

Just Between Us

Inspiring Stories by Women

by

**Selena Haskins, Christy Thomas, Adrienne Thompson, Janice Ross, Nicole
Dunlap, and T. M. Brown**

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CONTENTS

[Author Bios](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Mirrors Don't Lie by Selena Haskins](#)

[For the Love of You by Tamika Christy](#)

[Epiphany by Adrienne Thompson](#)

[Love Letters to Jahdai by Janice Ross](#)

[Falling for the One by Nicole Dunlap](#)

[Tinaah by TM Brown](#)

[Authors' Acknowledgements](#)

AUTHOR BIOS

Selena Haskins

Selena Haskins is a native Washingtonian who enjoys music, reading, spirituality, and spending quality time with her family. Besides writing, she loves basketball, particularly the Boston Celtics. Selena was inspired to write ever since she was a little girl. On February 16, 2013, Selena fulfilled one of her life's goals by publishing her first novel, *A River Moves Forward*.

Selena has always had compassion for the disfranchised, and therefore her stories addresses issues of poverty, race, abuse, and the family dynamics. By the same token, Selena infuses messages of hope, love, and forgiveness, which she believes are the qualities of humanity.

A River Moves Forward is available for purchase on:

Barnes and Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/a-river-moves-forward-selena-haskins/1114591561?ean=2940016227955>

Connect with Selena, she would love to hear from you!

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Tamika Christy

Tamika Christy was born and raised in the Bay Area and started writing at an early age after receiving a journal as a Christmas gift. In college, she majored in English with a creative writing option and realized her true passion for writing—and discovered an interest in becoming a published author. After graduation from college and uncertain of her career path, she attended law school.

Tamika's first novel, *Anytime Soon* was released in July 18, 2013. Tamika enjoys running, cooking, and spending time with her family. She is currently working on her second novel.

Anytime Soon is available for purchase on:

Barnes & Nobles: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/anytime-soon-tamika-christy/1115198830?ean=9781937084950>

Boutique of Quality Books: <http://shop.boutiqueofqualitybooks.com/Anytime-Soon-978-1-937084-95-0.htm?categoryId=-1>

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Adrienne Thompson

Adrienne Thompson was married at sixteen, a mother twice by seventeen, and thrice a mother and divorced by twenty-four. Adrienne Thompson is no stranger to adversity. Not your typical teenager, she went on to complete her college degree and to earn her nursing license, becoming an RN. She attributes God's faithfulness as the catalyst for her success in life. Now, having raised two children as a single mother, with a third fast-approaching adulthood, she is sharing a long hidden talent and passion with the world. Using the lessons that life has so expertly taught her as a guideline (betrayal, abusive relationships, self-esteem issues, witnessing the deteriorating effects of drug abuse), she has created stories that will both entertain and inspire readers. She currently has nine bestsellers in publication on Amazon.

Adrienne currently resides in Arkansas with her daughter. Formerly an RN, she now writes and publishes her stories full time.

Adrienne's books are available for purchase as follows:

Kobo: <http://store.kobobooks.com/en-us/Search/Query?query=%22adrienne%20thompson%22&fcmedia=Book&sort=none>

Nook: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/s/adrienne-thompson?store=allproducts&keyword=adrienne+thompson>

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Janice G. Ross

Janice G. Ross was born in Guyana, South America and migrated to the USA in 1980. She is an author who enjoys writing about social issues and personal experiences. Her debut release was entitled *Damaged Girls*. Janice uses the three books in that series to detail the effects of different forms of abuse, discussing issues that are known to be taboo. Her latest release, *Jumping Ship*, is a dedication to her country of birth and an introductory novella to the *Island Hopping Series* – due out in 2014. It's poised to be a colorful and emotional experience of life, love and family.

Janice enjoys reading. And is drawn to stories with distinct characters that she can love or hate, characters she can form alliances with or characters that she can swear off and despise. She is also weak for a good cultural tale, preferably in the form of historical fiction. Janice loves to be taken off guard by clever language and settings. Janice is also a devout supporter and promoter of other authors through social media. She hosts a weekly show, *Cultural Cocktails*, on the largest social radio network, Blog Talk Radio.

Damaged Girls I and II can purchased on:

Barnes and Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/damaged-girls-janice-ross/1114076750?ean=2940045145077>

Google Books: http://books.google.com/books/about/Damaged_Girls_I.html?id=JkuEHsNKnFOC

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Nicole Dunlap

Nicole Dunlap holds a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology and Child Development, and a Master's Degree in Counseling from Azusa Pacific University. She lives in San Bernardino with her husband and two beautiful daughters. She works for social services and has been self-dubbed the “gumbo genre” novelist, and believes books shouldn't be lightly seasoned. Her stories revolve around family and relationships and women's issues, drizzled with drama, peppered with suspense, and finished off with aromatic notes of romance. Nicole is the author of *Miss Nobody: The Shaw Family Saga*, which is part of a three-book series.

Miss Nobody: The Shaw Family & Series can be purchased:

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T. M. Brown

TM Brown lives in Stroudsburg, PA. She is a Human Factors Engineer by day, and an Author by night. Her first book, *A Life Not My Own*, is the story of her childhood and young adult life. There's love, loss, loneliness, triumph and more within the pages.

Tina writes in a creative way that makes you feel it's just the two of you in a room chatting. Tina's next novel was created from conversations she's had with her Grandma while growing up. She's enjoying discovering the characters and the storyline.

*****COMING SOON: *Struggles of the Womenfolk******

A Life Not my Own can be purchased on:

Barnes and Noble: <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/a-life-not-my-own-tm-brown/1113946678?ean=9781477295687>

Authorhouse: <http://bookstore.authorhouse.com/Products/SKU-000620537/A-Life-Not-My-Own.aspx>

You can connect with Author TM Brown through her social networks and Author's website, she would love to hear from you!

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Twitter: <https://twitter.com/TbrownM>

Author's Website: <http://author-tmbrown-com.webs.com/>

INTRODUCTION

This wonderful group of talented authors have come together to share their personal stories to encourage, strengthen, and empower other women. It is our desire that women all over the world will gain something positive from our experiences and share them with other women. It is good to be in the company of women who have been through it, lived through it, and are still here to tell it. *Just Between Us*, every woman has her own story to tell about her progression from yesterday to today. Sometimes we are the only ones who can understand each other's plights.

We've published our stories FREE of charge. We know that gift we receive is in the giving. After all, we are children of God and we need to be more patient, loving, and kind to one another.

We truly hope that you will enjoy our stories and will reach out with us through our social networks. We would love to hear from you...

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.- (NIV)

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.- (NIV)

Mirrors Don't Lie

By Selena Haskins

For if anyone is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, this one is like a man looking at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself, and off he goes and immediately forgets what sort of man his is.- James 1:23-24 New World Translation

I knew enough about the Bible to know that the Apostle James was referring to the spiritual side of a person in the verse mentioned above, but one morning I pondered over the symbolism of the mirror when I caught sight of myself before leaving for work. Every morning, I gave myself the once over before the mirror in the living room. Hair strands in place—check, no boogers in my nose—check, pants zipped—check, and off I went to work. But, this morning, I paused and stared at myself. My make-up could not hide the bags underneath my eyes, and the Visine didn't get all the red out. As my eyes stared back at me, I noticed they looked sad, tired, exhausted. I then understood why the Apostle James used a "mirror" as symbolism in the scripture. A mirror will always tell you the truth about yourself. A mirror could only reflect what was being presented. On that particular morning, the mirror before me was saying that I looked like an ugly duckling, and I felt like an ugly duckling because I was totally burned out! I stepped in even closer to the mirror and watched the pupil of my eyes dilate and then shrink under the lights. I needed rest. I wondered how I got to this place of exhaustion, but I couldn't ponder too much or else I would be late for work again. That was me, always rushing, juggling many tasks, caring for everything and everyone, and making little time for me. It was important that I took care of everything else first. I needed new clothes, shoes, but that could wait, my baby needed clothes and shoes. I needed rest and relaxation, but that could wait, my baby needed my time and attention, my congregation needed me, my husband needed me, my friends and family needed me. I could wait. I snatched up my purse and hurried out the door.

"This is just great, I'm stuck in traffic again," I slammed my hands against the steering wheel. My mind tried to think of an excuse when I pulled over to the side of the road to email my job that I would be late. Guilt came over me. I should have went to bed earlier then I would have gotten up earlier, but if I did, clothes wouldn't have gotten washed, dishes wouldn't have gotten cleaned, and clothes for the next day wouldn't have gotten ironed. What about nights when I just couldn't sleep? My mind wondering endlessly about the next day's task and before long the alarm was sounding. Well, guess what? My job didn't care. It was not my job's fault that I had responsibilities. It was not my job's fault that I hadn't been able to sleep well through the night. Duty called, and if I wasn't there, then I could say bye-bye to being able to ever buy clothes for myself or anyone else! Bills wouldn't get paid either. Secular work was unforgiving and unsympathetic.

Of course as soon as I got to work there were fires that I had to put out. Everything was urgent, including the fact that "so-and-so" kept complaining that the fax machine wasn't working and I discovered it was out of paper. Why he didn't see the blinking red light was beyond me. Still, I had to fix that, and a bunch of other minor things deemed to be an emergency. I raced to get everything done so that everyone could be happy. By lunch time, it started happening. My heart started pounding heavily, my palms were sweating, my legs felt numb, and every negative thought raced through my head and spun around fast like the hands on an ancient clock. I felt dizzy. *Not now*, I told my mind.

Take a deep breath this will pass, I kept telling myself. It didn't pass, at least not fast enough for me. My hands trembled as I reached inside my purse for my anxiety medicine. I was having another panic attack. I swallowed the medicine and started praying to Jehovah God. *Please Jehovah in Jesus name let this pass. Let me be OK.* Faster than the medicine could even take place, I felt Holy spirit come over me and help me to focus on reality. There was no impending doom. I was not going to pass out or faint. I was not having a heart attack. Finally, I was able to make it through the rest of the day.

My doctor had me examined by a cardiologist specialist and also ran a bunch of tests that all came back normal. My symptoms were clearly isolated to anxiety, what a relief I felt, at least temporarily. "You still need to get to the underlying cause," Doc cautioned. You see, I didn't realize how tired I was. I had just published my first book, *A River Moves Forward* and things were going great. Sure I had several interviews, photo-shoots, book signings, emails flooded with new fans, and new social connections with other authors that kept me on the computer for hours! That was *okay* I told myself. This was a *good* thing! I didn't realize that even fun projects if not put in their proper place could become just as overwhelming as everything else. At any rate, Doc prescribed a new medicine for me and I couldn't wait to take it. I believed it would help keep my anxieties at bay- wrong! The medicine surely energized me and made me feel happier. Heck, I was bouncing off the walls at work and throughout the day, but that was just it, I was too hyped! At night I would wake up looking at the ceiling wondering what time the party started. I was sleeping even less maybe 3 hours at best! I was losing weight because I wasn't as hungry, but because of the lack of sleep I would eventually crash!

"I'm going out of my mind," I told my husband. He was more patient than I was in this regard. He insisted I give the medicine a chance, but after another week I was done! I rushed to my doctor's office and he immediately told me to stop taking the medicine. It would take even longer to get it out of my system and I started feeling crazy. Not manic crazy, just abnormal. I kept pushing myself to do all of my usual activities, and because I couldn't sleep, I started working on the sequel to *A River Moves Forward*. I would also read the Bible and pray. Nyquil and Benadryl became my best friends, but I never took the two of them together. It was either Nyquil one night and Benadryl the next until my doctor prescribed sleeping pills. I took the sleeping pill and it worked! However, I feared becoming addicted so some nights I would skip the sleeping pill and all medicines and try to see if I could fall asleep on my own. It didn't work, so I moved on to natural things like herbal teas which did help some. On desperate nights I would drink two glasses of wine, but I didn't like the hangover feeling in the mornings. I wasn't being patient, but I was desperate. When you're sleep deprived you become even more anxious to actually get sleep!

