

# motherhood so white

A MEMOIR OF RACE, GENDER,  
AND PARENTING IN AMERICA

**NEFERTITI AUSTIN**

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*This book is dedicated to my grandparents:*

*Ann, Henry, Grandma, and Pop, for setting the bar really high.*



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# Prologue

**“Come on, August, grab your pullover.”** I waited for my little boy at our front door.

“Where are we going, Mama?” August asked, dragging his black Gap sweatshirt behind him across the hardwood floors.

“To a rally at the park,” I answered, sliding the hoodie over his tall, slender body. Handsome and inquisitive at only five years old, August already had the makings of a scientist/cowboy/race car driver, and I was proud of how far he had come.

In a past life, before we became a family, August had lived in two foster homes. Meanwhile, I earned a license to foster/adopt from the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services. After months of certification and waiting, I became a mother to a six-month-old Black baby boy, and my life changed forever.

August’s addition to the neighborhood made us one of five Black

families who dwelled between La Cienega and San Vicente Boulevard. August and I loved our little slice of heaven—filled with Mexican Jews, nonpracticing Jews, old people, Koreans, young white families, and a formerly handsome playboy, who drove a red convertible and didn't date anyone older than twenty-five—just outside of the Beverly Hills hub. La Cienega Park, with its green play structures, sandbox, clean bathrooms, and recreation center, was a block away. Every day, elderly Jewish men sat at concrete benches, speaking Hebrew, feeding pigeons, and playing chess. Mothers nursed their babies or worked out with trainers, and little kids played king of the hill. On Wednesdays, the park was filled with divorced and coparenting dads and their children. The rumor was that Wednesday was designated court-ordered visitation day. Every now and then, a B-list celebrity from *The Fast and the Furious* would be on dad duty.

Before I adopted August, I landed in Beverly Hills in June 2006 on a fluke. I had lived in the San Fernando Valley for seven years when the condominium I was previously renting was sold. I was in denial about moving and waited until the last possible moment to find a place, when I stumbled upon a one-bedroom apartment on the eastern border of Beverly Hills. There were no fancy shops near me, and if I wanted to stargaze or stroll down Rodeo Drive, I'd have to drive west on Wilshire Boulevard for eight minutes. It wasn't the most upscale apartment building either, and even my grandmother made sure to emphasize to her sister and church members that we didn't *really* live in Beverly Hills, but it was home.



As we made our way down the dusty steps and onto the street, August asked, “What’s a rally?”

“It where lots of people who like the same things come together and talk or sing.” Earlier that morning, I had googled the Black Lives Matter website to see when they were coming to Los Angeles. As I scrolled down the page, I discovered a rally that night. I was frankly surprised a rally would be held in Beverly Hills. Of course, there was wealth in the area, but this was not a fundraiser. It was an event that was designed to bring white people, far removed from blight, gangs, and poverty, out into the street in support of Black lives. It was one thing to send money or sit at home and hand-wring. It was another to publicly cry foul at a system that routinely oppressed Black people. That’s what I had done by adopting August, and that was the reason I took him out that night.

“Like a party?” His eyes lit up.

My child was not even in kindergarten and already a party animal. “Um, not really.” It was already seven o’clock. Ordinarily, August would be getting into a warm, sudsy bath at this time of the evening. After he played with his boats and fish, he’d be ready for a cup of milk. Then August, who liked brushing his teeth, would delay bedtime by splashing water all over the sink. While I cleaned up, he would choose three or four books from his overflowing red-and-blue bookcase and wait for me in his twin bed. Tonight, I was disrupting his routine for one reason. I needed to connect with other mothers of Black boys.

“Why are we going?”

Good question. My heart echoed President Obama’s sentiment that Trayvon’s murder was a *national tragedy*. This was one of the few moments in history that the death of a Black boy was elevated to a national tragedy. I took a beat to consider how to broach the subject. If I gave my sensitive child too much information, he would feel bad without understanding why. If I gave too few details, he would miss the importance of the moment. I did not want to frighten him, but lying wasn’t the answer either.

“Why, Mama?” he asked again.

“Because a few weeks ago, a boy named Trayvon Martin was killed walking home, and we want to show our support.”

I spoke calmly, hoping to give August the impression that despite using the words *boy* and *killed*, my son was safe. I pretended we were just taking a casual stroll to the park, though the circumstances were far from normal. Except, I quickly realized, they were normal. *This* was my new normal. Most Blacks were taught that life was tenuous and this reality was just part of living in America. Before becoming a mother, I was detached from what that really meant. I lived in an affluent neighborhood and ran with a highly educated, well-traveled crowd. I thought my privilege shielded me from ugly truths about the actual worth of a Black life. Trayvon Martin’s murder opened my eyes to the new reality Black mothers faced every day. There was no guarantee that our boys would arrive home safely from school or back from the store after purchasing Skittles.

Trayvon's death grounded my parenting priorities. I went from trying to understand the difference between the Montessori and the Reggio Emilia approaches to education, to understanding that I was part of a club whose sole membership requirement was being the mother of a Black boy, and feeling the weight of that fear keenly for the first time. Suddenly, I was scared for August, who shared a birthday with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I wept inside because there would be times in August's life when trouble would find him, even if he was just out minding his own business, all because his racial classification was Black. Trayvon's death gave me another thing to worry about: life. How could I protect my son? How could I give him the best life, one where he enjoyed a childhood of trains and dinosaurs, not rallies for the gone-too-soon? In my new skin as mother of a Black boy, I had to think through how we would navigate a world set up to challenge his very existence. The task was daunting and made me feel powerless and small.

"Mama, I don't know Trayvon. He must be in Miss Isabella's class."

"No, he was a big boy," I said softly.

"What does *kill* mean?"

I had seen that one coming. "*Kill* means..." I faltered and tried again. "Um, killing is like when you step on ants and they die."

August frowned. "Did someone step on Trayvon? That's mean."

"I don't know all of the details, but—" I lied to stop the hole of fear that was swallowing me. "There are some mean people in the world, and a mean man killed Trayvon."

“Will that happen to me?”

I stopped walking and bent down, cupping August’s face in my hand, and looked into his beautiful brown eyes. “Oh no, angel, but you need to know that some people will think just because you’re a Black boy that you are not smart and funny. They will not care how much you love Elmo or how you got angry when you found out Pluto was a dwarf planet.”

“Why?” he asked sadly.

“I don’t know. Some people are stupid.”

“Ooh, you said a bad word.”

“Oops!” I covered my mouth and pretended to giggle.

“Can I get on the slide when we get to the park?” August was hopeful.

“Not tonight, son.”

I’m not sure if he understood that I had just done something terrible, had stolen some of his innocence. I had no choice. In ten years, August would be more than six feet tall, and people would assume he was older than he really was. He would not be given the “boys will be boys” benefit of the doubt for speeding or participating in immature class pranks. Trayvon’s murder unleashed a veil that separated August’s previous life as a precious, innocent babe to a child who would have to learn that his race and gender could get him killed.

Our busy street, a shortcut to the Beverly Center and West Hollywood, was quiet for once. The corner our apartment building sat on also held three office buildings, though the low brick building that used to house a colonic clinic was vacant. The rumor was that

nearby Cedars-Sinai Hospital had purchased the prime location and would begin demolition of the old building soon.

