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RESTORATIVE NOTIONS: REGAINING MY VOICE, REGAINING MY FATHER:

A CREATIVE WOMANIST APPROACH TO HEALING FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

by

ADENIKE HARRIS

Under the Direction of Layli Maparyan

ABSTRACT

This creative thesis illustrates how the writer initiated a 'call-and-response' dialogue as a healing strategy to heal her relationship with her non-abusive biological father after revealing to him that her stepfather had sexually abused her from ages 14 to 22. This memoir both contributes to the field of Women's Studies and provides an example that other sexual abuse survivors can follow to heal their intimate relationships.

INDEX WORDS: Sexual abuse, Sexual violence, Womanism, Memoirs, Healing, Feminism, Child sexual abuse, Father-daughter, Dialogue

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by

ADENIKE HARRIS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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2011

# RESTORATIVE NOTIONS: REGAINING MY VOICE, REGAINING MY FATHER: A CREATIVE WOMANIST APPROACH TO HEALING FROM SEXUAL ABUSE

by

ADENIKE HARRIS

Committee Chair: Layli Maparyan

Committee: Amira Jarmakani

Julie Kubala

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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## DEDICATION

*I dedicate this project to every child who suffered at the hand of someone who was supposed to protect him or her. I give you my story in hope that you can find a safe space to begin your own healing.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I acknowledge my father for his strength and dedication to helping me with this project. He expressed his pain, his love, and his hurt, and it allowed me to gain trust, love and peace in our relationship. I also acknowledge my mother for supporting me and giving me the extra nudges, hugs and anything I needed when this project got overwhelming. I want to acknowledge Dr. Rosa Ashe for her therapeutic help and her support, not only as my therapist, but for being my backbone and helping me realize the importance of this project in the fields of psychology, women's studies and my own recovery. I also acknowledge a dear friend who I will keep anonymous. Without her guidance, encouragement, and late-night study sessions, this project would not have been completed. "Fifteen minutes minimum a day." Girl, it got me through! For each of them, I am grateful and indebted. They complete my survival.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

For some survivors of sexual abuse, breaking the silence imposed upon them from their perpetrators is a tough journey. Sexual abuse thrives through the forced silence and secrets the victim is required to keep. Regaining voice can begin the end of sexual abuse. The regaining of *my* voice helped me initiate a dialogue with my non-abusing father. Even though we didn't have a broken relationship, I was still a child of divorce, and my father lived 3,000 miles away from me. We talked on the phone a lot, wrote letters, had visits and even had those father-daughter talks about sex. In my early teens, not long after my mother got remarried, my father asked me specifically if my stepfather was a good guy, or if he had done or said anything to me sexually or physically. Before the age of 14 the answer was no, but on my 17th birthday, I distinctly remember my father asked if I was sexually active, whether I was dating anybody, and did I want to tell him or ask him anything about sexuality. The true answer was YES, but instead I lied and said "no." My denial of sexual abuse by my stepfather created a relationship with my biological father based on secrecy and lies, which lasted until I turned 22, when my father learned about my abuse from my brother.

Surprisingly, I never doubted whether my parents or family would believe me. I felt safe and secure because they spoke to me as a child about not lying, being truthful, and speaking up for myself. Both my mother and father would always ask me what was going on in my life, and they reassured me that I could tell them anything, especially if I was in trouble. Even though my father was 3,000 miles away, he and my mother shared very similar styles of parenting and guidance and how I was to act when I was around them, which they both would call 'home training.' I lost my courage to speak to them and the confidence in trusting the relationship we had, be-

cause of my stepfather's lies and manipulation. He would tell me stories about my mother and father's history as a couple and make insinuations that undermined the relationships I had built with them. He was 58 years old to my 17, and every statement he made was to keep *it* a secret. He would muddle the image I had of my mother by telling me that she wasn't a good mother without him because of how 'my sister turned out.' I always heard him saying to my mother that he was a strong black father since he raised his two sons alone. My abuse by this man created misplaced guilt and shame in my mind, but it never occurred to me that my parents wouldn't believe and support me. I had an innate sense of security when I found the courage to finally tell them.

Soon after I graduated from college, I began reclaiming my voice and courage. I first told my minister, then my mother, then my mother told my brother, and then my father knew. I regained my strength through the act of verbalizing the abuse, ending my own denial. My brother called the police. An officer came to our home. I told him my account of the sexual abuse and went to the police station and wrote the story of my sexual abuse down on paper. When I finally reached out to my biological father, I also reclaimed my voice by telling him NOT to do anything rash or violent. I told him not to react, that I was fine and that all I needed was for him to be okay. I was strong. I no longer felt victimized.

> "hey daddy, yes you are my daddy. i've been dealing with what to do…not sure what i actually want to do. i'm kinda concerned about mommy, and just about everyone for that matter…. i want to express something to you[:] i do not want you to …do anything out of vengeance, i told this to [big brother] and i told this to mommy. i also want you to know that I am okay. what [big brother] told you … is true. i was sexually abused, or it could be assaulted, molested whatever the technical term is these days by … my stepfather. i go talk with the district attorney on thursday or possibly wed morning, we're hoping it can be wed morning because we also have a court hearing for a restraining order against him so that he won't be allowed to come by the house. I'm not sure where your head is right now, so please PLEASE tell me what you're feeling [,] all of the feelings, and i know you have questions…. but anyway this is just to touch bases with you and to let you know that i love you and i'm okay. talk to you soon." (*personal communication, May 5, 2003)*

I told both of my parents that retaliation was not what I wanted or what I needed because then my stepfather would still have the power, and I wouldn't have my parents by my side during my healing process. I knew that my parents would want to harm my stepfather. My father may not be a gangster, but he still grew up in the city, and everything he was taught during his up-bringing as a black man from DC was to protect his own. My own mother has told me enough stories of her North Philadelphia youth to know how her cousins 'handled' any family situations where someone they loved was hurt. Their type of 'justice' still has people missing. I wasn't interested in vengeful and emotional retaliation, and I made that clear to my parents. I even had my mother stay in the same house with my stepfather and pretend everything was "regular" the day I told her, because I didn't want her to react and go to jail. I wanted her to wait until we had a plan. I told her we needed to figure out what was next. I told her and my biological father how *we* would handle this situation, instead of them telling me. I was now in charge of myself -- not my abusive stepfather, nor anyone else.

Since then, I have been able to reclaim the close father-daughter relationship I dreamed of as a child. My ideal father-daughter relationship consisted of a father who I didn't lie to, hold secrets from, and could express my needs and wants to without feeling anxious or scared. I was never able to have that because of my abuse. Breaking my own silence led to emails, phone calls and visits with my non-abusive biological father where we talked in detail about why I didn't tell him sooner. As a child, I believed in the importance of a working and positive relationship with my biological father because I knew a father-daughter relationship was supposed to be happy, fun and safe. After being manipulated and lied to by someone *abusing* the role of father, I yearned even harder for my ideal father-daughter relationship.

Within my own family, on both sides, there are at a minimum six cases where a male member of my family touched, or verbally insinuated a sexual act towards a female child inappropriately. On my mother's side of the family, these instances were never discussed with me before I came forward. My stepfather was the perpetrator in two of those cases. I discovered in court and when talking to neighbors, he was also the sexual perpetrator in at least two cases towards adult women who came to him for therapy. My speaking-out broke generational curses of silence about familial sexual abuse, and also broke cultural curses within the black community. My decision to reclaim my own voice after my abuse creates new actions, new processes, new cultural 'dealings' (i.e. naming abuser, refusing silences, rebuilding intra-family relationships) in my family that could be used as another example of a healing process for sexual abuse survivors. Not all survivors need to handle their abuse exactly the same, but there comes a point in survivors' lives where the release of misplaced guilt and shame can come through the simple acknowledgement of their abuse to a supportive individual in their life, whether male or female.

The creative thesis, *Restorative Notions: Regaining my voice, Regaining my father,* includes a 'call-and-response' dialogue between the supportive individual I've chosen, my non-abusive biological father, Peter J. Harris, and me. This creative thesis illustrates how I healed my relationship with my non-abusive biological father after revealing to him that my stepfather had sexually abused me from ages 14 to 22. This thesis also provides an answer to the question: How does father-daughter dialogue contribute to the ways African American Women resist the historically constructed silences around their sexual abuse? In our dialogue we discuss in candid, vivid and honest detail our emotions and thoughts and the effect my childhood sexual abuse has had on our relationship. This thesis models a new way for African American women survivors of sexual abuse to discuss their abuse with supportive males in their lives as another tool in their

healing. Using my dialogue with my non-abusive biological father, I provide an example of how that conversation evolved and how it worked to heal our relationship. I do not claim that my style and vernacular with my father will work for everyone, but I do claim that the intimacy, openness, vulnerability, trust and candor with a supportive male will be helpful in a survivor's healing process. This style is typical to the everyday survivor and their support system. It is used to engage and connect them to the creative project and to the academy.

*Restorative Notions* is designed to model a method of healing using a 'call-and-response' dialogue between a supportive male in a survivor's life, which could be an uncle, best male friend, or an intimate partner, and how that conversation can begin their healing process. Furthermore, as a feminist, womanist, black woman, and a black survivor of sexual violence, I document the much-needed conversations between a black female survivor and a non-abusive black male. This type of conversation-open, honest, deep, candid, taboo free, real without pretenses-is critical in the healing process of individuals, and it enriches the cultural work of researchers exploring black women's sexuality and sexual violence against black women.

As Evelynn Hammonds (1994) pointed out in, "*Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality*," black women's sexuality and sexual violence against black women have been subjected to "silence, invisibility and erasure" (p.130). Lori Robinson (2002), in *I Will Survive: African American Survivors of Sexual Assault and Abuse*, indicates the importance of ending the silences of black women as they pertain to black women's sexual experiences. Black women have dealt with sexual victimization, and having their bodies colonized, from the beginning of slavery, and their reactions have been, "silence, secrecy and partially self-chosen invisibility" (Hammonds, 1994, p.132, Robinson, 2002, p. xxii). The silence and invisibility were initially created as a form of protection from sexual stereotypes that made up black women's expe-

riences, but turned into a "politics of silence" (Hammonds, 1994, p. 132). In the introduction to her anthology *The Black Body,* Meri Nana-Ama Danquah (2009) describes the black body as being consistently "*ized*" i.e. -sexualized, romanticized, criminalized…."(p.14) and the black body's objectification through medicalization, observation, and oppression. Danquah, (2009) states that even though externally black women seem to have embraced their bodies, actually, they have *internalized* this objectification and sexualized stereotypes and felt substandard in relation to the socially constructed images of beauty (p.14-15). In *Stolen Women: Reclaiming our Sexuality, Taking Back Our Lives,* black sex therapist and researcher, Dr. Gail Wyatt (1997), states that the black woman's body and sexuality have been mystified and erotized, making her "value as a person overshadowed by her value as a sexual object" (p.73). If a black woman's sexuality is socially devalued then inevitably men will look at her as nothing more than a body that is only good for the taking. Black women, too often than not, as shown in Danquah's (2009) book and through Wyatt's (1997) research, have internalized their own devaluation. This internalization trickles down generation to generation. Black women hesitate to discuss their pain from being sexually violated, which weakens their attempts to gain a voice in their own healing.

From ages 16 to 20, I internalized my abuse. I chose to make myself as unattractive in the eyes of men as I thought I could. I dressed in oversized clothes, wore no make up, cut my hair low like a boy, all to make myself as "un-sexy" as I thought I needed to be to make the abuse stop. I didn't realize that I was perpetuating the historical realities of young black women confronting sexual violence. But, I didn't feel valued enough physically and sexually to tell my mother or biological father of my abuse. Even though I had no doubts that they would believe me, I was more afraid of what 'others' outside of my family would think. Culturally black women often don't discuss their sexual assaults and abuses. They live by the edicts 'don't air

your dirty laundry' or 'don't put the family business in the streets" (Wilson, 1993, p.39; Robinson, 2002, p.58). The creative portion of this paper illustrates the ways I regained my voice and released any internalized guilt, shame and pain and helped demolish generational curses within my own family and black culture.

Speaking about my abuse and talking in detail with my biological non-abusive father through the use of email, writing, tape recordings, and personal conversations during visits shows a survivor another way she can heal. *Restorative Notions* adds to self-help literature, accounts of black women's sexuality, and memoirs of sexual abuse survivors. My argument, grounded in womanist theory, says that the community, which includes men, is a major contributor to social change. Also, I argue that self-help literature and memoirs are missing a key factor in their exploration of father-daughter relationships. In cases of sexual abuse, some literature overlooks the importance of a non-abusing father in a survivor's healing. Including my non-abusive father's voice in this creative project allows me to highlight his role and our work in my own healing. It allows him to speak to the men in survivors' lives and gives them a way to cope with sexual abuse, and how it may affect their interactions with survivors. My father's voice will be helpful for men who are dating or married to women who have experienced sexual abuse, as well as to non-abusive fathers who want to communicate with the female survivors of sexual abuse in their lives, especially their daughters. These men may never have known how to approach their daughters, broach the subject of sexual abuse, or handle the emotional challenges that survivors may not have a name for or be able to identify. My hope is that this project will potentially help everyone become more sensitive and understanding to abuse survivors. I also want to help eliminate the thought process that survivors should "get over it" because time has passed. This project is full of love, peace and community. I want it to fill the hearts of everyone

who reads it with joy, sadness, and some anger, but eventually the release of happiness, because it shows how I survived, am living and learning how to love myself, inside out, and to love others.

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When it comes to women's sexuality, including sexual violence against women, Women's Studies literature encourages sexual abuse survivors to heal by speaking out and gaining voice. Women's Studies literature emphasizes the themes of women finding their voices and speaking out to break imposed silences. Within Women's Studies, I have found support to answer my personal and research question: How does father-daughter dialogue contribute to the ways African American Women resist the historically constructed silences around their sexual abuse? Womanist writings in particular, since they are based on a philosophy of including the entire community, supports the inclusion of my non-abusive biological father's voice in this project. In traditional Women's Studies writings, sometimes female voices are privileged to the exclusion of male voices, and sometimes even black women's voices. For example, in *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Hill Collins (2000) states, "In Feminist contexts black women's sexuality is sometimes added to the other issues just to showcase "How black women have it worse" (p.124). Collins asserts that, "Everyone has spoken for black women, making it hard for us to speak for ourselves" (p. 124). I identify this creative thesis as Womanist because I am speaking as a black woman, for black women and emphasizing the conversations between black males and females.

My project draws on historical literature, memoirs, and self-help literature. Even though my literature review is not exhaustive, it highlights strengths and weaknesses and locates my

creative work within an evolving field of study. My project contributes to the expanding literature by sexual abuse survivors, especially African American women, and provides a new way for them to discus their abuse with supportive males in their lives as another tool in their healing. My project specifically emphasizes, in the tradition of Womanism, empowering the voices of both African American women survivors and a non-abusive black father. The literature that I've reviewed does not include the voice of non-abusive black fathers. My project contributes new concepts and new thoughts by calling into question rigid guidelines of traditional academic theory by adding personal experience and creative writing.

The literature shows that survivors of sexual assault and abuse are consistently looking for ways to heal, and there are many ways they might choose to begin that search: individual therapy, self-help books, and reading or writing memoirs. Some historical literature that focuses solely on the history of black women's sexuality to often shows how black women have internalized a negative sexual history that has forced a dual concept of to "tell" or "not to tell." Culturally, African Americans don't want to support a black woman, if she tells of her rape or abuse, especially if the perpetrator is a black man. In *Black Sexual Politics,* Patricia Hill Collins (2004) asks, "Why as a culture do we cringe and criticize when we do come forward about abuse" (p.216)? That criticism towards survivors and victims actually keeps African Americans stagnant in their progression of being truly free as a culture. Additionally, Collins (2004) quotes Kimberle Crenshaw, stating "sexuality is the central site of oppression in feminist works," (p. 216) and Collins (2004) herself adds, "within American society sexual violence has served as an important mechanism for controlling African Americans, women, poor people and gays and lesbians, among others" (p. 216). Sexual violence is an oppressive tool identified in numerous texts but in the context of black women's experiences it is more prevalent. In *Black Feminist*

*Thought*, another Collins (2000) book, she also asserts "US culture … routinely accused black women of being sexually immoral, promiscuous jezebels" (p.125). Black women saw secrecy and "internal self-censorship" as protection – "silence made sense" (Collins, 2000, p. 125). A lot of black women identified silence as a form of resistance and hoped it could possibly change the socially constructed stereotypes surrounding their sexuality and bodies, yet their silences were used against them. In Evelyn Hammonds' (1994) essay, *Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality*, she states, "in choosing silence black women also lost the ability to articulate any conception of their sexuality" (p. 133).

As a result, African American abuse victims feel as though they have no choices, they already feel controlled by their abuser, and they don't have the support of their community. Wyatt (1997), in her book *Stolen Women,* states, "African-American women who report being sexually abused in childhood also describe problems sleeping at night and concentrating in school during the day. They claim that their friends ostracized them when they disclosed their abuse to them" (p.60). Even if black survivors have not disclosed their abuse, they can discover opinions of the community just from hearing people gossip about other women who did come forward. Survivors can hear the criticism and disdain in people's voices when they discuss cases in the news about a black woman claiming to be raped or assaulted by a black man.

Community opinions often surface through weighted questions and statements such as, 'well, what did she have on? She probably wanted it!' etc. There is still the notion that the woman is to blame, and if she's black, and the man who assaulted her was black, then she should just deal with the issue 'in house,' without letting everyone (other races, particularly whites) in on the community's business.

Families try to use this 'in house' method of healing by telling a young girl she should "be strong and get on with her life" (Wyatt, 1997, p. 60; Collins, 2000, p.124) which adds to the suffering of a child-abuse victim or a rape victim. In her book, *Crossing The Boundary: Black Women Survive Incest*, Melba Wilson (1993) discusses the limited outlets to sort out the confusion and pain, and how the assault gets absorbed into a victim's psyche as guilt and shame (p.4). As an African American survivor becomes a woman, the guilt associated with her childhood abuse becomes a way of life. On one hand, most survivors believe that their sexuality and their bodies are theirs to control and they should have prevented the violent attack on it, even though, on the other hand, history tells black women that their bodies and their sexuality were never theirs (Wilson, 1993, p.3). The black woman's body has always been something of a spectacle for others to see, which increases the objectification it endures: I want to see it, I want to touch it, I want to own it. Saartjie Baartman is one of history's most noted black women, because of nothing more than her body and the controversy surrounding it. She was put on display just to be viewed and called grotesque, uncivilized. When she died, her body parts were displayed in a museum for 100 years before being properly buried in 2002 (Danquah, 2009, p.15-16). She was a public and vivid example of our objectification and eroticization.

Within African American politics, despite the gross violations exemplified by the life of Baartman, black women's sexual victimization, (rape/assault/abuse) was never at the forefront of the black cause. There was and still is the idea that black women should prioritize race oppression, classism, and then, maybe, sexual oppression, in that order. In *Black Sexual Politics,* Collins (2004) emphasizes the notion that the black race was always more important a cause than the plight of the black woman being sexually violated (p.217). A lot of times within black culture, there is also a conflict in how or who defines what it means to be a man, and more specifi-

cally a black man. When some black men are identifying what it means to them to be a 'man,' they include violence as a part of that definition. Collins (2004) asks, "Can men remain 'real' if they don't incorporate ideas about violence (expressions of dominance) into their definitions of black male masculinity? How much physical, emotional and or sexual abuse should a 'strong' black woman absorb in order to avoid the community censure" (p.245)? According to Collins (2004), a black man isn't able to show any form of weakness, and accepts definitions of manhood that leads to violence towards women in his own community. "Most black women are raped by black men…," according to Collins (2000) in her book, *Black Feminist Thought,* "and many black men have internalized the controlling images applied to black women" (p.148). Consequently, rape is still used as a weapon against not only black women but black children, as well.

Historically, black women were silenced but not silent about their rapes. There are documented histories of black women speaking out against their rapists. In her book, *At The Dark End of The Street,* Danielle L. McGuire (2010) states, "Black women did not keep their stories secret. African-American women reclaimed their bodies and their humanity by testifying about their assaults. They launched the first public attacks on sexual violence as a "systemic abuse of women" in response to slavery and the wave of lynchings in the post-Emancipation South. [quoting from Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston, 2000), 21]. Slave narratives offer stark testimony about the brutal sexual exploitation bondswomen faced....When African-American clubwomen began to organize antilynching campaigns during the late nineteenth century, they testified about decades of sexual abuse.[quoting from Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston, 2000), 24] (p. xviii)". McGuire (2010) also states, "Throughout the

twentieth century, black women persisted in telling their stories, frequently cited in local and national NAACP reports. Their testimonies spilled out in letters to the Justice Department and appeared on the front pages of the nation's leading black newspapers. Black women regularly denounced their sexual misuse. By deploying their voices as weapons in the wars against white supremacy, whether in the church, the courtroom, or in congressional hearings, African-American women loudly resisted what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the "thingification" of their humanity. Decades before radical feminists in the women's movement urged rape survivors to "speak out," African-American women's public protests galvanized local, national, and even international outrage and sparked larger campaigns for racial justice and human dignity" (p. xix).