My doctor recommended that I talk to a therapist after a month had passed and I was still having trouble sleeping. I followed his advice apprehensively because I didn't know what I was going to talk about. After a few visits I told my doctor, sure it's good to talk, but I felt like it was just a casual conversation with a friend. He insisted I go back to the therapist and ask her, based on her professional expertise, for a diagnosis. *Great! Now I'm in the middle of two doctors trying to figure out what the heck was wrong with me!* The therapist had a hard time saying what was wrong with me because I was pretending that everything was just fine. Surely *I* didn't have a problem. *I was superwoman! Nothing could've been wrong with me! I felt able to handle any and everything!* That's what I told myself, but that mirror did not lie. The therapist got down to the nitty-gritty somehow. I laid back on her couch with my eyes closed as explained everything. When I opened my eyes, I caught the therapist staring at me in shock. When she caught my gaze she smiled, and tried to hide her surprise by pulling out her clipboard.

"Well?" I looked over at her.

She seemed to be thinking before she spoke. First she commended me for opening up, and then she spoke frankly.

"You need to take a serious timeout!" she exclaimed. "You need to start right now by taking care

of Selena, that's for sure!"

"But you don't think that's selfish?" I asked.

"Absolutely not!" she replied, adamantly. "If you don't take care of yourself no one else will. And if you're waiting for somebody else to take care of you then good luck."

"People depend on me. It would be unloving and unchristian-like not to help other people."

"You're right, but not at the expense of putting yourself in the position you're in now. Your solution is quite simple, but you will have to put it to practice," she explained. "It starts by first using one word."

"What word is that?" I raised my brow.

"NO."

I chuckled. She couldn't be serious. I couldn't believe that was her idea of a solution. I wondered what school she attended. Maybe I was scheduled with the wrong therapist.

"You laugh, but I'm serious. When you learn to say no, not just to other people, but to projects that you know are going to take up too much of your time or make you even more tired, you will start feeling better about yourself. You will be less tired, and your *mind* will learn to relax, so by the time you get home or when it's time for bed, it should be easier for you to fall asleep."

"That's easier to do with things outside of work, but what about at work?"

"Pace yourself, delegate tasks, and organize. You are only one person. If someone needs something done faster when you're already working hard enough, you have a right to tell them they have to wait or they can do it themselves."

"Well, what about all of these ruminating negative thoughts I have? It's like I can't turn my brain off most days."

"Part of it is a lack of sleep, part of it is likely a habit you've developed. But, for every negative thought, replace it with something positive or tell yourself, 'I'm not going to think about that right now, because it doesn't make me feel good.'"

As I lie there, I kept thinking that her solutions were too simple, but she insisted if I put them to practice I could get better at it. She also explained how easy it is for people like me who actually like to help others to say "NO." We enjoy the feel of successfully helping other people, but after people dump their problems or issues on us, they go about their business, leaving US feeling empty or guilty because we didn't say "NO" and wished we had.

Like any assignment, my personal task from the therapist was embraced like a challenge. That was me, the competitive nature to get things right – be right, and fix it. I had the same spirit years ago when I played basketball. I carried those same perfectionist tendencies with me throughout my life. Little did I know, it would be those tendencies that would wreck havoc on my psyche! On the other hand, I could use that go-to spirit to encourage myself to do better.

The first thing I did was put in a leave slip at work for one week's vacation. It dawned on me that I did not have a vacation in five years! Yes, you read that correctly. I had only taken a few days here or there, mostly because I didn't have the annual leave to take. I always saved what little leave I had for my son's doctor's appointments or something that needed to be taken care of with the house such as a repairman coming out to service something. With one week off and not enough money to travel so suddenly, what was I to do?

"You can have a stay-cation," the therapist said to me during my next visit. I couldn't imagine how much fun a "stay-cation" could be? I pictured us staying at home watching TV and before long it would be time to go back to work.

I was wrong! Our stay-cation as a family turned out to be one of the best vacations we had since our son was born! We did quite a few things locally and it was like a real vacation. Not to mention, I finally got some sleep! I sleep for hours on-end, and we didn't leave out the house until the afternoons

or evenings depending on what we planned for the day. I actually came to appreciate my hometown of Washington, DC again. There was so much to do! A lot had changed since I was a kid. DC had built up so many sightseeing places from the Madam Toussaint's Museum, to the Spy Museum, and restaurants galore! We also had the amusement parks at our disposal, and didn't need much money for gas. We had fun without going broke!

By the time I went back to work I felt like a new person. I stood in front of the mirror without any make-up on. My face was practically glowing. The only thing I added was a little lip gloss. There was no need to hide any ugly fatigue. I didn't feel like an ugly duckling nor did I look like one. My coworkers noticed right away how refreshed I looked, and all of them asked where I had gone for vacation. I proudly answered, "I stayed right here at home." I expected them to say something that would make me feel bad about it, but instead, most of their responses were... "Those are the best vacations because you get to rest!" I was surprised, but happy the responses weren't negative.

Overall, I learned that putting myself first doesn't make me a selfish person; it makes me a woman who loves herself enough to realize that she's important too. I came up with a routine that will help me stay on the right course as I continue to move forward. I promised myself from then on, that I would pay more attention to how something feels rather than what something looks like. Instead of appearing to be that perfect mother, friend, and wife. I would rather look human by simply doing the best that I can. If I'm really tired, I know to take a break now, even from projects deemed fun. I am not going to feel guilty nor allow others to put guilt trips on me when I decide to take a break for myself. We all have our limitations, and we must recognize that or the mirrors of life will show us our truth rather than what we want to see it or not. Secondly, I understand that if I cannot do it, it will get done eventually either by me or someone else. Everything does not have to happen today.

We all have help if we open our eyes and look around. Pride can make us blind to the help that's available every day. We have to take advantage of it and trust that other people will do a good job. Besides, God always blesses his people with assistance. There is not a single person in the Bible who did not have a companion or even a stranger to help them. Adam had Eve, Moses had Aaron, Ruth had Naomi, David had Jonathan, and even Jesus had his apostles.

So, each day as I look in the mirror, I'm always searching for the truth within myself, and not just spiritually. I use the mirror as my checkup overall, because I know it will always tell me the truth, no matter how ugly. I will use that truth to continue to make myself a better person, according to God's will and purpose, not *man's*. Man is *never* satisfied, and is judgmental, but God is patient and understanding. He knows what Selena Haskins is capable of. No longer will I allow anyone to push me beyond my limits or allow their judgments to cause me to feel guilty and browbeat myself into fitting their standards. I'm *very* happy and blessed to have a friend in Jehovah and Jesus Christ, because with them all things are indeed possible!

For the Love of You

By Tamika Christy

As a single young man, my dad did the best he could to raise me and make life good for the two of us. Without a good example, and high hopes for his baby girl, my dad turned his life over to God and vice gripped the Pentecostal culture. The rules and culture of the church we attended were strict by any standard. There was a long list of things that were considered “worldly”, and off limits to members within our church. We didn’t go to the movies much or listen to any of the cool songs my classmates sang at school. I felt like the odd one out when the girls at school raved about the newest R&B song or talked about the latest movie release. My dad and I socialized, but it was mainly with other church members. My dad also forbade sleepovers. Whenever I asked to sleepover at a friend’s house, he would tell me I had my own bed and didn’t need to sleep in anyone else’s. I didn’t like it but I didn’t complain much. Overall, life with my dad was sterile, but good. He was strict but he was nice to me and there was no drama. Things were stable and I was his only child so he spoiled me. My dad taught me how to fish, how to clean house, the difference between a Phillips head and flat head screwdriver, how to pray and, how to be a lady. My dad believed women should have high standards and he was going to be certain those high standards did not escape me. My God-fearing father was a wonderful example of ambition, strength and intelligence. He was a tough cookie though and gave little praise and even less affection. He was a provider and that was how he expressed love.

I visited my mom and sister infrequently throughout my childhood and teenage years and I was always glad to see them. My mom didn’t raise me and it didn’t seem odd to me until I was a little older. My dad never spoke ill of my mom. For all I knew, they had broken up, and my dad drew the lucky straw and got me. As a child my fondest memory of visiting my mom was her odd and rough laugh. She was the exact opposite of my dad with her carefree nature, easy laughter, and cursing. Cursing wasn’t necessarily an amazing thing to me, it was just something I wasn’t used to and I found the rebellious behavior funny. My mom was beautiful, she wore big pretty wigs and her infectious smile caused her eyes to crinkle in the corners. Whenever I went to see her, my stomach danced and with each departure, I cried.

As a child, I didn’t think about whether I preferred my dad’s strength and stability to my fun-loving mom. I hardly knew the difference. I knew they were different and I knew I loved them both. And even though my love for the two of them was unconditional, the fact remained that I was primarily under my dad’s care and his influence trumped my mom’s. I worked hard to please both of my parents. I did well in school and I stayed out of trouble for as long as I could. My dad ran a pretty tight ship and as I got older, I found myself wanting more independence. During my senior year of high school I got my first job and I commuted from school several times a week on the bus. I found the freedom exhilarating. My routine of work and school was manageable and six months into my new job, I met my first boyfriend. I found out that I was pregnant shortly after graduating from high school. I was deathly afraid of my dad’s reaction because I knew he would be hurt and angry. My dad often said, “Life is about choices and consequences”. He was right. I had made a choice and was faced with the consequences of being a mother.

My parents’ reactions were a prime example of their differences - my dad was deeply disappointed and concerned about my future and my mom was elated. It was hard for me to talk to my dad because

I felt ashamed of myself and I knew I had disappointed him. So, as my belly grew, so did a renewed relationship with my mom. I talked to her and spent more time with her during my pregnancy than I had my entire life. I discovered how much I liked her and took note of our similarities and differences. The physical features and the odd, rough laughter seemed to be the extent of our likeness. Other than those things, we were pretty much opposites. She told me I was too young to be so uptight and I thought she was a tad too free-spirited for her own good. I also began to notice how soft she was—not just to the touch, but soft-hearted and gentle. She gave second chances, she didn't hold grudges, and she was genuinely sweet and nice. Soft was new to me. My dad had taught me many things, but being *soft* was not one of them. My mom noticed a few things about me as well.

"You're too hard on yourself," she'd say.

"Give people a break," she'd say.

"Why are you so rigid?" she'd wonder out loud.

She was right about me. I didn't believe in excuses, didn't like to give too many chances and was hard on myself and others. My mom didn't understand why I was so upset with myself about the pregnancy. She didn't think it was the end of the world. People got pregnant every day, she reminded me.

By the time my daughter was two years old, my mom and I were as close as a mother and daughter could be. You'd never know she missed most of my childhood and adolescent years. And it didn't matter. She was there, and she was a wonderful mom and grandmother. Getting to know my mom had a ripple effect. I started to understand things about myself that were formerly a mystery. I had a lot of my mom's character but I didn't realize it before. My dad taught me the logistics of being a lady-neighbor, clean and appropriate, but that was the extent of his expertise. Mom taught me how to care for my daughter and for myself. She taught me how to forgive and love myself. How to let go of things I couldn't control and keep moving forward no matter what the pace. She said if I didn't, I would not be able to love anyone else and worse than that, it would be hard for anyone to love me. I took her advice in stride, but didn't practice it for a long time. Her influence was still too new and old habits die hard. My dad taught me that I had to be righteous, respectable and wary of the games men play. Yet another way my parents differed.

My mom and I turned into quite the duo. When there was a business issue that needed to be handled, she called me. When I needed guidance regarding matters of the heart or conscience, I called her. She offered insight from a tender side, a side that I still hadn't tapped into. I maintained a wonderful relationship with my dad, but I learned that some things you need mom for. I began to start off each morning with a prayer to the good Lord and a phone call to my mom. She could make me laugh no matter what else went on in my chaotic little world. She'd greet me and then selflessly let me ramble on about what worried, ailed, or excited me. My emotions ran the full gamut and mom was always ready for them.

