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Jenisha From Kentucky

I came to New York
sure of one thing—
that no one could
ever know my past.

By Jenisha Watts

Illustrations by Didier Viodé

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Ms. Brown didn't tell me where we were going. I knew we would be visiting someone important, a literary figure, because we took a gypsy cab instead of the subway. It would probably be someone I should have known, but didn't.

A brownstone in Harlem. It was immaculate—paintings of women in heads-carves; a cherry-colored oriental rug; a dark, gleaming dining-room table. Ms. Brown led me toward a woman on the couch. She knew that I would recognize her, and I did, despite the plastic tube snaking from her nostrils to an oxygen tank. Maya Angelou's back was straight. Her rose-pink eyeshadow sparkled.

My mind called up random bits of information from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Canned pineapples—she loved them. Bailey—her brother's name. What she felt when she heard someone read Dickens aloud for the first time—the voice that “slid in and curved down through and over the words.” And that, like me, she had called her grandmother Momma.

“What's your name?” she asked.

“Jenisha.”

“Last name?” she shot back.

“Watts.”

Maya Angelou now knew my name.

The party was for the poet Eugene B. Redmond. Amiri Baraka was there. The family of James Baldwin. And Nikki Giovanni, who once wrote—just to me, it felt like—“Though you're poor it isn't poverty that / concerns you.”

By then I knew how to mingle with literary types at networking events. But I always felt like my worth was tied to my job, or my education, or my family background. This night was different. I didn't have to prove myself. It was assumed that everyone here was important, because who else would possibly be invited to Maya Angelou's brownstone? In my head, I created stories about who I might be to these people. Maybe I was a young poet of great promise, or a family friend of Maya's, or even her granddaughter. Having Maya Angelou as my grandmother would have been nice. Toni Morrison, too. And James Baldwin for a granddad.

I'd done this as a child as well, imagining who I could have been if I'd had a different kind of family. Who I could have been had my mother been a professor, an artist, a writer.

But I didn't grow up in a Harlem brownstone. I didn't have a professor or an artist or a writer for a mother. And Maya Angelou wasn't my grandmother.

I was Jenisha from Kentucky, and I was raised in a crack house.

AT THE CHARLOTTE COURT housing project in Lexington, Kentucky, the apartment complexes were all the same, the front yards bare dirt with patches of grass. Lexington is a very white city in an extremely white state, but the West End is Black. Lots of people were poor. I had a bubblegum-pink ten-speed that I would ride to the corner store, where older girls and I would steal Lemonheads and Now and Laters. In summer my brothers and sister and I would rush to Douglass Park to catch the free lunch truck. On weekends we'd bum money at the Plaza—the West End parking lot where people dressed up to sit on the hoods of their freshly washed cars.

The neighborhood was full of boys fighting. Once, my little brother Colby needed a haircut. Our mother, Trina, had no money for the barber, so she shaved

his head with a disposable razor. His tight coils covered our floor, and the next day all the kids on the school bus laughed at the nicks on his head.

On one of my birthdays—I was maybe 6 or 7—Trina let me have a party. No balloons or cake or gifts—just a few girls from the neighborhood going wild. We were upstairs when another mother knocked on the front door. “I told y’all you were not allowed over here,” she said to her daughters.

I knew other people who used drugs, but what happened at our apartment was different. On any given day, folks would be in the bathroom or a bedroom getting high. In return, the dealers gave Trina free drugs. Our door was always opening and shutting, strangers entering and leaving. One evening my little brothers and sister and I were in our bedroom, coloring dinosaurs with green crayons. I was about 7. I was working hard to keep them busy so that Trina could enjoy her high. I don’t remember Trina ever praising me for being a good big sister, but I heard her brag to a friend about how quiet we were when she left us alone. Coloring books kept us quiet, she said.

Sometimes the cops would come, four or five at a time. My siblings and I would lie in bed as they walked through our dark apartment with flashlights, their staticky walkie-talkies impossible to understand. In the morning we’d see that they’d trashed the place: flipped mattresses onto the floor, pulled out drawers. My Aunt Soso says they once found drugs hidden in the cereal boxes.

