mary stood over her as she dialed the number. Her smile showed that she believed that the saga of Sanford would soon be over. I thought that the true violence would soon begin.

When the cops came, my mother gave them the letter that Sanford had written and Mary informed them of my bruises. I could only sit and imagine the weight of Sanford’s anger falling on my head the first chance he got to see me. He was arrested but I knew that wouldn’t stop him. Many times he told me that neither my mother nor the

cops could stop him. Because he'd always followed through on his violent promises, I believed him.

All that night, his brother called the house saying that we had ruined Sanford's life. "Now he can't go to college," he said.

My mother just hung the phone up, ignoring his concern for Sanford's well being. She needlessly told me to stay away from Sanford. She didn't realize that this was what I had wanted. I wanted to be free of Sanford's wrath. The question was whether he would stay away from me.

The police only held Sanford for three days. In that time, my mother secured a restraining order that ordered Sanford and his family to stay away from me, my school, and my house. On paper, I was free. In my reality, Sanford was twenty minutes away from my death. Nevertheless, those three days of knowing that I was out of his reach gave me a feeling of release.

On the fourth day, I walked into my Shop Class to find Sanford sitting in the desk next to mine talking to Mr. Aaron, my teacher. When he saw me, his eyes lit up as if he was excited to be surprising his girlfriend with an unexpected visit at class. I expected him to pull out a gun and shoot me or stab me right in front of Mr. Aaron. A whimper escaped my lips. Before I could speak, he stood up and asked if he could talk to me. I was so afraid that I could barely move my feet. He guided me over by the table saws. Again, I was under his control. He took my hand and began to whisper his pleas.

"I'm sorry about what happened the other day. Did you know I got arrested?" He waited for my response. I was still frozen with fear. When I didn't respond, he

continued. "It was horrible in there. I missed you so much. I know we can work this out. You know how much I love you. Please don't leave me."

"I can't," was all that I could get out.

He brought his hands up to his eyes and released a soft cry. This maneuver used to make me feel sorry for him. Normally, my next words would be "I forgive you," but this wasn't a normal situation. This was the closest that I had been to leaving Sanford for good. I could not let this opportunity go to waste.

"I need you more now than ever. I just found out yesterday. My mother is in the hospital. She overdosed on drugs. She might die."

Tears were running down his dark face. He pulled my hand to his face. "My eyes are crying. Please stop them." I slowly pulled my hand from his, wiping the tears on my pants.

My sternness began to shake. He was in so much pain and I was abandoning him when he needed me the most. I should be there for him. I didn't want him hurting. For the last two years, his happiness had been paramount over mine. For the last two years he had been everything good and bad to me. Maybe we could work this out if he got some help. It was because he loved me so much that he treated me so badly. Those seeds of forgiveness always prompted me to remain with Sanford. All of those thoughts ran through my head as I watched the sincerity in his face change to anger. I must have taken too long to say, "yes" because he grabbed my hand again.

"I won't let you go. I need you." His eyes showed his determination.

"No, Sanford."

He began to squeeze my hand tightly.

“There is nothing I can do for you.”

The pressure began to hurt my fingers, but I continued to talk.

“I’m sorry about your mother but I can’t be there for you anymore.”

Other students were filing into class and Mr. Aaron began assigning workstations.

“Laurie, you’re at the polishing table today. I want that lamp finished by the end of the week.”

“I have to go, Sanford.” He squeezed my hand even harder before he, finally, allowed it to fall. I turned and walked away from him to my locker. I expected him to run behind me and punch me in my head or grab me by the hair and push my head onto the table saw. I fumbled with my combination lock and pulled out my half-finished lamp. I didn’t look back. I just listened until I heard the classroom door close shut.

After that day, Sanford would sometimes drive past my house and blow his horn. He never approached me again, but the fear was always there. It wasn’t until I graduated basic training that I was strong enough to do what I felt I had to do.

I told myself that I’d let the phone ring two times and then hang up. The Fort Jackson wind brought the smell of baked chicken and the shrilled cadences of the latest newbies from the company chow hall. On the third ring, I lifted the receiver from my ear, about to hang up the phone when I heard his deep voice.

“Hello.” He sounded the same. It was weighted with the deep bass that came with maturity and laced with a high-pitched squeakiness that faded in and out during times of uncertainty.

“Hi, Sanford.”

He paused. His hesitation made it evident that my voice hadn’t changed either.

“Laurie? How are you doing?” he asked, trying to hide his disbelief.

“I’m fine.” I answered shortly, prepping myself for what I was about to say.

“I’m so happy to hear from you. I think about you . . .”.

“Sanford, I didn’t call for that.” My shortness startled him.

“What did you call for then?” he asked.