Although my mom was carefree on the outside, she had demons of her own. She felt guilty about her absence in my life and some other choices she made. She had taken the hard road in life and often wondered why God saw fit for her to still be on earth. She was searching for her purpose. Her children were adults and her grandkids were happy and well taken care of. She had mended relationships and settled her life down and despite how her presence had changed my life she still didn't feel as if she had much to offer. I was determined to help my mom the same way she had helped me. Ten years into our new relationship, my mom had guided and supported me through marriage, college, another daughter, law school and divorce. My mom never missed an occasion or morning phone call. She was supportive, loving and kind through it all.

We'd grown to a place where we taught one another. I started taking her places she'd never been and she showed me how to be a better woman and mother. She was forgiving, kind and sweet. I was busy, organized and frazzled. She was a doting grandmother. I was a divorcee on a mission to support

my family. Mom was an outgoing and fun free spirit that didn't care what anybody thought. I was reserved and fairly in tuned to the opinions of others. Mom was the soothing voice of reason, and I was the problem solver. We were twins with different powers. Physically we matched, spiritually we matched, but sometimes we were like Nirvana and Billie Holiday...totally different.

Although my parents split when I was very young, they maintained a good friendship and it's actually pretty refreshing. Graduations, grandkid milestones, and holidays-we spent together hassle and drama free.

Once things in my life began to settle, I had more time to spend with my family. I took my mom out more and tried to find things that I thought she would enjoy. I even tried to get her to exercise with me. I liked to run, but mom's idea of cardio was vacuuming the floor. I took her to plays, concerts, dinners, shopping and we travelled some.

My oldest daughter graduated from high school in 2010 and shortly after my mom celebrated her 59th birthday. A week later my dad was visiting at my house. We stood in the kitchen talking when his cell phone rang. My dad is the coolest guy you ever want to meet and he hardly gets excited so when I heard the anxiousness in his voice, my interest piqued. He listened to the caller and all of my senses kicked in. I knew something was wrong. It took everything in me not to interrupt his conversation and ask what happened. After all I was not only an adult but a parent and I had to lead by example. So I used my manners and waited until he got off the phone.

He looked at me and my heart started pounding. I didn't understand his expression and I didn't understand why he reached out to me. Even his words were incomprehensible. My mom hadn't died. Why would he say that? What was he talking about? I had just spoken to my mom less than two hours before. We had dinner last week for her birthday. I remembered it clearly. She wore an amber-colored maxi skirt and a matching headband. My sister and I took her to dinner and she said I should have given her a surprise party for her 60th birthday. In between laughs, I reminded mom that her 60th birthday was the following year. She put up a little protest and we did the calculation and determined that she was in fact 59 and not 60. I promised her a 60th party the following year. And always true to her sweetness, she agreed with a smile.

We were also planning to go to a concert in a few days, planning to travel more when I retired. I wanted her to guide me through menopause and hold me when my daughter went away to college, which was happening in two short months and yet, my dad was standing there telling me some nonsense about her being dead. I shook my head to clear it and informed him that he was wrong. I needed to get to her and I could fix everything. That's what I did, I fixed things. As I tried to gather my purse and grab some shoes, I vaguely remember hearing him saying she was standing outside and passed out. That's when I knew it was a mistake. People don't die that way. Something was wrong. People die from illness, drowning and gunshot wounds, people don't just drop dead. This was a horrible mistake that someone would have to explain later; but at that moment, I needed to get to my mom and make things right.

But first, I had to get my bearings. My 8-year old daughter had company. I had promised to take the two girls to the movies. I couldn't disappoint them because someone had made a mistake. That would never do. I asked my dad to be sure to take them to the movies. Being the absolutely amazing man he is, my dad, teary-eyed and full of concern, promised to take the girls while I, teary eyed and confused, left my house to go and see about my mom.

Even though I didn't believe what my dad had told me, on the way to my mom's house, I called a cousin to give her the news anyway. I was shocked to hear myself say it. I told her the news and asked her to meet me there. In the haze of emotion and confusion, I could hear my words permeate in my head.

"They said mom died. I'm on my way there."

I cried, sobered up and cried some more. My phone rang but I couldn't bring myself to answer it. I

tried to reach my sister. My sister, whose emotional connection to my mom was stronger than the umbilical cord that once physically connected them. She would be devastated and lost. I got sad for her. I called her several times only to be greeted by her voicemail.

It seemed like forever, but I finally got there and my thoughts were confirmed. No police, no paramedics, just a few visitors. I knew it. Sometimes people reacted too quickly, called an emergency when there wasn't actually an emergency. I'd figure it all out later. At that moment, I just needed to get in there and look at my mom, hug her and ask her how this horrible rumor happened. I was still getting used to her; I wasn't ready to give her up.

As soon as I stepped out of the car, my sister came to the door and I lost my breath. There are some things in life that don't need to be said. If you burn a pot of rice, you will smell it and know without actually seeing it and if you catch a flat tire while driving, you will know without actually seeing the flattened tire. Just one look at my sister and I knew. The look on her face confirmed that there was no misunderstanding; no vicious rumors and nothing I could fix. Mom was gone and my sister's distorted face and broken stance was all the confirmation I needed.

She was gone, my best friend, my therapist, my kid's "Nene". She was gone and I didn't get a chance to say goodbye. I wouldn't be able to give her the party she wanted and I hadn't told her how much I liked her new wig. I meant to tell her earlier, but we got off the phone before I could.

My mom and I had about twenty years to get to know each other and we didn't miss any opportunities. Even though she doubted herself sometimes, she taught me more than she could ever imagine. I am a much better mother and woman because of her. The day she died, I decided that I would keep her with me and I have held on to that decision. Each day I try to be a little more like her by being a little more understanding, a little more carefree, a little more loving and a little more spirited. Some days are better than others but I am not giving up. I need her with me and each day I work to keep her and her memory alive. My girls and I talk about her often and it's always some funny memory- NeNe dancing in the car or Nene's failure at trying to do a selfie with her Smartphone.

Towards the end of her life, my mom moved in with my grandfather because he needed someone to help care for his needs. I can't describe to you how much joy that brought to her. She had found her purpose and rekindled her relationship with her dad, much like she and I had done. My mom was genuinely happy. She had no loose ends to tie, nor any broken relationships or conflicts. She felt good, she looked good and she finally found her purpose. I am sad that she's not here physically but I feel her presence every day and I am glad she left this earth while she was in a good place emotionally and spiritually. I teach my girls some of the same things my mom taught me-how to love, how to forgive, how to keep moving ahead. Valuable lessons taught in a way that only a mother can teach. She touched a special place in my heart and as I teach my girls the things she taught me, I appreciate her now more than ever.

In life things will change. We will gain things and we will lose things. And just as some things change, some things will remain the same. We will all leave this earth eventually, but let's do something worthwhile while we are here. Let's appreciate who we are and what we have and find the true value of life and relationships. Love those that are close to you and those that aren't close to you. We never know how much a little love and a little time can change a person's life.

Just as some things change, some things remain the same. I still talk to my mom every single day and I still dominate the conversations.

Epiphany

By Adrienne Thompson

-You-

I loved you
Gave you my body and soul
And you laughed at me
You treated me like a joke

You used me up
There's nothing left inside
You emptied my heart
Assaulted my pride

And when I thought you were done
You came back for more
And with my spirit
You wiped the floor

You shattered my dreams
Laid to rest my hopes
Loved yourself and no one else
And it's hard for me to cope

Called me names
Put me down
Criticized and ridiculed me
And you loved to screw around

You never loved me, despite your words
Couldn't have cared less
Tore up my life
Left me in a mess

Now I'm so afraid
Can't seem to open my heart
Been trying to move on
Praying for a new start

The wounds are so raw
The pain is still fresh

Years have passed
But it feels like you just left

I'm so scared of being hurt again
I don't think my heart can take it
If this time love doesn't win
And so I live day to day

Wishing for love and happiness
Keeping my heart tightly locked away
Afraid that I'll fail yet another test
Afraid of the price my heart will pay.

I was at a point in my life where I was walking around with the weight of the world on my shoulders. My job was stressing me, my man was stressing me, and my bills were stretching me. I was struggling to hold things together for my three kids. I was fighting what felt like a losing battle against poverty and depression. I had a good job, but with that good job, I had accumulated a pile of bills as I tried my hardest to do with one income what could better be done with two. My head hurt and my back ached from the twelve hours I'd busted my behind working at the hospital and I was more than disgusted with my former husband/baby daddy and his sporadic child-support payments.

This man had already left me with a five week old, two other children, and no job. It had taken time, sheer will, and much help from the good Lord to make it from the pit of depression I fell into after he left, to deal with the heartache and disappointment and humiliation that comes along with a failed marriage, but I had managed to make it through all of that only to land in a new space full of new stressors—single motherhood.

At least I had a decent job and a decent home and my smart, beautiful children were pretty easy to raise, but still there were three of them and only one of me. I was one person dealing with three separate personalities, moods, and quirks. It took two to make them, there definitely should've been two of us there to raise them, but no, I was it. There was just me and the pressure of having to teach my girls to be women and my son to be a man was staggering. It felt like I was carrying a boulder of parenthood around with me day in and day out and my knees were buckling beneath the pressure and the mere weight of the load.

That's where he came in with his looks and his swagger. He wasn't Denzel handsome, but he possessed the strong facial features that had always appealed to me, and he had a way about him that made him stand out in a crowd. He wasn't tall or the best dressed man I'd ever seen. He was just magnetic, and so cool you would've sworn he was Billy Dee's twin brother. The confidence he exuded was almost palpable.

He was smooth and slick—too slick for a girl like me who'd only ever loved one man her whole life and had married that man and given him children, too slick for me since I was in such desperate need of love. I was so desperate for love that I looked for it on the sidewalk while driving down the street. I searched for it on the pews of my church. I wanted—no—I needed love desperately. And that made me ripe for his picking.

I met him at work. He smiled at me, and day after day, would come into my place of business, driving a clean, white SUV. He was always very cordial towards me, and maybe if my self-esteem hadn't been located somewhere below sea-level, I would've seen his friendliness as flirting. But instead, I focused on my work and smiled at him in return of his smiles, greeted him when he greeted me, and went on with my work—the longing still inside of me, the need for love intensifying with every breath I breathed.

Then one day, he asked for my number with a caveat that he was married. Yes, he was up front about it—made no excuses and told no lies. He was married, but he wanted to talk to me. He said I was sexy. That was a word I'd never heard paired with my name. My husband had often made me feel desirable but never sexy.

That alone made me wonder about this man. And so I gave him my number, but my bruised ego never let me believe he would really call me. It was just nice that he'd shown interest in me, I thought.

Imagine the giddiness, excitement, and sheer delight I felt when he actually *did* call me. We talked and he asked me about my life, my children, and my interests. He was easy to talk to, and he was very skilled at listening. I enjoyed our conversations, so when he asked to come visit me at my place, I agreed. I introduced him to my kids, and they liked him. He had kids of his own—several kids, but

that didn't concern me. Neither did the fact that he had a wife. After all, someone had slept with my husband and taken him from me. Why should I care about his wife's feelings? Why should she be my concern at all? I wasn't looking for forever. I was looking at right now. I was looking for some relief, something to ease my heartache and plug up the holes my ex had left in my soul. I needed to feel wanted.

And what she didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

So I saw him a few times, and we talked and held hands and the first time he kissed me, he was trembling. The thought that I excited him that much made me feel like superwoman. I excited him and with his touch, he made me feel alive again—jump-started my femininity. He was passionate and skilled and in this one man, I found all of the relief and comfort I needed. And against my better judgment and my own intentions, I fell in love. I loved this man and though he was married, he gave me more time and attention than the man whose surname I still carried ever had. He showered me with attention, spent the night with me, and called me all times of the night when we were apart. Said he couldn't get enough of my love.