Yet, even though black women talked about their own bodies and experiences, their voices weren't valued by white society as represented by the media, academia, the courts, police and white women. Even within the black community, they were still victimized and silenced by the patriarchy, if the perpetrators looked like them. In *NO! The Rape Documentary*, Aishah Simmons (2006) highlights the damage of intra-racial rape and the effects on survivors' ability to name their perpetrators. Female slaves were often silenced about their rapes because they weren't considered humans, they were property and what they felt and experienced weren't important. In, *Women, Race and Class,* Angela Davis (1981) emphasizes this silence by discussing the experiences of slave women and how their master's raped them. "Despite the testimony of slaves about the high incidence of rape and sexual coercion, the issue of sexual abuse has been all but glossed over in the traditional literature on slavery" (Davis, 1981, p.25). Due to this historically imposed silence, speaking out against white rapists or abusers in the black community is deemed acceptable, but black women's sexuality has been 'silenced' for the greater good of the black race specifically when identifying the black man as the perpetrator.

In this creative project, my non-abusive biological father agreed to participate because he loves me and has the courage and consciousness from coming of age in the 1970s to hear my voice and collaborate with me. My father falls into the category of what Aaronette White (2006) refers to as, "Feminist fathers" in her journal article entitled, *African American Feminist Fathers' Narratives of Parenting*. White identified feminist fathers as fathers, "who self-identified as feminist, profeminist or antisexist" (p.49). My father never claimed to be a Feminist, but he is a believer in the three characteristics White describes as central to feminist fathering. These characteristics, according to White (2006) are, first, "engaging in nurturing emotional intimacy with children…" where a father would, "challenge[ing] heterosexist definitions of masculinity by expanding 'what it means to be a man' to include formerly 'woman-identified' traits and behaviors (e.g., crying, comforting children and admitting vulnerability)" (p.55). White (2006) labels the second characteristic as Politically Conscious Parenting and states that such fathers, "actively raise their kids to oppose racist, sexist and heterosexist beliefs and practices" (p.56). Lastly, White (2006) describes the African American fathers of her study as challenging the use of violent discipline. My father rejects the historically confining definitions of black manhood and masculinity. His body of work as a published writer has included editing a magazine on black fatherhood and essays on his role as a loving father and friend and colleague to powerful women, from his mother to his homegirls. My father has always been a nurturer, even through divorce. He has never allowed his children to accept politically confining structures of what we were supposed to be as black children, and he participated in conversations and dialogues with us when we did something that deserved discipline. Spankings and what White identifies as corporal punishment were never his first choice in teaching us lessons. Because of these characteristics, including my father in this creative project provides a vivid example of just how African Ameri-

can women survivors of sexual abuse can discus their abuse with supportive males in their lives as another tool in their healing.

When my abuse started, I didn't want to tell anyone because I was more focused on the 'family image' that I had. I lived with my stepfather, mother, brother, and I had two stepbrothers and an older sister. I had the middle class family life, and I didn't want to break that up. As a child I didn't think it was a racially conscious thing, I just knew that I wanted to keep what I had, even if that meant I had to endure my abuse. My stepfather was active in my life; he came to school conferences, all my athletic endeavors. My friends and teachers and neighbors knew him. He was a presence. He was, in the eyes of the community, 'a good black father,' so who was I to say he wasn't. My own thoughts and behaviors coincided with findings Dr. Wyatt (1997) documented in her study on sexuality. She states, "Women recalled that they feared that their families would suffer some financial hardship or that their father/stepfather or mother's boyfriend would leave the family….children who are abused may feel that their silence will in some way help preserve the stability or economic status of their own family" (Wyatt,1997, p.60). I wasn't particularly conscious of these facts as a child, but I knew the importance of having a black father in the home, and how the presence of my stepfather impacted my social experiences with friends, teachers and even neighbors.

So even when a pioneer like Aishah Simmons (2006) creates a documentary film about "intra-racial rape" she comes up against resistance when looking for funding. As she notes, in her essay published in *INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence*, "Most people don't care about black women being raped" (INCITE!, 2006, p.174). Simmons (2006) brings to light on film all the pioneering concepts and analyses of Collins (2000) and Davis (1981). Visually, Simmons (2006) captures the similar stories of these rape and abuse victims. Their similarities

come in their silences, feelings of guilt because they were not given an outlet to be heard, and because they were raped and violated by black men. Simmons (2006) does include the voices of black men in her film, and they state the importance of black men taking responsibility for ending violence against women, and that black men need to acknowledge their part of the issue. However, her film does not include the voice of a non-abusive black father, nor does her film acknowledge the importance of the non-abusive black father's voice as a part of the black male voices she does highlight.

By speaking out against my abuse, my project is grounded in the historically feminist emphasis of women exercising their voices in the face of imposed silences. By adding the voice of my non-abusive black father, my project breaks ground in the field of Womanism by respecting and valuing and including men in the healing work of sexual abuse survivors.

## MEMOIRS & SELF-HELP BOOKS: GAINING VOICE AND HEALING STEPS

Sexual abuse memoirs and 'gaining voice' are intimately intertwined. Journal writing is often the seed of memoir. Memoirs help survivors realize that they're not suffering alone; other women have suffered the same or similar experiences. Reading an abuse survivor memoir ignites the flame in some survivors to write their own stories. In the review of a few selected memoirs by sexual abuse survivors, the primary themes are: publicly acknowledging abuse for individual empowerment; helping prevent future violence; and helping sexual abuse victims feel less isolated. Memoirs can also become resource-filled self-help books, with the expanded goal of helping survivors to remain private while taking steps toward healing (i.e. journaling, workbooks and worksheets, and finding community resources).

*I Will Survive: The African-American Guide to Healing from Sexual Assault and Abuse*, by Lori S. Robinson (2002), is an example of a memoir and self-help book combined. She

states, "Most importantly this book is for my fellow survivors. I offer you comfort, encouragement and empowerment…. You will understand that the violation you suffered was not your fault and that you are not alone. You will read the stories of survivors who have triumphed in their healing process…. I want other black victims of sexual violence to become survivors too. I want your pain to cease. I want you to thrive. I want our community to be healthy, to be safe, and to flourish" (Robinson, 2002, p.xxvi). Robinson (2002) offers to the black community different healing tactics for African American survivors and families who still see sexual abuse and assault as a 'private matter.'

During my own therapeutic healing, I was given different self-help books that included survivor memoirs. My therapist indicated that these types of books could possibly help me connect to others especially during the days when I wasn't able to see her personally for sessions. In every self-help book, I always first read the sections including the survivors' stories. I yearned to relate to others, and understand that I wasn't alone. I may have already begun regaining my voice by telling my family, but I still felt alone. One book in particular, *The Courage to Heal*, written by Ellen Bass and Laura Davis (1994), was an inspiring, comprehensive guide that offered hope and encouragement to me. *The Courage to Heal* was also designed for those who care about survivors and provided a clear map of the healing process, the steps to help change survivors' behavior patterns, and included individual testimonies from other survivors who were courageous enough to share their own stories in the hope of helping someone else. Bass and Davis' (1994) section for loved ones and supportive partners allowed me to realize the limitations in partner and family healing, because I desired to heal a relationship with a non-abusive father. Most of the worksheets were individualized, and the resources detailed in the back of the book were also individualized. The authors briefly discussed and advised parents who did not

abuse, but the focus was on the mother and how she should become supportive of her daughter. The authors fail to mention or suggest steps for a father who did not abuse, and how he should be supportive of his daughter. Bass and Davis' (1997) book was very helpful and objective, for sexual abuse survivors. Yet, they are still missing a few key elements to a survivor's healing process, such as more detailed support for non-abusive parents, specifically fathers.

Laura Davis (1991) wrote a book designed just for the survivors' supportive partners and support system in mind. *Allies in Healing* emphasizes that healing is more than a one-person process especially when it comes to relationships. This book allows for couples to discuss openly some of the issues that a survivor may not be able to verbalize. Davis's (1991) intentions are to address the, "one group that has been consistently overlooked -- partners of survivors. Partners are people involved in intimate relationships with survivors -- girlfriends, boyfriends, husbands, wives, and lovers" (p.1). Davis (1991) writes to partners, "This book will reassure you that it's possible to have a satisfying relationship with a survivor. It will encourage you to take care of yourself, teach you to look at your own needs, and show you how to support the survivor in your life without selling yourself short" (p.2). Again, this book fails to include the narrative of the non-abusive father, let alone a black father. *The Courage to Heal* and *Allies in Healing* were two beneficial books to my own healing and would be recommendations I'd make for anyone looking for a place to start their process, but I did not have what I needed when it came to the one relationship I desired to mend.

Through reading survivor memoirs and self-help literature I discovered how other survivors of sexual abuse began their healing journeys. I realized a lot of them wrote in journals or wrote poems about their abuse. At the Speech Communication Association's annual Conference, Carol Benton (1990) presented an essay entitled, "*Survivors' Voices Breaking the Silence: Own-*

*ing the past*." Benton (1990) states, "The process of journal writing is special in that it allows the adult survivor to break the silence and space imposed by the perpetrator while remaining essentially invisible and safe" (p.2). This statement resonated with me because I didn't have the ability to write in my own journal about my abuse. I had no safe place to remain invisible; to be able to share, even with myself about what my stepfather was doing, because he was always reading my journals. His 'journal spying' was an impediment that limited me from finding my own voice.

Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray (1993) wrote an essay that discusses survivor voices and whether coming forward and regaining your voice through the act of 'telling' is helpful or detrimental to survivors. The essay, *Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?,* examines two points of view when it comes to sexual abuse survivors speaking out about their assaults. Alcoff and Gray (1993) analyzed the claims that, "movements of social change should focus on the arena of speech as a central locus of power" and "bringing things into the realm of discourse works also to inscribe them into hegemonic structures and to produce docile, self-monitoring bodies who willingly submit themselves…to the authority of experts" (p.260). In other words, speech within itself gains power, speaking out takes away the power from dominant sources, yet speaking about trauma can make the survivor subjected to being dominated again, in this case possibly by a therapist. The authors describe the survivor movement being grounded on the theme, "speaking out" and how speaking out empowers and sometimes, even unknowingly, creates support for other victims. This essay identifies the difficulty survivors face in telling of abuse in a patriarchal society, and using therapists that are trained in misogynistic beliefs, but the authors stand by the belief that "telling" can be transgressive and survivors can find a place within social constructs and discourse analyses. The balance comes from creating a space where

emotions and personal experiences are combined and respected with theory (Alcoff and Gray, 1993). My creative project can be placed within that space.

Memoirs, specifically those that don't have a self-help character to them, are especially meaningful for sexual abuse survivors, because they break the isolation most survivors feel. In book-length memoirs, or essays within anthologies, survivors get to read about the difficult but ultimately satisfying journeys in which writers first confront the painful question: Who wants to hear my story? They finally answer; *I do,* and I believe my story is important to me and to someone else. In memoirs, survivors find deep connections with other survivors. They take away the loneliness. They comfort us. Encourage us. Soothe us. Memoirs describe how much courage it takes, how much stamina, it takes to fight against imposed silences. For some survivors, violence follows them into their dreams. In *This Bridge Called My Back*, Gloria Anzaldua (1983) writes, "In our common struggle and in our writing, we reclaim our tongues. We wield a pen as a tool, a weapon, a means of survival…." (p.163).

In *This Bridge Called My Back*, a section within the anthology is dedicated to the concept of "Speaking in Tongues". *Making Face, Making Soul*, another Anzaldua (1990) anthology, uses the term "giving tongue" to mean finding words and voices that women were never able to find to speak of horrific sexist, racist things. Survivors who write memoirs make the decision to claim personal existence, regardless of their family or cultural experiences. Survivors may hope to receive family and community acknowledgement, but they won't have their tongues re-binded. They won't be silenced again. Survivor memoirs enforce the statements: you will read what I have to say, even if you are the abuser. You will no longer have power over me.

In *Making Face Making Soul* (1990), bell hooks calls this "talking back" (p.207). Within the black community, talking back was considered disrespectful and rude especially if you were

a child, a girl or a woman. But talking back for women of color means speaking is used as a stance of resistance to oppression or anything that leaves women of color in places of insignificance (Anzaldua, 1990, hooks, p.210). hooks validates my own claims about the importance of dialogue, what she calls "the sharing of speech and recognition" among equals (basically women-to-women) (Anzaldua, 1990, hooks, p.208).

This creative thesis, which includes memoir, shows that dialogue, that talking back must occur between my non-abusive biological father and I, in order for real healing to occur. Father-daughter relationships are important, but only if that relationship hasn't been traumatized by abuse, especially not sexual abuse. Dr. Earl Henslin (1994), wrote the book, *You are Your Father's Daughter* where he states, "It is normal for every person, male or female, to need a father…. It's natural for every human being to want to feel the presence of a loving father, to want to be close to a father. It is our human condition to hunger for a father's support, understanding and comfort. That hunger for a father is an important part of who we are" (p.4). That hunger exists even within a daughter who longs for closeness with an emotionally abusive biological father, after her stepfather sexually abused her. For example, in *Behind These Walls: Betrayal of Innocence*, a memoir by S. Davenport (2003), she is unable to find connection with her biological father. Her inability to heal her father-daughter relationship stems from her biological father's refusal to 'talk back' with her, even though he says I love you (Davenport, 2003, p. 140). Davenport's (2003) memoir shows how important it is to have a non-abusive biological father as a partner in healing. Since Davenport's (2003) biological father refused to acknowledge any of his own abuse, verbal, emotional and physical, Davenport's (2003) desire to get a healthy father-daughter relationship rebuilt was limited.

Another book that accentuates how creative writing is important to Women's Studies and survivor memoirs is titled, *What Your Mama Never Told You: True Stories about Sex and Love.* Tara Roberts (2007) edits a book of essays by young adult black women who have chosen to share intimacies about growing up and womanhood. Roberts' (2007) book has a few short stories about abuse, and these women discuss how they dealt with holding on to the secret of their abuse. This book also includes a few humorous and endearing stories about being a young girl learning their sexuality, their bodies and how their upbringing had a lot to do with their own beliefs about sexuality. Some of the authors explained how their "testimony," or ability to share their story, was their hope of giving another young woman a chance to voice their own pains and triumphs. Even though the whole anthology was not geared towards abuse survivors and victims, the few stories that were, strengthen the notion that 'speaking out' heals. Roberts' (2007) book also shows the value of creative writing and fiction writing in healing work, and in this case regaining voice.

Through my own healing, and discovery of what I was missing, I learned that no one avenue is more effective than another. Memoirs helped me connect to someone else whenever I felt isolation; self-help books helped me relay my feelings to my therapist and Womanist readings help me highlight the strengths and weaknesses and locate where my creative work belongs within an evolving field of study. Eventually, I was able to grasp that my abuse took away the trust and foundation of the relationship I wanted with my non-abusive biological father. That reality fueled my desire for healing work with him, which resulted in this creative thesis, *Restorative Notions: Regaining my voice, Regaining my father.*

## 3 SIGNFICANCE OF PROJECT

This creative thesis contributes to the field of Women's Studies in the following ways: by adding to the topics of survivor discourse and sexual violence against women; using the voices of a survivor and her non-abusive father in candid dialogue creates a medium that has not been used before in Women's Studies; by providing specifics about one survivor's experiences adds to discourses within Women's Studies; by outlining a new healing strategy for victims of sexual abuse; by discussing healing as a potentially critical aspect of social change and activism within the African American community; by expanding the Womanist literature on black female-male relationships that explore *healthy* intimacy between an African American daughter and father. Within the context of Women's Studies, this creative project also adds to conversations about women's sexuality and brings light to the subject of sexual violence against women and how to heal from emotional trauma.

Secondly, this creative project specifically addresses the African American experience--which is rarely, if ever, analyzed and discussed in Women's Studies' literature – as it relates to healing from sexual abuse and being a part of the support system of a survivor. This creative project expands scholarly and creative reflections on the relationships between black men and women, misogyny, and sexism by including for the first time in Women's Studies literature a healing dialogue between a black sexual abuse survivor and a black non-perpetrating male. This creative project empowers an individual African American abuse survivor, making her the leader of her healing, on her own time, at her own pace, choosing her own healing partner.

Finally, Women's Studies is concerned with academic and social change at systemic and personal levels. This creative project, in terms of activist methods, capitalizes on the practice of reflexivity. My project encourages abuse survivors to define their own healing through intense

self-examination. This project disrupts the tradition of the academy by the inclusion of creative and personal writing.

## 4 OVERVIEW OF THE CREATIVE PROJECT

During a session with my therapist I was discussing my relationship with my biological father. I told her how excited I was to have him in my life and how I felt that he would be even more of a positive presence than he was in my early childhood years. I was proud to say that he was very supportive and encouraging to me during my healing process. But I also told her that I felt like something was missing. I indicated to her that I really wanted to mend the relationship we had and would have in the future, because I felt like my stepfather had saturated my mind with lies about him. She encouraged me and stated that reaching out to him would be beneficial to my healing and recovery. I wanted a new relationship with him. No more lies. Honesty and only truthfulness.

After my session, I called my dad and proposed to him that we write a book together that would include both of our voices and feelings about my sexual abuse and how we were rebuilding our relationship. He was enthusiastic, and he even told me that it would be challenging and would "take us to the bridge." He reminded me that even beyond being my father, he was a writer and cultural worker, dedicated to completing what he starts. So he insisted that I look deep inside for all my motivations and to find the stamina to complete the project once we started it.

Initially, my primary motivation was for my dad and I to break my pattern of being deceitful to him. I had been lying to him about my experiences with my stepfather up until I told him about my abuse. I wanted to change that so that there would be a clear, honest, candid, and

no-taboo foundation to our current and future relationship. So we agreed to speak plainly and directly to one another, even when it came to discussing the actual abuse itself.

Eventually my book idea evolved into this creative thesis. As I took classes in Women's Studies, combined with my own healing work, I discovered that my book idea could be turned into an academic project because I didn't see anything out there like it. There was no exploration of healing between a sexually abused black daughter and her non-abusive biological black father. I turned my independent healing work into academic research, scholarly and creative exploration.

This project will be 'call-and-response' conversations between my father and me, and will consist of our openly retelling and reliving the experiences of my sexual abuse. This will include my feelings, sometimes my dreams, even questions to my father that I may have been scared to ask when I was a child. They will include my father's responses, feelings and even some questions he may have initially thought too delicate to ask. But the essence of this project rests on confronting our fears about these taboo subjects that under typical circumstances no father would want to hear and no daughter would want to share. In fact, within the writing we both passionately acknowledge that we wish we didn't have to describe the details of my sexual abuse to create this healing work. We acknowledge how much we wish our lives were not affected by the ugliness of my sexual abuse, but we see the benefits in illustrating our healing work through this creative thesis.

Secondly, this project will answer the questions: Why don't survivors tell? How should they tell? Who should they tell? What happens when they do? This project will touch on the cultural questions of why don't black survivors talk to supportive male family members or friends? My project will specifically answer all of those questions on an individual level while hopefully

giving insight to these questions as a whole. My father and I will discuss why didn't I tell him, and why didn't I come forward sooner. Also, I will reveal in more detail why I felt our relationship was damaged due to this secret that my stepfather had sexually abused me. We will both be working through the breaches in trust. On my side, I couldn't trust anyone, even though my dad never did anything harmful or worthy of my distrust. Because of my abuse I still felt the need to remain silent, which fed my emotional distance from him. I will discuss my stepfathers' lies and manipulation, which divided me from my father and shattered the trust, intimacy, joyfulness, fun, and humor that characterized how I flowed with my dad as a child before the age of 14. Before I was abused, and during regular visits with my father, we had an ordinary and healthy father-daughter relationship. He braided my hair. Took me to buy clothes. Cooked for me. Helped me stop wetting the bed. We took road trips. He arranged for day care and summer camps. He read to me, bought me books and encouraged me to read, and even bought me feminine products when I entered puberty. My father was a disciplinarian and nurturer. He didn't like whining, but he always respected my voice. We had an honest relationship until my stepfather's sexual abuse began to silence me, and I no longer began to feel as if any of the things we had previously were real. My stepfather took away my sense of comfort with the term *father,* and that complicated my relationship with my biological father, which increased my distrust.

From his perspective, my father will describe his feelings of shock, especially, because before I told him my stepfather had sexually abused me, my father felt that we were communicating openly about sexuality and my relationship with my stepfather. He will discuss how betrayed he felt by my stepfather, with whom he thought he had a respectful and functional relationship, since they met not long after my mother married my stepfather. My father felt that he could trust my stepfather with me. This project will illuminate the range of his emotions as a

loving parent who felt he had, despite divorce, kept current with me as I went from girlhood into adolescence and young womanhood.

We hope that by going through this rite of passage, this familial, personal, intellectual, and cultural collaboration, we will rebuild the foundation that my sexual abuser broke. My step-father almost won. He almost permanently separated me from my father, by taking advantage of the fact that my father lived 3,000 miles away from me, and the silence I sat on for eight years. Given what I know now, that silence is the typical way abusers win. We refuse to give him that power, because we refuse to be silent. In this project, we regained our power and our relationship. This project highlights the importance of communication between a father and a daughter, especially after trauma such as sexual abuse. We both believe that fathers and daughters should name their pains and aches because honesty is the foundation to healing. This project shows how we were able to share our aches and pains with one another, and hopefully give other fathers and daughters, together or individually, a road map to how they can heal. I hope to become, even more, pop's friend, his home girl, intellectual collaborator, and cultural worker.