We knew why the police came. After they kicked in the door once, a man we’d never seen before handed Colby a bag of drugs to hide. And there were guns. I was standing on the stairs one night when I saw a man in a red jacket hand someone a gun that looked like a big, black Super Soaker. Trina made an “*oooh*” sound. I could tell she was nervous from the way she looked away from the gun.

One time, Trina went upstairs with a group of people to get high. I was crying. I yelled for her because I didn’t want her to leave me downstairs without her. I noticed a man with hazel eyes and a mole on his face sitting in a chair, staring at me.

“Do you want me to make you feel good?” he asked. My tears stopped. I knew that wasn’t something a grown man should say to a child. I was in the third grade.

The police never took Trina to jail those nights, but sometimes they would handcuff her. Once, she was sitting on the couch with my sister Ebony crying in her lap. “Can I change her Pamper?” she asked. She needed them to take the handcuffs off first.

Trina was what I called her. Even when I was little, I never called her Momma.

I DON’T HAVE any photos of myself as a baby. I recently asked some relatives if they had any in their own albums. No one did, but a cousin sent me a photo of Trina at her high-school prom. Her hair was up and she wore a pastel-pink gown, tight around her tiny waist. She looked innocent. It was the kind of photo that proud daughters share on Instagram. Anyone could see how beautiful she was. I had never thought that about my mother before, that she had been beautiful once.

When I picture Trina, I see her in a hospital bed.

I was in New York City in 2010, at my desk at *People* magazine, when I got the call. Trina had overdosed and hit her head, or been beaten by her boyfriend (not for the first time), or maybe both. When I arrived at the hospital in Lexington, she was almost dead. The right side of her head had been shaved and stapled closed. She couldn’t open one of her eyes, but when she saw me, a smile crawled across her face.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let me first tell you a bit about Trina Renee Watts.

She was born on October 16, 1965, across town from where we would live as children. Her caramel skin is pimpled and she has a birthmark that resembles a bruise over her right eye. She has always enjoyed reading and writing, and English was her favorite subject in school. She ran track. They called her the next Wilma Rudolph—she was that fast.

She got accepted to Western Kentucky University, but dropped out when I was born, in January 1985. My father’s name is Levi Fishback, and he met Trina at a club called Tommy Campbell’s.



The author’s mother, Trina Watts, at prom

COURTESY OF JENISEA WATTS

We would wake up and

Trina would be gone.

We wouldn't go to school.

We would sit like soldiers

on ambush and wait,

alert to any sound.

My sister JaShae was born a year and a half after me. Shay was high yellow, a quiet kid who rarely cried but would suck her thumb or shake her leg when she got anxious, and sniff Trina's shirts when she wasn't around.

When Shay was a baby, Trina started freebasing cocaine, and then she began using crack. When Shay was 11 months old, Trina started bleeding and bleeding, and she didn't know what was wrong. She woke up in the hospital, handcuffed to the bed, and learned that she'd given birth to another baby. She hadn't even suspected that she was pregnant. The baby was born with crack in his system and was in the neonatal ICU, covered in tubes, tiny enough to fit into her cupped hands. This was my brother Jacobbie—Colby.

Aaron was born just before Christmas in 1990, and our youngest sibling, Ebony, in 1992. All five of us have different fathers—I don't think Trina even knows who most of the dads are.

Trina would let me change Ebony's diaper like she was my doll. During a visit to a neighbor, the woman asked Trina, "Can I have Ebony?" as if that were normal, as if Trina might just hand her child over. She didn't, not that day. But a few months later, Ebony was sent to live with a relative, and she never came home again.

TRINA WAS NEVER MEAN, never hit us or screamed. She read us *Curious George*—the only book we owned. Sometimes she lifted us up on her feet, pretending we were airplanes, making engine noises. She put up a Christmas tree, even though we had few gifts. Once, an older boy was bullying me on the bus. I had a pencil in my hand and stabbed him on the top of his head. Stunned, he touched the spot, and blood colored his fingertip. That evening, his mother knocked on our door. "Trina, look at what your daughter did to my son," she said, showing her the mark on his head. Trina said, "Well, what did *he* do to *her*?" Trina was on my side.

