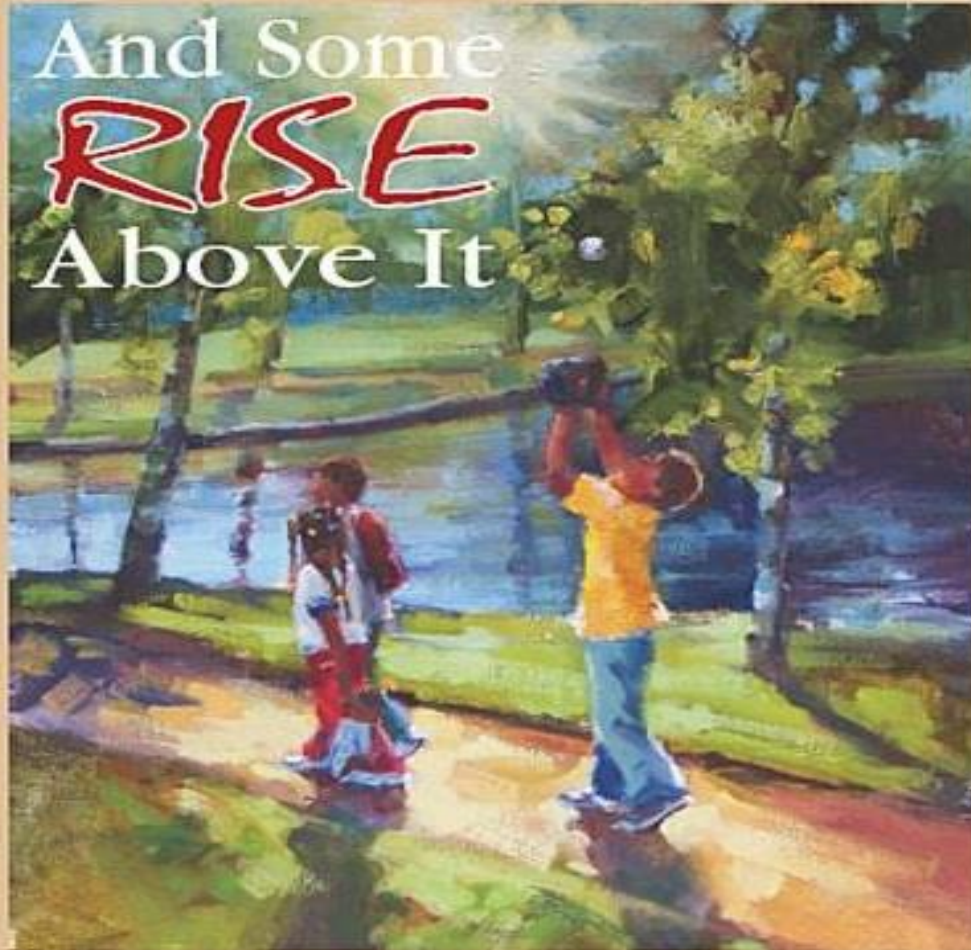


And Some RISE Above It

*Certain memories from our childhood shadow us throughout our lives.
When brilliant memories challenge the heinous, and are victorious, we can smile.*



BASED ON A TRUE STORY

O. Dashawn Patrick

Dashawn Patrick

And Some Rise Above It

by

O. Dashawn Patrick

And Some RISE Above It

Author's Note: This work is a memoir. However, most names have been changed completely or altered somewhat. The timeline of *And Some RISE Above It* was slightly altered in the editing process.

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Dashawn Patrick

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“I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.”

Philippians 4:13

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SETTING

Shawn Patrick's dream has come true; he is a professional baseball player. It is the evening of his first professional game. His friends and family are lined throughout the stadium to watch him play.

"Leading off and playing second base, #20, Shawn Patrick," the announcer says over the stadium intercom as Patrick darts onto the field. Two players later, *"Batting third and playing centerfield, #24, Ken Griffey, Juuunioooooor,"* is announced as Griffey sprints out to centerfield.

After both starting lineups are called out, a young woman wearing a black dress walks onto the field and begins singing the National Anthem. Shawn removes his hat, gazes at the flag hovering just beyond the centerfield wall and mouths the words of the National Anthem.

As the Anthem plays, he reflects on how his life began and what he overcame in order to wear a professional baseball uniform. Tears spill from his eyes as memories race through his mind, taking him back to the day he first held a baseball. That is where his journey began.

I

The Pearl

What was it about that old raggedy baseball that made it so special? It had long been retired from its glory days of being tossed back and forth among friends and smacked around by neighborhood kids during sandlot baseball games. Over the years, it had spent entire fall and winter seasons in my backyard, covered with wet leaves and snow, so it was waterlogged and as heavy as a ripe melon. For six months out of each year that tattered ball would vanish, like a hibernating bear, but magically emerge in the spring, just in time for baseball season. It had once been a pearl with vibrant red seams meticulously woven through glowing white leather, but the remains of the ball looked more like something used to teach a dog to play fetch. The bright seams had faded to a mucky orange and had worn down so low that they blended flush with the soggy leather, making it impossible to get a firm grip. To the naked eye it had become nothing more than shredded red string and torn dingy leather, but to me it was still a pearl.

The value of that ball was not its usefulness or its cosmetic appeal. It was in the memories embedded deeply into its corked center. I was six years old when Carol, my caseworker, gave me that ball. “Shawn, I bought you this baseball,” she said that day, handing it to me. I gawked over the pearly white ball as it rolled off her fingertips into my palm. Something had gone wrong! Carol was a genuinely sweet woman, so I wasn’t surprised she’d bought me a brand-new baseball. It’s just she’d never bought gifts before when we were moved to a different foster home. She handed Michelle, my four-year-old sister, a black doll that peed all over the place when its stomach was squeezed; Darnel, my five-year-old brother, a Jackson Five T-shirt that had Michael doing the splits; and me, a baseball.

For Darnel and Michelle this day rivaled any Christmas morning we’d ever had. They leaped into Carol’s arms, showering her with zealous hugs and kisses. Without delay Darnel tore off the cheerless white T-shirt he’d slept in, replacing it with the colorful Jackson Five tee, changing his mood from melancholy to joyful. Michelle raced through Carol’s office, finding the nearest water fountain. I clinched my baseball, watching as Michelle filled the belly of her doll with tap water. I sat wondering about the consequences of the gifts we were receiving. We’d done nothing extraordinary, so why was this instance any different from the past two years? The moment I realized the significance of Michelle’s black doll, Darnel’s Jackson Five t-shirt, and

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my new baseball was engraved on the walls of my memory, like the carved initials of lovers on a tree. It was the day a baseball replaced my family. Something had gone wrong!

It was a Saturday morning. I remember because my favorite Saturday morning cartoons were on television. My grandmother had given Darnel, Michelle and me baths and dressed us in our finest Sunday clothes. I knew this day was abnormal because Sunday church clothes and Saturday morning cartoons never went together. It was like a *One of These Things Doesn't Belong* segment on Sesame Street; it just didn't fit. Plus, I always felt nauseated when we were about to be taken from our grandmother.