The structure of this creative project is a 'call and response' dialogue highlighting our two individual tones of voice. We used distinctive formats for both voices, so that it is clear when I am speaking and when my father is speaking. Overall my father and I have been having healing conversations since the spring of 2003, but we have officially been writing our 'call and response' dialogues since the summer of 2008. We allowed for the natural ebb and flow of a conversation as we watched our relationship evolve from pain, sadness and anger, to feelings of joy, triumph, and laughter. Please be aware that reading the details of my abuse and my experiences may be painful and possibly traumatic to a survivor, or a supportive individual in a survivor's life, and it is not my intention to trigger any emotions or memories in others that could pos-

sibly cause pain. My only hope is that if you can get through the reliving and retelling of my story that you can also work through your own. If you find that my story and the details of my assault are too much to bear, based on where you may be in your own healing, just know the purpose of this project is for healing, and come back to it when you find yourself ready. Feel free to read from the chapter entitled, *Regaining My Voice*, to the end if you find that you need to connect with me without reading about my assaults. Read the *Regaining My Father*, section of our dialogue to gain your own courage and voice. Use my story however it fits for your recovery. Read just my father's words if you want to hear the support of a male. Use my words as your words. My story meets you where you are and is designed to strengthen you.

# 5 RESTORATIVE NOTIONS

## GHOST ON THE DOOR: RETELLING AND RELIVING

### ADE:

My mother gave me a gift for Halloween one year. I believe I was 10 or 11. It was a wooden ghost, with the words BOO painted on it in bright orange. I loved it. I thought it was the coolest gift to receive, especially since Halloween isn't really a "gift giving" holiday. I put the ghost on my bedroom doorknob when we moved into the new house in Prince Georges County, Md. when I was 12. Because my mom gave it to me, it was extremely sentimental. The first time it happened, when my stepfather violated me, emotionally and physically, all I remember is the sound of the wooden ghost hitting my door. It made a distinctive "clunk" and "rattle" which will stick with me forever.

I also had this poster of a beautiful Lincoln Town car. I clipped a newspaper picture of Denzel and put it in the driver's seat—I was your typical teenager. But that first intrusion into my room and sexuality not only had me eventually throw away a special gift from my mother, but also that poster. He used my teenage infatuation of Denzel to engage me sexually. He told me to fantasize that Denzel was doing to me what in fact he was doing to me. How dare he fuck up my fantasy life!

I threw away that ghost when I moved to Atlanta. The "click and clank" of that once innocent, precious gift that brought joy, became the sound late at night that told me when to expect the worse violation imaginable of a child and go inside my own space within my head. That ghost on my doorknob became an alarm and reminder that extreme trauma would be entering and exiting my room.

**Pops:** I don't know if you remember, but during the summer of 1989, when I was living in the DC area, before we drove cross-country to LA in 91, you took classes in this art program. One day, you brought home this paper-creature with crayon features. I asked you what it was and you said it was a dragon. I pinned it up on our front door. I said it would guard the house. After that summer, I hung that dragon on the inside of every front door of every crib I lived in. When I moved into my current house in LA, in 1995, it went up on the door before I went to sleep that night. In 1997, when you came to visit that summer when you were 17, you were shocked to see that dragon up on the door. I told you it was always going to guard my house. It did, until I started renovating my LA home in May 07. When the construction workers were moving furniture around, ripping up wood to lay down new floors, they eventually had to take the door off its hinges to rebuild the threshold in the doorway to match the new wood floors. I was at work during all the work they were doing. I didn't think to move the dragon to a safe place. The workers accidentally ripped the dragon in half. I came home one day to see only the top part of the dragon hanging from the door. I looked but couldn't find the other half. I started to leave half a dragon on my door...but it didn't feel right. I was pissed. At first, I was upset with the workers. But I was really pissed with myself. I felt like I had betrayed you. That dragon was made of paper and had gotten brittle over the years and he had sure paid his dues protecting my homes and me for almost 20 years. But I didn't protect him. Just like I didn't protect you.

**ADE:**

I've never really written any specific sexual details about my childhood assault. I've always written in some form of cloaked language that only I understood. A lot of my language was guilt-ridden and specific to "believing" what he had to say to me. I've never used my stepfather's name in anything I wrote; I never described any assault or violation into my innocence. I was extremely conscious of the possi-

bility that he could read my journals and anything I may have written on my computer when I lived at home. Even after my court appearance at his sentencing hearing, I suppressed every memory that had any detailed relation to the sexual act itself. Even after the potential threat of him being able to read any of my writing was gone, I still monitored, in my own thoughts, what I would share with people, or commit to paper.

I began to realize the more I suppressed the memories inside my head, the more they resurfaced when something small would trigger them. The memory and feelings relating to it would overload my head, my body and even my mood. Now I realize why I have dreams the way I do. Now I realize these memories have to come out. I have to acknowledge them and admit the details of my sexual violation and the feelings that go with it. I have to see it, and realize that I survived it, not just because I stopped it from happening any further, but that I actually own my sexuality, I enjoy it, and respect it, without it being tainted by the negative feelings surrounding that first time I was violated. I share with you in heart wrenching, emotional detail, the thoughts and memories in my mind.

**Pops:** Growing up, my worst nightmares, I mean during my actual nighttime sleep, always threatened me with the death of my Moms. I have vague memories of nightmares in which she was about to be swept away by rushing waters. Or dreams when she was just fading or floating away from me. Or she was snatched away trying to protect me from vampires. No, for real, vampires! Too many Christopher Lee movies when I was a kid.

Until she actually died on July 10, 1984, I thought with the stubborn innocence of a child that by waking up before she died in my nightmares then she would always remain alive in my life.

It's June of '84. I'm sitting with her in the ICU room at Greater Southeast Memorial Hospital. Moms turns to me, trach tube a rattlesnake in her throat. She's rasping out her funeral arrangements to me. I take dictation, patient as she speaks, pauses to catch her breath, tries to rise on her right elbow, falls back. I'm taking dictation from my dying mother, after she just matter-of-factly told me to pick up a hospital note pad on the night table.

Wasn't no question: I grabbed that notepad, because she knew that her Peter J. (that's what she always called me when she was angry or serious) the journalist, the poet, would handle this business. I'm taking notes, overwhelming the single spaces of the ceremonial journal I'm writing on the groaning note pad. I ask her, "What am I doing?" and she smiles, a pained smile, wrinkles in her forehead, and she whispers, "Who else?" I later wrote in a poem that she knew "this was my gift, not daddy's or big brothers' or little sisters'/this was my job/facing the ghosts/speaking for the ghosts/dancing with the ghosts...."

For a father, besides the death of his kid, there aint no more nightmarish thing than to hear that his kid has been sexually abused. Before you shared with me that your stepfather had raped you, I couldn't have imagined facing such news without killing that motherfucker. You get news like this and immediately go into shock and think that, *what?* since I'm the pops, I'm supposed to find a gun, or go get my boys, or hire a crack head to become an assassin, or just roll up on homeboy and beat him with a baseball bat down onto all fours.

But not one of these responses made a bit of sense after you shared your news with me. I didn't know what to do. Only when you asked me to do nothing in revenge, when you asked me to just be there for you, did it hit me that, yeah, I was in pain, but you had been wronged, not me. Your actual body and psyche and imagination and safety and family harmony had been violated. You were the only person who could give me directions, set the goals, determine what game plan we would follow to protect you from this criminal and make sure that he paid for what he did.

Once I respected that simple truth, once I got past all *my* shit, once I inhaled the simple truth that it's first and foremost about you, I knew what I was supposed to do (and it is still difficult). I should do just what I did for my mother: Witness. Own my grief and helplessness and rage. Hold your hand. Transcribe for the ghosts. Remain grown. Celebrate that you and I are still alive and willing and able to face, wake up from, and live through this nightmare in our own ways, but together.

By writing with you I honor my mother. Since you were only four when she died (Moms was only 57 when she died), I just wish you could have gotten to truly be her granddaughter. My Moms was a funny, ethical, honorable, and resilient woman. Like you've become in your late 20s! I am writing with you because once I wrote down my mother's funeral arrangements and then lived through the first day after she died, and then lived through the funeral, even spoke my own extemporaneous eulogy from the pulpit, and then lived some more through the first and second decades after she died.

I didn't think I could handle the death of my mother (and that nightmare aint never really over, let me tell you). But I survived, with my own sense of humor, honor, and resiliency. I didn't think I could handle your rape. But I'm trying, dear Lord! And with your help, *believe I'll run on and see what the end's 'gon be*!

**ADE:**

Sometimes before a date he'd tell me that he'd have to relax me so my hormones wouldn't be raging and I wouldn't be tempted to sleep with my date. He would take me into his room, the same bed he laid in with my mother, and tell me to lie down. I remember the first time sex happened it was in that room. It had to be a weekend and my mother was most likely shopping, or running errands. He told me to lie down and relax. I didn't know what to expect. I was used to the late-night visits in my room, but never during the day, never in his room. I just assumed that it was going to be the same as usual though, like when he came in my

room. I'd give him my breasts or allow him to touch me while he masturbated. Just hoping it would be over quickly and I could try and go back to sleep. But this was different; this was in his room, on a bigger bed. He took his clothes off, all of them except his socks, and took mine off. I was so stiff. I was so scared. My mind was racing. I told myself to get up. "Run to my room and lock the door. Get Up- do something. You're not supposed to be here. This is too far; you can only handle what happens in your room." But I didn't move. I didn't blink, I barely breathed in and out. He spoke in the quietest whisper, telling me its okay and to relax. We can just lay here next to one another. When I think back, I feel like everything he ever did was planned out, like he knew my mom would be gone and for how long. Like everything was strategically planned and organized. Lying there, I didn't know what was coming next. He asked me if I was okay.

"HELL NO!" my brain yelled. "THIS IS SICK, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU'RE FUCKING CRAZY."

Instead I nodded yes. Where was my voice? Why didn't I say what I was thinking? He gets up. I hear him in the bathroom, opening a drawer, opening a package or something, and I'm paralyzed and naked on his side of the bed. Stuck naked, listening to my stepfather in the bathroom doing something. My eyes were closed but I felt the bed sink, and then he touched me. I flinched. He whispered, "Its okay, relax." I didn't relax but he still managed to pull my legs apart. He inserted something inside me with his finger. My eyes were still closed; I don't think I could have looked at him. I began to visualize my body. My toes, my calves, my hips, my hands were clenched, my breathing extremely heavy. He left again for the bathroom. I could have run, this was my time. Nothing. *What's wrong with*

*me? Why am I just fucking laying here?* I feel something come from under my closed eyelids. A tear. Damn! I'm crying again, just like the first time he touched me in my room. *Get up Ade! Don't just lie here. You have something he put inside you and you don't even know what it is! GET UP!* Nothing. He's back lying next to me. I feel his hands. He's touching my body, just rubbing first. Then I feel him shift his weight and he leans his head in to kiss me on my lips. I have movement, I turn my head, and he gets my cheek. My mind finally has a connection; he won't get me to kiss him. Never. I won't give him my mouth. He kisses my cheek, neck, down to my chest. I feel everything more heightened; I'm not disconnected like in my room. I'm not pretending to be sleep like when he's in my room. WHY can't I go to sleep? Why can't I shut off? Then it happens: he tried to insert his penis in me. Nothing, I'm stiff as a fucking board. He tries to move my legs further apart, and I don't budge. He says its fine.

"Relax, this is going to help you I promise. It'll make you not think about sex with your date. You'll be able to just enjoy your time with no pressures."

He continues to push my legs, finally getting them apart enough to try and insert again. He's not really hard. He's pushing but nothing is happening. Then he asks for my participation, he wants me to "do his favor" which he refers to when he comes in my room trying to get a nut. He wants me to stimulate his nipples. I robotically oblige. I'm used to that. Keeping my eyes closed and just giving my body, or, at least in my room, as it escalated, touching back. Now here I am participating in helping him get excited so he can penetrate me. Damn, I should have gotten up! What was going to happen now? I'm in my head when I feel the hardest pressure I've ever felt between my legs. My voice came back but only a whim-

per escapes. It's pain not pleasure. He pushes, asking if I'm okay. I say nothing. *Never did he ask if he should STOP.* In all his questions of concern did he ask if he was wrong? He pushes forward; I whimper again. My cheeks are wet. Finally it's done. He's inside of me; he lies down on top and begins to move. I am crying harder now but I still don't have a voice, no sounds come from me. He moves his hips, makes some noises. I feel his head lift from the pillow. I know he's looking at me. I feel him lean down again towards my face. Tries to kiss my mouth; I turn again and he kisses my wet cheeks. He whispers, "I just want to kiss those pretty lips." I stay to the side, my hands are still clinched at my side, my legs are flat, and he's inside of me. I'm lying there, I'm crying, my eyes are closed, my brain finally goes blank. The next thing I remember is he's getting up, running the sink, and he comes out with a washcloth, he wipes me down, cleans up the thick mess that's between my legs. Sits next to me while I lay stiff in the same spot naked, now that he has his underwear on. He tells me to open my eyes. I don't at first. Don't want to see, or acknowledge him or what happened. I just wanted some breakfast; I just wanted to go on my date the normal way. He says again open my eyes; finally I do. I see his face. I cry some more. He wipes my eyes with his hands, says,

"Its okay. The first time is always more painful, that's why I wanted it to be with me, not some boy who won't take care of you. Are you hungry?" I stare at the ceiling behind him.

"I'll go make you some breakfast."

He puts the covers on me, says I can get up when I feel like it. He'll go make my favorite. Just like that, he leaves the room, closes the door. I hear him

downstairs. Finally my legs work. I gather my clothes, walk down the hall and open my bathroom door and go in. I look in my mirror and see myself for the first time; I begin to cry, harder than I did lying in the bed. Crying from my belly, but then I remember he's still in the house. I don't want him to hear me. I turned the water of the shower on and get in the tub and sit. Letting the water run over my whole body. I just cry. I cry so hard I swear he can hear me but he never comes upstairs. I cry so hard and I pray for an answer to WHY? What did I do? What did that have to do with a date? I just sat in my shower and cried. I don't even remember who my date was, or even if I went on it. I only remember that was the beginning of years of the same routine. Sometimes would be faster, I wouldn't resist as much, figuring that I'll give in to get it over with; sometimes, I would still fight in my silent way. But that day was the beginning for me and I was 16.

**Pops:** So this sick motherfucker leaves his wife's bed, tiptoes from his bedroom to his teenaged stepdaughter's bedroom, while your mother and brother sleep... this sick motherfucker, who's a goddamn drug and alcohol counselor with years of experience, who'd shaken my hand at your track meets and at your brother's baseball games, this motherfucker sneaks into your bedroom, touches your body, sits back and jacks off, and considers this his brand of what!? *Foreplay*! So that he can one day, when your mother and brother are out of the crib, bring you into *his* bed, where he and his wife sleep and have sex and talk about their partnership, and where, no doubt, this sick motherfucker offers his opinions as a father about you and your life, so he can have sex with you.... And wiping off blood and semen, and wiping away your tears of terror, are supposed to demonstrate that he's gentle and romantic and some kind of magnanimous royal patriarch who gets to deflower you....

Wow… reading your breakdown is incredible … and makes me think first of wanting to hire those New York cops who jammed that stick up Louima's ass…. Makes me wish that on the very next day you would have called me or told your mother or your brother or your sister or just ran out the house and went to the mall or jumped on a bus or gotten to your teacher at school or school counselor.

I am so sad reading about how paralyzed you felt, how helpless. Reading your testimony just makes my stomach drop and dries up the spit in my mouth and bunches up the muscles in my jaw and makes me feel numb, too, and sadder than even when my mother and father died. Also makes me think of what that judge said in court, after this sick motherfucker's lawyer was up there trying to tell the judge that you were a willing, seductive partner in this man's rape of his stepdaughter. The judge, a woman, said it was "obscene" that a grown man with all his experience as a counselor, even as a parent of his own children, would stoop into the slime of denial so deep that he would *pay* a lawyer to plead on his behalf that *he* was the victim, not you.

I shook that motherfucker's hand. I trusted him.

I swapped stories about parenting with him. I congratulated him on marrying your mother. I saw him as a brother. I saw him as a co-parent. I told my friends that my kids had two fathers – me and their stepfather. I introduced him to my big brothers at your college graduation. They shook hands with him. I introduced him to my sister and her husband and my niece at your high school graduation. They shook hands with him. I cringed watching him massage your legs at your track meet. I watched him click his stopwatch and count off your steps as you ran around the track. I watched your track meets from up in the bleachers out of respect for the time he'd put in as an unofficial track coach. I refused your mother's invitations to visit yall's house after both graduations, because I wanted to respect the home that he and your mother had made. I absorbed and struggled with feelings that you'd rejected me for this man. I doubted my history as your father. I thought he had replaced me. I respected your choice. I surrendered in the face of yall's successful two-parent family. I stuck to my commitment to myself, and to your mother after she

won custody, and fought my urges to cuss her out and use you and your brother to plant seeds of discord in yall's family. I paid my child support. I paid what I could when you entered college. I told you that you were always welcome in my home – called it your California home. I felt like, damn, ultimately, when I saw you head off to college, and then graduate from college, we'd all made it: I was happy living in California, your mother had found happiness, and, whew, we could count ourselves basically lucky that despite divorce and long geographical distances between us that there was at least some rhythm and progress.

And all the while this sick motherfucker didn't deserve nothing but an ass whipping and prison and banishment. This grown-ass man was *macking* a goddamn teenaged girl! Saw himself as a pimp, not as a father. As a hustler, running game, having his nasty-ass cake and eat it too. I hate this sick motherfucker. I hate what he did to your body and the bullshit con he ran on your mind. One call, the second after this motherfucker even looked at you wrong, let alone touched you or touched himself in front of you or the rape you described, and I know that me and your mother (as much as she's gotten on my fucking nerves over the years) would have worked together to protect you.

Why you didn't call me or tell moms or anybody when he first came into your room? What did I do wrong that you didn't trust me enough to tell me? What was he saying that kept you constricted? What was going on in yall's house that he could get away with even violating the bed he shared with your mother?

**ADE:**

Finding the words or the reasoning to "Why didn't I tell?" is like, DAMN, I don't fucking know. I mean point blank, in all seriousness, I don't know. With all my elementary and middle school training on strangers and predators, never once do I remember the talk about someone at home being that predator. You did ask

me and my brother if he was touching us or being mean, rude or disrespectful and when you asked the answer was truly NO. Mommy never asked me though. I guess now with an adult mind I say damn no one asked me about home. No one asked me if life was good "for real." I mean shit, as a child, the only person, adult should I say, who was talking to me was his sick ass. While he's not a "stranger" according to whack-ass programs talking to kids, I still had the intelligence to know what he was doing was wrong, but they never said what to do if it was a stepfather.

They never went into the protocol of what we are to do if your own stepfather was touching you. The focus was always on the stranger: not to get in the car, take candy, etc. Everything needs to be updated. Talks for kids regarding drugs, sex and predators. To this very fucking second why I didn't call you, tell mommy the next morning, go to school and tell a teacher -- I can't answer. That first time I just stuffed the incident and the feelings. Then I became so used to stuffing my feelings and all the incidents, it just never crossed my mind to actually tell. I believed I could change it, and get him to stop by finding a replacement. To be extra honest with you, and myself, it was all about finding a new dude, to show him I learned this shit, and was ready to move on from him. I remember him in my room and how that became routine. I remember that fucking day when I was sixteen and it escalated. I remember how in my room and my mother's own room then he took free reign to do both, touching and favors and sex. No room that I thought was safe was safe. I remember how his office then became the next room when we would "talk," especially when I did something wrong. Any place in the house was possible, no time was off limits, even with mommy in the house or gone, he was bold and confident.

And I never knew what to do? I always hoped mommy would come upstairs, or come home, or wake up, but she never did. The specific dates and locations during each act may not be clear but each act is more than certain and permanently burned in my brain. After sixteen, my mission was "get him to stop by finding someone else, not get him to stop by telling those who really love me." Looking back it was what psychologists (but of course not in this round-the-way vernacular) would call a jacked-up emotional and psychological relationship. I get touched, raped, I do favors for him, and I get something in return. He cooked my favorite foods, he didn't ask me to do my chores, stupid childish shit that a child would want, like fucking ice cream. I remember that shit too, getting fucking ice cream for "being a good girl." Damn this nigga was really that sick *muthafucka* that they actually warn you about. Buying the kids ice cream to get his rocks off. But my change came somewhere between seventeen and eighteen. I came into "my own."

I remember being out in LA with you Dad. I remember the party, but whenever I look at that picture of us I see in my timid stare to the side, underneath my eyes, I can remember what I was holding onto. I can feel that I still had a secret and the perfect time to tell you. I NEVER did. That talk where you asked about sex, man that was the biggest lie I ever told you. That simple No. But in my seventeen-year-old mind I didn't want you to know. Fear and shame ripped me apart and held my tongue. I was afraid of what would happen to me, to him, to my mom, to my family that I was attached to. I have to admit, I did love him as a father. He was what I knew. You were my father but you weren't there. As a fourteen year old, we hung out, but I didn't get four years of living with you. I didn't really know you. I mean, shit, first time I hurt myself in your presence, I screamed

for my mother! I was stuck. I loved the man as a father, wanted to believe he wasn't hurting me, but all the while knowing and feeling ultimate shame, not only because I knew he was a fucking swine and evil and doing wrong, but shameful, because I had yet to build any other feelings for him but love. That, MY FATHER, is the answer to why I never told when I was originally violated. I loved him, his two sons, the togetherness he created in my world, the solidarity and comfort he brought to my mother, even if it was all fake-ass bullshit. It is what kept me trapped, and a victim. The only thing I say now, is that at seventeen and eighteen and the rest of my college years, something changed. That love finally turned to hate, not just in my house but inside of me.