I had rehearsed my words repeatedly in my head. They sounded hurried coming out of my mouth. “I called to tell you that you didn’t succeed. I made it through basic training even though you said I wouldn’t. I want to thank you for all of the bad things that you did because they became my motivation. When I had trouble passing the run on the Physical Training test, I saw your face telling me you knew I wouldn’t make it. With those words ringing in my ear, I found the strength to run faster. When I couldn’t qualify with my weapon, I saw you standing beside my foxhole telling me that I couldn’t do it and I sharpened my sight and hit every target. I want to thank you for being what you were because you ensured that I would not come home a failure.” The words poured out of me.

He never said a word. I couldn’t even hear him breathing. I waited for a retaliatory word or words of remorse. I got neither. The other end of the phone was filled with silence. I took that opportunity to ask one final question. “Why Sanford?”

He cleared his throat as he had often done when he was afraid.

“I knew that I was going to lose you,” he paused. “I thought you would only stay if I made you.”

“I would have stayed with you forever if you would have treated me right,” I said.

“I wish that I would have known that then.”

I could feel his sadness through the phone. All of the emotions that I had felt for him in the past had turned into pity.

“Can I see you when you come home on break?” he asked.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I answered. “Just take care of yourself.”

“You know that I will always love you, Laurie.”

My stomach turned like it did the day my mother and I walked to his house and to the end of our “love.” The breeze was blowing just like it was that day, but now I appreciated it in a way that I could not back then.

“Love yourself, Sanford,” I replied. “That’s worth more to me.”

I felt renewed. I felt like I could lift a mountain and thwart any adversity. I had closed that chapter of my life and was starting a new one. It was supposed to be a happy one, but I soon learned that old habits are hard to break. I had to break the negative habits in my life or they’d break me.

After I graduated from basic training, I was stationed in Fort Gordon, Georgia. It was a pleasant change from basic training. As soon as I got off of the military bus, Drill Sergeant Pruitt appointed me squad leader. I had six soldiers that I was in charge of. My position gave me confidence that I had never enjoyed. My soldiers respected me and liked me. They would come to me with their personal problems and I would try my best to help them. My squad was my primary concern. I was like their mother. Except for my class work, all of my time was spent nurturing them. That was until I met Pete.

I was walking to my company from the chow hall. He was standing on his company steps. My squad-leader band caught his attention.

“Hey squad leader, you want to work for me?” he shouted from the steps.

“No,” I shouted back. “But you can work for me.” He came down the stairs and asked for my name. His thick New York accent sounded melodic to my ears. He was light-skinned with thick, curly hair. His eyes were almond shaped and a deep dark brown. He had little freckles that covered his nose. He walked me to my company and we set up a date. We went to the Kings Inn Hotel, which is where all soldiers spent their free time. We went from room to room visiting the other soldiers in his unit. He had a loud mouth and he talked constantly. He was rude to everyone, but it was a funny type of rude. He was a New York. They were always rude and always the life of the party. It was entertaining to watch him joke on everyone in the room and be forgiven by all. In between his “performances,” he would find me in the crowd and mouth to me “You’re pretty” or “I like you.” After the party died down, we took a cab back to my company. He walked me up to the door of my barracks and touched my hand gently.

“I enjoyed myself with you tonight.”

“I enjoyed you, too,” I replied.

“Can I see you again?”

“Maybe,” I answered and walked into the barracks.

After that day, he would come to my barracks after he got out of school. It was like clockwork. We would walk around the post, enjoying how majestic it looked at night. He carved “P.R. loves L.C.” on the tree outside of my barracks and he gave me a

diamond heart necklace for Valentine's Day. He still had the New York rudeness, but he hid that when he was with me.

A month after we started dating, he did not show up for one of our nightly walks. I asked a friend from his unit where he was and he pointed to the volleyball net that was outside of his company. I saw Pete doing push-ups and jumping jacks with two drill sergeants standing over him. He had disrespected a drill sergeant and was getting "rehabilitative punishment." After that day, every time I saw him he was doing some type of physical "rehabilitation" because of his mouth. He was always in trouble. Two weeks before he was supposed to graduate, the drill sergeants got tired of his insubordination. He was dishonorably discharged from the Army.

These were all red flags that I ignored. When he left the Army, he went back to live with his mother in New York. I had a month before I finished my training. Once I graduated, I was stationed in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. The first weekend after I got to New Jersey, I went to see him in New York. He met me at the train station with flowers and balloons.