I had made this trek to the park hundreds of times. First, as a single woman, newly arrived in Beverly Hills, walking my dogs, then, as a single mother pushing August in his stroller. Later, August would push his own stroller, and I would watch him stumble and fall, learning to walk and trying to keep up with our dogs. The park was our haven where he spent time building sandcastles, making friends, and learning to ride his bike. But tonight, we had other business there.

With no cars in sight, August scampered ahead and waited for me at the streetlight. The light was red, so he pressed the button to illuminate the walk signal. The intersection of Wilshire Boulevard and Gale Drive felt like a cold wind tunnel. Concerned about the cool night air, I gently turned him to face me.

“Angel, let’s pull your hood over your head.”

Suddenly, the reality of our situation hit me. We were Black people, dressed in dark colors, standing on a street corner in a wealthy neighborhood. I had a brief moment of panic and contemplated removing August’s hood and warming him through my embrace. I knew that a white boy wearing a hoodie wouldn’t warrant a second look from a passerby. August was young enough that he could get away with it, but if he were, say, thirteen, he would likely be perceived as threatening with his hood up. To the white world we lived in, a hoodie plus a Black male was synonymous with danger.

I grimaced at the irony that I could not even get to the park to

protest the death of a Black teenager without considering how August would be perceived. I decided to let it be and keep his hood up. We had not done anything wrong.

Trayvon's murder spoke to all aspects of my identity: Black woman, single Black mother, historian, sister, cousin, coworker, friend, lover. Much as I would have liked to, I could not ignore what was happening to Black boys all around me, or rationalize the violence away to convince myself that August would be spared. As an adjunct United States and African American history instructor at multiple Los Angeles community colleges, I was well versed in how this shit played out. So many Black men had been lynched and killed at the hands of white men in America. It was a record on repeat, a song I tired of, especially now that I had a son to raise.

My pedigree and privilege gave me access to a world away from police brutality, drugs, incarceration, and premature death. I had collected stamps on my passport from three continents, been to law school, explored slave castles in West Africa, walked in the footsteps of the Harlem Renaissance's elite on Martha's Vineyard, rafted down the Guadalupe River, and been to the flash point of the Civil War in South Carolina. I had danced atop tables at beach retreats in Mexico, sunned on whimsical weekend trips in Palm Springs, changed cars and jobs every other year, and maintained standing hair and massage appointments. I was a free, successful Black woman in the world, and still, none of that meant my child would surely be spared the fate of so many Black boys in our country. I wanted August to have the same

privileges I did, but a case of mistaken identity or racial profiling could wreck all of that. That's not what I had signed up for when I decided I wanted to become a mother.

I was already an outlier in the Black community for adopting a child I did not know and was not related to. I was an outlier in the white community for adopting a child domestically, and the butt of jokes by male coworkers who didn't believe I could raise a boy on my own. As a writer, I was fighting against white privilege's erasure of Black parenting perspectives and insistence that the word *mother* automatically meant *white*. The denial of voices of color meant our children's lives did not matter. Motherhood was supposed to be fun, filled with challenges to bring the best out of our kids and ourselves. For me, and for all Black mothers in America, it was alternatively fun and harrowing, as we broached conversations no parent should ever have to have with their young children.

As the death of Black boys became a way of life, my eyes opened to an important truth: Black mothers lived in a different America from white mothers. I saw the ease with which my white mom friend Liza babied her five-year-old son, Colton. While she closely monitored his emerging reading skills, she failed to educate him about the fact that America had a Black president. She had no idea that toy guns in the hands of Black boys could be misconstrued as a threat. Colton was free to roam about the country at will; August had to be vigilant about where he was at all times.

When we finally arrived at the park, most of the protestors were

gone. We missed it. I hadn't known what to expect but was willing to walk into a scene of grief, anger, shouting, and volatility. That was not the case. It was as if providence wanted me to keep August's innocence intact a little longer. I was disappointed but relieved and happy to have shown up, not just for August but for all mothers of Black boys.

August asked, "Where are the people?"

I looked at the throng of footprints in the sand and noticed a few stragglers, sitting quietly at the tables where the old Jews played chess. "They've gone home," I said, kissing his cold cheek. "Thanks for being such a trooper tonight."

"Now, can I get on the slide? Please."

"No, sir." I winked. "You need to get some rest so you'll be ready for school tomorrow."

I took my job as mother seriously, not only about teaching August how to tie his shoes or his ABCs, but about the institutional racism that was and would be a part of his life. No matter how fancy our zip code, he would need that information to stay alive. Woke to the broader meaning of Black motherhood, over the past few years I turned inward to examine my own life to determine why I decided to become a single mother via adoption—not an easy path for any woman, but especially a Black woman, to follow—especially when parenting in America is still filtered through a white lens.



# *My Adoption So Black*

## **My parents, Diane and Harold, met in Los Angeles in**

1968 at the Watts Field Center, an employment agency where they were both looking for jobs. Diane was nineteen years old and dating another guy who belonged to the cultural nationalist United Slaves or US Organization, founded by Dr. Ron Karenga, creator of Kwanzaa. The organization was pro-Africa with a strong emphasis on the Black family. Though my dad hated Karenga, he respected his ideas about Black economics. The ideals of Black nationalism appealed to both Diane and Harold, whose respective square parents were desperately trying to keep them on the straight and narrow.

Diane's parents, Ann and Henry Hawthorne, migrants from the segregated South, wanted Diane to go to college and get a job. Harold's parents, John, Sr. and Doris Austin, also Southerners, wanted the same for their son. Diane wanted to be free to live her life as she

saw fit. In Harold, she found a kindred spirit, and she eventually left her boyfriend to marry him. They wanted to create a life and home where art, music, and political thought triumphed over racism and capitalism, where Black would be beautiful every day, and they were recognized as equal citizens in America.

The Hawthornes, my grandparents, were humble about the success they had managed to attain despite their challenging circumstances. With dreams of a better life, Henry had relocated from Beaumont, Texas, and Ann from Boyle, Mississippi, in the 1940s. They both had a strong Protestant work ethic and did not curse or drink. They saved their money, took care of their children, and enjoyed the trappings of a middle-class existence in California. My mother and her sister, Helen, took ballet and tap dance lessons, and their brother, Eldrige, was a Boy Scout. They attended a predominantly Black United Methodist church in Baldwin Hills, with parishioners who spoke in hushed tones in the sanctuary. They took family vacations to Bryce Canyon, Yellowstone National Park, Beaumont, and Mississippi, often with their first cousin, Ray, in tow. Ann and Henry believed that if a person got a good education and worked hard, they, too, would have the American dream of home ownership, family, annual vacations, and a cushy retirement.

Middle child Diane was unimpressed by her family's history or conventional lifestyle. In her mind, her parents were out of touch with the times and woefully unprepared for how drastically the world was changing. Despite showing early signs of potential, she wanted

no part of their bourgeoisie lifestyle. Diane had been valedictorian of her junior high school in Compton, but became defiant when the family moved to predominantly white Windsor Hills for her to attend high school. Her rebellion started with running away from home to see friends in Compton, smoking cigarettes, and stints in juvenile hall, and she finally moved out of Ann and Henry's home before graduating from Dorsey High School.