**Pops:** Since we're both grown now, there's no way we can 'fix' the past. No way to do a thing but look back and find some words to describe the loss, the feelings of being trapped, being a prisoner of, like, a whole galaxy of feelings. Even my question, why didn't you tell me...? Really, that's a question that may have its answers (and I know you know those emotional phases since you studied psychology), but the answers are by the book, you know. Cause when we locked up in the thicket of the thing, the only answer is what we come up with based on exactly what's going on in the moment. You know how mugs act like they so bold in hindsight about anything -- like when cats talking about how they would have acted during slavery.... 'Yeah nigger I would have kicked massa's ass...' 'I *know* I would have been a field hand, runaway, Underground Railroad conducting motherfucker!' And don't none of us know what we would have done. I mean, same with what you're sharing with me. Of course, I'm supposed to have just killed Homeboy, after you told me what he did to you. I'm supposed to have grabbed a weapon and walked right up in his face and got to swinging, got to shooting, got to stabbing. I'm supposed to have killed him with my bare hands. Choked him till his eyes rolled up in the back of his head. Until he foamed at the mouth. And I'm

supposed to have shouted at his ass while I was whipping his ass. I'm supposed to have made him confess. Beg for mercy. Atone. Then kill him. Put him out of his misery. And stand over him. Spit on him. Stomp his face. Kick him in the nuts. And you know I wanted to. Still want to.

It rearranges my molecules to think I did nothing to him. Did nothing to protect you. Didn't have the sensitivity, second sight, mind-reading abilities to peep what he was doing to my kid. My youngest daughter. I know we are working together and I'm doing what's right, because you asked me not to go off, and because *this is what a father really does: be there for his kid... this is where the real vows get put into practice. This is what I'm supposed to do: take my lead from you, even as I own up to all that I feel, all that awesome and awful range of hurt and rage and righteousness I feel. I'm in it to win it!* Yet it rearranges my molecules when you come up for air from your deep thoughts and say that you was loving him, knowing him, more than you was loving me, knowing me, even though you *knew* that he was just fucking wrong. That's so painful I cannot express it. I can't breathe through that one. But I can tell you that for me it feels like one of the core tragedies in my life. After going through all that I went through to try and work with your moms to stay in your life. All the money I sent, all the court bullshit, all the silences and arguments and distances and determination to create as much normalcy as I could during our visits ... all the tears I went and shed, in my privacy, to my friends, even in front of bureaucrats telling me I wasn't shit, telling me I wasn't keeping up with my payments, telling me I was just this Rolling Stone nigger who abandoned his kids, telling me I was a member of the statistical army of motherfuckers who willfully created the army of single mothers in the Black community.... After all those tears, after brooding and impotence and heart palpitations that sent me to emergency rooms, the bottom line is that there yall was, living in the fucking suburbs, in a beautiful house, two parents in the crib, two working adults in the crib, plus a non-custodial parent *paying his financial child support and picking up the tab to fly yall out for visits*, only to find that it was just a rotten situation. Cause it *was* rotten, if to maintain that image of nuclear family the patriarch, the 'good' man, the stepfather taking over for where supposedly a nigger like me left off, was raping his

'daughter.' Just rotten, no matter what his presence said in the abstract world of observation. Just rotten, because it was all a lie.

Love. You loved him. Reading that rearranges my molecules, because I'm human and it hurts. But when I take my deepest breath, and look back through my sharpest hunger, there wasn't an ounce of love in that house. Cause love means safety. I'm talking about love, not R&B love, not Hip Hop or even Sarah Vaughan love, but love that spreads an electrifying confidence through our bones until there aint no doubt about who got your back. Find another word for what you felt, because even if he never had intercourse with you, even if he only talked sexually to you, even if he changed his *intonation* in your presence, even if he hugged you one second longer than he should have, even if he made a sex joke in your presence, even if during birds-and-the-bees talks, his encouraging smile lingered or veered off into the slightest smirk, even if he remarked to your mother that you were becoming a beautiful young lady, even if he glanced at your ass when you wore shorts and didn't see you as a kid – like I still do and you 30! – then love can't even be *spelled* when it comes to what you went through. Not if love means anything! And since he was raping you, well, I just flat out don't want to hear that word. Let the psychologists and psychiatrists and group therapists give us a vocabulary that embraces the deep paradox of what you were feeling, and let them include love in that dictionary, but this father, this man, your real father, I know love wasn't in that house, wasn't no part of what welled up inside you for that man. Denial on my part? Call it what you want. I aint saying it aint human what you felt, what you went through. Much as I hate him, he still a human being. But I'm way up underneath that part of the brain baby. I'm down here living with a simple loving common sense and Home Training. Where I define and defend myself. Love is safety. Love is sacrifice. Love is stamina for the right thing. Love is *doing* the right thing. Love is living through others. Love is facing up to our selfishness and then powering and begging or praying through that selfishness. Love is recognizing somebody else's rights. Love is being grown and dealing like you grown. Love is yeah, since we human, and biological, *acknowledging* that as a girl-child enters puberty, she can become beautiful

and sexy and may even, in an unexpected, visceral moment, stir within a father, her pops, a '*damn, that's my little girl?!* before our common sense and Home Training – our guides and gifts from loving elders and histories and customs – make us laugh and ground us again, so that we again become what loving fathers are: protectors, journey-agents, wisdom-keepers, even desperate prison guards struggling to hold off the inevitable maturing of our daughters.

Love. That man didn't love you. You didn't love that man. You may not have loved me during those days when you were violated. And believe me I felt our distance! I lived through that painful no-man's land, that time when I only had my own hunger for you to keep drawing me into our future. Aint nothing I can do about that history, those memories, but testify. But damn if I'm co-signing on to any definitions – *even yours!* – that gives a whit of respect to what he put you through and to all the contortions you had to go through to let 'I love you' come out your mouth for him.

***ADE:***

Man pops what did you do wrong? Shit, as an adult, I would say you lived your life, but as a child, damn man, I have to say you left. Moms never dogged you. Moms never said negative shit about you. When them child support checks came, she cashed them, then we went to get me and my brother some shoes or clothes. But even though you were available if I wanted you, I still felt that abandonment. You left and you took my brother. You picked him over me. You became, in my small little world, the father from afar. My earliest memory of you was when I was seven and it was the first time I came out to Oakland. I don't remember shit before that. When you wrote that story about braiding my hair and how you were around when I was 18 months old, brushing my little teeth, taking baths and anything else you recalled as a part of being my father, I have no serious recol-

lection of any of that. It bothers me, hurts me, and enrages me that I don't have any memories of you being in the beginning of my life. I cried when I read that story because it was right after I came forward and told the truth about my abuse, and my tears were a confirmation that I was important to a man who truly was and is MY FATHER. I had another male to look up to and now I had a chance to reconnect. Those tears were for a memory that you had, not me, but because you had it, I was confirmed in my relationship to you. I could truly delete these horrible memories of a father. I could no longer feel sad because the "father I knew" was such a piece of shit. You asked me what you did and my only answer is you left. I understand now, I respect why now, but as I was growing up I was alone. Mom worked all the time, my sis was fucking up, and my brother wasn't around for the first part because he was with you. I was alone.

When mommy found happiness with this man, and after my resistance to bond with him was worn down, he played his hand. He filled that fucking space. He never talked no real shit about you. It wasn't until I was 20 or so did he even try and say negative things about you. The interesting part was by then I didn't respect or give a shit about what he said. By then I was angry and resistant and everything he said to me was shit and landed on deaf ears. He could have told me to move out of the way of a moving truck during that time and I wouldn't have moved just because he told me to. But as a child he just made his move into that lonely space I was in. That was his game, which was how he got his victim. Pops you did nothing. What you felt was right at the time, but in my little world you left me.

That nigga didn't have to say shit to keep me constricted. He just knew what not to say. He knew not to threaten me or moms. He knew that I would have reacted to that. But what did he say to literally control my life for 8 years? I don't know. There wasn't a script. This man didn't do the PBS specials using violence and threats on my life or my moms. He used that fucked-up language. He talked that bullshit about teaching me. But really what did he say to keep me silent? He just knew that fucking psychology shit. He knew manipulation and how to use it on a child. I remember when I took my first psychology class in high school and learned about Freud and that fucking weirdo with his freaky sex shit, I began to realize that my stepfather was a Freud advocate. Go figure. That's some real fucked-up shit. But the real shit is how he mind-fucked me along with his physical attacks. He had me scared to speak out and tell, but not because of threats, but that fear of being left again. He must have read some real deep heavy-ass books on psychology, because I still can't find the nigga's degree. I think he made up being a therapist; he probably became a drug and alcohol counselor, because he went to enough groups to figure out how to run one himself. He's that lame-ass dude who could be considered a master manipulator. He reads people and figures out their weaknesses in order to control them. And, well, it doesn't take a genius to figure out what a child wants. But I can't answer precisely what he said to maintain his control. He fucking had my mind personally struggling to just compartmentalize all the shit it had in it. For a while he won, but the overflow took over, and the love I thought I had for him, and the need to have the loneliness void filled, were turned into hatred for how he made me feel and disgust at his manipulation and perverse control.

Maybe my visit to L.A. when I was 17 did it, but I know when I came back home my shit was different. You definitely handled me, comforted me, and made that feeling like you left me totally disappear. I came back home feeling like what was missing in my life was not being filled with the ignorance that this man was putting into my mind. I came back home fired up and ready to begin using the word STOP. Now the interesting part is that it still never crossed my mind to tell anyone else, but it did cross my mind to make it stop and begin standing up to him directly. I don't really know what that was about but hey it was something different.

Man, my house was like War of the Roses, but not between moms and him, but between moms and me! When she shared concerns as a mother to him as her husband, he would use it to keep us separated. He mind-fucked moms too, had her sucking up all those lies about how she sucked as a mother because big sis was all jacked up. Of course he wasn't mentioning his own contribution to my sister's distance and the things he did to her that contributed to her jacked-up perception on life and men. I mean fourteen to sixteen, it seemed like moms was just around, like she was relinquishing her parental role of me to this man, because he convinced her how good of a father he was because he raised his two sons alone. Yea *muthafucka* failed to mention he was fucking drunk half the time and the boys practically raised him and themselves. My mom trusted the man she married. The man she took vows with. I actually remember their wedding; I was not a happy camper. Go figure huh…Moms was giving up on herself, on what she taught her kids, and believed that whatever this nigga said was gold. I remember him saying shit like she was a terrible mother; she wasn't good at connecting to them; wasn't

a good wife because you left her. So he was the second chance she needed. I didn't know then what that shit was about, but I know now. It was the seeds he planted to begin our household separation.

When I graduated high school the real separation began between moms and I, because of the lies he would tell her about me, and her going through whatever mind-games he had her on. Most always the lies were about sex and boys, and my social life; he claimed I was some super promiscuous whore on my college campus. Saying I wasn't going to class, that all I was doing was having sex in the boys dorm; comparing my college experience to my sister's, saying I would end up pregnant like her. My freshman year of college, he convinced my mom to bring me home every weekend before track season started, or during the weekends we didn't have meets, so I wouldn't "get in trouble." The shit that started my anger was the fact that he was lying on me, about me and that he was telling my mother these lies AND MOST PAINFUL was her believing that shit. I got angry because I just didn't want my mother believing this man anymore. I didn't want my mother to think I was something I was not, so I made a choice to begin to connect, slowly and in my own way, but I was determined to undermine this fucking individual. My household was hell inside; outside it was the black Brady bunch. I was the ideal kid, with the biggest secret ever. There are so many stories of things he told my mother and how he kept us apart. My perfect outside world was shambles behind closed doors. I hated being in that house.

**Pops:** I didn't choose your brother over you. But I know it felt like that. I have a photo of you that your auntie took at the airport. Your head is bowed in 4-year-old mourning. If I was in my right mind, I would

have given your brother back to your mother and never separated yall. I should have been bigger than your mother and surrendered. Fuck the court order that gave me the 'legal' right to take your brother out to California. Separating a brother and sister! What a fucked up idea. It was your mother's, at least it was the offer my lawyer got from her lawyer. I just felt so desperate that if I didn't take that offer then I'd never see my kids again. Of course, I didn't have to live in California. I didn't have to live with the woman for whom I left your mother. I could have stayed with your mother. I could have stayed in Maryland, where my beloved mother had just been buried that July. I can tell you that I wasn't in my right mind. That ugliness could only beget ugliness. I was 29 years old. Flooded with rage and testosterone: this was a war between me and your moms and yall were trapped in a minefield. I had no skills. I had no tools. I was grieving everything and didn't even know it. I was in the epicenter of stuff that was ripping me apart: divorce, custody battle, mother's death, new relationship in which I was helping to raise another woman's son, working part time in a new area 3,000 miles from everything familiar to me. And I'd 'won' – aint that a bitch! – I'd won the chance to have *one* of yall, to raise *one* of yall under the same roof. I had no clue. I'm sorry. I know we're all still affected by that separation of a brother and sister. I didn't want to raise just my son. I wanted to raise all my kids. I wanted all yall with me and I 'took it to the bridge' in court to try and get custody. But I was wrong, and I knew it was just wrong on GP, to agree to take your brother and leave you. Even though I tasted some wholeness by having him for those next four years. When your moms went right back into court to overturn the court order, I went crazy. Said fuck visitation. Your brother wound up staying with me and you were forced to stay in Maryland until the final court order four years later that gave moms sole custody. And that's when you came to visit me, finally, that June 1987.

I'm looking at the picture on my refrigerator of you standing with me after your brother's 'graduation' from 6th grade that same month. You're standing in front of me, staring into the camera. You're holding my right hand with your right hand. Wearing a white sweater. Showing your teeth but not really smiling. Tentative. Still figuring out how to be with this man named daddy. Wearing my rough-dried, two

braid hairstyle. I loved having you both out there with me. I was still sad, adding to my menu of disorientation the knowledge that I'd lost final custody, that you both had to return to Maryland at the end of August, that I didn't know whether or not I'd get back together with my lover, with whom I was estranged at that point, because neither one of us could bear the weight that came with loving through all the drama that I brought with me to California.

I'm sorry that leaving your moms meant leaving you. I'm sorry that being a father to your brother meant I couldn't be a father to you and your big sister. I'm sorry that 1984 left a vacuum inside you that was filled by a man who lied to your moms about his intentions. I'm sorry that neither your mother nor myself could stop the spiral of bad intentions between us, so that we could tap our gifts and whatever love we ever had to get beyond our own egos and figure out a way to do right by yall. I'm sorry I didn't ask my father for help. I didn't ask my brothers or sisters for help. I didn't call my aunts or uncles. I didn't ask my best friends. I'm sorry I didn't look at your sad little face and really see you, then sprout a maturity or insight beyond my age and lingering adolescence. I didn't choose your brother over you, but I can understand how it felt like that to you.

Then 10 years later, when you were 17 and came out to LA....

You allow me a little peace to hear you say that despite lying to me, despite telling me the biggest lie you ever told me, you went back home a little bit stronger and a little bit more ready to do battle, to fight to reclaim your body and your power, until, finally, you shined the light on that motherfucker, ultimately testifying in court to send him to jail.... Yes, you allow me to feel a little bit of peace. I know I can't take no credit, but I swear if there's anything I said during that visit in '97, if there's any way I hugged you, any movie we saw, any dinner we cooked, any friend of mine you met, any walk on the beach, any contemplation, that contributed to you fighting back and pushing back and saving yourself, then I am one proud father, let me tell you. And I don't mean some shallow selfish pride. I mean a pride that is all about the *vibration*, baby, all about the drumbeat of connection that somehow we cultivated and maintained through

all the distance, disappointment and defeats. I am proud of you. I am learning now what it was like in yall's house when you went back in '97, then graduated from high school, then started your first year in college. And you're helping me really understand, on another subsonic level, why you couldn't keep in touch with me like I hungered for during that phase. Because you were *duking* it out. Focusing. Defending yourself. Thrashing against somebody trying to drown you. Our thing had to wait. As many holes as we had between us, at least you knew you were safe with me, because you'd just visited me, and we'd just spent uninterrupted days of safety together. I'm putting my words on it, I know, but looking back I'm really, suddenly, appreciating how smart you were to trust that I would be alright – you knew the drumming between us! – while you buffed up against that rotten, manipulating, fake-ass stepfather. (And I wonder what stories *did* he tell your mother?) I'm respecting you and your struggle like I'm looking at the past through, like, an *emotional Hubble Telescope!* Facing what you were facing, you loved yourself with a power I'd never loved you with. And I loved you like a motherfucker! I loved you with all my flawed motherfucking heart. Mistakes flying out *my* choices. Desperation in my love, but never no threat to you and your body. I left moms but I never wanted to leave you. I fell in love with another woman, but I never fell out of love with you.

In August 1987, when I watched that airplane disappear into the sky carrying you and your brother back to Maryland and to your mother, I stood in the Oakland airport like a statue and I cried and I cried so hard, but so quietly to myself, I am sure that folks standing behind me sensed a loneliness, a deep deep loneliness, even though I'm sure they had no idea where it came from. I don't know how long I stood at that window before I turned to walk slowly back to my car in the parking lot. I don't know how I had the coordination to drive my car. I can't imagine what yall talked about sitting on that plane. What your brother felt like leaving me after those four years. What yall felt being together again, after me and your mother separated you, and kept you separated, because we were fighting, *we were duking it out*, and sinking you guys into loneliness and grief and mourning. I know I knew enough to go get a massage that

evening. From a body worker who told me she felt my sadness and who witnessed my tears and who summoned all her skills and empathy and somehow helped me from sinking until I disappeared into depression like that plane disappeared into that blue Bay Area sky.

Then in the fall of 1997, when I watched another plane carry you into a pinpoint, back toward your mother and your brother and your sister and your rapist, I felt a buoyancy because we had held our circle and you had left me with my innocence when you chose to lie to me, and I felt close to you, at least closer than I'd felt since you were my gap-toothed knucklehead, the brown girl I bathed and pushed in the stroller, and changed, and fed yogurt to when I took you and your toddler brother with me to read poetry in a friend's class at Howard University .... I felt close to you, because out of fear, or because you knew that you had some rumbling to do back east, you took your 17-year-old, timid, scared, shamed self back to your battle field and changed your life. I hope that is what lets you know I didn't choose your brother over you, because if I raised him to be anybody during those four lost years of your life, then I raised him to fight for what's right, to speak his mind and stand for himself, live for himself and never ever let nobody punk him, never let nobody snatch his tongue out his mouth or courage out his chest. I taught him to speak up, speak up, speak up, and buff your motherfucking genius and claim your motherfucking genius, and whip out your motherfucking genius like it's a switchblade (although I wasn't about no violence you know). I said stand up and stand for your African self, 'cause that's what it meant to have African names, that's what it meant to have a father from the motherfucking 70s! wild and uncensored and serious as the heart attack that took out my mother, your MaMommy, who you don't remember because she wrote a letter to your moms and said she'd rather not see her grandchildren if moms was going to use the courts to keep me from yall. That's what I tried to teach your brother during those missing four years. And that's what I wanted to teach you. I could have taught you if you'd come out with him, with us on that plane. I might have even taught it to you if I left you with moms and just got on that plane by myself.

Aint nothing I can do about it now, but let you know wasn't nothing lightweight about that moment and those years. It was all about love the best way I knew how to show it under the worst circumstances of my life. And I mean that. I was fucked up losing my moms. But contributing to the limbo yall entered at that airport is something, every day of my life that I wish I could do over. It's a daily blessing that more than 20 years later, we're still holding hands. And testifying. Surviving. Eyes on the motherfucking prize. In it to win it.

**ADE:**

He was symbolically my father. I was whom he claimed as one of his children. Having sex with him was wrong but I wasn't able to tell him to stop. He told me it was okay, that he was "teaching" me how to be a good woman to whomever I decided to become sexual with. He told me that he didn't want me to be like those other girls and experience my first time with a "hit it and quit it" or for it to be with some guy that wouldn't appreciate me. I'll never know what my first time could have been like, because of his fucked up "teaching." I was so scared to even talk to anyone about sex during my teenage years because I would have known way more than them. I was frozen because people might have looked at me strangely if I joined in the usual teenage sex talk filled with exaggeration and ill facts and decided to correct them. My peers would begin to wonder where I gained my information. Something inside me drove me to believe that he really WAS only "teaching" me and once I got a boyfriend and decided to be sexual with that guy then all my lessons would stop. I believed in my 18-year-old mind, that I didn't need to tell anyone of my at-home sex life, because I could handle it by myself. I would hold

all of it in, keep my "perfectly normal" family together, and I would get a boyfriend, and everything would be okay.