Despite his foul behavior in the military, I believed that he was a nice person. He was just misunderstood. I understood him perfectly. Some of his bad characteristics added to my "love" for him. He was aggressive and that made me feel safe. He was possessive and that made me feel wanted. I rationalized his meanness as stress. I explained away his mood swings; I just didn't understand him. I accepted his unemployment, because the people on the jobs disrespected him. I ignored his criminal behavior because he had to steal in order to take care of us. I was naïve and stupid. We were together four months when I found that I was pregnant. I was happy, but I never

knew that my pregnancy would be the spark that allowed Peter to turn on me. If I thought he was rude and mean before, I hadn't seen anything yet.

On the day I told Pete I was pregnant, he met me at the subway with flowers. He was ecstatic about the baby. We went to his mother's house where everyone made a big fuss over me. He didn't appreciate that. He was jealous because all of the attention was focused on me.

We were standing in the living room hugging. His mother told him not to hug me too hard. He began to hug me harder so I pulled away from him. He left the room enraged. Five minutes later he called me into his bedroom. He pushed me onto the bed.

"Don't you ever embarrass me like that again," he yelled.

"I'm sorry, Pete." I didn't even know what I was apologizing for, but I promised that I would not embarrass him again. After that incident, he showered me with apologies. I forgave him because I loved him, but I'm not sure that he loved me.

He began to make it a sport to see how much he could hurt me. He'd hit me for talking back to him. He'd hit me for being late or for being early. He'd hit me because I woke him up to go to work. He became cruel. It got even worse once he moved in with me. Then, he was able to do with me as he pleased without his mother there to rescue me. Because of all the fighting, I only carried my baby eight months. The early delivery was because of all of the stress that I was under. After Dereck's arrival, the stress reached an all time high.

Pete was excited when Dereck was born. He promised that he would change and be a great father to him. I wanted to believe him. The day I left the hospital, he reneged on that promise.

We didn't have a car so my next-door neighbor picked us up from the hospital. She had a daughter in a car seat and we didn't have a car seat for Dereck. We had to use her old one in order to take him from the hospital. There wasn't enough room in the car for Dereck and her daughter to ride in a car seat and for Peter and his sister to sit in the backseat. I decided to hold Dereck up front with me. I was so excited about leaving the hospital that I didn't realize that I was putting Dereck in danger. Pete never said a word.

We had to go to the barracks from the hospital because I hadn't moved into housing yet. When we got to the barracks, Pete unloaded the car. He carried a bowl that the hospital gave new mothers in order to relieve the pain from having a baby. I was walking up the stairs holding Dereck when Pete ran up beside me and smacked me across the head with the bowl. I had no idea why he did that, but I was upset and scared. When we got into the room he told me to put the baby down on the bed. I kept asking him through tears why and he just kept saying put the baby down. Afraid for Dereck's safety, I put him down and Pete immediately jumped on me. He had never hit me so viciously before. He was punching me in my stomach. He had me pinned against a wall with a headlock. It was different this time. I tried to fight back. His sister tried to get him off of me. Throughout all of the commotion, Dereck was in the background with his tiny voice screaming at the top of his lungs. Finally, Pete stopped. We just looked at each other in exhaustion. It was like we had just finished a catfight. He apologized afterward, but I never truly forgave him. That was the exact moment that I knew that I had to get away from him.

When I moved into housing, Pete immediately let me know that he was the "man" of the house. I had no furniture when I moved into the house. He called his mother, Liz,

and enlisted her help. She brought pans, dishes and linens. She was a caring woman. She doted on Dereck and me. On the rare moments that he would hit me in front of her, she would not hesitate to jump in front of me and restrain him. Sometimes, she would give him a punch or a slap. Her only fault was that she enabled Pete. When we would get into arguments, she would take him into her home and treat him as if he were the victim. She was compassionate to all, even those who didn't deserve it.

Pete realized he had total control of me. There was no one there but me and him. This meant that no one was there to tell what he could or could not do. So when I argued with him, his slaps would go unanswered. If he thought a guy was flirting with me, he could punish as long and as harshly as he pleased. This went on for the first six months of Dereck's life. I was in a zone. I learned to accept the punishment as a consequence of having a father for my son. I didn't want Dereck to grow up without a father like I did, so I stayed through the beatings.

After a year of Pete's "love," I felt myself growing weaker. Pete was succeeding in breaking my will to want more for myself. I started having thoughts of killing him in his sleep and ending the brutality of our relationship. It wasn't long before Dereck became victim to our violence. When Pete and I would argue, he would violently grab Dereck from my arms so that he could hit me. One time, he used Dereck's bottle as a weapon to silence me and inadvertently hit Dereck in the stomach as he lay sleeping on the bed.

Incidents like those prompted me to do something to get out of this relationship. I came up with the idea of bringing my brother, Dathan, to live with us. I thought that he

would protect me from Pete. In essence, he protected me from the physical violence but he subjected me to another ordeal that I never thought I would find myself in.