My aunts Jewel, Amanda and Camille, and cousins Curtis, Bobby and Danielle huddled near us in my grandmother's living room as if they were anticipating a knock on the front door. I remembered looking for my mother and father, but they were never around when my stomach felt queasy, so they most likely wouldn't be arriving anytime soon.

Darnel, Michelle and I sat on the couch, watching as our family wept over us.

"I love you sweet babies. Shawn, you watch after your little brother and sister, okay? I love you," Aunt Jewel said, rubbing my back.

"God is watching over you children. He loves you and He will never leave your side, always remember that. Auntie loves you," Aunt Camille whispered, fighting back tears, stroking Michelle's hair.

"Darnell, listen to me. Don't ever think that we don't love y'all. We love you from the bottom of our hearts. We will never let y'all kids out of my heart," Aunt Amanda sniffled, holding Darnel.

The atmosphere was so somber it felt like a funeral. I sensed this was not like other times; their hugs were tighter; their tears were larger and the pain in their voices was immense. I tried not to cry. After the first few times I had become almost immune to it. I swallowed my tears, which was probably why I always got so squeamish when this happened. I closed my eyes tightly, fighting back tears, but when I noticed my grandmother weeping I could no longer hold it in.

"Gramma, why are you crying?" I asked. I knew why she was crying, but I didn't want her to know I was aware of it. "What's wrong, Gramma? We will be back tomorrow for Sunday morning breakfast and church, won't we? Don't cry, Gramma, I'll see you in the morning," I

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said. Her tears confirmed the feeling in my stomach. I knew this would be the last time we would see our family. She flung her arms around me, pulling me close. I could feel her tears as they rolled off her cheek, trickled through my hair, splashing onto my scalp.

After about ten minutes, I heard the honking of a horn. I knew the horn was for us. "C'mon, you guys, grab your stuff, let's go," I said, heading toward the front door. I walked slowly, waiting for Grandma to tell us the horn was not for us, but she said nothing. We walked through the door, stepping onto to the front porch, I stared through the screen-door at the yellow cab parked in front of the house. The driver was a middle-aged White man with a dingy gray and black beard. I noticed smoke from his cigarette circulating around in the cab. As we walked down the front stairs and out of the gate, my grandmother broke her silence.

"Shawn, Darnel, Michelle, come here," she whispered. I turned but didn't walk towards her. I knew this was tearing apart her soul and it would be more difficult if I cried or begged her to stay, so I stood in the gateway, fighting off tears. The cab driver got out of the car, placing our bags in the trunk. Grandma walked towards us, slowly, forcing one foot in front of the other, and knelt down to our eye level.

"Listen, Suga! Mamma loves y'all mo' than I loves my own-self. I couldn' stop 'em this time. Mamma tried wit' evraythang I had, but I couldn' stop 'em this time. Shawn, Darnell, you 'membra what I tole ya, 1107 East Jefferson Street, thas Mamma's address, don't eva fo'get that, Son, 1107 East Jefferson. Mamma will always be here, 1107 East Jefferson, you babies come find me 'cuz they won' let me know where they takin' y'all kids. I love each one of ya, I know you know I love ya," she said, tears streaming. "Darnell, Shawn, now you repeat Mamma's address. I needs ta know that ya know where I will always be," she sobbed. She had drilled her address into my mind long ago, so I already had it memorized.

"11-0-7 East Jefferson," I whispered with a lumpy voice.

"Good, Baby! Mamma ain' neva leavin' here, so you come find me. I love you, precious," she said, leading us to the cab. We climbed into the smoke-filled cab, Grandma shutting the door behind us.

"Buckle up," the driver barked in a scratchy voice. As I clamped the seat belt, Grandma walked to the window. Her usually peaceful face was a mask of frustration and she was visibly scared. I had never seen her like this. She placed both hands on the window and brought her face within inches from the glass. The next thirty seconds seemed as if the world moved in slow

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motion. I placed my hands against the inside of the window, but it offered her no relief. She pulled her hands away and burst into sobs. She took one step towards the cab but the driver put on the left turn signal and merged into traffic. I glanced back at my grandma and she was still standing on the sidewalk, sobbing, waving with both hands. The cab drove down the street, stopping at a red light, but I hadn't taken my eyes off of her. The light turned green, and as the cab began to turn left I waved goodbye. She placed both hands over her mouth and blew a kiss. The cab turned left, and that was the last time we saw our family.

Where now? I thought. We had already lived in seven different foster homes, so what would this one be like? How many other kids were going to be there? Would there be a mother and a father? Would they have a dog? What school were we going to go to? Did they know Michelle never took her thumb out of her mouth? What color were they going to be? The hardest part was meeting a new family and trying to figure out if they liked us. Carol Chipley, our caseworker, didn't tell us anything about this new family when we went to her office to make our adoption tape.

"Hi, my name is Shawn, I'm six and a half years old and I like baseball," I said, peering into the camera, grasping the brand new baseball Carol had just given me.

"My name is Darnel, I'm five and I like the Jackson Five," he said, showing off the Jackson Five T-shirt he'd received.

"It's your turn, Michelle. Look into the camera and say something about yourself," Carol said. Michelle said nothing. She sat sucking her thumb, staring blankly into the camera.

"This is my sister. Her name is Michelle. She's four years old and as you can see, she likes dolls," I said in her place as she sat sucking her thumb, clenching her new black doll. That tape was probably the only information this new family knew about us. I didn't know exactly why we were receiving gifts and making the tape, but I knew we weren't going to see our family for a long time.

The ride was long and boring and the driver inhaled at least four cigarettes. He didn't say a word to us the whole time, but he'd look over his right shoulder every few minutes, flashing a half-hearted smile. His teeth were crooked and mossy yellow, and the cigarette dangled from his lips as if he were trying to balance it. The only noise he made was a few gross coughs, spitting his grossness into an empty RC Cola can.

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After what seemed like forever, I sensed we were getting close to our new home. I could tell we were almost there because he kept turning his blinker on and off. Right turn, left turn, left turn, right turn; that always meant we were zeroing in on a location. I knew we were only a few minutes away.

As he took a right turn, I looked up at the street sign: 85th Street. He drove along slowly, looking at all the houses on the right side of the street. I was looking at the houses as well as the kids playing and adults lounging around their yards. This was like no other neighborhood I had been in. Every house was neat and clean; the yards were nicely mowed and had sprinklers watering the grass. I'd heard about middle-class neighborhoods in school but I'd never seen one before. This was the precise image I had, except in my account all the people were Black, but everyone in this neighborhood was White. There wasn't a single Black person in sight, just White kids laughing and running through sprinklers. I nudged Michelle and Darnel to look outside at the White kids playing and running around. They finally stopped amusing each other and got a glimpse at where we were. They still had no idea that these people were going to be our new neighbors. I looked to see if there were any kids my age and I smiled when I saw a whole block full of kids who seemed to be six to ten years old.