Gaining this 'savior' of a boyfriend was my goal when I went off to college. In high school, it was way too hard to find someone to even talk with casually, let alone think about having a sexual relationship. I mean I would get a boyfriend during high school but my stepfather would be all over me. Wondering who I was talking to, never letting me talk to boys at track meets without wanting the details of the conversation when I got home. I was very fearful of him even knowing whom I was talking to during high school. He made me think I didn't know how to pick the right guy to be around me. He told me all the time the guys I chose weren't any good; they would just use me for sex. They only wanted me because I was the cute girl, and would look good on their arm. I had an internal fight, because on one hand I knew guys saw more than my pretty face and I never felt they liked me because of my body, but on the other hand I was internally accepting the bullshit I was being fed at home.

I never showed it but I personally went through the teenage self-image issues surrounding my body. I mean, I was the skinny girl amongst all the fuller girls, thick hips, thighs, and breasts. I really never thought anyone in high school wanted to be sexual with me anyway, but I was always confused to be told they wanted me for sex. The little girl in me still wanted to believe in that "daddy" and I was internalizing those negative statements. The statements that made me feel less-wanted at school, and even more damaged and confused at home.

"They only want you for sex. They're gonna use you. They don't really like you for your mind."

What kind of fucked-up messages are these? Damn I didn't understand anything, but I believed him. I took these statements with me to college, decided that I'd be in control, I would be the initiator of my own sexual side. My first time would be because I wanted it, not because I would be chosen. Well I couldn't even be honest with the guy. I had to tell him I had been with someone else before him. Number one, I didn't want to put the "virgin pressure" on him and two I was scared to open my mouth and tell the truth. I mean, how perverse would it have been to tell him it was the man who he met and helped move me into my dorm room! Being a virgin in the unofficial sense of the word made me question everything even more. With all this "teaching" I wasn't really paying attention. I was never mentally there. I was always somewhere else. I only gave my body, never really connected. I mean, who would? So, how do I use what I'm supposed to know? And the one 'lesson" I was never given was how to handle the emotional part? How to connect sex and feelings? How do I have sex for fun and not fall in love with everyone? How do I handle the desire to just be loved by the man that I have chosen to become sexually intimate with? I don't know, I always found myself at either one of two extremes, extremely detached or extremely connected thinking I've found The One, and I shouldn't look any further. Both extremes always seemed to end in the same place: not understanding why this "teaching" isn't working and me being hurt again.

**Pops:** Everything he said to you was so lame.

You knew it then and now that you a grown woman I *know* you know that truth. Not one word that a *woman* would have taken seriously. I mean, what if he had been talking to your mother....telling *her*

that he was anointing himself your sexual guru. What if he was telling your *mother* that, yeah baby, as part of my role as stepfather, I think it's important that I teach your daughter how to have sex the right way. I think it will be too traumatic for her to experience her first sex with some other teenaged boy. That way I can be sure that she won't get pregnant and then I can be there for any questions she might have. And then your moms – yeah right! – would nod her head to him and say, '*Whatever you think is best, honey, and by the way, since it's such a good idea why don't you call her father out in California and let him know your plans, so that you both can map out the absolute best strategy for teaching your sexual lessons*.'

Fucking absurd!

That's why punk-ass sick motherfuckers like him keep all their shit on the down low. '*don't tell moms, let's keep this our secret, only I understand you, psst, you'll thank me later, don't worry, I love you'.* Bullshit like that -- with the inherent, indelible threat of violence and ass whipping poisoning the air, just because of how unequal yall's relationship is. Just because he's damn near six-feet tall and you're a skinny kid. The whole skanky, whispered, invisible world is what makes it obvious he knew the whole time how rotten he was, how quietly vicious and hypocritical he was. How much of a liar he was. How good of a liar he was. How much he thought about this shit. How much he thought *through* this shit. How much he really did understand about a child's development. How much he really violated any shred of ethics he had as a parent and as a professional trained to coach folks in crisis. The whole skanky cloak-and-dagger vibe of the shit shows how much control he had over yall's household. This nigger orchestrated his movement, timed it, so that right in yall's house he remained out of sight of your mother or your brother or his other children. I can barely imagine the times when yall were altogether around the dinner table, or gathered in the car to ride to a track meet or to a movie. Then this sick motherfucker actually drove you to college and dropped you and your stuff off at the dorm, like he was Cliff fucking Huxtable or somebody. Meeting students with that lying-ass grin of his, proudly presenting you as his daughter. I wished you would have

shouted -- to even these new classmates in your life -- that this man was *teaching* you about sex to prepare you for a fulfilling life in college, so that yall could have called campus security to come arrest his ass.

All my adult life, I have been around young people as either a parent or teacher. I adopted your sister. I helped raise your stepbrother. I've fought through courts and gossip and your mother's fetish for clichéd *he say/she say* arguments to be father to you and your brother. Since I was 22 years old, I have been in and out of classrooms as a teacher or writing workshop leader. I have been a dean on a college campus. I have taught elementary school students, middle school students, and high school students. At 22, when I first began teaching in Baltimore at the Park Heights Street Academy, I taught female students who were between 14-21 years old. I was already a father to your brother and I was helping to raise your oldest sister, who I would adopt. Shit, I even remember one or two of my oldest female students were so fine that after class, in the privacy of my own sexual psyche, oh yeah, I fantasized about them. I remember one older student boldly asking me out to dinner. I have been a counselor to students in crisis and in celebration. In group sessions and behind closed doors. And I have never once disrespected one of those young people. Never hugged one a beat too long on the sly. Never suggested that we leave my office and go somewhere more 'relaxed' to discuss their difficulties. Never asked for their private phone numbers. Or invited them to call me at home. Even at 22, I told my Street Academy student, without a moment's hesitation, hell no I aint going to dinner with you. You're my student, I'm your teacher. Period. From my Home Training to my politics to my common sense to my deep understanding of how much power a teacher has over his students, I received the visceral and intellectual and ritual message that my students could never be my students if they didn't know (not just feel, but fucking *know!)* that they were safe with me, safe enough to tell me anything that the situation called for. That's also why it rips me apart hearing that somebody who was *masquerading* as a teacher and as a father would use his power over you. Would actually execute his fantasies right in his own house. And then use all *his* training to manipulate the

fucking *oxygen* in yall's home until it became of rancid cloud of ugliness and secrets and lies and decay and disrespect and illusion.

This criminal motherfucker.

Talking about he teaching you something. Teaching you what? How to hate men, how to mistrust men? No, really, he was trying to teach you that he could just *impose* himself on you. Not just on your body, but on your *future*. This sick nigger wanted to imprint on you *his* image, *his* smell, *his* karma, *his* disgusting standards. Everything he said was lame. Everything he did was wrong. Every rationale he gave was bullshit. Every lie he told you was to make himself look normal. Every day you took his shit and kept your mouth closed was a victory for his ass. Everything we say now, everything you shout about your past, everything I say to speak my peace, is a magic spell of fight-back! Not one more second of silence about this shit. Tell the whole fucking world about this sick criminal motherfucker. Don't give one moment's thought that his sickness deserves your respect. I respect a cockroach more than him. I'd let a family of them crawling insects nest in my favorite vegetable pasta before I worry about his feelings, his story. Shine the light on this nigger so he can't show his face to his own mother, to his own children, to his own mirror.

**ADE:**

He used to actually take his penis and put it inside me and want me to enjoy it. To "give sexual feedback." He would always say that I can't deny my body's reaction to the stimulation. No matter how quiet I was verbally, he knew I wanted it physically. A few times I struggled with actually wanting sex. I felt like maybe he was right. I felt guilty whenever I would feel like that. How could I want to sleep with my mother's husband, the man who convinced me that he should be called 'daddy.' I knew everything that was happening to me was a result of my violation,

my exposure to this physical stimulation, but I couldn't help but wonder if he was right. I did get stimulated. My body wouldn't lie no matter what I told my mind. It got excited. How would I explain that? I couldn't explain or deny what my body was doing. The natural sexual stimulation fucked me up, because I started to think that maybe I did want the sex. But what the fuck, how could I have wanted something I never knew anything about? I was fourteen years old when he initiated sexual contact with me. I was only sixteen or seventeen when I struggled with my guilt surrounding my body's reaction and the possibility of me "liking it." But did I like it? Really or was I a sixteen- or seventeen-year-old teenager experiencing physical sensations I never experienced before and wasn't sure how to process them? Damn I wish I had fought back more instead of lying there. If I did that I don't think I'd feel guilty about any pleasure I received from these encounters.

**Pops:** I never believed in taboo subjects as you and your brother and sister got older. I initiated talks about everything. Remember how on the first day of yall's summer visits, I'd ask something like, *What's happening in your mother's house? Is there anything serious we need to be talking about before we get rolling on our visit? Is everything ok at yall's house?* And once, right after you mother and your stepfather got together, I asked you and your brother did he treat yall right, did he touch you wrong. Yall answered that he was cool and that's what gave me permission to lower my guard about homeboy. I still don't believe in taboo subjects.

But I believe in *taboos* ...

Your stepfather using his penis as some obscene barometer of your body's reactions and responses is a fucking taboo. No doubt. I have no brain cells that can allow me to tell you how wrong this sick man was. Which of *his* brain cells could give him permission to see you as someone to have sex with? What

train of thought could he generate to convince you to call him daddy and then give him permission to get naked with you? What tortured mind-games could he play to delude himself that he could fuck your mother and her daughter? I hate writing this. I hate having to face this history. I hate that this is one of our collaborations. I hate that we have to use our courageousness to rebound from this violation you were forced to survive. But like you I aint letting him have no more opportunity to pass his punk-ass off as a good man, a man with your interest at heart, a man of any worth. Let's talk about sex. Let's talk right now the way I've always talked with you about sex, until you testified about your rape and we had to deal with the reverberations of your violation. Remember when you were 17 and you came out to LA to visit? Walking on the beach after we'd vibed on the sunset over at the Santa Monica Pier, I asked you if you'd had sex yet. You told me no. I said ok, well, I got your back when you want to talk. I told you I would always be straight up with you, answer you as honestly as I could, if you had questions, if you wanted to share with me. I talked about how I rapped with your brother about sex when he was in college, as he was losing his virginity. And I just reminded you that I'm from the 70s, you know, and I'm all about it, you know, being grown with my kids, with my daughter. (Years later you said that the reason you said no I wasn't having sex is because you didn't consider what your stepfather was doing *was* sex.) Also during your visit, we held that healing circle in my house. Invited over several of my friends. Me and you testified how much we loved each other and wanted to get closer as you eased out high school and on into college. And the men and women in the circle shared their stories – good and bad – about their fathers. I swear, after I split from your mother, all I ever wanted was to be the best father I could be. Wanted to get to where I could share with you in a complete way why I left your moms, what I tried to do during our worst years when you were too young to know me, what my goals were for you, and how I wanted to be somebody you could be proud of, because even though we lived 3,000 miles apart, you always knew me, knew where I lived, had my phone number, visited me. I always wanted to make *our* memories, you know. Shopping. Going to the movies. Braiding your hair. Eating meals. Then as you got older, I wanted long talks about

our family history, moments when you checked me on my facts and opinions or defended your mother, discussions about ideas and books you were reading, or dudes you were dating, or the questions you asked your moms about me, about our break-up, until we could say, yeah, we're a pops and daughter from a family of divorce, but we also got our own history, our own groove.

And I wanted very much us to have genuine talks about sex. I wanted to give you what I didn't get from my parents. My mother used to give me books about sex, which was cool because as an early teen I had learned my anatomy from the photos in those books. I had looked at cross-section drawings of the penis and women's vagina. My father never talked to me about sex. Not like I'm talking about here. He did, when I turned 18, begin to talk nasty around me. Said pussy and cock-sucker and motherfucker. But he never sat me down in any organized way, in any candid way, and just rolled it out for me. The Deal. And none of Moms' books hipped me to the literal messiness of sex and the emotional pandemonium of sex. So I wanted to be the one to talk to you about the glory and the blues, the sensations and heartbreak, that can come with sex. I sure never thought I'd be talking to you about the radioactivity that comes from having your stepfather rape you.

I wanted your first sex to be exactly what that lying motherfucker supposedly wanted to help you avoid. I wanted you to be a little girl as long as you wanted to be. And when you began to find yourself drawn to somebody, I wanted you to be confused and curious and nervous and thrilled and icky and finally willing to get the news you needed from your moms and/or me or some older auntie or even a girlfriend with some sense in her head. I wanted you to be in doubt, weighing your goals vs. the risk of disease and pregnancy. I wanted you to find your *conversation* with a youngin, you know, in your high school, or later in college, a modern conversation about what you both wanted, about whether you were virgins or not, whether or not yall had any clue what yall was about to get off into, vs. what you'd heard or sang about when you listened to R Kelly or somebody. I wanted you to hold off on sex if you had any doubts. I wanted you to break all the patterns of silence in your moms' family, in my family.

I wanted to prove to you that you could talk to me, that your father was way up in your corner, finally, whether you told me up front or after you went on and had sex for the first time. I didn't want you to get sick or get pregnant, but I wasn't going to go all fundamentalist on you! I wanted to be a loving realist who remembered that sex is normal and one of life's sho-nuff pleasures when you get past all the game playing we throw at each other. I didn't want your first time to cause you no permanent damage, physical or psychic, you know. Yeah, actual intercourse might hurt and you would bleed. Might even have turned out to be a drag, and left you wondering what all the fuss was about, especially once you hooked up with somebody later on who would turn you out. I wanted you to choose your first sex partner. I wanted you to glimpse your favorite fantasy with your sex partner. I wanted your first time to be like a downbeat to a lifetime of making good choices, of choosing lovers with whom you explore pleasure. That's what a real father wants for his daughter. I wanted first sex to be your opportunity to learn about what you wanted in somebody, what you didn't want in somebody. Wanted you to start cataloguing what's right for you, what you liked (smell, sounds, touch, words, sensations), what you didn't like, what was important to you, what instincts you needed to sharpen, when you could trust yourself, how important sex was or would be in your *whole* life. I wanted you to have the luxury to feel what you feel from the inside-out, you know, compare the sensations that welled up in you because you were a healthy teenager with what you felt when you touched yourself with curiosity, with what you felt when you and your friend kissed or took walks after school, or just hung out with each other.

Even beyond never wanting you to have to learn that your stepfather was a rapist, I didn't want you to have to sneak about your own house. I didn't want you to have to cover yourself like you were living in a boarding house. I didn't want you to fear the sound of your toy ghost bumping against your bedroom door. I didn't want you to be touched by some impotent middle-aged man. I didn't want you to have your youth used against you. I didn't want you to feel that threats were a part of sex. I didn't want you to have to wrack your mind over why you felt visceral pleasure while you were in a situation you should never ever

had to face. I didn't want you to have to write about rape in your diary. I didn't want you to swallow your rage. I didn't want you to be cut off from your mother. I didn't want you cut off from me. I didn't want you to have to choose between what your real father wished for you and what some sick motherfucker put you through.

**REGAINING MY VOICE**

**ADE:**

I graduated from college in 2002. By that time, the actual sex had stopped. Occasionally he would try his hand at getting a "favor," especially if I was home for a break from school. I remember one time he actually tried to get a "favor" from me in my dorm room my junior year. It was the first and last time he ever brought that shit to my school. He was up there probably for a track meet, but who knows he may have just come up there to "visit." What I do remember is that I was patiently waiting for him to leave, so I could go back to my friends, and he sat in my desk chair while I was on the bed. I wasn't feeling anything at that point, just irritation because he was there; I would say I was probably 21 by then. He looked terrible, stressed. I remember looking at him with disgust because he was there. See, the difference this time was I had begun to have these violent rages at home -- yelling and cursing him out whenever he said anything to me. In the house, I began using his worst fear against him. If he tried to touch me, I screamed at him, told him if he ever touched me again I'd tell my mother, or that I'd actually cut him. I have no idea why I didn't just tell my mother. I guess I was just in my anger phase. I felt stronger just because I was actually telling him no and he was listening. I felt like my life was mine again.

Yet for some reason he was still in my dorm room. When he looked up at me and told me he was about to go "but" he wanted to know if I would "do him a favor" because he and my mother were having problems. (Obviously they were having problems -- he was a swine…so I thought to myself). By this time, my mother and I had begun talking to one another again, without his input. I would call her more directly and email just her from school. We hadn't made any major strides, but it was a lot better than freshman and sophomore year. I am not sure what came over me that day in my dorm room, but I gave in. I felt semi-strong because the favor would only be done with the following stipulations: He would NOT touch me, he would not see me naked, I would have my clothes on and the only thing he would get would be my fingers on his chest, and if he took too long I would stop. I'm not even sure WHY I even had stipulations, why I didn't kick his ass in the nuts right there in my dorm room, but maybe it was still that child in me that was "used to this" and my adult in me felt like it had to be on my terms, which was where the stipulations came in.

The one thing I do remember is that he took too long and I did stop. I didn't allow him to finish, and I told him I had to pack and go study, being that this was my dorm room and it was the end of the year. Truth was, I was tired, didn't feel like playing the game. That was the last time my fingers touched his body or any sexual activity occurred between the two of us. The summer after my junior year of college was volatile in my house, but he never touched me again. My senior year of college, he would try and use that same bullshit mental crap on me, but it wasn't working. I wasn't listening. The only thing I was doing was trying to figure out my next move and how to live my own life. After graduation I was right back in

the house I couldn't stand being in. That summer I got my first job. I was making money, and being 22. I was partying and had a new romance with someone I was really beginning to care for. I was still living with a man who was telling me how much of a "whore" I was, especially when I was going out to clubs with my friends, and basically doing the shit I was supposed to be doing as a college graduate with no real responsibilities.

A defining moment was when I internalized that "whore" message and actually tried to be one. I figured that the yelling and the screaming and the "fighting back" wasn't working, that maybe I'd just become what he was calling me and see how that worked out. I had a guy that I really cared for, but he lived far away, so he wasn't really a boyfriend, so I began using my looks to get into clubs in the city. I hooked up with a bouncer. I knew he wasn't really interested in me, shit he was 30+ and I was 22; what connection could there really have been? Anyway it was fun, until I started to realize I was putting myself in situations that were way out of my character and comfort zone. Meeting him after my 11 pm shift in mall parking lots, just to "say hi," or saying to my mother, "I'm staying at a friend's house," just so that I could see this grown man. Never getting a date or real relationship acknowledgement. It was exactly what my stepfather said: he wanted me just for sex and I decided to go with it. I didn't snap out of this minimal self-loathing until I actually had sex with the man. The way that went down made me realize that everything about that situation was fueled by some continued confusion and low self-worth. On one of those nights meeting him in the mall parking lot after work close to midnight, we ended up in the back of my car in the woods behind a high school in the parking lot. He wanted sex, but I wasn't sure I did. I asked if he had protec-

tion but before I saw it we were already having sex. I never actually saw the protection or the wrapper and I was feeling quite awkward and unsure. I was not careful and was in a situation with a man that I didn't even know like that. I mean I had to ask myself what was I doing? I didn't even do this type of thing when I was in high school, why am I doing it now at as a 22 year old? It was so out of my own personal character to put myself in this type of situation I couldn't believe I had actually allowed my stepfather's negativity to infiltrate my thoughts and actions.

After that experience with the bouncer guy, I totally flipped the script. I decided two things. First was: if I ever wanted to have a "real" relationship with any man, but specifically the man who I had feelings for who lived out of state, then I needed to change my life and stop lying. Secondly, I needed to feel safe and get my mom back. I decided to begin with my mother and I knew the way back in with her was just to ask for time, and so I did.

She and I began spending Sundays together. I specified to her that those days were just for us, to do anything, and to go anywhere. I then asked her about going to church. See, mommy had always been a spiritual woman but during her marriage to my stepfather she stopped going to church regularly. Her sadness was obvious and her positive outlook on life had changed drastically. Like I said, he had a hold on everyone in our house. He was able to get a woman who went to church every Sunday to not only give up her faith, but also her children. I was sick of it, so church was the way I was able to get my mother back. Those Sundays became wonderful days. She and I would talk about my stepfather. I began to "clear up" some of the things he told her about school, about guys I was seeing and talking to. I began to feel safe with her again. I began to feel like this was the mother I

knew and loved and respected. Yet something was still holding me back from telling her everything. I had moments where I wanted to scream to the heavens while we were out on our Girl Time, but instead I just wanted to enjoy the joy, never wanting to end it with some tragic story. The energy in the house shifted as well. She and I had our own "secrets," but not in the negative sense. I felt like I was building my army, like I was getting stronger and stronger just by talking to her instead of listening to him.

The church we started going to was how I met my minister, who eventually became the first person I ever trusted completely to tell about the sexual assault. The first time I met her I just felt comfort and at ease. She also indicated that she did spiritual counseling and therapy one-on-one and I asked her if she had an opening for me because I needed some help. Our first few sessions were basic. I talked about my anger. I talked about my relationships with men and how I felt I wasn't really "good" at picking men. She just listened. I even told her about my stepfather, about how he was overbearing, but I never came out and said what he had done. After about a month of going to see her, I had an incident happen in my home where my mother was in the middle of a decision I had to make. My mother and I were doing great. I had confided in her that I wanted to go see a guy friend of mine from out of town. He was going to send a ticket for me and I really wanted to go. My only hesitation was my stepfather. My mother told me to go. She said I was 22. I could go. She knew who the guy was. She felt comfortable with me leaving for a weekend. She informed me that I shouldn't tell my stepfather and that she would "handle it," (My assumption was that she would tell him where I was after I left but I never really asked). Anyway, in my session with my minister, I

just felt wrong, lying to her during these sessions and lying to my mother all these years. I was literally just exhausted from the lying and holding things in, and protecting my stepfather. I mean damn…all these years no one was protecting me and I was still protecting him. I was telling my minister about my upcoming trip, how excited I was, and also how nervous I was. I told her sometimes my stepfather's actions were like that of a jealous boyfriend. My minister looked at me and point-blank asked me, "Why would you say that?" And something just clicked in me. I looked at her and said, "Because he has been abusing me since I was 14 years old." No hesitation, no wavering, I didn't even give her a speech to prepare her for what I was going to say. I just said it. She looked at me and came and sat next to me. And she said, "Does anyone know? Does your mother know?" No, no one knew.