When Dathan got to New Jersey, he and Pete immediately became partners in crime. Like you, Dathan loved his liquor. He could hardly see my pain through his vodka bottle. He and Pete began to drink together and party together.

One night, I got a collect call from Monmouth County Jail. Pete and Dathan had been arrested because they were stealing change out of my neighbors' unlocked cars. Then, they broke into the public pool and stole towels and goggles. I could not believe that they had been so stupid. I had to explain to my mother and Pete's mother that they needed to be bailed out of jail because they had stolen quarters, nickels, and dimes. I was quickly growing tired of their antics. It wasn't long before I became a victim of their foolishness.

I sat in the room looking into the mirror that covered the wall, imagining how many people were looking back at me. I'd never been to the Fort Monmouth Police Department. They always came to me. Sergeant First Class Maggart had gotten the call from the Company Commander to have me report to Criminal Investigation Division. I knew that meant bad news. CID investigated crimes that were committed against the military by soldiers or civilians. I could not imagine what they wanted with me. I hadn't heard from Pete and Dathan for a week. They had gone to New York. I hadn't questioned why because I was happy to have the time alone with Dereck. Silence had replaced their loud laughter, drinking, and smoking. I enjoyed the silence.

I sat staring at the mirror waiting for something to happen. My chin rested on Dereck's curly hair. I prayed that I would not get arrested in front of my baby. I could

not conceive what reason I was there for, so I just waited for what was already a bad situation to get worse.

A tall man with a gray suit and a beige and black tie walked into the room. He had a serious look on his face and he carried a thick wad of papers in a manila folder. He sat across from us on what looked like a card table. I expected him to fall to the ground but the table sustained his weight.

“Specialist Carter. Are you in acquaintance with Dathan Carter and Peter Rodriguez?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“What is your relationship to them?” he asked.

“Peter is my son’s father and Dathan is my brother.”

“For your own safety, I’m going to read you your Miranda Rights.”

“I’m getting arrested,” was all I could think of. Every time someone was read their rights on television they were arrested. I waited for him to pull handcuffs out of his pocket.

“Do you understand your rights?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Are you aware that Peter Rodriguez and Dathan Carter have been selling drugs out of your house?”

My mouth dropped open. I knew that Peter and Dathan were doing something, but I never knew what. It was true that neither of them had a job, but they always had money. I had never questioned them about it because I didn’t want to know. I never

thought that they were capable of doing anything other than petty theft. Selling drugs was an entirely different situation.

The detective stared at me as if he were measuring my level of reaction.

“I never knew they were doing that,” I answered.

“Specialist Carter, I’m going to be honest with you and tell you where we are.

We are charging Peter and Dathan with distributing drugs and we are deciding whether or not to charge you.”

I wanted to cover Dereck’s ears so that he couldn’t hear the threats of the officer.

I could not answer him. I buried my chin deeper into Dereck’s curls.

“I never knew they were doing anything like this.” My eyes began to well with tears. “All I do is go to work and take care of my baby.”

“I understand that, Specialist Carter. We have a very difficult situation here and we have to figure out what to do.”

He got up from the table and left the room. I could no longer contain my tears. I wished that Pete and Dathan were there and not me. I wanted them to feel the knot that I felt breathing in my stomach. Dereck saw my tears and tried to touch them. He began to fidget trying to get out of my lap and crawl on the floor. I held him closer to me, knowing that he was my only comforter. I needed him.

The man in the suit walked back into the room. He pulled up a folding chair and sat in front of me. His knees were almost touching mine.

“I think I can help you, Specialist Carter.” After what seemed an eternity, he smiled. “We believe you,” he said. I had no idea who “we” were and I really didn’t care. That they believed I wasn’t involved meant everything to me.

“We are going to need your help though,” he continued.

I was willing to do anything that they wanted me to. I just wanted to get out of that room with the eyes staring through the walls at me.

“We will need you to answer some questions for us.”

He wanted to know how often Pete and Dathan went to New York. He wanted to know if I had ever seen them with drugs. He wanted to know if they had ever talked to me about drugs.

I wasn't much help to the detectives because neither Pete nor Dathan ever talked to me about drugs. I knew that they went to New York at least two times a week and knew that they occasionally smoked a joint. I told him everything that I knew and that satisfied him.

After my lengthy interrogation, the suit man told me that I was free to go.

“If you see them, don't tell them you've talked to us. Just give us a call and we'll pick them up for questioning. Thank you for your help.” The knot in my stomach continued to contract. This time it was for excitement. I would finally be free.