A love child, I entered the world four days before Neil Armstrong landed on the moon and Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* became the first important jazz fusion album. Two years later, Coca-Cola launched a juggernaut ad replete with multicultural faces singing about buying the world a home and furnishing it with love. Their perfect harmony belied the Black and Brown Vietnam veterans returning home, strung out on heroin, dazed, confused, and unable to find employment. America in the 1970s had blood on its hands from riots that had engulfed Los Angeles, Newark, Detroit, and other metropolitan cities during the previous decade. White women were demanding equal rights. Black women were finding their voices; Huey Newton was free; Angela Davis was on trial for her life, and Assata Shakur had disappeared into the arms of Cuba. My brother, Kareem Ali, arrived exactly two and a half years later in January 1972. By that time, our parents were married and trying to raise a family.

My parents cut their teeth during this turbulent climate. Harold and Diane had separately melted into the Black Power movement by rejecting their parents' lifestyle. They wanted to uplift the Black race

through protest, pride in their African heritage, jazz, poetry about revolution, and drugs that gave them freedom from what was going on. They saw themselves as the proletariat and, like many young people, were seduced by the powerful rhetoric of those unafraid of *the man*. My dad was so entrenched in wanting power for the people that his best friend christened him Seibu Jahid-Ali, a name my dad took to mean *warrior*, though the secondary translation would be *exalted, hardworking man*.

My father, Harold, was also a middle child. His family moved west from Watts to a three-bedroom home in southwest Los Angeles. This neighborhood was filled with three- and four-bedroom homes, large backyards, great schools, and whites who took flight in 1960. His parents and my mom's parents moved west to give their children a running start at the American dream. They had aspirations for their children and thought that a life grounded in Christianity, family, and love was all they needed to navigate the dystopian 1960s. What my grandparents didn't know was that their middle-class values were no match for the burning desire my father and many others had to hold white folks accountable, or the subsequent call of the streets. After he was put out of his parents' home, he went to live with his aunt Dee. While there, he attended community college, partied, and worked odd jobs until meeting my mother. He was happy when he learned she was pregnant and told me many times: "I just knew you were a boy." Surprise!

When Kareem and I were very young, our family lived in a small apartment in Inglewood. My mother worked nights, and sometimes

while she was at work, my dad made me and my brother peanut butter-and-honey sandwiches and Kool-Aid. My dad was handsome, charismatic, athletic, and troubled, with a drug problem he was never able to shake, anger management issues, and dreams that never came to pass.

He tried to make sense of the unpredictable world he inhabited and found solace in books like Chancellor Williams's *The Destruction of Black Civilization* and Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. He was an avid reader of all things related to Africa, slavery, Marxism, segregation in the United States, and had an amazing jazz record collection. My love of art and sense of equality came from his passions and romantic sensibilities. I grew up believing that he was a member of the Black Panther Party, but it wasn't until he died that I discovered he had actually joined the Black Vanguard, a group more radical than the Panthers.

At our Inglewood apartment, the record player was always spinning and my parents' friends would come over and smoke weed, snort cocaine, drink Gallo wine, and dance to Marvin Gaye into the wee hours. Kareem and I were supposed to be in bed, but we couldn't sleep with the loud music and laughter of high adults in the house. Sometimes, we would crawl to the doorway and watch. I was five years old and curious about what antics they were up to.

Harold and Diane's young, chaotic love and volatility forced me to mature early. Kareem and I were left alone a lot, and our parents slept heavily. In the mornings after their parties, five or six adults would be passed out in the living room, and we'd have to step over them to get

to the kitchen to pour ourselves some cereal. It was up to me to take care of Kareem, so I would be in charge of making breakfast or a snack. Too short to reach the Cheerios on top of the fridge, I'd stand on a chair and hand Kareem the box. Then I'd get the heavy gallon jug from the fridge and pour milk into a bowl, trying not to spill. I was mothering when my mother could not.

Other times, our parents' arguments left us afraid. They cussed each other out, and I have at least one memory of Harold hitting Diane. By 1974, their marriage was over. My dad went to the penitentiary, my mom went to rehab, and we went to live with Ann and Henry.

When Kareem and I were a little older, my Afroed daddy would take us to MacArthur Park, where he'd blow poetry about love, loss, and the people. In addition to writing, he could build or fix anything, and was a talented photographer and forger of driver's licenses. It took a steady hand to laminate those little cards, and he honed his craft in the early 80s in prison, practicing gemology and earning a certificate from the Gemological Institute. Over the course of my childhood and adolescence, he worked as a youth counselor, car salesman, sold Amway, and performed a myriad of other jobs that did not require a college degree. The few jobs he had generally ended with him getting fired or quitting because he wasn't making enough money. So, he hustled.

Harold generally kept us away from his drug dealing, but there were times when we'd be visiting with him and he'd tell us that he had to make a *run*. That was code for us to wait in the car, or if it was

night and we were spending the night with him, that he was going out and would not return until early the next morning. He knew we wouldn't leave the apartment or tell our grandparents what he was up to. That would have caused all kinds of hell to break loose. Nor did we share with our Windsor Hills classmates that our dad had guns hidden within the couch, smoked weed in front of us, or had us wait in the car while he made a run. I doubt he was proud of how he made money, but as a felon without a college degree and a drug addiction, his choices of employment were slim, and he did what he had to do.

What Harold should have been was a historian. The stories he told us about his younger years with our mother made their lives seem dangerous, exciting, like watching a Blaxploitation film for kids. Without realizing it, he gave me the ability to imagine a creative life, and his way with words later carried me through my career. I felt like he saw me, and that it was important that I knew who he was. In contrast, my mother was silent on the subject of her past. Perhaps this was why my parents were a good match. Unless Diane and her sister, Helen, were laughing about their glory days in 1968 as stone foxes in the Kwanzaa parade, my mother did not share anything about herself. So, I only got one side of their story and learned my history through Harold's eyes.

I had to depend on other people's memories to construct a full picture of Diane as a person, but one of the strongest memories I have is about my name. My parents never agreed over who named me, but it was important to my mother that I be able spell the complicated

syllables. Fully able to read and write since I was three years old, I still could not spell my name in kindergarten. One night, when we still lived in Inglewood, I was attempting to complete a worksheet for school.

Diane took a drag off her cigarette and patted her short, perfectly rounded Afro. Dressed in blue jeans, extra-large hoop earrings, and a white back-out that complemented her rich brown skin, Diane was every inch a 1970s soul sista.

“Write your name at the top,” my mother prompted. She was frying potatoes in a cast iron skillet.

“I don’t know how,” I whined. I sniffed and wiped tears from my chubby cheeks. I hated all nine clumsy letters. *N-E-F-F-E-T-I-T-I*, my parents’ spin on Nefertiti, queen of Egypt.

Diane took a steak knife to sharpen my pencil and wrote my name across the top. “Copy these letters. Do it ten times.”

Kids and adults alike had a hard time pronouncing my name, and most had never heard of my royal Egyptian namesake. The African/Arabic names my parents had bestowed on me and Kareem invited jokes and merciless teasing. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Afrocentric parents like mine often assigned their kids names like Africa, Jabari, Ali, and Kente. That was all well and good in the confines of the movement, but it became a huge problem in my bourgeoisie neighborhood filled with names like Charisse, Toiya, Laurie, Anthony, and David.

My mother, who was angry that I did not like my name, said, “We wanted you to be your own queen.”



“But the other kids tease me, and my teachers don’t say it right,” I complained. I was so done with being called *Left Titty*, *Miss Kitty*, and *Ne-fetti* that I changed my name to Tina in the third grade.