And so our love grew, day by day, week by week, month by month, and I settled into my role as his mistress. He gave me his love and his time, and I reciprocated with all of my heart and soul. I raised my children and went to work and never missed a Sunday at church all the while giving my heart and my body to another woman's husband.

Then one evening he came to visit me with his head hung low. He'd crashed his car and needed to borrow mine. Of course I let him. I mean, we were in love. If he needed my help, I was glad to give it to him. But as the few minutes he promised it would take him to handle his business turned into hours, I began to worry. Then I began to wonder. What business did he have at night anyway? When he finally returned, he smelled funny and when I asked him about the smell, he readily admitted that what I smelled was marijuana. I was shocked but not shocked enough to stop seeing him. I loved him and him returning late or smoking marijuana wasn't enough to destroy what I felt for him.

Later, he dropped another bomb. He'd lost his good job and asked if he could borrow twenty dollars. Oh, and could he use my vehicle again? I was a little more apprehensive this time but nevertheless, I said yes. Why? Because I loved him. And there I was again, pacing the floor, waiting hours for him to return. Praying he wouldn't wreck the vehicle my father had so graciously gifted to me. This time, it was nearly daybreak before he returned and I was so angry, I broke it off right then and there.

Yet, I loved him and I needed him. So when he called, I let him back into my heart and my life. And as time ticked away, his behavior continued to change more and more. He would borrow my car and my money and spend less and less time loving me. But in my mind, I believed that if I just held on things would go back to normal and he would once again fill up the empty spaces my ex-husband had left behind. I couldn't give up hope because I loved him.

I loved him when his marijuana use escalated to a crack addiction. I loved him when he was arrested and incarcerated. I loved him when his wife left him. I loved him when he was released from jail. I loved him when he moved in with me with a promise that he was clean. I loved him when he relapsed. I loved him when he stole from me. I loved him when he cheated on me. I loved him when his other woman vandalized my vehicle. I loved him when he totaled my vehicle. I loved him when he punched me and choked me. I loved him when he said cruel things to me. I loved him when he left me. I loved him when he returned. I loved him so much that I forgot to love me.

I lost myself, my sense of who I was before him. My love and need for him consumed me. It was all I thought about or wanted. I loved my kids, but that was different. I was addicted to what this man had once given me—so addicted that I was willing to wade through the filthy sewage of his troubles to get to the paradise of what we once shared. I thought if I just loved him hard enough, I could change him and save him. I believed that my love could heal him. He needed me. No one else could

fix him like I could.

Then one day, he got tired of the mess that was his life and checked into rehab. I was so proud and happy for him, and I stood by his side as he did the work to restore his life. We were apart for months and had little contact with each other. When I could finally visit him, I was there with bells on. He was better and my hope was renewed.

He stayed in rehab and I went on with my life and little by little, I became accustomed to his absence and I became more aware of the things I'd been neglecting while trying to keep our relationship alive. Because of the tumult of our love affair, I'd forgotten that my children needed me more than anyone else, and I began to devote myself to them. And when he asked me to move away with him so that he could escape the bad influences that kept him bound to the drugs, I said no, opting not to uproot my children.

His suggestion? Leave them behind.

My answer? No way!

Ours would have to be a long-distance relationship. Shouldn't he be able to agree to that since I'd stood by him through so many trials? Wasn't my request a reasonable one?

We would see each other about once a month, and I was okay with that. I loved him and any time we spent together was special to me. I especially remember celebrating Valentine's Day with him in that first year after he'd sobered up. It is one of those occasions I'll never forget. He made me feel so special and loved and so needed.

Then one day, I found out about the many women he was seeing besides me. After all we'd been through and all I'd done to help him, I still wasn't enough. I was devastated and I prayed harder than I ever had in church the following Sunday. And for the first time, I heard the voice of God as clearly as if He was sitting on the pew next to me. I suppose that maybe He actually was sitting there.

He said, "Why do you keep doing this to yourself? It's time to move on. You deserve better."

Just like that, I had an epiphany. I realized just how unbalanced my life had been, how I'd thrown all of my time and energy into a relationship that started out wrong and was therefore doomed to fail. I realized that as much as I prayed and attended church, the life I was leading was nowhere near Christian-like. I realized that even in trying to help this man, my motives were selfish. I wasn't trying to fix him so that he would lead a better life; I was trying to fix him so that he would be a better mate for me.

I realized that in nurturing my love for him, I had neglected everything, *everything* else in my life, including my own well-being and mental health. But most of all, in letting him and his vices consume me, I'd broken my children's hearts. I'd only been half the mother to them that they deserved. And that one revelation literally broke my heart. And so, I moved on.

That epiphany was like someone pulling back the heavy curtains in a dark room, allowing the bright sunshine to illuminate every corner and crevice. By letting him go, I removed the dark cloud from above my head and cleared the cobwebs that had tangled my thinking. Left behind were gaping wounds that have still not totally healed. I can admit that I am still a little fearful of love, or at least I am fearful of love as I once knew it to exist. But at the same time, I am ready for true love—the love that God promised to send my way. But one thing's for sure: I will never sacrifice my soul again. I will never lose my sense of self ever again. For no one and nothing, will I sacrifice the life, love, and freedom God has so graciously gifted to me.

And that's my epiphany.

Love Letter to Jahdai

By Janice Ross

Edited by Karen Perkins
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He lives in my past.

He relaxes in a sandy home, constructed of fading Jamaican brick. He sits cross-legged on an unfinished concrete floor, smiling and daydreaming about me, reminiscing about our past together. His tinted hazel eyes are not dark, but hollow. Memories are real. What once was, now exists at his command. Inside his lids' hidden embrace, my petite, sensual form is imprinted. Full, pink African lips lift around the edges, and when he remembers what has become – they fall. But he knows how to be strong.

Every bit of his 5'10" build is strength, profound power and rich beauty. Not wimpy, nor intimidating, but inviting. I remember it so well. Natural tan arms are uncertain of their home because I am not beside him. They are lost without me. I am not there to demand their attention, nor maneuver and shift to become the pivotal point of this sanctuary. He is lost.

His arms are lost without me. For now and forever, they can only do what he reluctantly tells them to do. He leads them through the daily chores of his new life. I can envision them running through his thick, fluffy locks, as he nourishes them with gummy aloe juice. Producing squishy noises as he performs the art of hand-washing his natural bronze dreadlocks. Even holding the handle of the wooden spoon, stirring the pot of Ital Stew. From his unforgettable hands up through his luxurious locks, and well below, his body parts are pure and free. He consciously rejects the taste of flesh and only finds nourishment in the vegetation and fruit of the earth. Perhaps . . . that is why he is Jahdai.

Jahdai,

I remember the first words you ever spoke to me. On that treacherously humid day, nearly a mile from my temporary dwellings in your universe, in a town they refer to as Pig City. I revisit the dirt roads and powdered sidewalks as often as I can, in my mind. I even allow your name to dip into my psyche. And I'm able to hope once more, to love once more, to cry once more because only then will my sentiments return. You are my dear Jahdai.

Your name means 'whom Jehovah directs'. I did not know it then, but I know it now. How you intrigued me so . . . Your light escaped the heavens and formed a perfectly shaped halo that set ablaze my heart for you. Just to think, had I not taken a brief intermission from my charge and had you not allowed for your steps to be directed, the one whom Jehovah directs may not have been directed to me.

Just a day short of our time, less than the 1,440 minutes that stood ransom to my destiny, I drifted into a waking dream. A butterfly was on the loose. Once captured in a solid nest, restricted from real color, secluded in a cave. The innocent creature somehow broke free from its captivity. Rather than join others of its kind, and flutter through the greenery in the midst, Madame was beguiled by the salacious radiance above. Without remorse, she eagerly bolted towards the heat and burning destruction of the sun. As I awoke from this trance, I found peace in the butterfly's escape. Truth be told, I envied her break from reality.

I've never before mentioned my dream, neither to you nor another living soul. Upon reflection on

this love letter I'm now giving to you, I feel it befitting to finally liberate my mind. At times, I believe the creature was an extension of my spirit, perhaps my soul.

Would our secular love have been any different, had I told you of my dream?

Would you have treasured me more, if you knew I'd flicker away from you?

Would love have been the same?

I was twenty two years void of purity but full of lustful love, and on this treasured day I erupted in excess. In your presence, all others were mere shadows of a long forgotten childhood memory that did not matter. My soul felt your existence long before my full brown eyes were privileged to have envisioned your beauty. And so you staged a protest on my painfully overcrowded, yet lonely world. Without seeking direction on a road of salvation, I found that which was meant to be.

I found you.

"Just do it." I remember so well the sifting of your sultry, melodic tongue as it stroked the simplistic English terms. Your vocal symbols had the effect of creating a parade, simply for my benefit. I clung to each syllable, and swung through the jungle. By the time you spoke the final term, I was dancing to a rhythm of shameless tunes – not reserved for the meek at heart. My head spun. I fell instantly into lust, maybe even love. For someone who had always cooed at the very idea of being in love, I don't believe it became a reality until you scooped me in.

You knew this, didn't you?

"Excuse me." I recoiled at the unexpected proclamation. My breathing scampered about, causing me to sway as if I would faint. I became enraged at the effects, yet rejuvenated all at once. I was happy and sad, hopeful and optimistic. And surely disconnected from the world outside the space we occupied just then. I was drifting.

Could you see me flutter from reality?

If so, I couldn't tell because your actions did not provide an ounce of comfort to my spiraling mind. Instead you bottled up my hopes of escaping, tickled my inner emotions and made fun of my shy girlish fumbling. You captured the essence of all that I was and placed it in a jar for all to see. And then placed my soul on the lid for safety, knowing that flight was unlikely just then. You kept all that I was in plain vision, for all to marvel at the acute power you held over me. Beyond the basic exchange of words, you stripped down apprehension and stroked raw flesh with clever conversation of an insignificant nature, while your mind inadvertently seized the opportunity of my unraveling sensibilities.

You persisted with light chatter.

"Buy tha horse." Filled with a greater purpose and higher motive; you provided insight to an upcoming horse race. "Might not 'appen now, but it aggo tek place. Jus' remember, Just Do It. Alright, Empress?" Your words were a chant of unfiltered male ego – overshadowing my past, commanding my present and fulfilling my future.

"Okay," I replied in an uncommonly stunned manner, as you shot a quick wink my way. My lips protruded and placed a gentle tap on your perfect and creamy tanned skin – but it was in my imagination. In reality I recoiled in fear of merciless defeat.

"Dem call me Jahdai," you announced in a prestigious manner. "Ax for me anytime."

But I realized that I hadn't made that seven minute walk for you. I was a woman with purpose. I had every intention of placing an order, then returning quickly to my cave. You shattered my resolve. I was forced to tear away from temptation, moving forward from potential happiness. I settled my bet and headed back to a make-believe life that waited a clear mile and a half away from you.

As I stepped my way, and you headed yours, I snuck my head around in a nonchalant fashion to admire you – the golden prince of the Western Hemisphere.

Did you know that, even at our first meeting, I was enthralled by the way the rustic honey and ginger highlights caressed your lustrous locks?

And when you turned around, as you headed away from me, I partially melted and slithered away for my presumptuous lust for you, Jahdai.

I remember my unsettled introduction to you; even then I was persuaded of your place in my fading existence. In hindsight, I admit that in the darkest, nastiest hours of my stifled life, my spirit sought yours. I know the same of your spirit because I heard it. I listened as it proclaimed an assorted fashion of torture, of a misled and unfounded longing. I heard it in my sleep.

And you know what?