Sometimes she would pack us into her bed and say, "I promise y'all. I'm going to stop using drugs."

But then we would wake up and Trina would be gone. We wouldn't go to school. We would sit like soldiers on ambush and

wait, alert to any sound of chatter, footsteps, or clicking keys that would mean Trina was home. If someone knocked on the door, we knew to hush and not answer it.

One day, we were home alone, and I heard knocking. I was 7 or 8. I looked through the peephole. It was my dad. I opened the door and he walked in and looked around. Clothes were scattered everywhere and dirty dishes and trash littered the floor. We didn't have any food. We thought that he would take us back to his place, where he lived with his wife and stepdaughter, or at least give us something to eat. "I gotta get you out of here," he said. But he left and didn't come back.

Another day, I was wearing the same outfit I'd had on for a week, shorts and a tank top. My hair wasn't combed. Trina had brought us over to her friend's house, so the two of them could get high. The friend was balding and fat—I hadn't known that drug addicts could be fat. Inside, the smell of crack was strong—thicker than cigarette smoke, like someone who never brushed their teeth breathing directly into your nose—so I went outside to wander the neighborhood. I ran into a group of pretty, clean-dressed girls who scanned me up and down and whispered. I didn't like them. I didn't like my ugly sister Shay, or my nappy-headed brothers. They all reminded me of what those girls thought of me.

Once, when I was about 8, we were alone and hungry. Colby opened a can of cranberry sauce. One of us poured syrup on a piece of bread. If I'd had only myself to take care of, it wouldn't have been so bad, but as the oldest, I felt it was up to me to fix things. I decided to get my grandmother, Trina's mom, to help us.

My granny worked right across the street from Charlotte Court—she was a nurse for the Health Department. I crossed the two-lane road, pushed open the glass revolving door, and walked to the front desk. "Pat Dishman," I whispered to the secretary. She made me sign in. I pulled down my baseball cap and fixed my jacket. The women were dressed in blouses tucked into slacks. Some wore suits with heels. I had scratched-up legs and my teeth were so crooked that if I

smiled with my mouth shut, one poked out the side.

When I stepped off the elevator, I recognized one of my grandmother's friends, a white woman who offered me a Thin Mint and watched with concern as I gobbled it up. My granny wasn't in the office, but the friend said she'd let her know that I'd stopped by. Walking home, I wondered if her co-workers could see me through the windows. I was mad at myself for not being pretty.

"What the fuck are y'all looking at?" I asked Shay, Colby, and Aaron. I wanted Trina to stroll in so that I could cuss her out. *You stupid bitch!* I would tell her. *Crackhead! Where the fuck you been? We need food! I hate you!*

A knock on the door turned into a bang. It sounded like the police. But it was my granny, in a teal silk coat with fur around the hood. I unlocked the door, and she rushed in.

"Why did you come to my job?" she screamed. Her makeup, as always, was perfect, her lips a deep plum. "Why did you come to my job?"

"I didn't go to your job," I said, almost believing my own lie.

"Yes she did, Granny," Shay said. I wanted to smack her. I wanted to say, *You're uglier than me.*

"Don't you ever bring yo ass to my job," Granny said. She didn't ask where Trina was or how long she'd been gone, or offer to take us to McDonald's. She just left, slamming the door.

Another time, Trina disappeared for a few hours. We were waiting for her when the door to the closet opened and she walked out. That entire time, she'd been sitting in the closet, high. I can still see her long leg stepping out from behind the door. She moved like a nutcracker soldier, as if her body were made of wood. Her lips were pressed together, and she didn't acknowledge us at all. She just walked out of the apartment. We were too stunned to chase after her.

WHEN I WAS 9, we moved into the Salvation Army. Trina said it was because the police had damaged the apartment so badly during a raid that maintenance had to come and fix it up. We certainly hadn't

been evicted, she told me, because our subsidized rent was only \$50.