My father, who was equally unsympathetic to my plight, said, “I got that name from Miles Davis’s last acoustic album: *Nefertiti*.”

I did not care. As a child, the origins of my name held no significance, and I vowed when I grew up and had kids, I would never give them stupid names.



My parents got a Black divorce, which meant they physically and emotionally went on with their respective lives, but neither legally filed for divorce. This arrangement was common in the Black community, because a formal divorce involved lawyers, which meant a lot of money had to be spent to make a separation legal. If kids had been produced during a marriage, divorce was a direct pipeline to family court and child support, which could result in a father going to jail for missed payments. Many Black women did not want to see their child’s father imprisoned or buried in so much debt that he couldn’t contribute financially or emotionally to his kids’ lives, and an inherent distrust of the justice system throughout the community made it preferable to handle separations in a more informal way.

My parents’ permanent separation marked the first time my brother and I lived with our grandparents, Ann and Henry. Spending time with them was fun. We helped Ann pick strawberries from her

garden, and Henry would challenge us with simple counting and spelling games. They even went along with my parents' progressive foolishness and taught us to call them by their first names, instead of Grandmother and Grandfather. They were happy my parents' relationship was over and hoped their daughter was on the road to ditching the drama of her younger years and becoming a responsible mother.

After Diane got out of rehab, we went back to live with her, but the arrangement didn't last long. For the next four years, we moved from Inglewood to Ann and Henry's home to Gardena and back again, switching school districts along the way. My mother was clean for short stints but never stable enough to provide a real home for us. She was leading a life of crime: boosting clothes from Broadway department stores, transporting drugs for her boyfriend, and God knows what else. Parenting was not a priority.

I distinctly remember being eight years old and watching Diane sing along to Billie Holiday's "T'ain't Nobody's Business if I Do" and Johnny Guitar Watson's "Ain't That a Bitch," as she cleaned our apartment on Stepney Street in Inglewood during one of the periods in which we lived with her. She would be snapping her fingers and off in her own world. We had bright yellow patio furniture, a glass-and-brass coffee table, and a black poodle named Peppy. My mom worked on and off, and pretty much let us run wild. Most of her boyfriends were nice, but they were drug dealers or some other form of lowlife. Just like Harold had, she'd take us on a run, or we'd sit for hours at

someone else's house, listening to music or playing outside while she got her swerve on. Diane was also drinking heavily, on welfare, and unable to keep a job. Naturally, we did not tell our grandparents. We protected her, even when she didn't protect us.

My father was in the same boat. Most of his crimes were drug-related, and he was in and out of jail. Harold was a convicted felon, which meant he struggled to get a legitimate job outside of construction or at low-paying nonprofit youth organizations aimed at deterring young people from life on the streets. Though he could build anything, he felt that manual labor was beneath him. My dad had delusions of grandeur, believing that one day he'd buy a home in Windsor Hills and we'd all live together again. It was an odd dream for a man who had ardently rejected his parents' bourgeoisie lifestyle. I can only guess that as a father, he finally realized his children needed stability, and at the rate he was going, he would never be able to offer it to us.

When we lived with Diane, we always looked forward to going to Ann and Henry's house, a mid-century home in upper middle-class Windsor Hills. Ann would prepare us a quick meal, usually chicken and greens, followed by dessert. There was always a carton of vanilla ice cream in the freezer, iced oatmeal cookies, or frosted animal crackers in the cookie jar. Ann was serious about her garden and taught us how to pick strawberries without bruising them from the patch on the side of the house. Henry would either be reading the newspaper or a DIY book on nutrition, or typing a letter on his forty-pound black Royal typewriter that no one, including Ann, was allowed to touch.

If Ann and Henry weren't home when we stopped by, sometimes a brown sack awaited us on their doorstep. Henry would use a black marker to write our names and draw a happy face on each bag. Usually, a green apple and pastry were inside, showcasing a small token of grandparently love. Growing up, the gift offered joy and stability amid the chaos of life with our drug-addicted mother and father. At that point, Kareem and I were unaware that our situation would soon change dramatically. One day, when we were nine and six years old, we'd climb those steps and find not a sack lunch but home. Home, as in a permanent living situation. Home, as in we would no longer be raised by our parents. Home, as in my own Black adoption, a nonlegally binding agreement executed between Ann, Henry, Grandma, Pop, Harold, and Diane. Though we were never formally adopted, our entire family, and the rest of the world, would soon recognize Ann and Henry as our parents.



If Ann and Henry had any complaints about becoming parents again, they never said so. I, however, was ashamed of my parents' instability and absence. I realized something was wrong with our lives when we lived with our parents. We were at the bottom of their list of priorities, and that hurt.

I quickly discerned that life with Ann and Henry was light years better than the environment of ripping and running I was used to. I felt it in the peaceful quiet of our Windsor Hills home, and our steady

routine of school, activities, chores, homework, dinner, bedtime. In the pat on the back from Henry, who was a germaphobe and uncomfortable hugging anyone, and in the home-cooked meals Ann prepared every night. Their devotion was palpable and warm, just like the constant heat in the house, a warm, dry musk radiating from the floor furnaces in the living room, hallway, and den, a combination of heat convection and my grandfather's homemade humidifier. My grandfather always kept a metal pot of water in the well of the furnace to diffuse the dry air. Sometimes, he would remove them to show my brother, Kareem, and I the white-and-green chalky buildup clinging to the bottom and sides of the pots. He'd chip little pieces off, letting us touch the rough mineral deposits. Henry explained how calcium and magnesium built up over time, and reminded us not to open the nickel louvered wall grates. These impromptu science lessons were typical of his parenting style. He was a purveyor of knowledge on everything from how the body digested food to why what we saw on television was a pack of lies.

The high heat, prompting everyone who climbed the thirteen steps to the front door to quickly shed jackets and sweaters, wasn't the only constant in our home. The crackling of pork bacon teaming in a cast iron skillet every morning was another certainty. My grandmother always cut the package of bacon in half and insisted that a long-handled fork was the only tool needed to turn the meat. Her mother-in-law thought it was *country*, but Ann said cutting the bacon was the only way the pieces would fit neatly in the skillet. Bacon disappeared

fast, and even Henry, who was a pescatarian, would snatch a piece if there was any left.

Evenings were reserved for the vinegary smell of collard greens and sweet Jiffy cornbread. Greens were Ann's favorite meal and she did not play when she made them. CNN was usually on in the background and the oven door was left slightly ajar to let the warmth escape into the kitchen. Earlier in the day, she would have picked the giant leaves from her garden, meticulously removing every twig and pebble, and then wash the greens in the kitchen sink. While they soaked, Ann would grab her cast iron skillet and put a little water in the bottom to simmer a smoked turkey wing until the meat fell off the bone. This could take an hour. While the meat cooked, Ann pulled the leaves from the stalk, tossed what she didn't need, and then gathered garlic salt, black pepper, sliced onion, and Lawry's seasoning salt. The aluminum stovetop pressure cooker would appear from a deep cabinet, and she'd combine the turkey wing with its hot gravy, seasonings, and enough water to cover the collards. She would lock the handle of the pressure cooker and let the steam work its magic. The *whisk-whisk* from the steam valve could be heard throughout the house, like a comforting whisper.