Pete and Dathan came to the house two days later. The doorbell silenced the calmness that Dereck and I had been enjoying. I didn't know whether to immediately call the cops or answer the door. The bell rang again. I decided to let them in. When I opened the door, I saw Pete and Dathan standing in the threshold and a dark figure running up behind them.

All of a sudden, there were cops everywhere. They were masked with guns drawn. They swept Pete and Dathan off of the porch and to the front of the house. I stood in the door in my nightgown, shocked at what I was witnessing. I closed the door

and went back to bed, where Dereck was quietly resting. I lay beside him and enjoyed the best sleep that I had ever had.

The next day was filled with disappointing surprises. I awoke with a pounding on my front door. I opened the door to find Pete smiling in triumph.

“They didn’t have anything on me.”

I tried to hide my disappointment.

“Dathan was stupid enough to sell to an undercover agent. They didn’t have anything on me though. What’s to eat?”

He walked into the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator. He ranted on about how he was untouchable and the cops could not get him.

I sat on the floor and lay my head in my hands. I could not release the tears because they’d show my true feelings to him. Dereck awoke upstairs and I went to answer his cry. As I picked him up I shared a tear with him

“It’ll be okay,” I assured him. I was lying because I didn’t know if it would.

After CID let Pete go, he felt invincible. Dathan was eventually released from jail, but he was barred from the post. This meant that Pete had to see him off post. That offered me some relief from his company. I should have called the cops and had them keep him away from me, too. I was afraid of what he might do. I was also afraid of what my Company Commander would do.

I had been reprimanded for the CID incident. My chain of command told me that they didn’t want to hear anything about me or from me while I was still in their unit. If I called the cops on Pete again, it would be reported to my company. I had my job and my baby to protect. I could withstand all of Pete as long as I could take care of my baby.

For another three months, I put up with Pete's arrogance and violence. Then something happened that ensured that I would not have to deal with Pete for a long time. I was going to be stationed in Korea.

Korea was a twelve-month tour and I wouldn't be able to take my baby. I knew that I could not leave Dereck with Pete for a year. I would have left him with Pete's mother, but I knew that she'd only give Dereck to him. I decided to do the only thing that I thought was right. I asked my mother to move to New Jersey and care for Dereck. She complied and my relationship with Peter was over. As bad as Peter was to me, he could not stand up to my mother. He had never liked her, and she had never liked him. She knew that he wasn't treating me right, but she stood by and let me make my own decisions. The day I told him that she was coming was the same day that he left. That showed me a lot about Pete.

I used to think that Pete was such a strong man because he could physically and mentally control me, but I found that he was really weak. He was not enough of a man to challenge my mother so he fled.

On January 9, 1995, I boarded the plane to Korea. I had to be at the airport by five o'clock in the morning. I pulled myself out of the bed and began to dress Dereck. He slept peacefully while I stood over him and cried. On the ride to the airport, he laid his head on my lap. His tiny snores sounded like music. My mother and Dereck were not allowed to walk me to my gate. I had to say goodbye in a pizza restaurant. I held him close to me and whispered, "I love you" in his ear. I didn't want to wake him, but I wanted to see his brown almond shaped eyes before I got on the plane. I handed him

over to my mother. His body curled up as she took him. She gave me a hug and told me to be strong. My heart was breaking for my baby. I could not look back as I walked away.

As I boarded the plane, I tried to wipe the image of Dereck curled up on my mother's shoulder out of my mind. I had to be strong for myself and for Dereck. In twenty-one hours I would be stepping into another world and I had to be ready for whatever it would bring. I spent most of the flight staring out of the window seeing Dereck's face and wondering what he was doing. I imagined tears running down his face as he went from room to room trying to find me. I saw the workings of his little mind as he searched in the bathroom, the bedroom and the kitchen. It would all be to no avail. Mommy was gone. She was not mommy anymore.

I watched the sun set and rise during the flight. As the darkened sky began to lighten, I pictured Dereck climbing out of his bed, beginning his search again. My chest ached for the soft touch of my baby boy.

I walked off of the plane, realizing that I was on foreign soil. My dam was beginning to overflow. I was farther away from my baby than I had ever been. He was on the other side of the world. The commotion of the airport overwhelmed me as I tried to avoid the people rushing past me.

Finally, I saw a familiar sight. Camouflage-wearing men were directing other homeless soldiers to a corner in the airport. I tried to ignore the Korean soldiers patrolling the airport with M16 rifles up at arms. They were accompanied by Doberman Pinschers that curiously sniffed the air for illegal substances. One of the camouflaged soldiers walked.

“Are you a soldier?” he asked.

It must have been obvious. Why else would I be in such a strange land?

“Yes.” I answered.