The cab came to a halt in front of the only house on the block that didn't have a sprinkler. It was a medium-sized, turquoise blue home with white trim and a small white picket fence that encased a well manicured front yard. Inside the yard was a yellowish-brown, German Shepherd-Golden Lab-looking thing. Whatever type of dog it was, it seemed excited.

The driver eased his way out of the cab and removed our bags from the trunk. As we hesitantly got out, the dog ran to the gate and began barking. The front door opened and out walked a beautiful, light-skinned Black woman. She was petite, about five-foot, two inches tall and appeared to be in her late twenties or early thirties.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked the cab driver in a sweet voice. She looked different from the other women that we'd lived with. She had an upper-class aura about her, as if she'd been to college or came from a wealthy family. Her hair was light brown with a reddish tint and it was picked into a perfectly-shaped afro. She was wearing tan silky pants and a black and tan blouse that was buttoned to the top. Her black moccasins looked comfortable and she seemed peaceful, as though she expected us and wanted us to be there.

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“Twenty-two dollars even, ma’am,” the cab driver mumbled. She pulled out a pocketbook and handed the cab driver some money. I don’t know how much she gave him, but it was enough for her to tell him to keep the change. He hacked out a “thank you” and went back to his job.

“Hello, children, my name is Sylvia Jackson,” she said, calming the dog and opening the front gate. “Come on in. This is our dog, Kenny. Don’t worry, he won’t bite you. He just likes to jump on people. Come on in, this is your home now, too,” she said, motioning for us to enter the yard. I knew if I didn’t go first, Darnel and Michelle surely wouldn’t budge. I entered the gate and could feel them practically standing on my heels. I knew they were afraid of the dog and somehow they thought I would do the, “*I’ll protect you, go on without me,*” hero thing. I was just as afraid as they were, but my fears were far greater than the dog. I already liked this woman and the neighborhood, even if the kids were all White. It seemed as if I could rest at this place and I really didn’t want to move anymore. “*God, please let this be the last home, please,*” I whispered under my breath. I really couldn’t care less about the dog; I just wanted to stay.

“Let’s see. You must be Michelle. Look at you, just as pretty as can be. You sho love that thumb, don’t ya. I used to suck my thumb when I was a little girl, just like you, and this must be Darnel,” she said, turning to Darnel. “You have a new brother and his name is Darnel, too. You sure are a big boy for five years old. That leaves only one more, and that’s you. Hello, Shawn, nice to meet you. Are you children ready to meet your new brothers and sister?” she asked. She moved with energy and her voice was pleasant and youthful. She didn’t sound burdened, as if the state had accidentally placed us with the wrong family. Sylvia was different; I liked the way she talked to us. It wasn’t as though we were foster kids or wards of the state. She talked to us as though we were good kids who had no problems and no history.

“Hi, Sylvia, my name is Shawn. You were right, that is Darnel and this is my little sister, Michelle.” I spoke up right away. She took Michelle’s hand, leading us into the house. “This is the living room. Y’all have a seat on the sofa and I will go get your new brothers and sister,” she said, disappearing around the corner.

As she left the room, I glanced at the pictures on the walls and plants and flowers in every corner. The tan shag rug was spotless and the couches were soft and wooly. I peeked through the shutters separating the living room from the kitchen and my eyes nearly popped out of my head. Sitting on top of the refrigerator were five boxes of brand named cereals: *Fruity*

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Pebbles, Lucky Charms, Cocoa Puffs, Cookie Crisp, and Apple Jacks and I knew, at that moment, I wanted to stay. All the other homes had generic cereals like Puffed Wheats that came in see-through bags instead of boxes, or the knockoff brands like Pebble-Fruity-Crunchies or Choco-Puffy-Flakes. I hated that stuff. It was enough to make a kid want to call in sick for breakfast. I used to listen to kids at school brag about all the name-brand cereals that their parents bought; now I had those same bragging rights. I wanted to sit in class and say something like, “Jeez, I am so full. I shouldn’t have eaten all those *LUCKYCHARMS* for breakfast.” If there was one thing that warmed my heart, it was cereal. Sylvia had already won me over with her bubbly personality and her sweet voice, and now the cereal was all I needed to see. I loved our new home.

She returned shortly with three freshly-bathed kids. It was their home, but they seemed more nervous than we were. There were two boys and a girl. The girl was pretty and looked like a miniature version of Sylvia. The younger boy appeared shy, while the older boy seemed as if this was cutting into his personal time.

“Come on, children. Come on into the living room and meet your new foster brothers and sister.” They entered the living room. “Introduce yourself,” Sylvia said, pointing to the older boy.

“My name is Calvin. I’m fourteen,” he mumbled.. He had the biggest afro I’d ever seen. I mean, there were the Jackson Five afros and then there was Calvin’s. Wow! How could he comb that thing out? I thought. I wondered if he played baseball; if so, how did he stuff all that hair into his hat?

“Hi, I’m Deana. I’m eleven and I just finished the sixth grade.” These kids were different. They weren’t wild and loud like kids from the other foster homes. They seemed calm and domesticated.

“I’m Darnel. I’m four years ode,” he said, holding up four fingers. My brother squirmed as the other Darnel stated his name.

So here it was, a new family, strange-looking dog and White neighbors. It wasn’t all that bad. I had forgotten about most of the things that transpired earlier that morning, but the image of tears racing from my grandmother’s eyes was unshakable. I could hear her whispering, “You babies *be strong. Mamma’s with you.*”

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Each night I would lie in bed, gripping that ball as if it were a permanent extension of my hand, trying to recreate a memory of what life was like when we lived with our grandmother. Sometimes I squeezed so tightly that I could feel the imprints of my thumb, index and middle fingers fusing into the ball. It had been eight years since I first held that ball, and eight years since the day I last saw my family. I was now fourteen years old and questions that I had never asked about my life encompassed my every thought. Where were my parents? Were they still alive? What became of my father that night after the fire? What happened to my mother the day I found her lying unconscious on her bedroom floor? If they were still alive, had they tried to find us?

My only tie to love and serenity was my grandmother. I remembered how everything changed when I entered her home. How she pranced through her kitchen on Sunday mornings, listening to gospel music, preparing my special "Sunday School Breakfasts." How her kisses were wet, like raindrops, and her hugs engulfed my body and eased my soul. She was the link to my life before foster homes, but where was she?

As I lay in bed on this night, I drifted off to sleep thinking about the comfort of my grandmother's hugs and the tranquility of my grandfather's voice; thoughts torn from my book of memories.

On Sunday mornings my grandmother transformed her kitchen into an orchestra. The soul-pleasing sounds of the refrigerator opening and shutting, eggs being cracked and beaten, bacon frying and pancakes being flipped, melted together to create a symphony Beethoven himself could not emulate. This was the music of my grandmother's Sunday morning orchestra and I was always given red carpet service.