"You have to tell her. When do you want to tell her? I can be there with you."

I began to release in that moment. I just cried and cried, and she sat with me and just held me. It was the release I was waiting for and so desperately needed. After I finally finished telling her as much as I could, she told me that if I needed to talk further that I could call her on her cell phone. She also continued to encourage me to tell my mother, but to do so when I was ready. She also informed me that I could tell my mother in her office with her if that made me more comfortable. I left her office that day drained. I didn't know what was ahead of me, but I knew it was way better than what was behind me. I didn't tell my mother anything that day, a Wednesday. I can't honestly remember the interactions in my home for the next 3 or 4 days. I know by then things were great between my mother and I

and that I was not engaged in any type of interaction with my stepfather. I think I had even gotten to a place where I wasn't even speaking to him, except for the occasional hello and goodbye. I know I stayed out the house a lot, and I know that I worked crazy hours. Ironically, I was working part- time as a child advocate study aide at the drug and counseling center he worked at. But I always kept my distance from him.

The Sunday after I told my minister, my mother and I went on our usual day outing. It was Easter Sunday. And it was their wedding anniversary and when my stepfather woke up that day he asked mommy what time we'd be back, because he wanted us to have a "special family dinner." I remember looking at him and staring straight through him. Mommy nonchalantly told him we'd probably be back by 2 pm. He said he'd have dinner cooked and ready and he looked forward to celebrating. Well, during church service, only four days after I first told my minister about my abuse, I was moved to tell my mother. I mean, most black folks might say I got the "Holy Ghost" or something, but whatever that sermon was about, most likely resurrection and renewal being that it was Easter Sunday, it stirred something in me so deep about renewal and rebirth that when the minister asked for those of us who wanted private prayer after service I asked mommy if we could stay. I had tears in my eyes and she obliged, saying of course. I'm not sure if my minister saved us for last because she knew what I needed to do and was hoping that I would in her presence, but when she finally came next to us she removed everyone from the sanctuary. Asking them to give us privacy and that if anyone needed her they would have to wait. She sat with us and just prayed with me and I'm sure for me, and at that moment I looked at mommy and said my stepfather "has been

sleeping with me since I was 16, but he started touching me at 14." Those were the most profound words I have ever spoken, and the look on my mother's face made me feel a great sense of relief. She looked at my minister, then she looked at me and hugged me so tightly, and just cried the words, "I'm sooooo sorry" over and over again. We stayed in that sanctuary and she and I talked and I asked her if she was okay, and I asked her what she was going to do.

Immediately the rage and anger filled her eyes and I could tell what she wanted to do, especially knowing that we had to go home. My mother and I stayed at the church past 2 pm, and after we left church we sat in our car just talking. I told her in her car that I didn't want her to do anything to him. I told her that I thought we should go back to the house and eat the dinner he made and just pretend that she didn't know anything. I told her that I wanted to wait and figure out what our next step should be and to not react based on her anger, because I needed her more now that I ever would. She agreed and we finally headed back to the house. We both walked in and he's there, just waiting. He looked stressed and angry, and asked my mom what took us so long, and she just said, "Oh sorry, they had something at church that we stayed for." We all sat down at the most awkward dinner ever. He kept trying to make small talk and mommy and I just ate in silence. I have no idea what it was like for her to sleep in the bed next to him that night or what she was thinking or feeling, but in my room that night I just prayed that they both woke up. I woke up that morning and went to my part-time job where I had to open a gym at 6 am. I called mommy at her job when I thought she should be there, and they told me she was away from her desk, so I left her a message. That at least comforted me that she was okay and at work. About 20

minutes after that phone call to mommy, he came to my job. It was the weirdest thing ever. My manager told me, "Some man is at the storefront asking for you. Said he's your father." Irritated but calm I went to the door.

"What?" is exactly what I said to him. Irritation and aggravation written in that one word and all over my face. He was trying to explain to me that mommy wasn't talking to him and when he went to her job she wouldn't see him. I don't honestly remember much else because I wasn't listening. I was looking through him, at his body language. He was jittery, kept saying he wanted to "talk to me," that when I get off work to make sure I came home. I felt nothing at that moment except anger and aggravation. I just couldn't believe he was at my job, pulling me away from what I was supposed to be doing, because he wanted to talk to me, or he was upset because mommy wasn't talking to him. Like really dude? Who gives a fuck about you anymore. I told him that if I had time between this job and my second one (which, mind you, was at the place he worked) that I would come home but I wasn't sure. He told me that he'd get me lunch if I came home so we could talk. All I could think was, nigga I'm not 16 anymore; food doesn't get it. The jig is up. I just nodded and told him, "Yea I'll see."

Less than 30 minutes after my stepfather came to my job my neighbor called me. She informed me that I was NOT to go home, that my mom had told her everything, and that I was to come directly to her house when I finished working. Well, needless to say, through the interruptions at my job and the phone calls, my boss could see I had a lot of personal things going on, and she told me I could leave my shift early. I sat in my car listening to my neighbor in a panic, feeling like she was overreacting. I didn't need to be protected anymore. I felt this sense of

ease, like the worst was over for me. I remember the weirdest thing I said to her. I said, "I have to go home though. I don't have any tampons on me." I have no idea why that came out of my mouth, or even why I actually remember that. My neighbor was probably just as confused, because she informed me that she of course had feminine products at her house. I guess in my mind, through the haze I was in, it just didn't occur to me that my house wasn't safe, especially now that he must have known that I told mommy everything. I finally agreed to go to my neighbor's house. Not like I had a choice in the matter, but going there, and sitting in her house, finally it hit me what was happening. The chain of events were in motion.

My mother had filed for a restraining order against my stepfather. She had called the locksmith to come and change the locks on the door, and she told him to "get his shit out of the house before she got home." My mother did not come to my neighbor's house, but my neighbor's husband was a DC police officer and he was trying to find someone in the PG county department to go arrest him. I was so stoic. I felt numb and robotic, so much so that I actually told my neighbor that I had to go to my second job. She of course urged me not to go, being that she knew my stepfather worked there, as well, but for me it was what I was supposed to do. I didn't want to leave the kids I worked with without their tutor. I just told her I had to go. You know how movies go where everything around the main character is moving fast, but the main character is moving slow? Well that was me that day. I wasn't moving fast but everyone and everything around me was in this whirlwind. I can't explain it, even now, as I think about it, I can't explain why I was thinking about going to work, to be in a place where he might be. I couldn't

even explain why I wanted to go back to my house where he might be. Maybe symbolically it was my "last stand" or something to show I didn't care anymore. Who knows. But I did go to work. I was in there before he was, and the woman I worked with knew something was bothering me. She kept asking me if I was okay.

Then all of a sudden I remember him coming into the office. He walked past the room I worked in and went into his office. I got up and walked towards the tutor room. I heard him on the phone. That's when I realized he was talking to mommy. I only heard snippets from his side of the conversation. "Wait, wait….that's not what happened…she's lying…" or something to that effect. Point is, when I heard that, I finally had feelings again: anger, and rage and satisfaction. In the tutor room where I worked with the kids, I waited for them to come in. I was still in a daze but more so because of the audacity of this nigga telling my mother that I was lying, telling her that we should all have a sit-down, that my mother didn't "understand what was happening." Like really dude, like what the fuck! By that time, words came back to my throat, the blood was flowing back to my brain, and everything became even more real. When he walked into the room where I sat and said, "I still want to talk to you. You never came home. I just don't want you to be afraid of me," I looked him dead in his eyes and said, "I'm not afraid of you. I've never been afraid of you."

Right at that moment, before he could say anything else, someone came up to him and told him the police were there asking for him. My neighbor's husband had contacted the police officer in our county and they arrested him right there. It was a strong moment for me. It wasn't overly dramatic. It was just real. It was the first time that I had spoken the truth about anything in my life in relation to

him. I was not afraid of him. I honestly never was afraid of *him*, specifically. I was more afraid of judgment and others' opinions. And on that day I realized that nothing mattered anymore but me.

The following day was the 22nd of April, my mother's birthday, a date that she shared with this man, and that was the day of the emotional floodgates. Mommy was trying to hold it together for me but she left the house at one point and it took her so long to come back that I got worried. I found her at my neighbor's house and that's when her feelings of guilt started to come in. That's when she told my brother about everything that just happened, and he spoke to me on the phone and told me he was on his way up from Florida that minute. The questions from my mother and neighbors began, and that's the day that I was literally able to reclaim my voice and start telling the truth about everything.

Once my brother got up there, is when we found out about my sister's assault. My brother said we had to call the police and report it. We did and the rest is the beginning of the end. I still realize that I didn't report him to the police for myself. I did it after I found out about my sister, and decided that if he did this to us, then he's either done it before (and we found out later he had) and that he could do it again. And I refused to let that happen without somehow putting up warnings for anyone else. I felt stronger that day, but I also felt a little scared, which is why I moved to Atlanta. I didn't want to have to wander around Maryland wondering if I might run into him. But Atlanta was where I found my therapist, who really helped me get stronger. She prepared me for the court hearing. She helped me understand the stages that I would go through in my healing process. She helped me really be able to stand up for myself and begin my healing.

I remember another important moment at the sentencing hearing. After almost a year of his lawyer going back and forth with the district attorney trying to say I was the instigator of our "relationship," (that still sickens me), and his "not-guilty" pleas, he finally gave in and plead guilty. My personal opinion was that once the district attorney got that information from New York about his assault on another 14-year-old girl that his lawyer told him to take a plea, otherwise he would have gotten *waaayyy* longer in jail. In hindsight I probably should have told the district attorney "NO DEAL," but at that place in time I just wanted it to be over. Anyway, when we finally had the date set to sentence him I realized it would have been the first time I saw him since that day at the office. I realized that I was allowed to testify if I wanted to, hopefully to help the judge with her decision in sentencing. I wasn't sure what to say or what I really wanted to do. During a phone session with my therapist, since I was out in LA with you right before the hearing, she suggested I write out what I thought I might want to say to the court and to him. She also stated that I may not want to say anything, but either way it was up to me. During this writing process I found the journal and the date that I wrote what ended up being my guide on the witness stand. Here is what I wrote:

"8-20-04: it's not a dream but a reality. I am getting ready to speak my mind on a very serious issue. I didn't and still don't know how I'm going to feel or express until I get there. I don't know if I'm going to cry or be sad. But there is one thing I do know. I believe in my heart that C.G. Sr. needs to spend time in jail, why, because of the crime he committed. I don't care if he's never been convicted before, it doesn't mean he's never done illegal things such as child abuse or sexual assault before. I just happen to be the first person to stand up to him. He's a liar and a manipulator. He's a predator and a pretender. His life has consisted of portraying something that he is not on the inside. I personally don't believe that probation will affect him in any way. It would be more of a relief than a punishment. I sometimes return to Maryland and go past places and I wonder if he's around. I wonder how I'd feel if I ever ran into him. Anger is the first feeling that comes to me, but I realize that I shouldn't be, because that limits me from moving forward. But I am angry. I'm angry because he took my childhood from me. He

made me pretend that everything in our life was okay, but it wasn't. He made me feel like I couldn't do anything without him or his assistance. He made me feel totally self-conscious. He manipulated any relationship, male or female, and made me believe that others were manipulating or using me, either for my friendship if they were female, or for sexual pleasure only if they were male. He had problems with any male friend or suitor. Always telling me they were using me, always telling lies to me about them. I feel like he played with my life at his own free will and I will not stand for it anymore." (Personal communication, August 20,2004).

At the hearing, I listened to his "character witnesses" who came forward about the "great work he's doing at the church he's now attending," and how everyone was trying to say such great things about him, I decided to testify from the witness box. They had only known him for the few months before this hearing. I felt like once again this fucker is winning over some folks… but what they hadn't heard or seen was me. When it was my turn, I took what I wrote and addressed not only him and the court, but I addressed every person that came up on that stand to say they "knew him." I told them how offended I was and informed them that this was the "game he played," but they didn't really know him. They didn't realize that when he was first confronted by my mother of his actions that he blamed me for the sexual advances. They didn't know the things he said to me to keep me quiet. They didn't know what he did to my sister and to other women who came to him. Master manipulator didn't even describe what he was, because he was so good at it he even had them here at the courthouse as "character witnesses."

After the hearing, I documented in my journal for the next few days what was happening and on the 20th of August 2004 at 4:50 pm my stepfather was sentenced to 2 years in jail, four years supervised probation and 10 years as a registered sex offender, on-going counseling sessions and possible restitution. I never got the restitution, and don't feel like the hassle of trying to get it is worth the pos-

sible reconnection, but it was nice to know the judge put that in there. And on the 22nd of August he was to report to jail. Since then you and I both have seen his face on the Maryland and national sex offender registry and I discovered that he would be registered for life due to the nature of his crime. So I must say in a moment of extreme ego stroking that, "he messed with the wrong chick," cause I damn sure didn't back down. Once I started telling folks, I haven't stopped. And it makes me proud to say that I had a hand in making sure that man's face is associated with his crimes.

**Pops:** In April of 2003, on the day your brother called me, I was at the Actor's Gang Theater in LA overseeing a workshop for teenagers for the HeArt Project, the LA arts education organization for which I was Program Director at the time. He struggled to tell me. He finally said there was no easy way to give me the terrible news he had, so he was just going to say it. The phone was radioactive and I had to press it against my ear to keep from dropping it. He told me that he would drive up to Maryland from Florida. I hung up and stood by myself under the fluorescent lights in the lobby of the theater. I was paralyzed with shock and rage.

Nothing fit. I was on the job helping kids tap their genius and my son tells me that you'd been sexually abused by your stepfather, starting when you were the age of the high school students inside the theater. (I still didn't know the extent of your stepfather's violation, because your brother said he didn't know exactly what happened.) Outside the theater, it was a brilliant spring day, but I was scared to step into the afternoon sun. I was the co-leader of an organization but I felt completely powerless to make any decisions. Over the years, I have received many calls about tragedies – my parents' death, my friend telling me her daughter had been shot, even domestic violence between two folks who seemed perfect for each other. But hearing your brother's voice bearing the bad news about you! I was never supposed to hear such news. I'd done everything right. I knew your stepfather. You guys had vouched for him. He was a

good man, like me, and we had been working together, in our different ways, he in Maryland, me in California, to help raise yall into good people.

When I finally called your cell phone, I got only a voice mail. I know my message was weak. What could I really say? I just wanted you to call me back. I didn't feel I could call your moms. We hadn't been talking for years about anything serious. And I won't lie: I was pissed at her. How could she miss this? God damn it! This was her fucking husband! In her house! This is how all our fighting over custody was ending up? If I had won custody, if I had won custody! none of this would have happened. A whole generation of barely contained anger and frustration and regret and disappointment jumped me and I wanted to call and dump it all on her. But deep down, I knew it wasn't her fault. I didn't like your mother but I knew her enough to know she loved your little ass and no way could she want a man more than she wanted to protect you. After all the shit she put me through, I knew she could rumble. She would do the right thing against this nigger, now that she knew. I believed that, even though at that moment I didn't know what she was thinking or doing. Mostly, I was just so out of control and so far away that I was trying not to explode.

I finally called my co-director and told her I had a serious family emergency and that I had to go home. I told her I'd tell her more details when I got them. Before I left the theater, I honestly don't remember if I checked in with the students and the instructor. I just remember driving home and finding an email from you that boiled down to one thing: "i do not want you to ... do anything out of vengeance...," You also asked me to "please PLEASE tell me what you're feeling [,] all of the feelings...." Right then, your brother was driving up I-95 from Florida to be with you, and I wanted to catch a plane that minute. My instinct was to take a leave from work and fly back east and be with you. My co-workers would have completely understood. It would be expected of me. It would have showed how much I cared.

But I knew, I just knew, I was supposed to wait. Be still. Be patient. This is the truth. Even though I was completely conflicted. But it's like I could predict how shit would go if I flew back to Mary-

land. I would bring nothing but rage to the situation. It would have boiled down to me against him, even me against your mother. And it would have sucked me into yall's family, the family your mother made with that man, and we could see how that was turning out. She would have to handle this shit with her husband. Fucked up of me, I know, but I admit it. I was trying not to blame her directly, but I was definitely looking for someone to blame! Underneath my anger, though, I could hear a voice whispering: Stay in California. Stay home. Wait and listen. Hole up brother! Just hold up. Let it come to you. Now I can say what that chant meant: My job was to handle shit for the next 20 years. My job was to be your real father.

That's when I wrote you back:

"thank you for your note. first things first: i love you. always have and always will. of course, i am shocked and all that, but i am proud that you are tapping your power to think clearly and work on strategies to protect yourself and your mother.... honestly, i thought your mother and [your step father] were tight and that they were happy. In fact, I thought he was a man of integrity and I had no beef with him, because you seemed to have accepted him as someone who had contributed positively to your life. evidently, i was wrong and naive. ... i ask your forgiveness, but i will understand if you find it hard to give it. as for my anger: of course i am pissed and there is a part of me that wishes for [his] death. but mostly i am not focused on a sick man, who violated you and your trust, your sister and her trust, your brother and his trust, his children and his children's trust, and the home he had built with his life partner. i want [him] arrested, prosecuted and put under the motherfucking jail. i have no respect for him. he has been a pure act, who abused his power as a man and as a father figure and he can kiss my ass. but i plan to do nothing but make myself as available to you as i can so that I can deepen my commitment to contributing to your life with integrity. you may call me collect. if you'd like to leave MD and come here, let me know and I welcome you here for a minute or for as long as you need. i understand your worry about your mother. i respect your compassion. I wish you the intelligence to focus on what you can control."

"...Remember to take care of yourself: counseling, crying, releasing, speaking to yourself and others honestly in your own straightforward language about what happened and how you feel, and remember that in no way shape or form did you cause [him] to take the actions he took. he was and still is wrong. period. For every reason that can be imagined: he was and is wrong. period. that is your foundation. it will help you forever. it will help you do your work for yourself and anybody else you care to help."

"i am proud to be your father. always have. always will be."

"love/daddy" (personal communication, May 5, 2003)

To me, that's what our call-and-response dialogue has been doing: Working on the framework for our future. For me, the future started in those next few days and weeks, after your brother called me. We swapped emails and phone calls, while legal authorities in Maryland pursued a criminal case. I was

proud of you for having the courage to go to court. I was pleased that times had changed enough that the white man who was the DA was fighting for you. I was ready to go to court with you once they set the date for August 04. You kept saying that you had a million questions for me but that you'd rather put them in a letter, which I got about a month after you told us what had happened. It was a hard letter to read. It was fierce and demanding that I provide answers you thought I owed you, answers that would help you fix your broken foundation. Why I left your moms. Did I really love you? What kept me so far away from yall. It hurt reading your hurt. How angry you were that we hadn't really been father and daughter, how torn you had been: loving your stepfather, hating your stepfather, loving me, but uncertain about how I felt because of your stepfather's lies and the mixed messages about me from moms.

I was overwhelmed. Feeling self-pity, too. Now I had to go back over years of emotions, go back to my mid-20's, even go back to when I first met your mother, when I was 16 and she was 24, in DC, on my first summer job, when she was my group leader and our team cleaned up parks -- back to when me and her first had sex. Now I had to dig that deep, talk about my own burdens, how my parents broke us up that summer, then how I tracked her down in Philly in my senior year of college. Now I had to try and capture all my sadness. What it felt like to get back together with your moms, how we got pregnant with your brother, how scared I was trying to be a partner, a father, including the adopted father of your older sister, a breadwinner. In my answers, I had to help you understand my loss when I left your mother, fought for and lost custody of you guys. Now I had to capture my side of the story, explain what it was like being a youngin, trying to be happy, trying to be a good father, trying to describe how it felt to meet a new woman who felt like destiny to me, when I was supposed to be living with your mother till death do us part. Now I had to explain my bad decisions, my lies, my secrets, how poorly I handled my business, as I struggled to finally decide that it was 'right' to leave your mother, leave my kids, leave my own parents, brothers and sisters, my own stomping grounds in DC-Maryland, and relocate 3,000 miles away. Your letter was so full and it challenged me to communicate with you about so much painful and powerful stuff,

that I couldn't write another word, even though I'd been publishing my writing since the 1970s. I needed to talk out my answers. I felt that nothing I could write could capture the music of the answers I had for your questions. So I bought a batch of 90-minute cassette tapes, sat in my study with your letter opened on the futon beside me, and recorded two tapes with my responses and thoughts and riffs to your questions. I also answered your question about what I knew about your big sister and your stepfather. I explained that your big sister told me that he had touched her once, when she was vulnerable after giving birth to your oldest nephew, when he visited her apartment to bring over some diapers. Years afterward, she and I were talking on the telephone, when she asked what she should do. I told her she should tell your moms, which frightened her, because you were still living in the house. I told her she should tell your oldest auntie, who I believed wouldn't take the news lying down. I told your sister that she should share the news and not me, that it was important for her to take the lead, but that I would then have her back. I admitted on the tapes that I didn't handle this correctly. Despite my poor flow with your moms, I should have told her what your sister told me. I shouldn't have let the situation float ... until finally you had to come forward to reveal all you did....