He guided me to the other soldiers. I sat in a corner and stared off into space. As they explained to us the customs of Koreans, what to say and not to say, my mind wandered back to Dereck. The soldier that guided me to the group walked over to me and asked if I was okay. I could not hold in my emotions. Tears ran down my face. I tried to wipe them with my shirt,

“Did you have to leave your husband?” he asked.

“No. I left my son,” I answered.

His eyes dropped as he saw my breathing become heavier.

“Do you have a picture of him?”

I pulled out an 8 x 10 Christmas picture that I had of Dereck. He tried not to laugh at the gigantic picture.

“He’s a cute little boy,” he said.

“I know.” I looked at the picture. “He’s my angel.”

“He’ll be okay. You’ll be okay, too.” He walked back to the group.

Without any other words, I knew that he understood. He had been there before, seeing the fresh and wrenching pain. All he could ever say was that “it would be okay.” After that moment, I knew that it would.

They put all of us soldiers on a bus and shipped us off to the in processing station. I was given linens for my bed and a room key. I opened the door to the room and saw a twin-size bed and a gigantic wall locker. That room would be my home for the next year.

I lay on the sheetless bed and stared at the ceiling. Visions of Dereck playing with his toys, eating his lunch, and jumping on my bed lulled me to sleep.

When I woke, I taped a picture of Dereck sleeping on the wall next to my bed. Every night, I would kiss him and tell him good night even though it was daytime where he was. I promised him that things would be better when I got home.

I promised myself that I would adjust to Korean life. I would wait the days out by going to work and thinking about my baby. Time would just tick along and I'd soon be back with Dereck.

The rice-growing season had just begun. The smell of fertilized ground swam in the air and invaded my lungs as I ran two miles every day. When the rice first began to sprout, my visit to Korea was still new. I was going to different clubs every night, trying to rid myself of my yearning for my son. Jack Daniels and vodka always had an answer to my question of sadness.

When the grass was knee length, I had grown tired of the partying and drinking. I wanted simplicity instead of excitement. I turned to an on post college and filled my lonely nights with history lectures and speech lessons.

When the grass grew so tall that the men tending it could not be seen, I began to want something to fill me spiritually. I turned to God. Church became my new hangout. I surrounded myself with church zealots and gave my pain to the Lord.

When the rice growers were getting ready to burn the harvested rice patches, I would soon be going home. The anticipation of seeing Dereck's brown eyes brought my remaining time to a standstill. I decided to take a trip to Lotte World, an amusement park near the military post Yong Song. I got one of the Korean soldiers that worked with me

to write directions for me in Korean. I would set off on one last adventure, before I left Korea.

I had to stand the entire ride between two Korean men who kept trying to smell my hair. The women looked at me and whispered to each other and the children pointed and questioned their parents.

“What is that?” I imagined the children asking their mothers.

When I got to the park, I got on all of the water rides and one roller coaster. It felt liberating to be experiencing my adventure by myself. I stood on the balcony overlooking the ice rink in the middle of the park. I enjoyed seeing so many yellow faces doing exactly what I did in America. There were lovers walking and holding hands, friends running and laughing, and mothers carrying their babies. I was in a sea of foreign faces, and yet I felt that I belonged. I sat on a bench and let the breeze from passers-by caress my face. I watched life going by for hours. I felt a warm sense of calm blanket me. Life would resume for me again when I returned to my baby. Time quickly passed. I realized that I would have to get back to post before it got dark.

I stood at the bus stop for fifteen minutes. It was seven o'clock and I know the buses stopped running at eight. I boarded the first bus that I saw. I walked up to the bus driver and showed him my directions. He nodded his head and motioned for me to sit down. After twenty minutes of riding, I noticed that I had not seen any of the monuments that I had admired on my ride to the amusement park. I looked around the bus. Only an elderly woman and a young girl were left. I walked to the woman and showed her my directions.

“I need to get to Yong Song,” I said.

She turned her head to the window. I went up to the bus driver and showed him the directions again.

“No. No. Wrong bus.”

I was able to decipher those words out of his broken English. He stopped the bus and opened the door.

“Wrong bus. Other bus.” He pointed across the street to a blue sign with a bus on it. The street was a four-lane highway. I could not make my way across the sea of cars, motorbikes and bicycles. I saw a group of cabs parked on the side of the street. I walked to the first cab and the driver sped off as I tried to get in. I went to the second cab and the driver held up his hand.

“Money. Show money.”

I dug into my pockets and pulled out an American twenty-dollar bill. He locked his door.

“Korean money,” he said as he drove off.

I didn't know what to do. I had no Korean money and I spoke no Korean. I walked up the street praying that I would see my baby again.