I would stand in my bedroom doorway waiting for Grandma to give the three signs that breakfast was ready. I was like a sprinter at the starting line anxiously anticipating the starter to say "*Runners take your mark, get set, go.*" She had her own version of "*take your mark, get set, go.*" First, the sound of water rinsing off the utensils along with eggshells being tossed into the garbage was "*Runners take your mark.*" Next, I listened for the clanging of dishes and silverware as she removed them from the cupboard and set them on the table. That was, "*Get set.*" I was ready then, fingers on the chalk line, head up, back straight and feet on starting blocks, waiting for the gun to sound. I would hear her walk into the dining room and say to my grandfather, with

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her Louisiana accent, “Baby, breakfas’ ready.” That was “Go,” and I was off and sprinting. Out of my bedroom, over the living room couch, around the dining room table, down the long hall that led to the kitchen, I would leap onto my chair, fold my hands, place them on the table and scream, “*I want two, two, two, two and one.*” Two pancakes, two eggs, two pieces of bacon, two biscuits, and one glass of milk. That’s how I ordered my special “Sunday School Breakfast,” but I could not do it until she gave her three signs.

Upon finishing breakfast Grandma would wipe all the syrup and butter off my face and hands.

“There, Mamma’s baby is all stuffed an’ clean. I gotchya chuch clothes picked out an’ ya bath wata runnin’. Go on in the bathroom an’ take off ya jammies so Mamma can give you a bath. Daddy got a beautiful sermon planned fo’ today’s service,” she would say. My grandfather was the pastor of First Love Christian Church, a church he and my grandmother had built. He bragged he’d constructed over a hundred churches in his lifetime, but none was as special as First Love. His dream was for First Love to be a church where children had a voice.

“The Bible say you must enter the Kingdom of Heaven with the heart of a child,” he would always say. “Most chuches keeps they chil’reen quiet, but not at First Love. We gowne let the voices of our chil’reen be heard. Chil’reen bring life to the chuch and this chuch is full of life.” After taking a bath, I would get dressed in my Sunday outfit and sit in the living room watching my grandfather prepare his sermons. One day, I remember, the sermon was about the importance of having good intentions in the things we do and how God knows whether our motives are pure. “Son, God is more than human. Humans can be lied to and led by false motives, but tha Lawd knows ya heart. He knows why we do the things we do. We can’t fool God. We can fool each other, but we can’t fool God.” Every time he finished preparing his sermons he let out a tumultuous laugh as if his lesson rivaled Jesus’ *Sermon on the Mount*.

I would watch every move my grandfather made: the way he held and baited his fishing pole when he took me fishing on Saturday mornings. The way he played his harmonica when we walked home after church, as if he were a one-man Southern band. The way how, on Sunday evenings, he’d tell colorful stories of growing up in the South during the early 30’s and sang old Negro folk songs. “*Liiiiil piece a pie and a lil piece a puddin’—Gonna give it all away to see ole Sally Goodin—I’m doooooown—On my way—ta Arkansas—I crack my whip and my lead mule spun—And the old man spit on my wagon tong—Aaaaaaint gonna work no moe,*” he would sing

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while relaxing in his tattered arm chair. He was both amiable and powerful, but always looked serene. I never heard him raise his voice, but he spoke with the command of a Southern king. If Grandpa was said to have a true southern flavor, then Grandma was the barometer by which he was measured. From the black-eyed peas and honey cornbread, to Mahalia Jackson gospel records on Sunday mornings, she was tastefully soulful from head to toe. I would watch as she'd play the piano for the church choir and listen while she sang spirited solos. If there was one thing that defined her life, it was Jesus. Sometimes before church it seemed as if she was glowing, as though an angel followed her around wherever she went.

"Baby, is ya ready ta go?" she would ask Grandpa.

"I'm ready, Baby. I'm just goin' over my sermon with lil Shawn," he would reply. I never understood why Grandpa read his sermon to me as if my six-year-old input made any difference.

Just before we'd walk out of the door, headed for service, Grandpa would put on his long, purple and white robe that he and two other ministers wore. The moment that robe draped his shoulders a transformation took place; he was no longer Grandpa, he became *pastor*. Grandpa's demeanor was tranquil and placid but the *pastor* was charismatic and energetic. Grandpa was humble and reserved but the *pastor* was loud and boisterous and could lead two hundred people to sit, stand, pray and shout out "Amen," "Hallelujah" or "Praise God."

I fell asleep that night, clutching my pearl, wondering if my grandmother still loved us. Memories buried since the day I last saw her were awakened as I dreamt about Sundays at her home. Eight years had past since we'd been taken from our family. Had they forgotten us? Did they still care? I needed to find out! My grandmother held the answers to those questions and I had to find her. I was prepared to take that journey!

II

The Journey

“Cutie pie—you’re the reason why—I love you so—I don’t want you to go—you’re the girl—that makes me feel so good—cutie pie.” Wakened by the lyrics of my favorite song blaring from the alarm clock, I scrambled over thin cotton sheets, smashing the snooze button for the last time. The taxing nine-month relationship between the alarm clock, eighth grade and me had come to an end. Summer had just begun and although *Cutie Pie* was my favorite song, six A.M. on the first day of summer was entirely too early to rise *or* shine. I flopped over and tried drifting back into the dream I’d had about Sunday mornings at my grandparent’s home. The dream was so vivid I could smell Grandpa’s tobacco pipe and taste the maple syrup from Grandma’s pancakes, but the glow of the sun’s rays beaming through the curtains and directly into my eyes made it difficult to fall back to sleep. With sunshine and Seattle being bitter rivals, I decided to take advantage of the morning before overcast skies chased the sun away. I tossed my pearl back under my sheets and was ready for the first day of summer.

I was heading into the ninth grade, which meant more privileges and larger boundaries. As long as I was back by curfew, increased by two hours for summer break, I could basically do anything and go almost anywhere I wanted. My buddies, Carl, Donnie, Mike, Todd and I had already decided on our plan of action for the first day of summer: bus hopping. Bus-hopping was a rite of passage in our neighborhood. How far could we get from home? How many buses would we take on our journey? The feat that separated the men from the boys, at least in a fourteen-year-old sense, was how many guys we could get on the bus using only one pass. We were going for the entire record. Five guys on one pass was absolutely unheard of.

The plan called for each of us to chip in to buy the one-dollar pass. Since I masterminded the scandal, I’d have to get on the bus first, buy the pass and slip it behind my back to Donnie, who’d pass it to Todd, who would slip it to Mike and it would end with Mike passing it to Carl. There was something about being fourteen and knowing that we fell through all the legal cracks that gave us a carefree attitude. A stunt like bus-hopping carried a maximum sentence of one-week restriction, so it was well worth the risk. The only privileges lost were television or talking on the phone, and that was the extent of our punishment.

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That summer morning, I jumped down from the top of the bunk bed that my younger brother, Darnel, and I slept in.