I was never fearful of the abysmal moans that sought me out during the night because my instincts spoke of you. I sensed a yearning of our spirits – calls of transcontinental tongues that we would never fully grasp as mere mortals. However, the flesh that transported each lost spirit held an inkling of desperation for greater need. But we were not to connect then – not quite yet. So for days, in the midnight hour, your darkness sought my light and my darkness sought your light until we were to meet again.

Hourly, and by the minutes, I prayed for your protection, Jahdai. Even as I needed guarding from the terrors of my foul survival, I begged for an angel to shelter you from tribulation. My distress was not about my faltering existence. I was a product of a detrimental situation, controlled by a ruthless dictator. I compelled the pain, put it under submission as best as I could, and instead redirected the passion towards the one whom God guided to me. I made it so that I was not a victim of malicious behaviors, but a readily available participant in an act that produced purity. I suffered through prangs of lust and deathly control. But I didn't allow them to cripple me. Instead, I planned ahead.

I missed you. I missed the potential that dangled in our future, while knowing that it was all lies. Yet I held on to unsubstantiated hope. I dare not challenge the battle after my surrender was not negotiated but forced, though I learned to rely on a mounting optimistic outlook.

On occasion, as I was compelled to sit on the edge of a vanity with legs spanned as wide as my joints would allow. Betwixt my person stooped the devil in his natural form. His skin was crisp from a lifetime of scorching, his eyes dripping with lust and possession. I was condemned to this invisible caged life, and existed only for his pleasure and benefit.

“Not another!” His domination, with profane force, was formed on the basis of lustful need. In his claws a sharpened pair of old-fashioned silver scissors, meant to mutilate my womanhood. He shook, as if the center of an earthquake was on the rise. Bloodshot eyes moved about my little frame, seeking their next pressure point. But he chose to settle on that spot – my precious spot.

“I should cut it out,” spat the ghastly creature in venomous spasms. “Mine!”

Do you remember the marks, Jahdai, mosquito bites that never faded?

Please don't get upset.

Life repeated its course many times over. No need to allow anger the privilege of residence over that situation. Not now, not anymore. My expectation in revisiting the past is a mere reflection, an explanation of circumstances that denied our progress. No worries. I was okay then, as I am okay now.

I dare not cry, Jahdai.

Did you ever know the extent of my abuse?

Of course not.

I never unfolded the glistening, white handkerchief. Never allowed you to see the opposite side of heaven. As far as you could tell, I was a woman in love with two men. You didn't like it much, but you accepted it.

If only you knew.

I never allowed you a glimpse beyond the embroidered kinks of pure cotton. The slight blemish, which vaguely dangled in your visual stream needed only minor explanations – the smudges were of

no concern to you. That was my chosen lifestyle, when I complicated my youthful years with a stint in Lucifer's cage. That was my world and none of your concern.

But now you know.

All of the fervent fury that Satan used to trap me into this adoptive world just north of the equator became silent torture to my scrawny soul. I was null to the years, no longer envenomed since I chose this trail of my own accord. Moreover, the actual pain was of negligible value.

The Wednesday that marked your entry into my pathetic life was special to me. I was taciturn in a union that produced heated life, while your entry allowed my force to withstand the wounds of the arena.

Thank you.

"Empress," was the word you used to court me, more than eighteen days later. This time, our meeting grounds were destined to be closer to my territory.

Jahdai, I'm sorry. I tried to expel our first encounter from my mind. I made every effort to lessen the effects of the ties that our souls tightened upon introduction. So I laid low and made amends with the situation that battered my emotions, trampled my spirit and abused my body. But by this time you already held my soul, so none of the latter mattered much. Eventually, my self-inflicted prison was torn down and you found me, when I was ready to be found. For much in my life, I held fear . . . I was scared. Afraid for the little ones I held – the little ones I loved, my children.

You knew that.

I was nervous. Afraid for the few material objects that provided mediocre comfort, whenever time permitted. I was afraid for the life that was mine some eight months prior before I was condemned to crucifixion in a foreign land. The locks that you came to know intimately had just re-grown after insanity had overtaken embattled limbs. No one robbed me of my crown. One day, in a peaceful tremor, I latched on to the shears of my torment and festooned the cheaply plastered flooring with my copper and brown hair. It was a part of my silent fury.

Release was what I sought.

I despised the gaze from my reflection in the looking glass. The over-tanned skin was permanent – the only rationale behind a failed endeavor to strip the devil's sweat and my detested complexion. Shame inhibited a once confident mind. Self-assurance escaped through the corner lobby – fled a long time ago. I was broken in this world and beyond.

Do you remember my disposition?

I was shackled to a life that I could not live, but I attempted to modify my situation by latching on to your freedom. Cautiously, I sought protection from prying, sources of cantankerous motives. My naked eyes blazed and rolled to the left of me and to the right of me. They were further directed to the distance from whence I came, in the blazing humidity that was visible at twenty seven minutes past the noon hour. Only then would my line of vision settle on the source of my intrigue.

"Hi you," I replied, in an attempt to downplay my unmatched battle with the beaming sun.

And so, from that moment on, the streets became our marital grounds, in the town of Pig City – across from the other town of Waterford – on the southeastern region of the island of Jamaica in the West Indies. As daylight shed its intrusive rays on all that lay hidden and all that stood masked, my freedom to roam was evident.

I was your empress and you were my king.

We no longer cared to mute our newly formed romance; instead we made a decision to live in the light, if only for the moment. When daylight took flight and robbed our bliss, unwelcomed shadows in the night became reminders to an unwanted reality that was deficient of the combined energies converging from you or me.

Jahdai, when I was void of your love in those nightly escapades, your memories would stroke my

nappy locks and gently place invisible kisses upon my forehead. The impious innocence captured in the cavity of our love lived in chaste form. Although I had another, circumstances excused the curse upon my head. We were right and my other life wrong. I made provision, dismissed my indiscretion as necessary. With planned dexterity, I catapult the defeat of my chosen course and slid securely into a replacement life – although temporarily.

Though you always knew of another, do you forgive me now?

Do you forgive me for enjoying your charms, as I reciprocated with superior agility?

Without knowing the child and woman of my earlier years, you saw the youth of my past and blessings of my future. You saw me as more than the mongrel that the fiend cursed me as daily. He was the father of my children. Picked at my existence. Bashed at what little strength I could ever muster. Stripped away every bit of self-worth I ever had.

But you – but you . . .

Jahdai, you plucked through the rubble of ugliness. I was darkened by years of extensive abuse in the beast's glamorous lair, barmy from ruthless torture, fleeting bouts of his own insecurities. The creature's indiscretions were many; shame was not akin to its nature. In fact, my yoke was such that I carried the dishonor for all. You were oblivious to my overloaded basket. Beyond the corrupt gravel, you sought and found me.

Thank you.

As daily strolls led us through dirt-filled spaces and damaged greenery, our imagination did not allow us to discount the moment's circumstance; instead, we mentally created a reality that only endorsed our rewritten past, self-contained present and wishful future.

My slender palm, in the middle of yours, was home. My little frame, filled with your masculine thirst provided what I needed. Without sensible proof of upcoming opportunities, we loved. Amongst the walls, containing your lowly home, we developed an adoration that I relied on for mere human acceptance, and you relied on for self-preservation.

Was it so, Jahdai?

I think so.

Unlike my reality's hurried occupation, our exchange of love was patient, kind and forgiving. Your kisses did not batter my lips, breasts or hips. Your tongue did not dig or plot my demise. Instead, it draped its moisture around my likeness, and blanketed the damage of a scorned, prior life. The span of your muscular charged body seduced my naïve, but previously plucked womanhood. Your hips did not stage a battle with me. Arms did not strip me of freedom. No, not you. I was readily allowed to meet your thriving force with my building one. We met somewhere in the middle and ended somewhere down below. But while we converged in the midst, the rhythm and blues rocked our world. Jahdai, that was our lovemaking.

Then, one day, you sought me and I did not come to you for three sunrises. When I finally sought you back, anger flared in your eyes and mimicked the shades that kissed your glorious locks. You removed your sunglasses, approaching me with caution, trembling.

Jahdai, do you remember how angry you were?

I thought I saw wet drops at the deeply slanted corners of your eyes. Over on your side of town, under the blazing sun, shaded by a barren tree, you nearly cried for me. The temporary spots that shadowed just beneath my full eyes, the barely faded discoloration that provided evidence to my battered existence outside of you were too much to bear. My endeavor to downplay the marks was unsuccessful because you knew my body as you knew my soul. An amateur to love would be oblivious to their lover's natural gold. This was not the case. You, Jahdai, were no amateur to my love. As if you bore witness to the brutal attacks against your fortune, hatred developed against an invisible abuser as hurt percolated our unfaltering love.

“Empress,” was all that you could say, as your golden fingers cradled my body so sweetly. “Empress,” was heard in a melancholic rhythm that lacked more depth than these two simple syllables. “Empress. Empress.” Your words no longer a name, but a proclamation of love for an eternal lover. It was this strength in our love that led to a solid affair between you, Jahdai, and your empress.

“I will teach—” you began in fury.

“Let it go.” I ended in subtle loathing against my distant offender. “Jahdai, my king, those that fight with fists are nothing more than senseless cowards. I am alive. The color will fade.”

“I would neva tek advantage an’ batter you. Him spoil-up yo beauty.”

“Beauty is a deception. Just as the hurt has faded away, the color will also.”

My words.

Your words.

They meant much.

Didn’t they?

Vain promises of comfort had to suffice, for our situation was a love of a lifetime that would never be fulfilled.

After more than six months of our secret yet open meetings about the towns they refer to as Pig City and Waterford, our spiritual marriage continued to progress to a physical extension of a deeper love.

Do you remember, Jahdai?

Do you remember how I pledged an everlasting love to you and how you confessed a permanent need for me, to be with each other evermore?

I sometimes reminisce on the first time our lovemaking became a reality. It is so painful to think on now because it was so long ago and can only be visited in the past.

I remember the manner in which you would sweetly contract your neck, bowing your 5’10” height to seduce my 5’1” in frame. Your eyes were greedy as they fed on me. Never once did your gaze reach beyond mine. Long before the impact was made, your energy forced its way into my impatient soul.

Do you remember how we lost all sense of time?

When night did not wait for our passion to subside, we were caught, held captive in unfamiliar territory. And I was left with no recourse but to rebuke you and beg for my life from another less worthy than you.

When days prolonged our separation, weeks stepped in our way. You knew the repercussions of our naïve decisions. We believed that which was good could take the place of that which was bad. Jahdai, I was barred from you . . . you were banned from me. Then one day, while strolling in defeat on my home front, you fought your way through the barricades and attempted to force my freedom.

Depression took human form and rambled down my dusty street in broad daylight. Your spirit announced your blatant arrival long before you could. I felt misled by an apparent hoax, for you only resided in Pig City. As you drew closer, my love, I became throttled with a multitude of harsh blows. Your purpose in overlooking protocol was to demand the release of your empress.

Did you really think it would happen?

Would that force release me willingly?

“I’m sorry,” I cried. Unconcerned with a public display, I fought for that which I felt was right. My fingers held on to the grille, the bars were thick and solid. Everyone was deep inside the house, but I sensed your approach. Leaving everyone behind, I tiptoed out on to the veranda and peered around at single-level concrete houses in shades of blue, green and yellow. At eleven in the morning on a Saturday, no one was out except for you.

“Come away with me. I will provide,” you whispered through the eager wind. I could barely reach

you from behind the rods, yet badly wanted to come to you. But I knew better than to pull that gate. The noise would alert my home and several others around me. Your enticing lips dipped down. The mask you wore was lined with days of churning pain. You were almost unrecognizable, except for the beautiful locks that shone in the daylight.

“I can’t.” I wanted to capture your face in the palm of my hands. I wanted to trail my tongue on your golden face. I yearned to twirl my fingers in your hair. Neither action could manifest. Not then.