We ate at a brown table in the Salvation Army cafeteria and shared a bathroom with homeless people who mumbled to themselves as we brushed our teeth. We slept in a room that automatically went dark each night when the clock flashed curfew.

One day, Trina and two other mothers took us all to the park. They huddled by a tree as I sat on a park bench, keeping an eye on the little kids and on Trina. Two homeless men were pointing at our moms. One was shaking his head as if he was disappointed. I could see the fire from the lighter warming the crack pipe as Trina and the other women bent down and took turns.

I was surprised that she had found other women like her, other moms who enjoyed drugs. At the time, Trina was on crutches because she had gotten in a fight and broken her foot. *Even hopping around on one foot*, I thought to myself, *she still wants to get high.*

Aaron came down with a bad fever at the Salvation Army. He was in Trina's lap, his head on her chest. Ordering an ambulance was going to be expensive, but Trina didn't hesitate—she just wanted to make sure her baby boy was okay. Right then, she seemed like a normal mother.

MY AUNTS, Chantelle and Soso, came to the Salvation Army with a U-Haul to get me. I sat between them. The drive to Tallahassee was bumpy and long, the inside of the truck hot and sticky. But Florida, when we got there, was peaceful and sunny and had palm trees. I moved into Aunt Chantelle's apartment, where she shared one room with her baby son and I shared the other with my 7-year-old cousin, Kiki.

Aunt Chantelle had just graduated from Florida State University and was working at Target. She tried to give me a normal life. We ate dinner at a table and had Fruit Roll-Ups for snacks. I was in the fourth grade at Apalachee Elementary School, and every day my hair was done and I had proper clothes to wear. Once, when it rained, she let Kiki and me run around until we were soaked. We filled

buckets up with rainwater, which she told us was good for our hair.

But many days, I would walk down to a payphone near a convenience store, where I could call my granny collect to ask about Trina and my siblings. That's how I learned that the state had taken them away. Shay was living with my granny's sister, Jamie. The boys were in foster care with a Jehovah's Witness. They were all gone.

The adults seemed to have known that this was the likely outcome—that's why I'd been sent away, to keep me out of the system. But I felt so guilty for leaving, like it wouldn't have happened if I had been there, like I was the only one who could protect them. There were two boys in the neighborhood who reminded me of my brothers; one had the same box haircut as Aaron. I'd knock on their door and ask if they could play, when all I really wanted was to watch as they wrestled on the playground.

I had a journal with a red-ribbon placeholder that I wrote in about Trina's addiction and how much I missed my siblings. One time, I left it out in plain view, where I knew my aunts would find it. That night, I sat with my ear against the wall, listening as Aunt Soso read my journal over the phone to my granny.

I was beginning to see that writing things down, naming them, could make other people feel things. I felt freer writing than I did speaking out loud. I discovered books in Florida too. I lived in my head and went wherever the stories took me—into the world of a boy who learned that he was diabetic because he always had to pee; or a redheaded, freckled kid who wiped his runny nose with his shirt; or a rich kid who was new to school and tried to use his money to make friends. Reading was the only time when I didn't think about Trina or my siblings.

I LIVED IN FLORIDA for more than a year. Then the state of Kentucky gave Trina another chance. Shay, Aaron, Colby, and I all moved into our grandmother's house—the three-bedroom house on Valley Farm Drive where Trina had grown up. Trina wasn't permitted to live with us yet, but she visited on

weekends. She was in rehab and working at Hardee's. One evening, she came by with another woman—her caseworker, I think—to bring me a birthday card and a Butterfinger, my favorite candy. When she was sober, Trina would do my hair. She knew how to do cornrows in elaborate designs, any style I wanted. She took her time, and her hands were gentle.

It was a different world from the projects. My granny was a master sergeant in the Army Reserve, and she was strict, but she took care of us. She worked every day, so she'd get us up early and I'd dress Aaron for day care. We'd sing the Barney song together. We had a yard to play in, and at night, we all slept in the same bed under a blanket covered in faded-pink strawberries, me in the middle with my arms around my siblings.

Granny threw us birthday parties, too. I had a party at a skating rink with a Mickey Mouse cake. She pushed me to work hard at school, though I didn't always listen, and she got a tutor for Colby, who was struggling.