“Darnel, wake up,” I said while turning up the music on my clock radio. “Don’t you see the sun blastin’ through the windows,” I said, dancing as the lyrics to *Cutie Pie* echoed through our room.

“Stop, Shawn,” he growled, rolling to the other side of his bed. “Leave me alone, I’m tired,” he mumbled. When he was younger, Darnel was a sleeping and eating phenomenon. I had never seen a kid sleep or eat more than he did; he could probably sleep through a war. I was the polar opposite. I was the kid who went door-to-door gathering the entire neighborhood to play football, baseball or hide-n-go-seek. Cain and Abel probably had more in common than Darnel and I.

“Get up, D, it’s summer! What are you and your friends up to now that school’s out?”

“I’m not doing anything today,” he grunted. “I’m tired, and I’m not getting up yet.”

“Whatever, Darnel! Well, I’m about to go bus-hopping today. We’re goin’ to the Seattle Center and then to the Kingdome to watch the Mariners get their butts kicked. It’s eighth-grader day and all eighth graders get a free ticket to the Mariner’s game, fifteen free tickets for rides, free cotton candy, a hotdog and a coke. Too bad you and your friends are only in seventh grade or else you guys could come with us,” I said as he briskly rolled back over towards me.

“I wanna come, Shawn, *please*,” he begged. “All my friends are gone, so can I come with you guys?” I thought briefly about taking him with us because the kid was living the inhibited life of a seventh grader, while I was enjoying the foot-loose, fancy-free lifestyle of a graduated eighth grader.

“Shawn, please let me go! I have my own money and I’ll even buy your bus pass.” He was begging to go and I couldn’t turn him down, but what to do? Hang with my little brother, or hang with my usual suspects? I figured out a plan! I’d give him the old ‘pick a number between one and ten’ routine. If he picks the correct number, then it’s him and me; if not, my buddies and I make bus-hopping history.

“Okay, I’ll take you with me, but now that you’re coming with me, get your butt out of bed and let’s get going,” I said as he scuttled back under his comforter.

“Boy, no you ain’t goin’ back to sleep! You better wake up and get ready to go or else I’m leaving without you.”

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“Okay! Okay! I’ll get up,” he mumbled.

After eating breakfast I called my buddies and cancelled plans to go bus-hopping. As I scanned the bus schedule, Darnel got dressed and Michelle came crashing down the stairs.

“Shhh,” I whispered. “Here comes blabbermouth. Don’t say anything about where we’re going today. She’ll ask to come with us and if we say no she’ll tell Sylvia that we are going downtown. Darnel, don’t say a word.”

“Ohhh, Shawn, I heard you say downtown. You guyth are goin’ downtown? I wanna come,” Michelle begged with her thumb clenched in her mouth. Michelle was now twelve years old but I don’t think I’d ever seen her without her thumb in her mouth. Every word she said had an added *ph* or *th* sound to it because of her thumb. Words like boys and girls became “boyth” and “girlth.” Okay, so my little sister needs her thumb surgically removed from her face and my thirteen-year-old brother wants to tag along with me. Things could be worse!

“Shawn, take me please, can I go with you guyths,” she asked. “I’m tellin’ Sylvia if you don’t take me! You know you’re not supposed to go downtown by yourthelfth.” There, she said it. We’re not supposed to go downtown by ourselves, but she wants to come with us. If we don’t take her, she foils our plans. She basically had us trapped.

“Duh, we’re not going downtown,” I said, nudging Darnel. “You think we’re crazy or somethin’? We’re goin’ to the community center to play baseball. All my friends are meeting us down there and you can’t go, so HAH.”

“Yeah, we ain’t even goin’ downtown, so HAH,” Darnel repeated.

“You better not be goin’ downtown or I’ll tell Sylvia and you’ll get a whoopin’ jutht like the latht time,” she said. Michelle was the biggest tattletale in the Pacific Northwest. A year ago she’d told on me because I took all the bread from our breadbox to Green Lake to feed the ducks. “I’m tellin’ on you guyth,” had to be her signature statement. She was like a pretty black doll that, when you pulled the string on its back, said “I’m tellin’ on you guyth. You’re in trouble.” I was put on restriction for a weekend for the big Green Lake bread scandal.

“Okay, Michelle, you can leave now. We’re not goin’ downtown so you have nothin’ to tell, so bye-bye,” I said. She was a good kid, but she was way too slow for me. She always walked up to the stoplight and crossed the street conservatively, like an old lady. I mean, the stoplight would say “walk” and she would spend 30 seconds looking both ways before stepping into the street.

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After booting the tattletale out of our room, Darnel finished getting dressed and I found that our bus was leaving at 9:15 and it was now 7:50. A few moments passed when I heard the flushing of the downstairs toilet. It was the other Darnel that lived there. Darnel, the other Darnel that is, was twelve years old. He, Calvin, and Deana were brothers and sister, and the house belonged to them. Michelle, Darnel, and I had been living there for the past eight years. It was a peculiar situation. Two sets of kids, six total, all around the same age, trying to make a family. They were already a family before we came to live with them, and now, eight years later, Michelle, Darnel and I had become intruders.

“What are you guys doing today?” asked the other Darnel. Two Darnels living in the same house was strange.

“We’re about to go play baseball at the community center. My friends are waiting for us, so we gotta get goin’,” I replied. “What about you? Where are you goin’ today?”

“Kyle’s mom invited me to go swimming at their house. Their pool has a slide and a high diving board. Wanna come?” he asked. Darnel was a cool kid. We got along well because we both loved sports. I played baseball and football, and he played football and basketball. I didn’t really hang out with Calvin too much because he was older.

“No, thanks, we planned this baseball game about a week ago. Everyone’s gonna be there,” I said.

“Alright, see ya later,” he replied as he took off running upstairs.

With all obstacles out of our way, it was time to have fun. I put on my black and red plaid shorts, a white v-neck T-shirt, white tube sox with three red stripes on the top and black Converse All Star tennis shoes. Darnel’s outfit matched mine, so we looked like twins. It was now about 8:45 and our bus was to depart at nine fifteen. The stop was ten minutes away. I didn’t want to run to the bus stop because I was worried about Darnel’s stomach. It wasn’t his fault that he moved so slowly at times. He’d been in a terrible accident when he was a baby and the effects never went away. Kids would pick on him because of the unsightly scars on his stomach, back and neck. I’d lost track of how many fights we’d been in with kids who’d picked on him.

It was an impeccable 80 degree day, the kind of morning that made it easier to live through the rain and overcast days of Seattle. The most familiar phrase on the local news was, “it looks like another rainy, overcast day here in Seattle.” Although it rained two-thirds of the year,

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summers were heavenly. We were at the beginning of a three-week stretch of flawless weather and we didn't need a weatherman to tell us that.

"Darnel, hurry up, we're gonna miss the bus if you keep laggin' and draggin'."