Those tapes contained my sacred testimony, everything I could think to say, good or bad. I talked, I shouted, I defended myself, I challenged you to ask your mother the same or similar questions. I apologized, I cried, I let silences communicate in their own ways, until I was exhausted but satisfied that I had shared with you my core truths in my most authentic voice about my deepest love for you and about my deepest commitment to helping you in any way I could under the guidelines that you had set: no violence, no vengeance, no manhood or fatherhood based on my ego, only on your guidance as the only true victim in this criminal violation.

I feel like those tapes become the beginnings of our new conversation as Father and Daughter. After listening to the tapes, you called me, and we talked with less uncertainties and hesitations between us. You said you wanted to spend the summer at my home in LA to prepare for your court appearance. I

said yes and then I knew I was right to have stayed here. Stay home and keep the house spiritually clean and ready to begin the real work of our future. All summer we talked, deep conversations, slowly melting any remaining ice between us, blowing away the clouds of misunderstanding, filling in historical gaps, finding our rhythm. Before you came out to visit that summer, you had moved from Maryland down to live with your cousin in Atlanta. One day, she called you and when you got off the phone you were angry and wouldn't talk with me. We were sitting watching TV and I said, ok, when you ready to talk, we'll talk....After a minute of heavy silence, I said: "But don't take too long." This is a house of communication! And inspiration. We don't brood in this house. I won't have brooding in my house. I'm a recovering brooder and I know that sitting on shit don't help nothing. That was the last time you gave in to silence. When you broke it down, you said you were tired of living with your cousin, tired of being in somebody else's space. You wished you could afford your own apartment. I told you to use the computer to search for a place from California and find out how much your own crib would cost. When you worked out the figures, it turned out that I could afford to pay the security deposit and the first month's rent. We decided to go for it and figure out the rent from then on out.

That August, sitting in the witness box at a Maryland court, I watched you testify against your stepfather. You stared him right in the eye and called him a liar and told him no. All your relatives were there for you, including my two big brothers, my two younger sisters; your moms, your big sister, your cousin. I can't remember why your big brother didn't drive up, but I think I told him to stay home with his family, that me and his uncles would be there for you. I was sitting behind your stepfather. I just stared at him. After years of being caught in the jaws of the child support system, I decide to let the legal system grind him up. I wanted to hurt him physically, too, but that afternoon, as you spoke from the witness stand, I knew in my bones that you were protecting your own self and that you were right from the jump to have told me that you would handle this. When he was convicted, I felt sad. I watched him get handcuffed. It was time to go home.

That next summer, on my first visit to your new apartment, I went to one of your counseling sessions. At first I just listened. Then admitted to your counselor how frustrated and impotent I had felt since learning about your violation. The counselor finally asked me if there was anything I wanted to ask you. I asked whether he actually had intercourse with you. I knew he had but when you quietly said yes all I could do was cry, because there wasn't no more hiding from the worst I had imagined.

During Thanksgiving '07, you called and said, "Hey daddy: I want to write a book with you." I knew our conversations would help consecrate our healing and show folks how much work and courage it takes to truly keep your head to the sky through crises. You suggested we call the book Ghost on the Door... I suggested the subtitle: A Father & Daughter's Healing Conversations After Sexual Abuse. Since then, I have had many doubts. True, I agreed immediately to work with you, and I told you that once I start something I finish it. But on the real, inside, I honestly didn't know if I could follow through on the project. I was worried that I couldn't carry the burden of this project. I worried that people would think that it was me who violated you and that our conversations were about me trying to atone for something bad I did. It was already heartbreaking enough to know that you were raped by your stepfather. I already felt weak knowing that I had agreed not to find a crackhead to car-jack him and beat him with a tire iron. But then, to work closely with you on a project that would keep reminding me of my pain, that would make me relive my feelings of helplessness over and over again? It felt impossible. I can't lie.

Like I do with all serious emotional stuff in my life, now that I try not to brood anymore, I talked about the project with my really important friends, men and women. Each one of them told me to take my deepest breath and participate fully in this collaboration. Quite naturally, my sisters, biological and sistren from other mothers, had my back. They told me that by collaborating with you I was having your back in a big way. But it was the men, especially, my boys, dudes I have known for years, who told me to dig deep inside for the strength to walk this road with you. They said this was the most important work I could ever do. They understood my doubts and my hunger to kick your stepfather's ass. All of them said they

didn't know if they could have resisted the urge (even after promising not to go off violently) and they all reminded me to focus on what you needed, not what I needed.

And both men and women reminded me that this is what writers do, this is what Black writers do: find words for what hasn't been described, find voice for what we need as individuals and as a community. They encouraged me to draw on all the poetry I'd written, draw from all the powerful stories from African American culture, recall how much courage it took for Robeson and Parks and the invisible millions of Black folk to stand when it was easier to lie down. Thanks to my friends, and inspired by my love for you, I found the courage to stand and face what scared me most: my failure to protect you.

Also, what I couldn't predict was how our call-and-response (in conversations and on the page) would begin to actually lighten the weight of our work. I didn't expect that over the years of our working together that I would learn to release some of my pain, that I would learn to forgive myself for 'not being there,' that I would grow and evolve into understanding: I can't control the past. I can only control what I do to transform this ugly history into a more beautiful future. Working with you, listening to you, just simply living day-to-day with you, since you told me what happened to you, have made me a better man. Working with you, I have asked myself the deepest questions I have ever faced, and I have refused to stop writing until I answered them sincerely and in my own voice. These are the questions I asked myself:

What does a Black father feel -- beyond the hunger for revenge! -- as he confronts his daughter's violation by someone who masqueraded to the public as a loving parent? How can a father channel his anger and devastation into a conversation of mutual salvation and celebration with his beloved child? What can a father learn about his own masculinity and manhood when he follows his daughter's lead and chooses humane dialogue over revenge and violence? How can we measure the healing impact on daughters and fathers when they privately and publicly refuse to sweep abuse under the rug? How can fathers and daughters define their emotional health and power if they vigorously and courageously help eliminate a deep silence in the American conversation?

**ADE:**

These questions are not only just for you, but for me as well. I mean, you honestly want to know how many times I wanted to throw this idea in the trash and give up? About a million! I wanted to basically say I was crazy for wanting to do this. Unlike you, I didn't have many friends who understood why I wanted to write this project with you. What I came across were strangers. Random people, when I happened to share with them what my project was about, were so intrigued and supportive that I knew I had to keep going. I'm not sure why my "sister friends" didn't really get it. Could possibly be that maybe they all had some secret of their own they were holding onto. I probably will never know. I had a few friends who "understood" what I was writing about, but no one ever really told me how important it was or that they "got it." I actually always thought I was alone in writing this, but I also think it's because of our age. The women I know aren't old enough to see the benefits of this project in the future or maybe they were just too focused on their own lives, which I totally respect. But I realize that every stranger I met made me feel like this was the greatest gift I could give to the world and made me reenergized and fueled to keep writing. To keep plugging along. And I did. Kind of like the tortoise and the hare if you ask me.

I'm so used to being a sprinter that I never knew how to be a distance runner or, better yet, a marathon runner. But now I get it. It's the pacing. It's listening to my soul when it aches and I can't read or write anymore. To accept that this is hard, this is painful to reread, to edit like it's traditional prose, to realize that other eyes will one day be on this and be able to see and possibly feel what I was

feeling. This was not my idea of healing, but it was what I needed to heal. I feel stronger now, I feel so sure of myself and the real father-daughter relationship that we have. I feel like I can take on anything now, even though I honestly don't want to take on ANYTHING else of this magnitude. I asked myself millions of times why in the world am I doing this again? What is wrong with me to think that people want to read about my abuse, but then I met another stranger, this time a man, who has a daughter who shared with him about her abuse, but she's a few years older than me, and she told him as an adult. He shared with me how he was trying to navigate their relationship and that he looked forward to knowing your perspective as a father and how we talked and healed after the fact. It made me again realize that there is a need for my story and for this type of work. There is a need for how we communicate and there is a need to show how real and candid we are with this topic. I feel like this project has prepared me for my unborn hypothetical children, because I want to be in a space where I can discuss anything with them and they know they can come to me with the same support that you have given me, even though it's a topic that I know you aren't enthusiastic about.

Through these conversations and interactions, you have not only given me my faith in the word 'father' again, but you have given me more examples of true manhood and maleness that, under the circumstances that were my life, I would not have believed existed. I would have only believed in the basic masculine scripts that are out there. I would have for a lifetime been mistrustful of the opposite sex, if I had only my stepfather's example to refer to. I'm grateful and honored that you stuck with me and pushed through this and are continuing to work with me.

It's funny as the years have gone on and we continue to talk without writing, and sometimes write without talking, I become prouder of you, myself and our relationship. I sometimes revert back to a little girl and believe that 'my daddy can do anything,' because that's what I feel. To be able and willing to read and listen to the stories I have shared, and to share your vulnerabilities with me, have made me feel like you're invincible, even though I know you're just a human being. I think it allows me to be that little girl in the picture you described, to let go of my hesitations about you, my insecurities about my real father, and to again look up to you as "super dad." And super dad's powers are just being real, compassionate, and human. He has no *x-ray* vision, and he can't fly, but he can cry with me, he can talk to me, and laugh with me. He supports me unconditionally but also keeps me in check even as a 30-year-old woman. I'm so grateful to know that the tough part is over. The recall and retelling can sometimes be cloaked in a joke, where I'm the one joking about whooping some ass, or learning karate and busting out some moves I saw in a movie. To be able to no longer sit in this abuse but to sit in our future and our relationship, even when we're talking about serious things makes me so grateful to have done this with you.

As I read this over and over again, to make sure that I've shared with you whatever I was feeling at the time I wrote it, I still hate it. I hate the fact that I have the abuse as a part of my history. I hate that I had to share with you details that still, to this day, make me cry. I hate that you had to read it, and know the things you know, and sometimes I hate that I still haven't even dug up some of the memories that I've buried so deep that they resurface when *they* feel like it. I hate that you felt weak and immobilized by my stepfather's actions just like I did. I

sometimes don't think anyone other than the families and the survivors who live through abuse realize that the after effects don't just affect the survivor but everyone the survivor comes in contact with, but most specifically the family. It's like a tidal wave. Like when a tsunami comes. It starts from one focal point, but then the waves get bigger and take over and literally crush and destroy everything in their path. Then the clean up starts. Sometimes I feel like that. The clean up is on going. Like the people in Haiti, New Orleans, Japan, every person who has dealt with a trauma, the clean up is on going. You clean up one thing, for me it was my relationship with my mom. She and I had 8 years to also talk and work, in our way, to heal. The next step for me was you, and this was how I wanted to do it. I knew you were strong enough, not only for your own part but for me as well. I believe in the timing of all of this. The time it took us to finish it, the time it took for me to think of it as something I wanted to even do. Just the time itself.

I even started a blog, and a "writing career" as an abusive relationships writer, because I felt like I had something more to say. My blog became Restorative Notions, *www.restorativenotions.blogspot.com*, because I initially wanted it to be a place where I could have healing thoughts for myself and for others, but ultimately where others could respond and post their own healing thoughts. It didn't take off, not for lack of putting it out there, but because the timing wasn't right. I had to finish this with you first. I had to finish our healing thoughts and our work, before I could do anything for anyone else. My blog is still there, I have people ask when I'm going to post again, but I had to realize when the time would be right, and that time is after this. To me the name restorative was the healing, the repairing, and reclaiming. It was everything that I wanted to accomplish, not just in tell-

ing about my abuse to my family and authorities, but to reclaim us, to restore our voices together again. Initially it was just a thought, this idea that something like this could be done, or in my case, *should* be done. For my blog it was about healing thoughts, times when I wanted to share and enlighten someone with my 'genius,' (yea I said it) but eventually it just turned into a place where I would just express my truths, my sadness, and my joys. As you and I got deeper into our writing, I realized that we were expressing healing thoughts, which inevitably became my real space for restorative notions. We may be having conversations but everything we write and discuss comes from the core of our desire to maintain healing thoughts. I felt like it was just a perfect fit, to reclaim our voices and to reclaim one another.

Throughout this whole ebb and flow, you've supported and encouraged me, made me feel whole and secure, even in your rants and the times that you have gone on about your feelings of betrayal, you always come back to the central theme of loving me and having my back. The beginning of this was like walking through hell again. I lived it, and never did I EVER want to go into details about those horrific acts again, but when we started this, I just wrote what came up. Sometimes I would wake up from dreams and the pieces I shared with you would be something from those dreams. I never had a method to my writing, I just wrote. Again I think it was the timing, because I just wanted to write with you, a book would have been great, getting a master's degree along the way is wonderful, but initially it was just to be able to write with my father. To heal with you. And now as I re-read this over and over, making sure that my emotions are felt, as are yours, I am better able to acknowledge something that maybe before I never was.

I didn't love my stepfather. Not if I really and honestly believe in the meaning of the word, in its biblical sense, it's romantic movie definition, and the definition from my own father. That was not love. It pains me even to read that I loved him. Because I didn't. I think that was the only word that I was able to use at the time because I never had any real definitions of what love is. I only knew what he told me, and he used 'I love you' as a part of his deceit. But I can say now after reading your words, and seeing how you interact with me, along with your friends, male and female, I see the purity of love, the easiness of it. There is no angst and chaos when it's real. Your friends love you and support you. I've been able to really look not only at my past emotional history with my stepfather, but also how I defined love in my relationships. It was always grounded in the tough and chaotic, not in the simple and easy. Your response, where you were describing how it pained you to read that I loved him, and that you would *NOT* accept that I loved him, made me look and acknowledge my own concepts of love, and how I was still living in a place of a damaged child, whose trust was torn apart and the word love was soaked in deceit. I'm so grateful for that part of this piece, because you gave me a new definition. Without it, I think I would have still been sitting in my old thoughts and experiences.

I realize that this topic of conversation isn't easy and that we'll probably bring it up again, on several occasions, but I can say this with the clearest mind and heart -- that the hard work has been completed. We can laugh through the pain. I can lighten up a situation with a crazy dance or some statement like the one I had after seeing my stepfather's face on the sex offender registry: "He fucked with the wrong chick…nigga got life registration for his offense!" Who else can do

that…who else can get hype at the computer and laugh through this ugliness? We can, but I attribute that ability to the fact that we have cried through the toughest part. And we sometimes still cry, but in the end we don't dwell on it, we acknowledge it as a part of our lives, my history, your history. But when we need to, we laugh through it, too. We may be at the end of our specific conversation at this point, but we are NOT at the end of our *conversations.* I always look forward to everyday we spend together, and what topic we will talk about.

**Pops:** You inspire *me*, because you really want to be well! That's what *this* Black father feels – way beyond the hunger for revenge! -- as I have confronted your violation by someone who masqueraded to the public as a loving parent. You aint faking it. Talking about healing then squatting in your illness. You want to be happy. You want to laugh. Dance. Get silly. Be grown. Speak your mind. Listen to wisdom. Grow. *You want all this just because!* Yes, you want to be in a happy partnership or marriage, to have kids, make a home with somebody, work on the future for your kids. But you inspire me because you get it: you got to lock in your right self before you can get deep with anybody else…. You want to be well. I tell anybody who listens to check out the first line of Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters: "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?"* That's what the healer asked the sister who just tried to commit suicide. "I like to caution folks, that's all. No sense us wasting each other's time, sweetheart…. A lot of weight when you're well. Now you just hold that thought." Even Toni buckled under that weight; she smoked cigarettes and ultimately died of cancer. Truly aint none of us perfect and it's hard to handle the weight of our particulars, but she never wrote no more perfect words for me.

If you want to be well, you got to *participate* in your life. You can't cherry pick all the hip, joyful, getting-merry moments, either. You got to participate when shit hits the fan, when it's easier to say nothing, when somebody's feelings will get hurt if truth be told, when you know you will end up alone or

lonely, when your youngest daughter tells you her stepfather raped her, she don't want you to kill that motherfucker, she wants to tell you everything, and she wants to hear what you got to say.

Our call and response *has* helped me channel my anger and my devastation into a beloved conversation of mutual salvation and celebration. Sometimes I forget that you are 30 years old. Even beyond how petite you are, you still got a young spirit and you light on your feet, not just because you ran track in college, but because you also embrace your big laugh, you love to eat (damn you can eat!), and you curious, ask your questions and speak your mind, all with the zest of a big kid. I love your stories about your girls or about clubbing or when you mimicking the cartoon voices of your nieces and nephews. And after all your feminist and womanist readings and explorations, I love to hear you crack up laughing telling me how you nodded off during an Alice Walker lecture on campus or how you effect the *and er um jargon-laced rhetoric* of academia in the voice of an alter ego from Southeast, DC, named LaQuisha! I respect you as a grown woman yet I have learned that you will always be my kid, you know. Doing this call and response healing work has reconnected our umbilical cord. Made us supple again.

What can a father learn about his own masculinity and manhood when he follows his daughter's lead and chooses humane dialogue over revenge and violence? I've never been a gangster or a tough guy, in any way that so many brothers define now as 'keeping it real.' As a teenager, I was a loner, although I loved being around folks, had enough friends, was even respected during the early '70s as a Blue-Eyed Soul Brother. But as I got older, I absorbed our culture's limited breakdown of what it means to be a man. I was a serious brooder. I held on to shit until I exploded over some nonsensical shit aint have nothing to do with why I was brooding in the first place. I spoke my mind about politics or sports, I argued ideas and ideologies, but on the personal tip I held shit in, failed to let women, especially, know what I was feeling, what I was hungry for, what my truth was on any deep level.

Working with you is the culmination of years of working on 'being well.' Years of introspection -- not brooding -- and relentless testimony in honorable conversations with men and women, in poems and

essays. Our work also comes after years of immersing myself in the power of cultural arts and cultural work. I have released control listening to gorgeous recorded and live music, sitting in theaters and poetry venues, presenting my work solo and with ferocious fellow artists, attending writing workshops at the World Stage in LA and critiquing other writers' work in gatherings at my home or at retreats. I have heard cultural workers strip themselves down to their deepest secrets. I have stripped myself, sharing my loss, my pain, and my wishes. I was being prepared to work with you. And I know that working with you is the most masculine thing I've ever done. It's 'manning up.' It's being a man.

I don't know if restoring our love can be measured, but I know that our dialogue has had an irreversible healing impact on me. Nothing I cannot face now, from here on out. Nothing I won't face. Nothing can surprise me, from here on out. Human beings can and will do anything to each other. Fathers can rape their daughters. Mothers can abuse their sons. Families often prefer to rot rather than confront their ugliest secrets. And the 'community' will prefer that we keep quiet, although that has changed. Without a doubt, there's too much information, too much momentum, too many years of women (our artists, especially) publicly refusing to sweep abuse under the rug. But dudes have grown, too. Many of us get it, because, like me, they grew up as movements were unfolding, they learned the lessons from their mothers, families, their peers. Also, like you say, we get it because so many of our lovers come to us with histories of being sexually abused that if we really love someone, then we got to go through it with them, if we ever find mutual joy and satisfaction. I guess we have to be our own measuring tools: we have to feel the temperature and dress for the weather.

I want to believe that you and me have redefined 'healthy relationship' between fathers and daughters. I'm proud to help eliminate a deep silence in the American conversation. Sadly, we aint the first to suffer and won't be the last. You helped me get past any pity. You helped me own my pain without becoming addicted to it. We had to think as if we were the best of what it means to be a Black daughter, a Black

father, and not let the rotten truth of another Black man's actions define us. We have remained human, despite the inhumanity of this man's actions.

I hope our call and response honors the tradition of *African American* autobiography, the history that started with slave narratives and grew to include so many important memoirs that covered the painful territories of human cruelty under chattel slavery, racism and its overt and subtle legacies, and family deterioration and healing. I aint lying when I say it has been *scary* important that we find a voice for what all came crashing together after the wrong committed against you. Knowing what we know, given all the homework we've done, how could we keep silent when we were still alive and had the tongues and good sense we were born with?

We had to Lift Our Voices, as the song calls us to do. We had to lift our voices sometimes with the intimacy of a diary written by a pre-teen silenced by the midnight footsteps outside her bedroom door. Sometimes with the growling pulsation of a grown man wrestling with every definition of masculinity he's ever heard. But always we had to lift our voices with the tone of two people who *know* they aint doing nothing wrong by speaking their minds and getting in the last word. We don't need permission. We aint asking for permission. Aint nobody, like Chaka sang, could speak for us but ourselves. In the years since you found your public voice of resistance, despite bitterness and a toxic taste in our mouths, we have kept our eyes on the prize of a bond that's loving, full-bodied, supple, graceful and dedicated to *feeling everything* – from ugly impotence to murderous rage to knee-buckling sadness that can cloud up any moment. By having no taboos, we redefined determination. By refusing to hide from ugliness we have made beauty. By grieving in our own individual ways, we have reflected each other. By together fighting against something as fundamentally fucked up as your rape by a man masquerading as a father figure, we have tapped into mutual respect, tenderness, and compassion.