On the surface, our activities mirrored white middle class America: a secure household, church, piano lessons, and baseball. That should have been enough to take the sting out of my alternate family configuration, but it didn't. Peer approval, real and perceived, was important to me, and I felt embarrassed that almost all of my friends, Black and

white, lived with both parents, or at least their mothers. My family felt different, and not in a good way.

Fortunately, my friends did not made fun of my living situation, but they were definitely curious. “Why don’t you live with your mother?” was a standard question that I might be asked on the school bus or during a game of hopscotch or tetherball. There was no escaping the inquiry. My mom had a new man, with whom she relocated to Houston, Texas, with in 1981. I don’t remember her leaving. There was no party, no tears, nor a discussion about her moving two thousand miles away. She was just gone.

Before Diane moved to Texas, I’d deflect my friends’ curiosity. “We see her all the time.” The adults around us were too busy in the day-to-day of child-rearing to sit down and explain why my mother didn’t seem to want to live with us. I was left to use my imagination to come up with an answer that did not beget more questions.

After my mom moved, I’d say, “She moved to Texas, and we wanted to stay here.” That answer carried some truth and gave me control over our family narrative. It also shut down any follow-up questions, except, “Where is your dad?”

My response to that one depended on whether or not he was in jail at the time. I might say, “Oh, he got a job up near Magic Mountain or in Stanislaus.” That meant that his decision to move was not up to him. My dad made a point to see us but spent the next twelve years in and out of jail. Even when he wasn’t incarcerated, he was dealing drugs or making fake driver’s licenses and flaking on the weekends

he was supposed to see us. He never kicked his drug habit and was hooked on heroin when he was murdered in 1991, a victim of his own misdeeds and Black men's expendability in America.

Even with my grandparents' love and support, I felt inadequate. I was petite, looked younger than my years, and had a funny name. Our living arrangement did not have a formal definition, and no one told me that my Black adoption followed an established cultural tradition with its roots tracing back hundreds of years to Africa. Multigenerational family units in Africa included extended family, and at the center were the elders who held considerable social authority. We brought these ideas of family structure to America, though they would be tested for the next four hundred years under the institution of American slavery, Jim Crow segregation, mass incarceration, HIV, and AIDS.

Africans brought to America were used for two purposes: free labor and reproduction. Personal relationships were not acknowledged, let alone valued, as separation of family members began before Portuguese, British, and American slave ships set sail from Gorée Island, Elmina, Osu Castle and at least forty-five other slave ports. Men and women were purchased and then stolen from the African continent and forced to build infrastructure for the rapidly expanding American nation, breaking apart the multigenerational family structure that most African people knew. This separation led to fractured and manufactured family units among the Black community in America. Untethered Black people without relatives to greet



or house them made family on the farms and plantations where they were sold. Blood ties carried less significance because relationships between slaves were uncertain and often dependent upon the success or failure of cotton, sugar, or rice production in a particular region. Socially, the institution of slavery disavowed long-lasting connections between Blacks by making marriage between slaves illegal, as a reminder that they did not own themselves. And the perpetuation of fractured family units did not end with the Civil War.

Nineteenth and twentieth century sharecropping compounded fragile post-antebellum relationships between Black men and women, though marriage at least was legal. Sharecropping amounted to de facto slavery for unskilled laborers. Illiterate and powerless, farmers were duped into signing leases with egregious interest for animals, seeds, cabins, furniture, clothing, and fertilizer. With high debt, rigged balance sheets, and no other way to earn money, Black men and women were shackled to land they would never own. Many ran off in search of work and fair payment, leaving children and spouses destitute and defenseless. The need to survive overturned the ideals of African communal living. Sharecropping broke this traditional family value and made it impossible for the Black community to build neighborhoods, schools, or collectively shake off the dregs of slavery.

During the Great Migrations of the 1930s and 1940s, nearly six million Blacks left the South and headed north or west for jobs to get as far away from lynching, second-class citizenship, domestic terrorism, and social and economic discrimination as they possibly could.

The wartime economy beckoned, and family members sent glowing letters home about their prosperity up North, causing many Blacks to abandon farm work for better financial opportunities and educational options. They found work in the defense industry, auto manufacturing, navy shipyards, and other skilled positions. In cities, Black women found jobs in restaurants and hospitals, and as teachers, and riveters on ships headed to combat, though many were forced to work as domestic help.

While these opportunities seemed to help heal the Black family unit, Black men had a hard time obtaining skilled or permanent positions or advancing in their professions due to the presence of white immigrants and the continued discrimination against people of color. Furthermore, limited education resources, especially for those coming from the segregated South, put the Black community at a disadvantage from the start, leading to discriminatory hiring practices and limited opportunity.

Upon discovering that the land of milk and honey was hostile, some men returned south for guaranteed, if physically laborious, work on farms. These Black men would stay connected to the family unit that remained north, sending back money when they could. This idea of the working parent, both in the North and the South, created a new kind of family dynamic. Geographically, Dad was elsewhere, and Mom, now a single parent and most likely working as a maid, was not available to support her own children. Who was left to raise the children? Relatives or neighbors in similar situations. These migrants

were connected by circumstance, and the community that surrounded the unit became an extension of *family*.

The practice of raising nieces, nephews, cousins, and grandchildren was soon ingrained in Black households and the main reason Black people formally adopted at lower rates than whites did. Calling back to the multigenerational family unit of precolonial Africa, we did not need social workers or dependency court, just the blessing of the elders to raise a child within our community.

Black adoption had one other rule: a point of reference. The family taking in the child needed a connection with that child, even a tenuous one. We needed to be able to point to behavior, coloring, or height, and directly attribute those factors to a known or somewhat known parent, as opposed to taking in a stranger's child. White people took in strangers—we did not. Even though I didn't know it at as a young girl, my family was fulfilling a cultural model created for us by our ancestors.



Life with Ann and Henry was good. Bussing had come to the Los Angeles Unified School District just in time for me to take advantage of it. The Triad Program, a volunteer initiative to increase diversity in public schools had started, and I, along with other Black kids from Windsor Hills, were bussed to mostly white Westchester for fourth and sixth grades. The white kids from Westchester were bussed to predominantly Black Windsor Hills for fifth grade.

At the start of fourth grade, I attended a predominantly Black school in a lower socioeconomic area. Most of the kids were cool, though some were rowdy. I was spared from the typical urban school experience because I was placed in the gifted classes. I had caring teachers who were committed to their profession; they were mostly white. When the Triad Program came into effect, however, I switched from the poor school to mostly white Westport Heights and was immediately placed in all of the low reading and math groups. My teacher, Mrs. Thomas, old and white and past retirement age, assumed because I was Black and had joined the class late, I was slow. Mrs. Thomas called me Tina because I told her that was my name in an attempt to avoid the inevitable conversation about how unusual my real name was, and didn't give me another thought. I was bored by the remedial work and longed to take my place among the best and the brightest.

"The teacher placed me in the slow group," I told Ann a few days after starting school.

Ann was not having it. She spoke with Mrs. Thomas, and in no time at all, I moved across the room to join the advanced groups. Getting high grades leveled the playing field between me and my classmates and slowly diminished questions about my family structure. In school, I was a regular kid with both white and Black classmates. In time, everyone understood I was neither an orphan nor adopted. I had two parents and a dog and had to go inside the house when the streetlights came on every evening just like everyone else.