"Okay! Okay! Don't rush me, Shawn. We have ten minutes before the bus leaves." He was right; we had plenty of time to get to the bus stop. I was in such a hyper mood because it was eighth grader day and that meant free rides. Darnel was not much for going on rides because they upset his stomach. Doctors made it clear that he was not to participate in activities that would disturb the work they had done on his stomach. I always wondered what was beneath all the scar tissue. Why were doctors so concerned about him? I didn't understand it.

It was an ideal day for screaming atop a roller coaster, but the dream about Sunday mornings at my grandparent's home was now the only thing on my mind. I pictured the glaze of the syrup dripping from Grandma's perfectly round pancakes and could almost smell the bacon, eggs and biscuits. I could not separate my thoughts from the sounds that came from her kitchen. I still remembered the way their home smelled like my grandfather's tobacco pipe, and how she always had gospel music playing from her old fashioned record player. Eight years had passed since I'd last seen her, but I still remembered the velvet pictures of Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy that decorated the wall above her piano. I could still envision the two-by-five-foot picture of Jesus and The Last Supper that encompassed an entire wall in her living room. I hadn't really thought much about my grandma until that day. That dream felt so lifelike that I could not stop dwelling on it. I wondered what she looked like or if she still lived in the same home. I wondered if she still loved us.

"Darnel, you feel okay? Can you run or is your stomach hurting?" I asked as we headed towards the bus stop.

"I don't feel like running. My stomach still hurts a little."

"Don't worry about runnin', we can just catch the next bus at nine thirty if we miss this one," I said. Sure enough, as we reached 15th Avenue, the 9:15 bus was departing. As we sat at the bus stop, my thoughts drifted back to my dream and how it had been eight years since we had seen or heard from Grandma. I still remembered everything that happened the last time we saw her, and I remembered her saying she would always be at that house on 1107 East Jefferson Street. I wondered if she still lived there. I wondered if she'd ever tried to contact or find us. I had an overwhelming desire to see her.

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I don't know how or when everything went wrong, but somewhere over the course of eight years, things had changed. Darnel and Michelle would tell me constantly how they hated living there and that they wanted to leave, but I never listened. I wanted to stay and call this place home. I was tired of moving from home to home; I needed to rest, and I didn't want to get acquainted with another family. Sylvia had pictures of us on the walls and I had friends and played sports. I didn't want to leave and that's why I ignored Darnel and Michelle's cries to go. I never thought Sylvia's house would turn out that way. It was no different, for Michelle and Darnel, than any other foster home. We'd never experienced this type of stability, and that was enough for me. I went to the same school every year from second to the eighth grade but before living with Sylvia, I'd gone to five elementary schools before the first grade. I didn't really know what I needed out of life, but what I had was enough. Darnel and Michelle needed something totally different, and I wanted them to have it.

I don't think Sylvia figured we would stay so long. She acted as a Good Samaritan by adding stability to the lives of the three foster kids. For a couple of years it was bliss, but what was meant to be a two or three year blessing turned into an eight year nightmare. I soon found that stability, without love, was just another foster home, except this one had better cereal.

It's funny how the mind of a child works. Over the first couple of years when Sylvia's family came over for holidays, Darnel, Michelle and I were told to "go down stairs" until everyone left. We would sit at the base of the stairs listening to all the festivities going on just ten steps away. We would tiptoe to the top of the steps and peek through the shutters at their family laughing and eating. For the first few years we would sit on the stairs and compare the feelings we were having with feelings we had in other foster homes, sort of a foster home rating system. Although we'd lived in homes that were much closer to poverty, for some reason, holidays on the stairs hurt more than a stomach ache.

After the third year, I decided there would be no more tears. I knew what time everyone would usually arrive at Sylvia's house, so before the celebrations began, I would sneak a box of cake mix, a mixing bowl, three table spoons and three small cartons of Sunkist Raisins downstairs. As soon as I heard the doorbell ring and the people arriving at their house, instead of crying, we had a holiday of our own. I poured the cake mix into the mixing bowl, filled it with water and stirred it until it spilled from the spoon. After washing our hands, we each grabbed a

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tablespoon and sat at the base of the stairs eating cake mix from the mixing bowl, each with a box of Sunkist Raisins.

“Darnel, hurry up, here comes the bus. Where is your money?” I asked.

“I got it right here,” he said, pulling out a crumpled dollar bill from his pocket. That was one goofy thing about kids. We always kept our money balled up or crumpled up somewhere in our sock, back pocket or shirt pocket. We didn’t have things like wallets or pocketbooks, or, God forbid, billfolds.

Darnel straightened out his one-dollar bill and handed it to the bus driver in exchange for an all-day pass. I was waiting to see if he was going to hand it to me behind his back, but no such luck. He stuffed the pass into his pocket with the rest of his crumpled up money. I was no different. I had my money crushed into my sock. I pulled out one dollar, straightened it out and handed it to the bus driver. “Thank you,” I said politely as he nodded in return.

“Go, Darnel. Go all the way to the back and I get the window seat on the left,” I said as we raced down the aisle and commandeered the back window seats.

This bus ride was relaxing and Darnel and I sat back and enjoyed the sunshine. We laughed at passengers as they entered the bus, told jokes and made faces at people in cars. I was in the mood to live in Darnel’s world for the day. I was glad that my goofball friends weren’t with me; I didn’t feel like being goofy. I felt like being polite and saying things like, “*excuse me, sir,*” “*thank you, ma’am,*” and “*you’re welcome.*” I was basically a pretty polite kid when I was at home or alone, but when I was with my buddies, I was a real jerk. I liked those guys, but they were troublemakers. I basically hung out with them because we grew up together, but the problem was, none of them played baseball. Sure, they played football and basketball, but how could I truly be friends with a kid who didn’t play baseball? There was no way! Every year, my new best friend came from one of my baseball teams. There was my regular season Little League best friend and then there was my All Star, summer league best friend. Summer league tryouts were two days away, so I wondered who would be my best friend this year.

I was trying out for centerfield. I’d been the shortstop on the last three All Star teams, but this year I wanted to play centerfield. I loved baseball, but for reasons most kids could not understand. The only thing I disliked about it was that the game had to end. It was like a two-hour shield from all the mysterious and tragic things that had gone wrong in my life. As soon as I stepped on the field, for seven innings, my difficult childhood was simplified to a bat, a mitt and

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a ball. For seven innings it didn't matter that I was a foster kid, and I didn't think about whether my mother and father were dead or alive. Baseball made me feel like a kid, not like a fourteen-year-old parent to Darnel and Michelle. It was the only time I didn't worry about what was going on in their lives. I loved baseball because it took away, in my mind, the word *foster* and just left a kid. Baseball never changed. Every time I stepped between the lines, I knew the rules. It was the only constant in my life. Living in so many foster homes, my life was based on the concept of temporary. A home here, a home there! A school here, a school there! Baseball was permanent; it never changed. Baseball made me understand that despite where I'd come from, I could do anything any other kid could do. Baseball made everything clear to me. I didn't have parents; so what?! I couldn't do anything about that, so I made my own way. Baseball gave me the confidence to protect my little sister and brother. It gave me the wisdom to know I had the ability to do whatever I wanted, if I tried.