“I’m not leaving without you.” Your plea was intrusive, but I gave you the right when I accepted your love.

“You must.” It hurt me to reject you, but I had no choice. In front of me stood a man that I wished I could have. Behind me were a host of obligations I could not run from. I could not leave my little blessings, never. And, unfortunately, they were tied to a life with the monster. I needed to stay until I could plan for my boys and myself, only then would I be able to flee.

“I’m not leaving without you.”

I drifted to the ground, holding my head. My back rested against the walls. You reached in and caressed me. Defeat took hold in your aura.

Did you realize that it was over?

“You must go, Jahdai. I’m sorry,” I declared between sobs, keeping in mind that must maintain an impartial resolve when I returned back inside.

Out on the veranda, I cried.

Do you remember?

You cried.

Do you remember that too?

Would there ever be another possibility for us in the future?

We stooped silently – you outside the grill and I behind the bars. I refused to go and you refused to leave, until I made a promise to sneak away the following day for a brief rendezvous.

Once the escape plan was hashed and took effect, you adamantly refused to follow. I came to your home. You threatened to never let me go. In the midst of your world, I became a stranger and slave to your refusal to accept reality. You were so lost and afraid that I did not know who you were. Your gaze was no longer clear hazel, but fiery red. Your once beautiful locks became satanic horns. Your words no longer trailed me with kisses, instead provided blows to my head.

Do you remember, Jahdai?

You decided not to let me go.

“This ah feh we reality!” Your shouts collapsed above me. With eyes glossed over, reaching across your beautiful caramel face, the demands and pleas were too intense to bare. You captured my soul, and always would be in control of that distant part of me. Don’t ever forget that; I hope you still haven’t forgotten that. Back then; we met too soon or perhaps not soon enough. By way of circumstance, obligations and restrictions, we could not hope for any more than a fantasy romance at best.

I am truly sorry, Jahdai.

As I studied your robust features and inhaled your enticing scents, I found the courage to stand up for what I felt was right at the time. “No, it’s not,” I countered your declarations. I could not reject my life for yours. Sinking low to the gray, concrete ground, I released showers of tears for what I wanted so terribly in life and what I so terribly needed. I inwardly prayed for a miraculous outcome that would allow me to hold true to my prior bonds, yet would keep you planted, solidly in my path. Deep within, I knew this would be impossible to ever achieve.

“Because ah your responsibilities,” you murmured under a whimsical breath. “If feh we love so tight, den no promise or nah body could tek you wey from me, Empress. You nah go nowhere. You

belong to me.”

You turned around, stomped through the once comforting concrete shack, slammed the bright-white wooden door, and seemingly locked the grill. Once steady fingers now fumbled with locks and chains and keys. I felt certain that you didn't mean harm, because I knew you loved me. This fact did little to change the spiraling course of other sentiments. You were scared, as was I. Neither of us knew how to deal with losing a lover; we did not know how to let go. We knew what was right. We knew what was clearly wrong. Love was different. Love is different. That which I sought freedom from, in the opposing town, had now become my faith once again. In the confinement of your home, I was barred, trapped. Unlike countless hours of our past romancing, I was afraid in your home.

Did you realize that fear was introduced to our pure love, when you decided to cross the line?

Prior to that terrible night, fear was something that had only resided on the outskirts of our made up reality.

Do you remember how I rejected the advances you made, when you unlocked the makeshift jail?

A few hours later, after your subconscious won over your ego, you returned and sought my forgiveness. But it was too late. Fear had broken the barrier. You knew this and you knew I had no choice but to go, and you knew I could never return.

Jahdai, I am sorry for the part that I played in dragging you into my life. I apologize for taking your love out of desperation, only to reject it shortly afterwards. I wanted to stay, but had no choice other than to go.

Did you understand then, when I was a grown-up child of twenty two and you a pretend man of twenty six?

Do you understand, now that time has brought us fourteen additional years?

As a woman, I made quite a few senseless choices. Some were bad and others were so very, very bad. For years, I contemplated the wrong that was done to me, never taking into consideration the things that I did to cause so much of what happened. Not to excuse my abusers, but I made decisions that put me in harm's way. It was not until I learned to face my shortcomings, accept blame for what I had control over and finally forgive myself that I was able to live without fear. I suffered from fear, panic and anxiety attacks for quite a few years before I found comfort through my Savior.

I learned to meditate and address those issues that kept me from progressing in life. In a state of meditation some years ago, I imagined someone I had hurt a long time before. After imaging and studying him the way I remembered him, I decided to relieve my mind. Jahdai was a blessing to my life, when I was at the lowest state in my life. In many ways, he was my guardian angel.

Someone dear to me has told me since that time, that everyone has a purpose in our lives, although sometimes we mistake that purpose. I no longer beat myself up for this period of time. I eventually got away from my abuser, but I will always remember Jahdai and the love that he brought to my life.

Falling For “The One”

By Nicole Dunlap

“Young Mother”

They seize us at our most vulnerable
Long hair, short hair, light brown, white,
Black skin, yellow skin and a plethora of shades in between,
We make changes in order to change them,
We excuse their errors in judgment and on occasion their wandering eyes or that Which wanders next
to steel thighs,
We grow within the womb, carrying their child...
On occasion, we're not alone as others are carrying *their* child,
Giving them all we have in order to mold them, change them, sculpt them into the Fathers we may or
may not have had...
All to find out,
They love the lives they lead,
We, in our quest to keep love, have developed and learn loves lessons,
Some of us almost in the nick of time...
Our eyes have opened and we, as women, finally will take no more.

Well, this story is for the man who comes after him. Yes, him, the one who ruined us. The subsequent man who brings a slight pitter patter to our gut, and we determine could be “the one.” Only, we’ve been cast aside before. Our hearts have been wrenched out of us by the “ruiner,” and we are no longer assured in our own capabilities to find the one. But didn’t we grow older? Aren’t we wiser? Don’t we know how to determine if this man is cheating because the one prior to him did? Our maternal investigative senses have piqued and soared to the max. We have learned to ascertain which man won’t grow up and if he never will, right? Not really, because we delve into our past existence with him in order to scale the ongoing of our current love affairs. However, we haven’t learned that this thought process could be our demise. The one that came after, I married. You may ask, isn’t he the “rebound guy.” Well, it took me over year of delving in the land of “self” to hop back into the game. I was pursuing my undergraduate degree with a toddler, so I had love and my life was busy enough in the meantime.

I believe I should go back to the start before I mention the man I married. After all, my past experiences led me to the “ruiner” which afterward almost tarnished me for good.

As a child, I grew up on the weekends with my father. My sister and I would enjoy dinners and outings as long as our stepmother wasn’t around. She didn’t like us; she wanted our dad to herself. It was at that point I determined I’d never have children or at least stay with the child’s father. Hint: this is the sole reason I tried to stay with the “ruiner.”

During the weekdays, my sister and I lived with Momma. She was very attentive as a mom. Except, one Sunday, when we got home from Dad’s, Mom announced she had gotten married. The next thing I knew, she moved us to Long Beach. It was a one bedroom apartment with this man, our new stepfather. We found that he sought more than our stepmother. Our stepmom was a good wife to our Daddy, so Daddy would be okay if we stayed with Mom most of the time. Unfortunately for us, we had to gauge our words so we wouldn’t offend our stepdad. Our drunken stepdad confined our mother to their bedroom on most days. When we came home from our weekend visit with Dad, he’d like to make comparisons and determine if we liked our father more...hmmm, he was a mean and emotional drunk. After a few years of my stepfather’s crud jokes, and his sometimes happy not drunken self, we were accustomed to the game of avoidance... dodge the psycho, enjoy the comedian.

After a few years of his crud jokes, his normal façade then his drunken angeriness, we grew accustomed to the game of avoidance. He was rather funny when not drunk. Yes, we liked him when not drunk, with a measure of trepidation, of course. And we got to enjoy being with our momma when he went on week-long trips as a truck driver.

Anyhow, my stepdad’s years of emotional torment to my momma and hateful vibes in our direction took its toll. He finally verbalized his wishes that our mother’s children were dead. His hand taking on the symbol of a gun. The scary thing is, he actually had one in the closet. He went to work and that’s when my momma, my sister and I learned a new skill. We could move away in 2.5 hours, with just the necessities...wow.

Momma was on a tight income. She gave as much love as she could, and I will always respect her for that. I continued my last year of high school and my sister left for college. Around this time, in my abandoned state-of-mind, I was noticed by a young man with green eyes. I call him the “ruiner.” He had an awful upbringing just like me, and he wanted love as much as I did. Wasn’t that just a match made in heaven? Well, it took a while, but I learned that he was the type of guy that was used to being taken care of by a women. You know those certain situations where mother’s or female caregivers rear boys on their own? Not all, but some of these women do so much for these young black men that they believe it should carry over into adulthood. That was not me. I noticed the signs of him trying to be less than helpful, especially after we had a child together. He wanted me to give him more

attention than I gave to my school studies and to our baby. That's when my initial beliefs of staying with him for our daughter's sake washed away.

All right, I've let my heart bleed as much as can be. If I go too far into detail, I might end up weeping on my keyboard. So let's move forward again to the rebound guy that exhibited "the one" qualities. Me with my stingy self, I hadn't anticipated giving this new man my heart. I assumed he would be the rebound guy, except, within my heart of hearts I felt lucky. He had his faults, but fit the bill for all my desires, and then again it put me on pause. Hmmm, I began to suspect that this new one was just too good to be true. Could he be the devil in disguise? Could he be just as bad as him—the "ruiner," if not worse?

I almost lost "the one" as I initiated a list of Qs and As to determine his credentials as my man. Don't get me wrong, we were within the throes of a good time and at the peak of desire for each other. We were enjoying each other's company, and I couldn't have been any happier if I'd have breathed him into existence or my imagine became 3D. We enjoyed the same movies, food, activities. He made me laugh. I can't express how important this quality is in a man. The "ruiner" hadn't made me laugh this much in years. My previous relationship with the "ruiner" was far from humorous. The best time I had with him was in the beginning, and for years I attempted to get that kind of love back. Could this new one be consigned to the same outcome?

My over thinking matters is what ruined me for "the one." He should have gotten the best of me all throughout our relationship, but instead he got the worst of me.

I questioned "the one" about females near and far—work relations, and previous friends. Hmmm, you see, within my mind he was *guilty* until proven *innocent*. Yes, that is the way I rolled out in order to secure my heart that had already been on lock down for years. As I continued to give him pieces of me, a little love here and there, not every bit of my emotion, he continued to love me wholeheartedly. He once asked me if I trusted him. I could see within the depths of his dark brown eyes a glint of worry. Even now it hurts, recollecting my following "lie" to sooth his ego. See, me telling him "Yes, I trust you," and still not doing so was a grievance to myself. I gave him just enough of myself not to leave. I could not be alone, of course. So with him being the "rebound guy" while letting off fireworks of a really good man, I continued to give just enough. I was living proof of the song by Feist, "*The Limit to Your Love*." Every word was the epitome of me.

He'd be five minutes late to my house for a date and my chocolate-brown eyes slightly narrowed as I initiated the comparison of this one with *that one*—the bad one. What had taken him so long to get here? Those movies that make women of color seem like female Inspector Gadgets were right. I'd initiate the questions. I'd go as far as smelling his neck, only his neck. I would not be "that woman." You know the ones comedians make fun of, indicating we, like hounds, sniff every orifice of a man's body. Yes, a subtle inhale would do, as my heart skipped a beat and my senses were piqued. Every chance I got, I took a look through his cell phone. While he showered or slept after giving just enough love, if the thought hit me, I'd slip over to his jeans or to the dresser and pick up his Smartphone. What was I looking for? I was searching for suspicious female contacts, text messages that sent red flags, naked female pictures, all of that and more. I took a look at his Internet search history, and I checked his Gmail app. I wanted my man to be squeaky clean.