By the time I reached high school, I had found my place among my peers but had dropped my identity as Tina and was insistent on being called Nef. Luckily, our high school added a ninth grade during my first year, so I was spared being called a *scrub* or subjected to a new round of *titty* jokes by the upperclassman. Even so, I was still sensitive about my name and hesitant to reveal it to anyone new. One day, I met a boy on the bus.

“What’s your name?”

“Nef.”

“Nef, that’s it?”

“Neffetiti.” It would be a year before I was brave enough to try out the conventional spelling.

He paused for a moment and said, “That’s cool.”

Suddenly, I liked my full name too. I didn’t have to explain that my parents intentionally adjusted the original spelling or that I was named for a queen in Egypt. The really cute guy with eyelashes long enough to touch paid me a compliment. I paid him back with sarcasm. When he told me his name was Everett, I said, “So?” I liked him instantly and spent the next two years running from him.



In another parable of Black adoption, our birth parents became more similar to older siblings or cousins than parents. Ann was the matriarch and pretty much got her way. Even if Diane may have wanted authority over us, she lost her chance when she moved to Texas. We

knew this and played on her guilt in the letters we wrote her to get stuff we knew Ann was not going to buy for us. Mainly, we'd ask for designer clothes, and Diane would send cash for reversible Guess jackets, Ton Sur Ton pants, and United Colors of Benetton sweaters. She could act in an advisory capacity and give us things, but she couldn't get us out of punishment.

When I was sixteen years old, I pulled what I thought was a foolproof scheme to go to a dance hall that Ann had forbidden me from going to. My best friend Lori's boyfriend, Claude, and his friend Courtney were going, and I wanted to go too. The plan was for me to spend the night at Lori's, then wait for Courtney and Claude to pick us up and take us dancing. I figured that since I really was going to sleep over at Lori's after the party, a lie by omission seemed reasonable. Ann must have sensed something was up, because after dropping me off, she drove back around the corner. It was like divine choreography—Ann pulled away just as Courtney's burgundy VW beetle pulled up, with me and Lori piling in. Ann drove by again slowly, and we all froze. I was so busted, but we went anyway. I danced like it was no tomorrow, sweating so hard my pressed hair ballooned into an Afro and burning up in a pink Ton Sur Ton sweatshirt, Guess jeans miniskirt, and low heel white and leopard Doc Martens. The next day, I was served with a two-week *you will not talk on the phone or go anywhere* sentence. My mother did her best to mitigate my punishment by reminding Ann that teens did things like that. Her pleas fell on deaf ears.

It was worth it because I was coming into myself and had even

embraced my name Nefertiti, which meant *a beautiful woman walks forth* in full. The name that I used to hate so much now gave me depth, and sometimes I felt like two distinct people. One Nefertiti wore Talbot's preppy suits to speech and debate competitions and mock trials. The other, an Afrocentric teen sporting a white dress and a red, black, green, and yellow sash, wore a Nefertiti medallion hanging from a gold chain. I would recite "Black Panther Seduction," an original creative composition about a black panther whose broken heart left her ferocious and alone in the jungle. I had a mild fixation with the big cat, sensing a depth and vulnerability in her and myself. I even won a couple of awards for my original piece.

Though Ann and Henry had the final say on things, I heard my parents loud and clear when they steered me away from Black Student Union activities when I entered UCLA. Once upon a time, UCLA had been the scene of a massacre in 1968. The unsolved killings of Black Panthers John Huggins and Bunchy Carter were still fresh on their minds nineteen years later. From their time in the Black Power movement, Harold and Diane knew precisely how politically charged and dangerous college campuses could be, and the spell racialized rhetoric could cast on naive freshmen. Their advice was in line with older people who had seen things. They wanted me to remain focused, and I trusted Diane when she said, "Look, we've already done that bullshit: protesting, chanting, shooting at the police. You don't need to get involved in that."

They needn't have worried. Black students at UCLA in the late

1980s had a more global perspective, with a lot of energy focused on ending Apartheid. Our local concerns involved racial profiling of Black people by the campus police department and who was up on their African history. I was clear on my identity as a Black woman from Windsor Hills, and aware that I was a beneficiary of the civil rights movement, 1960s student protests, and the Black Power movement. I was no stranger to supporting my community, having performed community service projects in high school and as a debutante. So, when the seniors found out that my parents were part of the Black Power movement and wanted me to immerse myself in the Black Student Union, I was able to politely decline. My parents and other young people's efforts had allowed me to enjoy my undergraduate years without incident, and I did. I pledged a historically Black sorority, worked on my mentor's legislative campaign, and burned rubber up and down the 405 freeway visiting friends at other UCs, or flying to the East Coast to hang on the yard at Howard University.

When I was a senior, I took a political science class: Malcolm X and Black Radical Politics. You would think that with activist parents, I would have aced that class. Well, the professor was a white hippy who was stuck in the seventies. He used to sit cross-legged on the table at the front of the lecture hall and "rap" to the class about Frantz Fanon and liberation struggles throughout the world. Instead of words, he drew squiggles on the white board that I assume must have represented the thinking process or psychology of men like Malcolm X and Ché Guevara. I had no idea what he was talking about. I tried to read



*The Wretched of the Earth* but got lost in the small print and hot sands of Algeria. When I had a paper due, I either called my dad or went to see him and told him my situation. He gave me all of the answers, and I earned—well, he earned—a B on my assignment.

Undergraduate flew by, and my early restless confusion about becoming a writer or lawyer was short-lived. Ann and Henry had programmed me to work hard, get a solid education, and go to law school. They, along with my aunt Helen and my uncle Roy, were not on board with my pursuit of the arts, believing I would become a starving artist. Their fears did not deter me. The creativity my dad instilled continued to grow, and I never stopped writing.

I did live like an artist, bouncing from job to job, traveling all over the world and casually dating Black, Iranian, Latino, and white men, although nothing ever really serious developed.

Despite my lack of a husband or a singular career, in my early thirties, I began thinking about potential paths to motherhood. I thought a lot about the way I had been raised—my chaotic early childhood living with Harold and Diane; the uncertainty and pain I felt each time Harold went to jail and when Diane abruptly moved to Texas; the safety and comfort I felt as the center of Ann and Henry's home after the Black adoption took place and Kareem and I landed there for good. Did I have the potential to be someone's mother? Was I destined to repeat my parents' history? I didn't think so—in fact, I felt in my bones that I was truly meant to have a family.

I came to the realization that Harold and Diane had not been ready

to be parents when I was born. They were irresponsible and selfish. They were also brave, passionate, and reckless, and ironically, wanted the same thing their parents wanted: a better life for their children.

If only my parents understood how brave their parents were to ride that wave into the unknown, moving from the segregated South to the west and never looking back. If only my grandparents understood how brave their children were for directly challenging *the man* and standing up to an unjust, racist, sexist world. The only thing separating them was style. How wonderful it would have been if the four of them could have met in the middle. I guess I was the middle, a perfect blend of a free-spirited outlook on life, a love of words, and the strength to take risks. My parents' legacy combined with my grandparents' steady hand, dependability, and selflessness made me strong enough to think I could build a family on my own.

# Mommie Dearest, Daddy's Dead

**While my dad had always shared his story and beliefs** with me, my mother, Diane, was a bit of a mystery. After she moved to Houston, Kareem and my interactions with her were limited to the Christmas season, a random week or two during the school year, graduations, and two humid weeks in Houston during the summer.