I also loved the fact that baseball came naturally to me. When I was ten years old, I asked Sylvia if God liked baseball and she said 'yes.' I asked her if there would be baseball in heaven, but she wasn't sure. I told her that I didn't want to go to heaven if it didn't have baseball. Baseball was in my blood. I couldn't explain why I slept with my mitt or always carried a baseball around. My third grade gym teacher asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up and I said I wanted to play baseball. She said, "Oh, so you want to be an athlete," and I replied "No, I just want to play baseball." I loved to play and summer league was only two days away. After about fifteen minutes the bus was completely filled. There were people going to work and to the beach, but most of the bus was packed with eighth graders on their way to the Seattle Center.

"Seattle Center," the bus driver called over the intercom. "All you kids enjoy the sunshine and have a wonderful time," he said, as twenty-five to thirty kids ran screaming off the bus. As we approached the front, I asked the driver the question I had wanted to ask since first getting on.

"Excuse me, sir, do you know how we can get to 1107 East Jefferson Street? Our grandmother lives there and we want to go visit her," I asked.

"What are you talking about, Shawn," Darnel asked, tugging the back of my shirt, his eyes dancing with excitement, as if he would rather forego a free trip to the Seattle Center, cotton candy and hotdogs, to go see Grandma.

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“Well, if you want to get to 1107 East Jefferson, get off right here. The number four bus is pulling up right behind me. That bus goes right past that address,” the driver replied, interrupting Darnel.

“Okay, we would like to get off here,” yanking the stop cord. “Can you let us off here?” I asked.

“Sure thing, son. You boys have a nice day,” he replied.

“Thank you, sir,” I said as Darnel and I dashed off the bus, racing to the number four. We flashed the driver our passes and found seats near the middle.

“Shawn, are we really going to see Grandma,” he asked. “How do you know her address? We haven’t seen her since we were little.”

“I just know it, that’s all. I don’t know how I remember it, I just do.” Darnel was restless and I sensed he was just as excited about seeing our grandmother as I was. Although I was eager, I couldn’t help but think about the negative side of finding her. Maybe she didn’t want to be reunited and that’s why she never tried to find us. What if she moved on and closed that chapter of her life and didn’t want anything to do with us? What if we knocked on the door and she peered through the peep-hole and told us to go away? I had no idea what would take place if we found her. I was six when we were taken away and now I was fourteen. There was no way she would recognize us. What if our mother lived with her and didn’t want to see us? What if our mother had a new family and we represented her nightmarish past? Could we have other brothers and sisters?

As the bus traveled along its route, I noticed a change in the passengers. The further south the bus traveled, the more Black passengers got on. Soon there was not a White passenger on the bus at all; everyone was Black, Hispanic or Asian. That was one thing I remembered about my grandmother’s neighborhood, all of her neighbors were Black or some type of ethnic group.

As the bus filled I could hear pieces of the different conversations going on. They were all jumbled together so I couldn’t hear the specifics of any one. The bus was packed and people were standing in the aisles. After two or three more stops, an elderly Black woman entered the bus. She appeared to be about sixty or sixty-five years old, and you would have thought it was blistering cold outside by the way she was bundled up. She was draped in a long, hunter green sweater jacket that was buttoned from her knees to her neck. She wore a dark gray scarf twisted twice around her neck to protect her from the chilling eighty-degree winds. Curly silver and

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black locks of hair fell from the green knit bonnet she wore. As she got on the bus, I could hear people offering her their seats but she declined each time.

“No, I’d rather stand, thank ya. Do I look old to you? I can stand on my own two feet, thank ya,” she said to the older gentleman seated directly in front of Darnel. I wondered if she was our grandmother, or if she knew our family. I remembered how women from the church were always at grandma’s house. Could she have been one of those women? There was a familiarity about her, like maybe she’d kissed my forehead as a child or I’d sat on her lap in church.

After a few stops, the elderly woman moved to the front of the bus, prepared to exit. I watched as people got off the bus until there were only a few passengers remaining. After about five more stops, the bus driver said over the intercom, “11th and Jefferson.”

“Darnel, this is our stop, let’s go, we have to get off here,” I said, pulling the stop-cord.

“I know, Shawn, I know! I heard the bus driver, too. I’m not a little kid, you know,” he replied angrily. I think he was still a bit embarrassed from the old lady seat situation. He still seemed a little edgy. He walked by me and threw his shoulder into mine. I paid no attention to the semi-tantrum he was throwing. I knew his feelings had been hurt.

“Thank you, sir,” I said to the driver as we exited the bus. We got off and I noticed the address of the first house on the block, 1101 East Jefferson. As I looked around, nothing appeared familiar. A nursing home and a large parking lot had replaced the park that used to be across the street from my grandmother’s house and a Texaco gas station had replaced the corner store where I would get free penny candy. We passed 1105 East Jefferson, but something was terribly wrong. There must be another 1107 East Jefferson somewhere else, I thought, because everything looked different. She’d lied to us! She said she would always be there, but her house was gone. Why did she make me memorize her address if she knew she wouldn’t be living there forever? This was the wrong house. We walked a little further and stood directly in front of 1107 East Jefferson. This wasn’t the house. It had been eight years, but I was positive it was not my grandparent’s home. The cars parked in front of the house didn’t belong to them, either. My grandpa’s 1969 Ford pick-up truck was nowhere to be seen, nor was my grandma’s 1972 beige T-bird. There was some type of four-door Toyota and a Chevy truck parked in their spots.

“This is the right address, Darnel. It says 1107 East Jefferson.”

“Do you think she is home? Shawn, what if she doesn’t remember us?”

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“It doesn’t matter anyway, cuz this isn’t Grandma’s house. Her house doesn’t look like this. Her house is red, not white and black, and there used to be a huge rock right in front of the fence,” I replied. I wondered who lived inside and if they could tell us where my grandparents moved. Or even worse, were they still alive? I was fearful and for once, I actually needed Darnel to tell me what to do next.

“What should we do, Darnel? Do you wanna just go back down to the Seattle Center or what? This is not her house.”

“No! No way, Shawn, let’s go knock on the door. It’s okay if this is the wrong house. I bet they know where Grandma and Grandpa moved.” I needed Darnel to say that because I was afraid to find out what these new people would tell us. “I’m sorry young man, but your grandparents moved back to Louisiana,” or, “Young man, I hate to tell you, but your grandparents passed away last year.” I couldn’t bear to hear that. I was terrified, but for some reason, Darnel wasn’t. He was prepared to take the next step.

“I’ll go up and knock, okay, Shawn?” he said as I stood staring at the white, manufactured-looking house that had replaced my grandparent’s home.

“I’m goin’, ok?” As he opened the gate and entered the yard, I heard the front door open.