He passed all my tests! Still, I could not shake this feeling of mistrust, even when there were no red flags. So I introduced him to the wolves, to orchestrate a rigorous battery of tests—My family. My three-year-old daughter loved him. After a while she started to call him "Daddy." The first time she did so, I froze as it came out of the blue. He'd smiled and replied to her request, allowing the title to solidify. This man would make a good father. So it would further hurt my heart if he didn't pass the rest of my family's tests.

My sister was quite edgy at first as she'd married his cousin. This was how I met "the one," at my sister's pre-wedding festivities. So she had all the dirt on him.

“Do you know he’s done x, y, and z with this girl and that girl...” Yes, she told me *everything* to the point where I had to take his newfound qualifications and have a “board meeting” with my cousin/ best friend (is she your sister or cousin?). My cousin had been in a similar situation in the past. She’d had her *ruining* and was past the rebound guy, dabbling into various waters, determining her choices. So we went over his past sexual tryst. Yes, boy cousins tell each other everything when a girl means nothing. So my sister’s secondhand stories had to be fully investigated. We determined that his past was his past, and I should tread lightly. Thus, the limit to my love continued. The phone checks, the inquisitiveness when we went to parties. The watching him with very observant eyes as we went to the movies or to dinner. I stared at him even harder if it was a pretty woman walking by. After a few double or group dates with my sister (sister or cousin?) and her new husband, and my cousin and the newest suspect, my girls found that he was goodhearted and could be trusted.

So I gradually ascended the pyramid of assessments, with this seemingly good man. He passed my father’s scrutiny and check list with flying colors. My stepmom liked him too, so I was appreciative.

My mom liked him—but I chose not to take her scoring system to heart. Funny side story, her boyfriend at that time turned out to be AWOL from the army and on medication. After she’d broken up with him, he’d come knocking at my door in the middle of the night. I was scared out of my mind, but “the one” was there as he called my mother’s name all through the night. Oh, excuse me, he called her “Rosemary” my mother’s name is not Rosemary, nor is her nickname. The next morning as I opened up the kitchen to cook breakfast with my boyfriend, my mom’s ex was at the window. So you see, I love my mother, but I have to give a sideways glance to her opinion of men. She is at the opposite end of the spectrum, too trusting. The Canadian songstress, Feist might have a song for Mommy; I’ll have to research that.

My great grandmother—oh boy, if you know her, you’d know it is not easy to fool her. She’s been on this earth just shy of a century. She is stubborn as heck and don’t take no *ishhh*. She’s seen everything there is to see, knows everything there is to know about the woes of men. I respect her opinion to the highest extent. My great grandmother liked him, also.

At this point, he’d past every assessment. And I had to turn to other resources to downgrade his qualifications. He listened to rap music. I, myself, don’t like rap music—most of it. He liked this, I didn’t like that. See a trend here? I took those miniscule variables and propelled them into an atomic-bomb.

Suddenly, our lives changed dramatically! The apartment we shared was burned down to the ground. We lost everything that we owned. Confined to the basics of just the clothes on our back, we moved in with my sister and his cousin—which now was my brother-in-law. What tricky family dynamics, but a good, supportive family.

I became very depressed during this time and “the one” was there to help through my depression. I grew up living two lifestyles; I knew what I expected of myself and for my daughter. I’ve always had down times. I would turn toward writing my novels during low period in my life. But the fire put me at my lowest point, spiraling toward my deepest depression. As a young adult, I dealt with the fact that I hadn’t given my little three-year-old the best, because everything I owned had been burnt to a crisp. “The one” helped me. He’d lost everything too, but he helped mend *my* broken spirit. I guess God sent me the right person. He was always so nice to me. Upon our first meeting, I noticed his smile. Anyhow, he rubbed my back and gave thoughtful words of encouragement while I worked on a graduate degree at Azusa Pacific University. I continued my full time employment as Care Attendant. I spent the rest of my time attempting to be the best mom I could be—smiling for my daughter’s sake—and giving him a second-rated me. See, I wouldn’t allow myself to be taken advantage of.

And, all glory be to God, my boyfriend was not as stingy as my stepfather. Nor as wanting as the “ruiner.” We grew together taking care of my daughter. We went to church. This is where the last test would be given to determine if he’d meet the requirements of marriage material. Ironically, this is

where the examination of his credentials should have started and ended. Not with Momma, Daddy, Great Grand-mommy, my sister or cousins, etc. I would always respect their opinions and hope that they liked him, but I should have allowed the Lord to mold this man into being “the one” from the get go.

Yet, through the three years of us being together, my PI resources and family’s tests, he stood strong. I’d hurt him a few times with my overzealous questions of his faithfulness. Those points could never be forgotten, especially when he asked me again if I trusted him. I broke down and told the truth. After all these years, the answer had been “no.” Now here we stood in the church. I’d grown up in the church on my father’s side and partially when my stepfather acted right or when my mother was at the end of her rope with him—she’d taken us to the church, too. So either way, I had the makings of a Christian foundation.

Every Sunday my Pastor would paraphrase Revelations 3:16 as “A little out, a little in, a little hot a little cold...” One day, he mentioned this passage about “lukewarm” beliefs as he’d done thousands of times before and people would get up and come to or rekindle their relationship with the Lord. Well, that’s when we as a family came to the Lord. Giving my heart—my locked up, dusty, haven’t been fully used in a while—heart to God is what I did. My boyfriend did, too.

God was *The One*. He has always been The One. He strengthened my relationship to the fullest with my boyfriend. Our relationship soared to new heights with God’s help. Now we are married. I won’t say that the “ruiner” doesn’t run through my mind every once in a while. Especially, when I counsel a young girl who allows herself to be taken advantage of or can’t see past a man’s outer appearance. Well, the “ruiner” is a constant each time he decides to see our shared daughter. It doesn’t take me back to the throes of distrust. When I am feeling low, and depression claws within my soul I know my spirit belongs to God. He, “the one,” saved me. And my husband, my backbone, is my continuous encourager.

To all women out there who’ve loved young, hard, and deep then been left by the wayside or were fortunate enough to walk away, I say find *you* first. Strengthen your relationship with God, The One and all else will fall into place.

TINAAH

By T. M. Brown

There's more to my story that I just couldn't share with you in my first book, A Life Not My Own. To share even more detail would have been disastrous to the family unit that I was so desperately trying to create. A lot has changed since the first book, so here's a lil bit more of my story....

I was so tired of struggling to get my act together. I was one of only a handful of people in my neighborhood to graduate from college. Still, I lived at home with Ma in Fairfield Homes, a project housing area in South Baltimore, and didn't have a driver's license let alone a car. From where I sat, there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

Every Sunday morning, I'd buy a newspaper and circle any job listing that I was even remotely qualified for. My criteria for accepting a job were really limited, since I would have to use public transportation. I didn't even have enough money to buy a decent outfit for job hunting. My little sister and I had to share clothes just to make up one acceptable wardrobe. She was working full-time at Epstein's department store on Light Street near the Inner Harbor, while I was still trying to recover from spending all my energy on HIM for the past 5 years. I felt like such a failure. I was so embarrassed. As the older sister, I felt that I should be leading the way.

My priorities were all messed up! Trailing at HIS heels had been my focus for so long that I had lost sight of my dreams and with it, I'd made it almost impossible to get out of Ma's house to live my life. So, to everyone's surprise, I made the decision to join the Army! It was the only way I could think of to really make a break from HIM once and for all. A few of my close friends thought it was a brave move, but honestly, I just didn't know what else I could do.

After making it through basic training at Ft Jackson, South Carolina, I went home on leave for two weeks. What a mistake that was! I spent all my time with HIM. It was as if I hadn't joined the Army at all. It felt as if time stood still. Nothing had changed as far as my heart was concerned. I still loved HIM, plain and simple. He was my first real love. I'm not talking about that boyfriend/girlfriend school aged crush thang. My love for HIM was the kind of love that catches you by surprise and never let go. The kind of love that when it ends, makes you feel like you're going to die from the physical heartache that has no cure and that no one truly understands unless they've experienced it themselves.

"Child, you gonna be OK," Ma said the day I left for my next set of training. "God knows you been through a lot, but you strong and you gonna be alright," Ma said. She gave me one last hug as I placed my duffle bag in HIS sister's car.

We didn't talk much during the drive to Penn Station. Really, there wasn't much to say. I'd made my decision to leave HIM and join the Army. I was proud of myself for doing so, although I also felt selfish that I was choosing my life and not the life I could continue to have with HIM. A life that would have been filled with fun, excitement, heart-ache and a revolving door that led in and out of Ma's house. He kissed me good-bye at the train station in Baltimore, whispered "always" in my ear and was gone once again.

I had to find a way to get over this stuff. I was stationed at Ft Benjamin Harrison, Indiana for the Advanced Individual Training (AIT) Course designed to teach me how to do my job. I was

determined that I would have the life that I felt I deserved. I didn't want to be emotionally tied to a drug addict who could never love me as much as he loved that shit. I told myself that if I could at least try to get over this, I'd be ok. And try I did!

AIT was a lot of fun, maybe too much fun. I was buck wild in AIT. I felt like an animal that had been released from a cage. I did whatever and whomever I pleased. I partied at every chance I got. I became involved with several men. I didn't care one bit about them and didn't want to care. I did exactly what I wanted and justified it all by telling myself that I was entitled to do so because of all the things that had occurred in my past. I felt that HE had taken advantage of me for years, and now it was my turn to have some fun.

Honestly, it was all a bunch of bullshit. I was older than many of my soldier friends. I should have been a role model for the younger soldiers but instead, in order to hide my heartache, my behavior became characteristic of women who are negatively labeled and are the topics of discussion among the men.

My past, my immaturity, and the sexual power that we women possess confused me. I confused sex with love. I was stupid enough to think that I could win a man's affections through sex. Although I was putting on a pretty good show by shooting down any nice guy who looked my way, I was still desperately looking for love. I didn't know a thing about real love, didn't know God's definition of love, and didn't even know God. I closed my heart to a relationship with God when I lost my mom from a drug overdose when I was only 13 years old.

It was a day just like any other day. I was in the gym, completing my 70th pushup when Jeffrey approached me.

"Dag Girrl!"

"What?," I smiled, pretending not to know what he was talking about.

"You knockin' them pushups out like they ain't nothing!"

I smiled at him and he smiled back. It was more than just a smile. It was an 'I'd like to square you away' smile. That's what some of us soldiers called having sex back in the day.

I loved my toned little body back then. It was nice just having a male compliment me on all the hard work that I was obviously doing. It was too bad that we could only wear uniforms during the day because I could have really worn just about anything back then.

"So, what's up with you PFC?" Jeffrey smiled.

"What you mean, what's up with me?" I mocked him.

"What's up with you Specialist?, I challenged. It was impressive to be an E4 Specialist in AIT. Most soldiers were only privates. To have this rank usually meant that the soldier had some level of college education or was prior military. I find men who are high achievers to be extremely attractive. Oh snap! I'm in trouble, I thought to myself.

"I've seen you at the club throwing down, dancing up a storm." He was smiling at me again and this time, I smiled back. He reminded me of Robert Townsend. He had a small, but muscular body frame and a very thick mustache.

"Girrl, you need to stay away from him. He done messed around with just about every girl in the company!" One of the other female soldiers, Vanessa said, as she rudely grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away from him, interrupting our conversation.

"Nawh! Him? I don't believe it!"

"Girrl, he smooth. I mean smooth! He'll have your drawls off so fast, you won't even know what happened!" she said, as we both stood there laughing.

"Time to do a few more pushups, soldiers," he said as he walked over to us.

"I guess our break time is over", I said as we assumed the push-up position.

I had always loved being outside in the cold as a child, but here at Ft Benjamin Harrison, Indiana, no amount of outerwear or thermal underwear was ever enough to fight off the chilled- to-the- bone

cold we experienced as we waited for the buses. Each morning before daylight, the buses would be lined up outside of our barracks waiting for us as we returned from having breakfast in the dining facility.