I could not hold in my despair and I began to cry. A short man with gray hair walked up to me and touched my arm. I thanked God. There was finally someone who could help.

“Thank you, Sir,” I began. “Do you speak English?”

The man pulled me close to him and tried to hug and kiss me. I pushed away from him and began to run. I was afraid. I was in a strange land, unable to communicate with the people, and physically violated.

I continued to walk up the street with no sense of where I was going. I stood in the middle of the sidewalk and let the strangeness encompass me.

A lone cab sat at the corner of the street. I walked up to the cab and found a skinny, dark haired, young man's almond shaped eyes staring at me with a smile.

"Hello," his voice rang from inside the cab. "Need ride?"

Thank God, I thought. He spoke English. I jumped into the cab before he could change his mind.

"I like American women." A gigantic white smile covered his face.

"That's great," I replied. "Can you get me to Yong Song?" I asked.

"I know Yong Song." Those words sounded like music.

I didn't mention that I didn't have Korean money. I didn't want him to put me out of the cab. He talked the entire ride. I could not understand much of what he said, but he was able to tell me his name and his age. He was twenty-three years old and thought America was fascinating. I can't remember his name and I couldn't pronounce it then. He had fun listening to it clumsily roll off of my tongue. In return, I tried to teach him my name, but he kept saying "Raurie" instead of "Laurie."

He drove me to the post and back to my hopes of seeing Dereck again. He was not allowed to go on the post so I had to run to the post hotel and convert my money. He patiently waited and trusted me to bring the money back. I doubled his fare and gave him a hug for saving my life. He could not understand with words how much his kindness meant to me. He understood my appreciation after he counted out his tip.

and wall locker. I plopped on the bed, throwing my calves up on the headboard. I lay there seeing through the ceiling, the clouds, and the sky. I looked directly at God.

“I could have died today.” I had to say the words aloud, as if to make it all seem real. “I could have been lost forever.”

I had been lost, and then found. That cab driver was an angel sent from God to save me. There was no coincidence or luck involved in his being at the right place at the right time. God had placed him where I could find him. I just had to take my time and look.

I had found my way out of a jungle. I realized that I was strong, because I had brought myself through that traumatic ordeal. I never felt so liberated or in control in my life. I wasn't a young girl anymore, weathered from all of the physical and mental beatings. I was a strong woman, who had saved her own life. I was finally what I needed to be for Dereck. I had taken a stand on that street. I persisted until I found what I needed and I prevailed. Through getting lost, I found me.

A month later, it was time for me to leave Korea. As I boarded the bus carrying me to the airport, I saw the rice farmers preparing the soil for new crop. When the smell of fertilizer floated through the air again, I would be breathing the same sweet and clean air that Dereck was breathing.

I smiled to myself. I, too, was planting a new crop. It was inside of me. I had no idea as to how I would sow and fertilize the crop waiting to be harvested. I just knew that I would.

When I got back from Korea I wasn't the perfect mother or the perfect woman. I still had my share of possessive and disrespectful men. What was different was that I didn't let them get inside of my head or me. I took care of my internal self. I didn't depend on them to do it. I wouldn't allow myself to become a victim anymore. I was taking control of my life and it felt good. It was like God was prepping me for what was about to come. So when it came, I was ready.

After Korea, I had to be separated from Dereck one more time. I went to Fort Sam Houston, Texas, for training. I hated it there because I missed my baby. I had no idea that my life would, once again, change in that place. The difference was this change would be for the good this time and not the bad.

I remember the day as if it were yesterday. He walked into the dark chow hall with a glow surrounding him. I was immediately drawn to him. In a place where people were stressed with screaming drill sergeants, physical training and all day classes, nothing of that sort touched him. He had a calm that only existed around him. I wanted to know where he got that from and I wanted to be a part of it. When I sat at the chow table, I told the girls I was with he would be my husband. I don't know how I knew that. I just did and I was right. Now that I have him I can't imagine living without him. I would be wondering what he was doing and if he were happy.

Even though I knew from the first moment that we were destined to be together, he needed a little more convincing. Our first meeting was rocky. I was so shy that I sent some young girls to tell him that I wanted to talk to him. How childish is that? I couldn't explain it. I had always been outgoing, but I could not approach him. The girls were

loud and obnoxious. When I finally stood face to face with him, he thought that I was just like them.

The biggest mistake I made when I met him was to open my mouth.

“So are we going to do this or not?” I asked. He thought I was talking about having sex with him. He was offended that I thought I could just walk up to him and ask if we could sleep together.

“If it’s okay, I’d like to get to know you first,” he answered.

I was so embarrassed that I avoided him after our first meeting. If I saw him coming, I went the other way. It wasn’t until he saw me outside of my classroom one day and was staring at me that we finally had another encounter. We arranged a date together and it was the best time that I’d had in my life. We went to the San Antonio riverwalk.