“Darnel, get back here, hurry up, someone is coming. Hurry!” I said as he scurried back outside the gate. I could hear the person talking; it was the voice of a little girl.

“Can I keep the change?” she screamed back into the house. “Thank you, I’ll be right back,” she yelled and slammed the front door. As she walked out of the gate, she looked Darnel and me up and down and rolled her eyes. I sensed right away that she had more attitude than a classroom full of girls. She was very pretty and her dark brown pigtails blended with her caramel complexion.

“Take a picture, why don’tcha; it’ll last longer,” she said to me as she came out of the gate. I usually had a witty reply to something like that, but this time I didn’t. I didn’t have much of anything to say. I just stared at her.

“And what cha’ll doin’ standin’ in front of my gramma’s house anyway?” she said placing her hands on her hips.

“Our grandmother used to live at this address, a long time ago. We were just coming to visit her,” I replied.

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“No, yo grandma didn’t live here cuz my grandma been livin’ here for twenty-five years, so now what? You got the wrong house, now leave,” she said.

“Is there another 1107 East Jefferson around here?” Darnel asked.

“No, this is the only one, so you got the wrong house and I don’t have time to be standin’ ‘round here talkin’ to you. I’m bouts ta go to the store and get my grandma some baking powder, cuz she makin’ me some cookies for my birthday.” Jeez, this kid was a trip. She was one hundred percent pure attitude.

“Leave! Be gone! We didn’t come here to see you anyway and I don’t want to waste my time talkin’ to you either, and if I had a camera, you would be the last person I would take a picture of so bye, be gone,” I replied.

“What’s ya grandma’s name, anyway?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about what our grandma’s name is! You don’t need to know,” I said. There’s only so much a guy can take from a 12 year-old, pig-tailed girl. She looked to be about Michelle’s age, but she acted like a grown woman.

“Well, I was fittin’ ta help ya out and ask my grandma if she knew where y’all’s grandma live at, but since you got a smart mouth I ain’t helpin’ you,” she replied.

“Did we ask you to help us? No, I don’t think so,” I responded. “So you can leave now. We don’t need your help, so bye-bye!”

“Yeah, did we ask for your help?” Darnel echoed.

“Be quiet, Darnel,” I said.

“Did you just call him Darnel?” she asked in a curious voice.

“You got two ears don’t you? Did it sound like I called him Darnel?” I said.

“Oh my God! Oh my God,” she hollered jumping up and down as if she had just seen a ghost. “Is your name Shawn?” she yelled.

“Yeah, my name is Shawn. Why?”

“Oh my God! Oh my God! You guys are Shawn and Darnel, Auntie Brandi’s kids! Oh my God! I’m y’all’s baby cousin, Danielle. Y’all got the right house, this is Grandma’s house,” she screamed hysterically, jumping into my arms, squeezing me as if I belonged to her. “I love you, Shawn! I love you! I miss you guys so much. Darnel, I love you, where’s Michelle? Are you guy’s coming back home to live with Grandma?” I remembered Danielle, but not like this. She was only three or four when we left Grandma’s house and now she was a big girl with way

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too much attitude. I couldn't believe that I'd just stood there for ten minutes arguing with a stranger who really wasn't a stranger at all.

After hugging Darnel she grabbed my hand as if she was about to start skipping down the street.

"Shawn, Gramma been missin' y'all. She been prayin' with all the church folks for y'all to come back home. C'mon, let's go inside. She makin' a big-o birthday dinner for me. She cookin' fish and French fries, that's my favorite. Come in, Darnel. Are you guys hungry?" she asked. I knew Darnel was ready to run inside and eat. It had been two hours since breakfast and he couldn't go more than three or else he'd swear he was dying from starvation.

"Uh-huh, I wanna go," he said nodding his head.

"Yeah, we'll go in," I said as she continued to clench my hand. Just as we opened the gate and started towards the screen door, the front door opened again.

"Danielle, baby, whas all tha commotion goin' on out there," the woman asked, standing at the front screen door. I looked up and she stared directly into my eyes. "Shawn, Darnell, is that you?" she asked.

"It is, Gramma," Danielle screamed. "It's Shawn and Darnel." It had been eight years, but I knew that was Grandma. She was wearing a black and green apron and wiping her hands with a dishtowel. I was two seconds away from crying, but I tried to hold it in. I thought she had moved. I thought she had lied to me when she said she would always be at 1107 East Jefferson. She hadn't moved and she didn't lie, which meant everything else that she told me was true: that she would always love us and would always pray for us. I couldn't fight the emotion any longer. I stood in the gateway of the same yard I'd left eight years ago and wept. She was still the perfectly-shaped grandmother and her skin still looked velvety and soft, as though it were three inches thick. I wondered if Darnel remembered how it felt to be in her presence, or how her calmness made me feel safe. Did he remember our lives before we lived in foster homes? I did, which is why I couldn't stop crying.

"Hi, Baby," she said to Darnel as she slowly walked down the stairs, swallowing him in her arms. She was close enough for me to smell her, and she still smelled like Sunday mornings.

"Danielle, take Darnel inside an' fix him a big plate a fish an' French fries. I bet this boy is hungry as a grown man," she said as Danielle finally let go of my hand and latched on to Darnel's.

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“Let’s go, Darnel. Are you hungry?” she asked, leading him up the stairs and into the house.

I was still standing in the gate entrance and I hadn’t taken my eyes off her. I don’t even think I blinked. The tears were flowing and I tried to stop them, but the harder I tried, the more they flowed. She walked over to me and caught every tear with a soft, tender kiss and the ones that slipped passed her kisses, she wiped away with a gentle swipe of her fingers. She began crying even harder than I was. Her crying was different. I felt her entire body shaking and the sounds she was making were the same ones she had made eight years earlier.

“I’m so sorry, Baby. Mamma is so sorry,” she said as she continued wiping my tears. “I loves you, Boy. It ain’ been a day in my life thas gone by that I ain’ thought ‘bout cha. I cain’ sleep some nights thinkin’ ‘bout cha. As God is ma witness, I prays fa you evray day. I loves ya mo’ than I loves my own self,” she whispered with a broken voice. “No mo’ tears, Honey, Mamma’s right here. You don’ have ta cry no mo’, Baby,” she said. But I did have to cry. I was crying because for the past eight years, no one had kissed me or wiped my tears away. I had to cry because my grandmother’s kisses made me understand that this was the part of life that I was missing. Love! That’s what I was feeling and I didn’t know how to respond to it. This was the first time I had been kissed since the day I had left my grandma’s house, and she said “I love you” more times in ten minutes than I’d heard from all the foster parents we’d lived with.

“I can’t, Grandma. I can’t stop crying,” I said with a cracked voice. She pulled me close, flinging her arms around me.

“It’s okay, Baby, go ahead an’ cry. Cry right here in Mamma’s arms. Go ahead, Shawn, let it all out, it’s okay, suga,” she said.