AIT was so different from basic training. It felt like I was back in college again, but only this time, I didn't have to take three buses to get there. More importantly, I had friends that I could relate to. We all had a purpose for being there. We were all soldiers and proud of it.

SPC Jones seemed to be crossing my path more and more each day. He would usually say something to make me laugh as we passed one another, but never really stop to talk to me. He was in the class that started a few weeks before mine. His circle of friends were older because he was prior military and was himself a little older than most. We had that in common.

A few of us older soldiers would get together to play cards on the weekend or just sit around and chat. We were just about the call it a night when Jeffrey said, 'It's about time for this cold weather to break. It's supposed to be a really nice day tomorrow. Tina would you like to go to the mall with me? We can catch a cab at the front gate'.

"You know you shouldn't be messing with Tina! She's too good for you, ho!" Vanessa spoke in my defense before I could answer for myself.

"See, there you go again, all up in somebody's business. Why don't you find someone to occupy all that time you got on your hands and stop meddling," Jeffrey barked in a southern drawl.

Everyone was laughing now, including Vanessa, who must have realized how protective she sounded.

"So, Tinaah, you wanna go?" Jeffrey repeated his question.

"That sounds like fun. I haven't been shopping for real clothes in a long time." Secretly, I found him attractive. I loved his southern accent, the way he said my name placing a few more a's in it to make it linger, and he had a good sense of style. That was obvious even in the casual clothes he wore when we were just sitting around playing cards.

The next day, we met at the dining facility for breakfast and then made our way to the mall. We walked around the mall all day and had a really nice time. He'd select clothes that he thought I'd look good in and for the most part, he was right. The shopping spree felt more like foreplay than just buying clothes. He was subtle in letting me know that he had checked me out to the point where he could dress me or undress me for that matter. I found that pleasing. It was starting to get late, so he hailed a cab to take us back to the fort.

"I like you," he announced, as he opened the taxi door for me.

"Thanks," I answered plainly, not knowing what else to say.

"I know what people say about me, but I'm really not as bad as they say. I like women. I always have. I have eight sisters, so I'm used to being around women and I think I understand them better than most men do".

Oh no! I thought, I've heard this crap before.

"So, now that we've gotten all these nice clothes, do you want to go to the club tonight?"

"You know if we go together, people are going to be talking 'bout us"

"Do you care?"

"Yeah, in a way I do."

"If you want, we don't have to go as a couple. We can just hang out and maybe I'll get a chance to dance with you if the other guys will let me," he teased.

"Would you mind?"

"If you promise to dance with me at least once."

"Ok then. I guess I'll see you there," I said, as I stepped out of the taxi. I walked straight to my barracks without looking back. I could feel him watching me. I didn't want to make eye contact with him. If I did, I was sure that he'd know that I really liked him.

Jeffrey had reminded me so much of HIM. We used to go shopping in Baltimore all the time. By the end of the day, we'd have so many bags and boxes, we'd have to catch a cab home and find a space among the boxes to sit. I really missed those days. Shit, there I was again, thinking of HIM, but "Jones," that's what I called him, was not like HIM at all. No drugs, no drinking, and no baby Mama drama. None of that!

I have to admit that I did look pretty good in the clothes that he had selected for me—a purple suede skirt with a cream, beige, and purple mixed sweater, and matching purple suede pumps. To complement my new outfit, I permed and styled my own hair. Years ago, my sister had taught me how to perm my hair and this was really paying off while in AIT. There weren't too many black beauty parlors that we AIT students knew about, but tonight the new skill of hair perming paid off!

The DJ was playing Heavy D's song, *Overweight Lovers*, and everybody was on the floor. My girls and I were taking over the floor with moves and the rest of the dancers just could not keep up. All the guys were watching us. My girl, Andrea, could pop and lock like nobody's business. People were forming a circle around us as we danced.

The deejay gradually transitioned the music to slow songs, and people started leaving the dance floor, except for a few couples. Jones appeared out of nowhere and took my hand, as Keith Sweat crooned, *Right and A Wrong Way* "Did you forget, you promised me a dance?" Jones asked.

"No, I didn't forget." He was wearing the black dress slacks, blue striped shirt and the black dress shoes that we bought earlier in the day. He looked and smelled good..

Jones slowly pulled me in close as we danced to the seductive lyrics of Keith Sweat.

"I'm not a very good slow dancer," I confessed to him.

"You're moving just fine to me."

"Tinaah, I like you."

Again I was nonchalant when I replied, "Thanks."

"Is that all you have to say? Don't you like me even a little?" He pleaded, gazing into my eyes.

"I think that you are a very nice man," I stated.

"But?"

"But, you know what they say about you and I'm not trying to get involved."

"Is there anything that I can do to ease your mind?"

"Probably not."

"You a trip girl!" he laughed. "You know you are not like anyone else that I know."

"Thanks," I said again.

"That's why I like you so much. You're real," he whispered in my ear. With each word, his lips touched the space just in front of my ear. It took all my strength not to appear moved by this.

Keith stopped singing and I thought to myself, thank God!

Jones stepped back as the song ended. The deejay picked up the tempo, and the floor was crowded again. I could see Jeffrey's lips moving, but the crowd was so loud that I didn't hear what he was saying. He left the dance floor, and my girls and I went back dancing. I didn't see Jones again that night.

"Hey, what happened to you the other night?" I asked Jones during Monday morning PT. I'm not sure why I asked. I guess I couldn't think of anything else to say, and I thought that he might be upset about how the night at the club ended.

"They're going to give us a three-day weekend pass tomorrow. Can we go somewhere?" he asked, ignoring my question.

"Where?"

"Well, I was hoping that we could spend some time alone. There's no secret that I really like you and I think that you like me too, although you try really hard not to show it."

I didn't know what to say.

"Tinaah, we're two adults. If we want to be together, why shouldn't we? Here, he said taking off his watch. "Meet me tomorrow at the front gate at 0800 PFC," he said, as he walked away.

I wish that I could say that our weekend was magical. That the stars and moon danced or some other really romantic description, but it really wasn't like that at all. Jeffrey was a really nice man, I liked him, but intimacy with him felt more like a physical need than one of desire. I've never been really good at recognizing a person's intentions, but with him, I felt that he tried too hard to please me and that felt fake to me.

We stayed at a local hotel where other couples "hooking-up" were staying. It was clean but nothing fancy. I spent most of the night, in the bathroom, trying to pull myself together so that he couldn't tell that I had been crying.

"Tinaah, what's wrong," Jeffrey said, when I finally came out of the bathroom.

"Nothing, I'm okay."

"Look, I can tell that you've been crying? You Okay?"

"No," I said, quietly.

"Then what's wrong? You can tell me."

I guess I just wasn't ready for this. I really hadn't expected to be moved like this. Being with the other men felt like a competition to see who had the sexual power. With Jones, he really did try to please me. In doing so, it seemed as if he passed through my defense shield. I was right back where I started, feeling lonely and missing HIM even while lying in the arms of another man. "Oh, sounds like maybe you've got feelings for someone else," he said, lowering my head to rest against his chest. "It's Ok. Honestly, he must have been a fool to let you go."

"We can leave in the morning after breakfast," he said.

We spent the rest of the night like two old friends, laughing, talking, and listening to music. It was nice just to be with someone outside of the military setting. We had become friends.

The next morning while we were eating breakfast, Jeffrey said, "So, you know that I'm graduating in two weeks.". "I'd really like it if we could stay in touch?"

"Yes, I'd like that too."

The next time I saw Jeffrey, he was in his dress uniform getting ready for graduation. His class was lined up for the last time near the bus parked beside mine. As he passed me to board his bus, he slipped me a note. "Please, read it later," he whispered.

Jeffrey left the base shortly after the graduation ceremonies without saying goodbye. I waited until I returned to the barracks that night to read Jeffrey's letter:

Dearest Tina,

It's hard to explain how I feel about you. You're different. You have a sweetness about you that most people our age have lost. We talked about a lot of things the night we spent together but I couldn't bring myself to tell you that I'm married. Very few people know this. It's one of the reasons I decided to come back in the Army.

I didn't expect to meet you. I didn't expect to fall in love with you. Please don't hate me.

Jeffrey

I read his note over and over again. I had never been with a married man before. To me, that was just wrong. Bad enough to be sleeping around, but with a married man! Oh hell no! I was sooooo glad he was gone.

I had only two more weeks before I too would graduate. Our class workload was lessening now and we had more free time. My courses were extended for an additional two weeks so I could receive special training on a new capability that would be used during field operations. It was considered a

special privilege to be chosen to attend the course. Now that the weather was nicer and Jones was gone, I was ready to leave this place as soon as possible.

It was a day just like any other day. I was returning from the latrine the first time I felt dizzy. I thought I was going to faint from the dizziness. While walking back from the dining facility, the dizziness happened again. What the hell?! They had been feeding us rabbit at least three times a week, so at first I thought I might have had food poison. Then later that night, I threw up everything in my stomach and then some. I didn't need a pregnancy test to confirm the obvious.

Jeffrey and I had only been together once. He was married. I wasn't even out of AIT yet, and now I could be pregnant. Would the Army kick me out? What would I do if they did? Go back to Baltimore! Oh hell no!!" I thought as I began to panic.

I knew I had to at least find out if I actually was pregnant. My grandmother had worked so hard to make sure my sister and I never got pregnant that I didn't know anything about any of this. I found a phonebook and located the local Planned Parenthood office. I was afraid to go to the clinic on post because I thought the Army might kick me out if they found out that I was pregnant.

The next morning, which just happened to be a Saturday, I took a taxi to the Planned Parenthood office downtown and had it confirmed that I was indeed pregnant. The doctor told me that they could terminate the pregnancy, and no one would ever need to know. To be honest, I thought about it, but I just couldn't do it. It just felt wrong. I kept hearing that corny Paul Anka song, "You're Having My Baby" playing in my head. The lyrics didn't really fit, just the one line, about sweeping the baby from your life.

I hid my pregnancy from everyone. I didn't experience morning sickness again until after I graduated and arrived at my permanent duty station in Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Even though I was more than 3 months pregnant, the soldiers continued to hit on me. At the time, I thought it was the funniest thing. Some were even persistent, not taking "no" for an answer. I figured that sooner or later, when my stomach got so big that I couldn't see my toes, they'd get the message.

Talk about drama! Whew! I had the attention of everyone on the first day that I wore my ugly as hell, maternity uniform. It was one of the worst days of my life! I felt like I had just been branded with the scarlet letter. This wasn't my hometown environment where unmarried pregnant girls were the norm, and there might be several girls pregnant by the same guy. This was no surprise where I grew up in South Baltimore, but the standards were much higher in the US Army. I was even being considered for Officer Candidacy School. Nothing that has ever happened in my past, ever made me feel as low as I did walking around with my belly sticking out with no man, let alone husband in sight.

I've heard it said so many times, that a child changes a woman. Well for me, once I accepted the fact that I was going to be a mother, it changed my entire life! I had someone and something to live for. I made the conscious decision to bring this child into the world. No pre-conceived notions about a knight in shining armor coming to rescue me. It was all on my shoulders. I wanted my baby. I wanted to give him all the things that I didn't have as a child. Primarily, a Mother's love.

My son was born in November of 1987 at the Army hospital in Ft. Campbell Kentucky. Since that day, my life has never been the same.

I am so grateful to God that I was able to share this portion of my life with you. It's not that I am proud of some of the things I've done. I'm just grateful to have come out on the other side of it. This is only possible through God's loving hands always on my shoulder, even when I was totally unaware of it. The one thing that I pray you can take away from my story is to refrain from judging people, even when their actions seem to indicate how they should be labeled. Many of us are looking for love and most of us just don't have a clue on how to find it.

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