I do want to be well. But not by myself. I want me and you, a Black father and Black daughter, to be healed for a lifetime. I want us to announce that we hold hands with each other, with our his-

tory, and that *we* define ourselves -- not what happens to us. We dove head first into this emotional vertigo and I think we're telling other fathers and daughter to be the experts on their lives, to speak their honest testimony, even in round-the-way, sometimes profane, vocabulary, if that's what it takes. We want anyone who's ever been told to constrict *his or her* testimony to find inspiration in our thing. We especially want to be the *evidence!* We *are* a courageous African American daughter and her brave father walking the talk of healing. We *promise* that there is hard-earned laughter in lifting every voice.

The definition of healing is simple but it aint easy: Talk. Listen. Talk. Listen. Cry. Laugh. And talk, listen, talk, listen, cry, and laugh all over again. Talk the brash trash of teammates.

Show the shared mad-love for each other. Leave the *psycho speak* and lip-synching bravado to the music videos. Remember the standard was set over a hundred years ago:

"*Lift every voice and sing, till earth and Heaven ring/Ring with the harmonies of liberty/Let our rejoicing rise, high as the listening skies/Let it resound loud as the rolling sea*"

A child talks to her daddy. A young woman talks to her father. A daddy listens and shares with his baby-girl. A pops hears and talks to his powerful daughter.

Together they wrestle the ghosts. Together they open up doors.

Ashe'

**ADE:**

During the summer of 2008 I decided to renew our childhood tradition of me spending my summer's with you since it had been since 2004 since I spent two months in your home. I figured I wasn't working, and I had just finished my course work, so why not take a real summer vacation. I needed to begin writing and working on my final project anyway so what better place to be than with you. We had a great summer, I just enjoyed being with you, hanging with friends, and really beginning to find my focus on how to write this project. I remember finding tons of

books that were to help me in my studies and which inevitably 'checked out' of your extensive library. But soon the summer came to an end and I had to return to Atlanta. We both were enthusiastic about the upcoming elections and the possibilities of having our first black president being elected. While back in Atlanta we continued to talk. I gave you updates on things with school, basically saying I found a job and got sidetracked because things were financially hard on my mom and I. I was trying to figure out how to 'be in school and work' but it proved harder than I thought. You were supportive either way, you understood some of the financial hardships I was under, and being that I was living with moms you were sympathetic yet firm about the main objective, 'get that master's.'

I always enjoy our exchanges, and in one particular conversation we were discussing the election and how excited we were that Obama won and we were a part of the history. We began talk of you coming to visit Atlanta and us taking a ride north to DC for the inauguration like the masses of people. You wanted to do your East coast thing: go to Florida to see the grandkids and my brother and then come see me and together we'd ride north. You and I finalized the plans for you to come up after Christmas and New Years from Florida and I shared with you the locations of little hotels around the corner from the house where moms and I stayed. I remember doing drive-by's of the hotels telling you which ones looked like what, and what the lobbies smelled like, or what the surroundings looked like. The one you picked had a cemetery next to it since it sat close to a church. You said, "Well at least you know it'd be quiet." I remember checking you in and you being hungry, and I took you to that Chinese/sushi place right across the street! Of course I should have known better being that I never ate there, nor had I even been inside

the place, but hey it was convenient and you were just trying to eat. But that was the worst food we ever had, and the sushi had cream cheese and lettuce on it, which was their vegetarian roll! To you and I both that was the nastiest sushi we've ever laid eyes on, let alone actually tried to eat. But it was the beginning of a wonderful week. I took you to my house that I shared with my mother, showed you around, took you to an art opening for a friend of mine and we had a dinner where you got to meet most of my female friends. That art opening, though, was a first for me in my adult life. I mean not only were you in town and attending a friend's event, but you and my mother BOTH were in my car, and at the venue at the same time. It was kind of surreal. I actually had to make jokes about it but it was honestly very touching for me. I mean it wasn't all fairytale, but to know that my mom and dad were just chilling and enjoying art, and chit-chatting while I was there, I felt like the luckiest kid in the world. And I do emphasize kid, because even though I was 28 I felt like I was 10 at a show with my parents, looking at one piece of art with my mom, listening to the crazy old man who owned the gallery with you. You and I joking about how his art looked like something my 3 or 4 year old niece was drawing with her crayons. During the day before the opening we were also finalizing our plans to get my car tires fixed and arranging for another friend of mine to let us borrow his camera for the trip. We were headed to the Obama-nation and I was extremely excited and anxious.

I think the last road trip we took was to Redondo Beach, California, when I was 10, so this was going to be a joyful ride, and I could help with the driving. The dinner with my girlfriends was also nice, how we joked as adults about me being your "wing woman" and maybe "hooking a brotha up," and me knowing that it was

just out of pure fun and entertainment, at least when it came to my friends. Now you definitely didn't mind if we used our father-daughter bond to attract a nice looking older woman at the bar who was "totally fiooonnee" if you saw one. It was just the solidification that we were grown, that we were friends as well as father and daughter. That you could joke with me about my adult friends with me feeling secure enough in our trust to know that you would never cross that line. To know that even when my friends give me compliments on how attractive my dad is for 'a dad,' it's always in the most respectful way. You joked with them, asked their interests, were supportive of their goals, and it was just fun to discover that one of my friends fathers knows a mutual friend of yours. It was just the connection I was looking for. The way a father was and is supposed to interact with his daughter's friends.

There was never that ease with my stepfather. As a teenager I always had angst during sleepovers, worried that he'd try something with them. I was always in this protective mode with them. He never showed any interest in them, but he did have his 'opinions' about their actions and behaviors, instead of just letting them be my friends. I know now, of course, all the reasons behind my anxiety, but it just felt good to see it done right, to feel that ease. It also made me feel even more excited and better about this road trip. We've never had problems talking but now we were continuing in this new interaction of healing and realness, and to be in a car for 10 hours, I was just ecstatic to see what would come next. The next few days we bought new tires from a member of mommy's church who owned his own garage, got the oil changed and got ready to head on out. We were laughing and talking trash, as we said bye to moms and started up on I 85N in my Civic. Less

than an hour into the trip, our good feelings and camaraderie were tested by a flat tire and a dangerous wait along the interstate for AAA. We were genuinely frustrated I mean, we did just get new tires. How in the world was one of those going to be flat already? I think we felt for a minute that maybe we were cursed. In Atlanta the idea was great, we felt safe and secure, but sitting on the side of the road, we almost gave up and decided to turn back after we got the tire fixed.

It was like we couldn't really figure out how 45 minutes on the road could have us with a flat tire going to see our new president get sworn in. Suddenly, with cars and tractor-trailers zooming north, and shaking my car, we just kind of cracked up laughing. It could have been way worse. The tire could have blown out and we could have spun out of control! AAA's driver *was* on his way and it wasn't like back in your day when being stranded while Black in the deep South could mean horrible outcomes especially for your light skinned ass with a brown skinned young woman. Well maybe you'd get punished but er um..me..not so much. We just started clowning, laughing cracking jokes about how maybe it was the negativity surrounding Obama's election trying to keep the masses of black people from attending. We decided to take some pictures of each other, which then morphed into recording videos of each of us describing how we felt. We started our conspiracy theory rants and comic relief and just realized that this moment was a part of our history. Before we knew it, we were channeling Richard Pryor or Dave Chappelle. We started cussing about how fucking lucky we were and that the *damn* car could have flipped over or spun out of control and at least we were together on our way to see the first Black-ass president of the United States get sworn in, if this AAA MuthaFucka ever showed up! We wound up with a joyfully profane 'This Is

Your Life' video. When the AAA dude showed up, he showed us that all we had was a donut spare in the trunk, but he said it would allow us to make it up the road to the Wal-Mart where they sold tires and could put 'em on for us. And, yes, AAA dude had a way-redneck accent, but he became the first of what we started calling NASCAR Good Samaritans. Those Good Samaritans kept on coming through for us, even in Commerce, GA, where I had NEVER been. One of our favorites had to be the serious good ole' boy at Wal-Mart who might as well have been a grease monkey in the pit at Daytona. He found out the Church Deacon hadn't put the valves in the new tires correctly. Thankfully, you went ahead and eased out that plastic, and bought the new tires, and we sat in the waiting room and listened to country music while that Georgia Boy made us safe again.

To me that was the confirmation that I needed to know that we'd make it through anything, that nothing, not even a flat tire on the highway, could ever stop us from getting to where we needed to go, on this trip or any trip.

**Pops:** Yeah I remember we got back on the road after our Wal-Mart pit run, and after swapping turns at the wheel, arrived in the D.C. area five hours later than planned. But around midnight, when we pulled into a gas station for that last fill-it-up, the radio DJs were spinning such back-to-back-to-back GoGo and Reggae and other party music that we kept the music blasting through open windows, dancing at the pump although it was cold enough to make us doubt our sanity! We chair-danced from that Virginia gas station into the driveway of my big brother and sister-in-law's home where we stayed during Inauguration Weekend. And with the extended Harris family, we braved more bone-chilling cold to become a small part of the thousands of folks who attended the Inauguration Concert and Obama's swearing in. The pictures show our frozen faces warmed by laughter and genuine awe that we were together witnessing his-

tory. We walked those two days among what had to be a million inspired folks, inching along in the bitter weather, everybody polite and curious about one another. Remember when it got too cold and we realized we could enter the national museum of the American Indian, and the cafeteria was serving really good food to hundreds of folks. We sat down and were joined by that elderly Chicano couple, who told us stories about working with Cesar Chavez, and how encouraging they were when they found out we were father and daughter. I felt so much warmer after talking with them. Eventually, we found a place to stand near one of the huge speakers on the mall, where we could at least see the inauguration stand. As we waited for the ceremony to start, we people watched. I pointed out the sniper teams up on the roofs of nearby buildings. Then you pointed out this woman, down on her knees, praying and sobbing, all by herself, surrounded by people, like she was floating within her own spotlight. And we respected her choice to testify in her own way by just turning to look at the other folks, hugging each other, lifting their children to their shoulders, eyes drawn toward the Capitol. We never mentioned our project but we didn't have to. We could feel that our journey had taken us to the right destination. We laughed and hugged and held hands and released any worries. I wasn't thinking about flat tires or heartbreak or emotional drama of any kind. As Aretha sang, Reverend Lowery preached, even as that gay-bashing dude spoke, me and you hugged and decided that there could be no better theme for our journey than the one chosen by the Obama campaign: *We Are One. Allllllthough….* much to my chagrin, we never did hear Frankie Beverly and Maze's song *We Are One* during those weekend ceremonies. My only regret. Well, and also, that I couldn't start a serious sing-along when I started shouting Frankie's song all off key! Sorry I made you cringe. LOL!

**ADE:**

I think about where we are now, as friends, as father and daughter, and I am so thankful. Everyday, I am appreciative of your support and encouragement. I think back on my desire to move from Atlanta, to LA and I realize how many times

in a year that I wavered, but you let me just think and talk out my decision. First I was moving, I was looking for jobs, I was getting LA contacts, and was ready to go, and that was the summer after the Inauguration. I made phone calls. I had this assumption that I could finish school while working, even though it hadn't worked for all of 2008. But I saw the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010 as my year. I wanted to stop working this job I called a slave job because of the hours they expected of me, yet the money wasn't up to par. I was just ready to go. I shared my angst with you and you never once told me what to do, but just encouraged me to just do whatever it was that I wanted to do.

I remember the talk we had right before I quit my job. I mean, I had a new apartment, I was paying rent, car note, utilities -- I was 'an adult.' I had a job when folks out there were struggling to find one, but my unhappiness and how much I had to focus on that job was literally driving me insane, not to mention taking me away from my thesis work. I remember the day I was just stuck on what to do. I consulted with moms but I also wanted your honest opinion and suggestions. You handled me, you supported whatever it was I wanted to do. You told me that if I felt the job was too taxing because of everything that I had to do and wasn't bringing in any money, then, yes, quit that damn job. Move back in with my mom and try to save, bring my debt down, and get my master's. You told me that, hey, I was a child of two artists, of course they'd tell me in a horrible economy to quit a job and focus on my art, focus on writing. You made jokes within the seriousness. That was October 2010.

I followed both of my parents' advice. I haven't regretted my decision since. Towards the end of the year I did begin the feel the pinch of the pockets though,

and decided to just keep following my dreams along with sending out a few résumé's but inevitably I was coming west. Little did I know I'd get a job offer from Delta Airlines from a resume I sent in to them from way back in July! But I went through the motions and began to think, could I be a flight attendant living in NY, flying the friendly skies. Could I finish my master's in hotel rooms? I started to feel that pressure again, like, damn, I need a job, but if I do this same pattern again, I'll get a job, and once again my thesis goes down the 'to do list'. But I accepted the job, told you I could get it done, told myself I could get it done. I actually got a little more fuel under my belt, setting up meetings with professors before the Christmas holiday, trying to really discipline myself. New Year came, I was making progress but the closer it got to me actually having to go to the flight attendant training I started to have that same feeling I had about my original job I quit. My energy was being taken from my work, my true work, the thing that I know I had to do: my thesis, this creative back and forth between father and daughter. I couldn't do this type of thing 30,000 miles up in the air serving peanuts. What was I thinking? Again slight panic and confusion. I'm living, penny-to-penny on student loans, feeling like I need to make a decision because moms is moving to Florida and I felt like I had no place to go. So I consulted with you, because that's what we do. We consult, we talk, we confide, support, joke, and listen. Never telling one another what to do but just providing guidance, even if that means not saying anything and letting one or the other vent. I do that for you and you damn sure do that for me.

During this go-round on the phone, what I really wanted to know was, if I wanted to change my mind and go back to the original plan of coming to LA, would

you still have me? I was nervous that you'd think my back-and-forth would be childish and immature, but I just felt the pressures of being a 30-year-old woman and not really knowing where I was going or what I wanted to be doing.

I needed my pops, so this time I just asked you and I got you. Immediately you said, "Hell yea, no question. Come on out, it would mean a lot to me to have an extension of me and my family on the west coast." That was all I needed to hear, I was driven again to try and finish everything before May of 2011. I planned to graduate. I planned to have you and my mother come join me at my commencement then tell Atlanta to kick rocks and see ya later, but not in a negative sense like I was running. But in the sense that my time was up, I was done here. I felt like everything was coming to a close. Even my therapeutic sessions were over, which was my decision to end, I felt like I had plateaued, that I had gotten as far as I could go with my therapist's help. I even asked you if you'd be interested in taking the cross-country road trip with me, that it could symbolize the journey we had been on since I moved to Atlanta? I wanted you to know how much including you meant to me. I knew that Civic and I could make that trip solo, but I knew it would have been even better for me to have you by my side. You thought it out, planned it around your schedule. Since you knew you would be traveling up and down the east coast with your job, you worked it out.

It doesn't amaze me anymore how easy it is for you to come through for me. I don't get the anxiety that "my dad wont be there," that some women and young girls deal with. I realize that we have worked through all of that negativity and insecurity. I just know: If you can do it, you're going to do it. If you can't, you'll tell me straight out, "Hey it's not going to work out." You explain why and we discuss

it and that's it. Never any cloak-and-dagger shit. Never any lies, never any false promises. When you joined me in my Civic for seven days across the country for a trip that took us first south to Pensacola, then west on I 10W, that provided joy through pictures and video. Even when the stress of the move, and the feelings of loss overtook me and had me walking through New Orleans like Frankenstein, you were there, right there with me. That to me was you not just being a friend and supporter of the moment but that was you being my FATHER. That was you showing me what a real father is and always should be. That was you reclaiming me and me reclaiming you.

# 6 CONCLUSION

Finishing this creative thesis took me five years of graduate school study. A lot of tears, hours of research, and triumphant moments. Many books, articles, sessions with my therapist, conversations with my father, moments of defeat and moments when I wondered why I chose to do this type of work. I learned through writing and healing that my experience was not unique to just me. I spoke to countless women and several fathers who heard the details of my project and praised me for my courage and thanked me for doing something they couldn't do. Their thanks and encouragement fueled me to keep going, to make sure that my project had a place in the world and in the field of Women's Studies. Within Women's Studies I learned the ideologies and foundations of feminism, black feminism, womanism, chicana feminism and Third World feminism. I expanded my usual thoughts into theory and began to accept my daily rants as important cultural and women's work. I never knew exactly why I always felt drawn to question the standardized woman's role or why it was socially acceptable to discuss the violence against women as coffee table gossip. I always posed alternative ways of thinking to men and women alike, especially when it came to sexuality, sexual assault and violence against women.

My project began as a way for me to heal in a personal and deep way with my father. My project was a way for me to look at my family history and say the buck stops here. I wanted to go back to the adage "its takes a village to raise a child," because I think my village was shut down because of its own pain. I decided that the community needed a wake-up call and if I had to be the first to ring the bell then I accepted the challenge. As I learned more about myself, I learned more about my field of study. I began to relate my conversations with my father to the books of Alice Walker, Angela Davis, Patricia Hill Collins, Zora Neale Hurston, and many other

black women writers, who accepted the challenge of confronting and writing about black sexuality, sexual abuse and womanhood.

These women became my elders; their stories became the journals I was never able to have. I have realized that my project has contributed to their writings. That I have become entwined with the writings of Alice Walker and others whose words became the words that opened up Womanism as an independent field of thought. Walker's simple definition of a Womanist as cited in *The Womanist Reader*, is defined as, "just feminist but more common" (Walker,1979, p.7). Walker defines Womanism as, "being womanish. (I.e. Frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color…acting like a woman…*willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth…in charge. Serious" (Walker,1983, p.19). I found that I was Womanish; I wanted to always know more than what was considered "good" for me, as a woman, to know. Walker also gave me the confidence to include my father's voice and experiences as a black man in my project. Walker's second definition of a Womanist states, "sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female" (Walker,1983, p.19). My project is not just for me but also for my father and my community.

*Restorative Notions: Regaining My Voice, Regaining My Father* encompasses Womanism's grassroots' ideals: grounded on the inclusion of all groups to equalize the playing field for social change. This project highlights social change through dialogue and conversation. Womanism doesn't stand for any kind of cruelty and inequality; a womanist does any kind of work individually or with a group that eliminates any suffering for all. Womanists do not follow guidelines. They don't believe in the structured and rigid regulations of traditional fields of thought. Womanist thought focuses on the togetherness and inclusion of everyone and creating

positive and welcoming spaces to promote change. Womanism is the everyday. Womanism is the everyday person, and includes everyone's daily struggles, and achievements. Womanism includes the community and spirituality. Spirituality is described as the connection between human lives, living kind, which could be characterized as all things, i.e. plants and animals, and lastly material things, and this connection is also related to politics and social justice. Womanism acknowledges and incorporates the spiritual into all thought processes and social transformation (Phillips, 2006, p.xix-xlix). My connection to humanity helped me to think about myself and to use my story as another means to help others. My spirituality was the beginning of what strengthened my voice. My minister, who happened to be a black woman, helped me discover the root of my pain and without her, and my connection to my spirituality, I would not have even come forward about my abuse nor gotten closer to my mother. I thought more about the possibilities of other little girls being harmed, and how I wanted to change how the world handled and looked at child sexual abuse.

I am claiming the importance of dialogue and communication, especially between a father and a daughter. I'm touching on the importance of combining disciplines and not being limited to one particular way or treatment as the best way to heal from sexual abuse. Womanism values such inclusiveness. Because of it, I am able to include my father's thoughts and feelings as a part of my own healing process, which would be disregarded under rigid feminist theory. I'm also emphasizing the everyday experiences and jargon of the community. In *The Womanist Reader*, Layli Phillips and Barbara McCaskill (1995), wrote an essay entitled, "Who's Schooling Who? Black Women and the Bringing of the Everyday into Academe, or Why We Started The Womanist." This essay was enlightening and empowering to me during my own struggle to build a bridge between my creative project and my academic work. Phillips (1995) states,

"Black women…have had to construct this knowledge outside the traditional locale of knowledge validation, that is, outside the academy" (p.86). She also discusses the concept that education is given to 'the community' in order to help them become more socially conscious but this "education" came from the "more socially sanctioned," powerful and wealthy to the "poor" and "marginal" (p.87). My project has brought the community to the academy and the academy to the community. By incorporating both community and academic vernacular, and personal experiences my project is placed in relevant spaces within both.

Womanism has allowed me to emphasize the need for gaining the independent voice of a survivor. Gaining my voice is a part of social change. I am social change. My father is social change. We are social change. We have learned that to resist the historically constructed silences surrounding sexual abuse we must use our voices, as survivors, as black women and black men, and we must emphasize the importance of dialogue. Our dialogue proves that African America men can challenge the norms about not discussing abuse with their daughters. It also demonstrates that avoiding retaliation is not inaction and can be stronger than physical violent action. We believe that just two people talking can change the world, if they understand that they are talking to their past, their present and their future. We have confronted taboos and forced silences with our experiences and lives. Our plan is to create workshops and use social media to create new forums for discussions and dialogue between other daughters and fathers, men and women, where they can speak their own truths. We have learned that it is never going to be easy, but we embrace the necessity of helping one another develop our voices, our courage. We discovered in the most profound way the true power of love. We believed we had a responsibility to contribute to our history. We contributed to our history. We have confronted and contributed to the historical record.

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