“She doesn’t spend a lot of time with us,” I once complained to Kareem. She was visiting LA during the holidays but was out and about doing other things most of the time. She may as well have been in Texas. After the initial thrill of her arrival, shopping sprees in high-end Westwood, or an outing to the movies to see horror movies our grandparents would not take us to, Diane was gone. From my preteen perspective, the point of her visit should have been to see us, not her friends. So I resented when she disappeared and then reappeared to take us to Johnny’s Pastrami on Adams or Langer’s Deli on Alvarado,

across from MacArthur Park, for beef-and-barley soup. I learned to be indifferent and soon girded myself for her visits with the expectation that she would be in and out.

Diane was a fly girl and owned the 80s. Marcus, her common-law husband, had struck gold in street pharmaceuticals, and they lived large with multiple Mercedes-Benz cars, his and hers mink coats, and a nice home in an unassuming subdivision in Houston, Texas. She shared her largesse with us, and our summers in Texas included rafting the Guadalupe River, Houston Astros baseball games, and Maze featuring Frankie Beverly concerts. I never questioned my mother's love, but none of the stuff or trips could undo the fact that she lived in another state or that I didn't always feel important to her.

Though we spent time with my father's family, Diane never went with us to see Grandma and Pop when she came to visit, and my dad did not come around when my mother was in town. I'm not sure if he was being respectful of her time with us or if he just wanted to avoid her, but their separation was exacerbated by the fact that she was living the high life in Houston. She smoked cigarettes but had kicked her drug habit, while my dad was still struggling. My mother mailed us photos of the gleaming cars in her driveway, pictures of fun times in Cancun and at Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and one of herself posing in eel skin cowboy boots. The life she presented was carefree and glamorous, but it did not include us.

When she was in Los Angeles, she went on the hunt for expensive

perfume, and always carried a makeup bag filled with diamonds, gold, silver, and turquoise jewelry.

“Here, I want you to have this.” She took a diamond ring off her finger and gave it to me one day when I was sixteen. It was pretty, with three diamonds in a gold floral setting. We were sitting in my bedroom listening to Michael Jackson. I slid it onto my ring finger and watched it dangle. “It’s too big.”

“Wear it on your middle finger, then,” she said, proud of her ability to cast off such an expensive item. We were almost like girlfriends. Almost.

I admired the ring on my finger. In that moment, it was cool. I didn’t know many girls my age with diamond rings so I wore it to school. But the luster quickly wore off. Just as Diane had been unimpressed with her parents’ old-fashioned ways and their departure from all that she knew in Compton, I was equally unimpressed with her lifestyle. I accepted whatever gifts she gave, but that did not make her my mama.

Kareem was the only one who understood how I felt. Our mother swung by with presents and good times, but we still longed for a more stable presence from her. Our Black adoption was in place, and I didn’t question the lack of discussion that went on about our living situation. As an adult, I realized that culturally Black people do not question the details of a family’s dynamic, as long as everything was going well. Only when shit went sideways, like bad grades, talking back, or the time I got suspended from a summer computer class

for throwing a lit firecracker at a student who had been bothering me, was everyone brought in the loop. In my family, I don't think it occurred to Ann, Henry, or my mother to have the hard conversation or even ask if we felt adrift emotionally because of our informal situation. Their silence communicated that everything was under control, so we never thought to ask questions like, "How long will we live with Ann and Henry?"

Looking back, a simple conversation from Ann and Henry along the lines of, "We're not sure how long you'll be with us. Maybe a couple of years, maybe forever. Either way, your parents love you, and we're happy to have you," probably would have gone a long way.

Instead, we got nothing. We felt abandoned, and we each manifested that feeling differently. Kareem, who was a great athlete, became a class clown. He was very popular and used humor to mask his pain. I hid my emptiness in my books and began to pull away. Kareem wanted Diane's affection, and I wanted to understand her like I understood our dad. Then Harold was murdered when I was twenty-one, and it was like the universe had played a cruel joke on me. The one person I shared everything with was gone, and I was stuck having to settle for my mother. After years of emotional and physical absence, she tried to step up our relationship. I guess she thought that since my dad was gone, she would fill that space. She started calling multiple times per week, mailed Hallmark cards with sweet sentiments, and made it clear that she was there if I needed anything.

I refused her overtures. I didn't call and when she came to visit,

I saw her only begrudgingly. If we went to dinner, I would sit at the table with little or nothing to say. As usual, my mother would be dressed to the nines with makeup perfectly applied. The more she pushed, the more I resisted. All along, I strongly identified with my grandparents, who had become my parents. They were my heroes. They sacrificed their retirement and money to care for Kareem and me. In comparison, my mother did not seem like a good parent or role model of motherhood.

Maybe if Diane had shared who she was with me, I would have felt differently and been less critical of who I thought she was. I had grown ambivalent about having a relationship with her, and turned my focus to figuring out what I wanted to do for a career—become a lawyer or a writer.

During my first year of law school, I had a revelation. Bored to tears and stressed with the amount of reading and endless debates with classmates over case law and tortfeasor liability, I began writing fiction. Since my high school stab at creative writing, I had written a couple of poems but nothing long form. The oppression of being a law student reignited that old spark to become a writer like my dad. I didn't tell my grandparents. American history had determined that doctor, teacher, or lawyer were safer professions for Black children chasing the American dream. Expectations were high because we were playing catch up from hundreds of years of institutional racism and segregation. Aspirational Black parents, who still had the strength to dream for their children, insisted on these paths. They did not want

to see their offspring beat up by life, struggling, or denied opportunities because of their race or gender.

Lynchings of successful Blacks thought to be “uppity” by whites were still clearly in the rearview mirror, and no parent would knowingly put their child in harm’s way by encouraging participation in a profession that had a history of negative outcomes. Black parents had witnessed enough violence against Black business owners in Tulsa, New York, Rosewood, and Atlanta to last several life times. Suicide, public humiliation, homelessness, and drug overdoses of artists and musicians whose amazing talents were stifled or stolen by the white establishment made them leery of the arts and other nontraditional fields. The odds of success for Blacks in film, literature, photography, modeling, fine arts, and the culinary arts were marginal compared to whites. So white children got to chase dreams, because, win or lose, the spoils always seemed to go to them. Black parents simply wanted their kids to win, in any way that seemed reasonably attainable.

I had to be surreptitious in resurrecting my dream of being a writer. I kept my room a mess of yellow legal tablets and open law books strewn across my bed. A close-up of my computer monitor, however, would have revealed I was attempting to write a novel. I was writing about love’s progression through hell and using poetry to describe heartbreak over a guy I had dated in undergrad. It was so over the top! My characters, Baby and Toe-Up, brought respite from my thoughts of eventually taking the bar exam.



The more I wrote, the more I craved the freedom to create. I was so weary and conflicted about not wanting to disappoint my grandparents that I developed irritable bowel syndrome. My appetite waned because the gas and acid in stomach set my intestines on fire. The pain was intense, waking me out of my sleep. I would be doubled over in pain, trying not to move a muscle, lest the burning sensation return. I subsisted on Mylanta, salad, cut-and-bake chocolate chip cookies, and hot tea for six months. I lost a lot of weight and looked like a twelve-year-old. I didn't know where to turn or what I was going to do until I found Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*. In the pages about the evolution of man's consciousness, I reached an unspoken truth—I did not want to be a lawyer. The writing was on the wall, but family expectations were in place. I kept the charade up through the spring.