The night was as perfect as it could be. There was a full moon and the lights from the Riverwalk Mall made everything around me twinkle. We walked up and down the riverwalk trail stopping to view the waterfalls built into the walls. He carried a disposable camera swinging at his side. He asked an older couple to take a picture of us in front of the small waterfall.

“I want to remember this night,” he said.

We talked about our families. I told him about how I missed Dereck and he told me about his nephew. He listened to every word that I said like it was the most important thing that he’d heard. He drowned out the twinkling lights, the strolling people, and the streaming waterfalls to focus all of his attention on me. He was nourishment to my soul.

As we walked across the street, he put his arm on the small of my back as if to guide and shelter me. He did it so gently that I didn't feel overpowered. He made me feel secure, but free. I cherished him for evoking that feeling in me.

We have been together for five years. It is as good today as it was the first day. He has always been consistent in his love for Dereck and me. Now, we share that love with our two newest additions, Tariq and Sanaa. You even mentioned when you saw him interacting with our children that you could not tell that Dereck wasn't biologically his. I saw a moment of admiration in your eyes when you said that. Where you reminiscing?

After Chico and I married, he constantly sacrificed himself. He gave up his aspirations to pursue his art career and took a job as a welder. He encouraged me to leave the army and go to school. He worked overtime so that I would not have to work. He worked twelve hours a day and came home to care for the kids while I studied. He never complained about me spending too much time with school. He just supported me. Like the way that he gently guided me across the street, he has guided me through our marriage.

Things are better now. Through every ordeal I've encountered, Chico has been there to comfort me. Through my pregnancies, he cared for me so tenderly that I felt I would break. He loved me so deeply that I felt I couldn't deserve it. My past hardships are the only things that put a damper on our otherwise perfect relationship.

Even though Chico is the kindest and most considerate man that I have ever met, I have trouble trusting him. It's not his fault. My distrust of men began with you. He

has never cheated on me and never put a hand on me except in love. Regardless of this, I still find myself accusing him of wanting other women. During our smallest arguments, if he reaches to scratch his head, I flinch in remembrance of past pains.

My doubts strain him because he wants to make me happy and I sometimes seem sad. I have a hard time believing after all that I have been through that I can ever truly be happy. I wait for the time when he will hit me, cheat on me, or leave me. Sometimes, I believe that he is here to stay. Then, my past taunts as it says to me that I will never be happy. I realize that I am truly blessed. Chico is patient with me and gives me the time that I need. He loves me harder when I feel the most insecure. He tells me that after all I've been through, God sent him to me because I deserve a good life. I deserve to be happy. After five years with this man, I'm beginning to believe it.

Although I have made bad choices in my life, I have grown with a loving husband and an understanding marriage. I have been blessed with the most beautiful and considerate children. I am college educated and still thriving to learn more. All of these things I wanted in my life and never knew how to get. A little girl who was molested, a lost teenager in the projects, and a physically and mentally abused woman, accomplished all of these things. It's as if Life took me over and decided that everything was going to be okay and I will be happy.

"I don't care how determined you are to pick an abusive man or live a life of pain. You will prosper. You will succeed." Life spoke those words to me as it guided me through my roughest times. Sometimes, I question and fight happiness. But I've learned that I have to roll with this thing, Life, and allow it to live for me, until I'm able (and I will be able) to live for myself.

I know that my story is overwhelming. You probably don't know what to do with all of this information. I don't want you to do much. I just want you to understand that your actions had consequences that you never conceived. You were the first man in my life to let me down. You made me accept the fact that that is what men do. Now that you know my story, I want the "sorry" that you give me to be different from the ones that I have received from every disappointing man in my life. I want it to be one of knowledge and not of the ignorance that you offered me this week.

I looked at your tired face, bent over Sanaa in her crib, and I saw you twenty-eight years earlier standing over me. I know that there is some good in you, but I want you to be accountable for all that you have and have not done.

I looked at you and Dathan, standing side by side, smoking a cigarette together and drinking a Budweiser. He is following in your footsteps, even though you only left traces of them behind. His face is your face only younger. It's too late for your "sorry" to make much of a difference in my life, but maybe it can make a difference in his. He is what you were. Do you want him to be what you are now?

Even if you don't want me to, I forgive you for what you have done. My heart reaches out to a tattered body that reeks of illness. Your liver is hardened, your lungs are blackened, and yet your heart is still soft. That is why I can forgive you. I feel sorry for you. You are close to your end and you have missed twenty-six years of enjoyment with your family. I can forgive you. The question is, can you forgive yourself?