That winter break, my mother's fourteen-year relationship with her common-law husband, Marcus, was falling apart, and she wanted to come home to LA, to the place where I had peace, community, and emotional stability.

Her announcement broke me. I had written her a letter in September telling her that she was a dark cloud to my silver lining. I told her that while I could count on her to show up for celebratory events like graduations, she was never there for me on a regular Thursday. I resented her presence and had a hard time faking excitement when she was in town. She wrote back saying she felt like the dark cloud too, and went on to explain what she was going through. Everything was about her. Never an apology for her actions, never

an acknowledgment of my feelings, just how bad *she* felt. Her letter infuriated me and further strained our nearly nonexistent relationship.

The night I heard she might leave Marcus, I sat in the middle of my bed, junky with law books, ink pens, and liquid paper, and cried. I had not cried since my father died two years before. Despite everything that had happened in my life, I was generally a happy person, but that night I was distraught. My carefully crafted separate worlds were threatening to collide. I thought how selfish it was of Diane to run home to Ann and Henry when things got hard. They had been bailing Diane out her whole life *and* raised her kids. Wasn't that enough? Why couldn't she move away from Marcus but stay in Houston? I didn't understand why she needed to come back to Los Angeles.

Ann must have sensed something was up. That night, she kept appearing in my bedroom doorway. I would not look up from my book, and the third time she popped in, I was openly crying. She asked what was wrong, and I told her that if Mom came home, I was leaving. I had no job and no money, but I was determined to find my own place if I had to. Ann rocked and shushed me. I had finally adjusted to the years of Diane's absence and needed her to stay in Texas.

When school resumed, I went to the school psychologist. Once again, I was going against the grain, breaking ranks with cultural norms about how Black people handled family drama. White people put all of their business in their street, Black people did not. We'd rather self-medicate with marijuana or alcohol or sex or shopping or perfection

or food or suffer in quiet desperation than bare our soul to strangers, especially white ones. That was a no-no, but I had nowhere else to turn. That was not me acting white, it was me trying to untangle my feelings.

“You must be crazy,” my mom said over the phone. She had decided not to leave Marcus after all. And when I spoke with my busybody aunt Helen later, she warned me, “Don’t be telling white people our business.”

“I would’ve gotten a Black therapist, but that’s all the school had,” I defended. “All I’m trying to do is get my head right. What’s so wrong with that?” I needed help finding a place for my mother in my head and my heart. I already thought of her as an older sister, but had unresolved feelings about being the daughter of a woman who left her kids to go live it up in another state.

A few days later, Kareem and I were at home, sitting across from each other in the kitchen. He was still on winter semester break. “You’re going to make Mom feel bad,” he said.

“What about my feelings?” I shot back. “Why am I the bad guy? You can go to therapy too, you know.”

“No way,” he said adamantly. His loyalty was torn between the woman he missed the most and his sister, who had been there with him through thick and thin.

“Suit yourself.” As far as I knew, no one in my family had ever gone to therapy. No wonder they were giving me the side-eye. In my next session with Dr. Jamison, she cut right to the chase.

“You have been waiting for your mother to comfort that little

girl inside of you and that is not going to happen,” Dr. Jamison said firmly. “You have to do that yourself.”

“How?” I was bewildered and saddened that I would be stuck doing my mother’s work. Hadn’t I already done enough? I took care of my little brother in that cramped Inglewood apartment when she and my dad were too drunk or high to do so. I never told anyone about the time Diane took us to the welfare office on West Boulevard and told us to tell the social worker we were hungry. I was seven, and my parents had split two years before, and she needed more money. Or the next year when we saw our Christmas presents hidden in the closet and as an apology, she made us tell her boyfriend, “I’m sorry, Daddy.” We already had a dad, and it wasn’t that guy. I hated her for that. I covered for her over and over, and now I had to comfort myself because she still could not do it.

“Start by telling that little girl she is okay. And you are. Your grandmother has been your mother all along.”

That made me cry tears of relief. Finally, through all of the family silence, an outsider quickly acknowledged what I had known all along. I had never been without a mother. Ann had been with me, showing up, caring for me, and loving me as a mother loves a daughter. I was now free to claim Ann as my mother. Dr. Jamison’s suggestion was priceless. I shared none of this valuable information with my family. They couldn’t get past the fact that I was seeing a psychologist which was fine. Therapy was for my healing, not theirs. Without apology, I was on the emotional mend.

Later that spring, I went to Houston for a law school conference and refused to see my mother while I was there. I spoke to her briefly before the trip and called when I arrived at the hotel, twenty minutes from her home. My friends and I were preparing to go out, and she was pissed that I refused to go to her house. “I already told you I’m not coming to your house and you’re not coming here.” I was using the telephone in the bathroom of the hotel suite, with ten of my friends waiting for me to come out.

“Girl, are you okay?” my friend Dana asked from the other side of the door.

I covered the receiver with my hand. “I’m fine. I’ll be right out.” I was annoyed that Diane expected me to go to her and make nice. We had barely spoken since I went to therapy, and just because I was in town didn’t mean I had to act like everything was cool. I was attached to the grudge I held and still processing what I learned in therapy. The little girl inside of me was fragile.

“But I’m your mother,” she said.

“That doesn’t change anything.” I hung up, knowing that one day I would become a mother myself and know exactly what *not* to do.



I got kicked out of law school at the end of that term, having spent more time on myself and writing than my studies. I wasn’t upset. The dismissal was my ticket out of a predictable path, and I was free to be me, until I figured out what was next. Though my heart was set

on writing full-time, I had to eat, and returned to graduate school, where I earned a master's degree in Afro-American studies with an emphasis in United States history and women's studies. School was a day job where I had room to pursue my passion. It was during this period that my writing took off. My old fictional friends, Baby and Toe-Up, became real characters in the first of two novels I published. My books were part of the launch of the Black romance genre in the mid-1990s. It was an exhilarating time and the beginning of my writing career. My family, who had been unsupportive at first, now bragged endlessly about my success. Henry took out ads announcing the publication of my books in Black newspapers the *Los Angeles Wave Newspapers* and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. He was so proud.

After my first book came out in 1995, my mentor, Marguerite, who was a member of the California state legislature and recipient of a Black adoption by her aunt, threw me a lavish book signing party at the California African American Museum. Henry flew my mother in. On my way to the museum, I stopped by Ann and Henry's. My mother was getting ready and wanted to ride with me. Before we left, she did what she always did—made everything about her.

“So, you didn't want me to come,” she said, sliding on black pantyhose. She was sitting on the toilet lid in the small bathroom, and I was standing in the doorway.

“I never said that.” I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “Can I have one day about me?”

“You don't act happy that I'm here.”

I'd had enough. "You should ride with Ann and Henry," I said. I told Ann I would meet them at the venue, jumped in my two-seater Honda, and left.

Standing before the microphone in front of 150 people, I thanked and acknowledged almost everyone in the wide-open space, except my mother. I forgot she was there. As I left the mic, Marguerite whispered, "Your mother. Say something."

"Oops," I said and ran back to the podium. "Oh, and thanks to my mom who came out from Texas." I gave her an awkward hug and everyone applauded.

My relationship with my mother seemed to be completely stuck. We couldn't get past the stalemate.