My dad would make the occasional appearance. One time, he promised to take me to the zoo. The night before, I ironed my black jeans until they had a white crease from the starch. I even ironed my cotton panties. I was picturing the day to come: He would take me to the gift shop and to McDonald's. He'd let me order anything on the menu.

In the morning, I wore my favorite purple sweater and new white ribbons in my pigtails. I went outside to wait, because waiting outside would help speed his arrival. I watched the road, leaving my post only to go to the bathroom, or to answer the ringing phone. I hoped it was him, calling to assure me that he was on his way. "He's not coming, Jenisha," my granny kept saying. I waited until the sun set. He didn't even call the next day, or the day after that.

TRINA GOT US kids back, but she began doing drugs again, too. I was always asking if I could go to my granny's, because it was calmer there. So I wasn't with my siblings on the day when Trina dropped them off with the woman who took care of Ebony. When she didn't come back to

get them, the woman called social services and reported her. I stayed with my granny while Colby, Aaron, and Shay ended up back in foster care. We never lived together again.

At Christmas, I would pick out gifts, wrapping them in forest-green paper with a Black Santa pattern. But I never saw my siblings during the holidays. Once New Year's came, I'd put the gifts in the attic. Eventually I stopped buying new ones. I brought the old presents down again and again, until the wrapping paper faded and tore.

I didn't cry. I just pushed away my emotions and eased into my new life. I had my own bedroom; the telephone worked, and the cable did too. Eventually my granny paid for me to get braces—a status symbol in my middle-school eyes. Only white kids, and Black kids from two-parent homes, had braces.

My sister Shay lived with Aunt Jamie in the projects and we went to the same school, one grade apart. She did endless chores and rarely had any new clothes. I used to make fun of her high-water pants. One weekend, when I was visiting, she took my wide-legged jeans. When I saw them on her at school, I tried to fight her. No one knew why—most of our classmates didn't even know we were sisters.

Shay probably had it worst of all my siblings. She moved out as soon as she turned 18 and got pregnant with her first baby around then. I wasn't much of a sister to her. I wanted to close the door on that part of my life. And I wanted to make my granny proud.

Granny was always warning me that I could turn out just like "your mammy." I was desperate for her to see me as a beautiful girl, a girl who was nothing like my mother. Maybe that's why I started calling her Momma. And for a while, she let me. But one day, I walked into her room and said, "Momma," and she looked up at me over her reading glasses. "I'm not your momma," she said.

I WASN'T LONELY when I was reading. And in my diary, I could say whatever I wanted, name every insecurity. Words also pulled me closer to other people—like Contessa, who had hair that ran past

her shoulders and got high scores on her papers, and yet was still my friend. Both of our mothers had been in jail, and we shared the letters that they had written to us from inside.

I was a collector of words. In sixth grade I learned the meaning of *dumb-founded* from a vocabulary test. I liked the fullness of the word and how it rolled off my tongue.

I felt the same about the word *perplexed*. Tom Joyner, the radio host, said "I'm perplexed" during an interview, and as soon as the word landed on my ears, I knew what he meant. I learned *epitome* from a TLC song, and *regurgitate* from a friend's letter about her abortion.

Words were the only things that seemed attainable to me. I could look them up in my grandmother's dictionary and understand their meaning—unlike math, where, if I was stuck, I'd need someone to help me. The more words I learned, the more I realized that my own language could be deepened.

My grandmother worked a lot, and when she was home, she'd stay in her room. One day she said, "I got you some pads." I thought, *Wow, she got me some writing pads*. But when she didn't make eye contact with me, I realized that she meant something else. She must have noticed the blood on my laundry. She didn't like the word *period*—she thought *cycle* was more polite.

When I was home alone, I would read her *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, and the laminated aphorisms and poems she'd hung on the wall. My favorite was called "Don't Quit": "When things go wrong, as they sometimes will, / When the road you're trudging seems all uphill ..."

TRINA MOVED IN with Granny and me when I was about 15. We fought a lot—I thought she owed me for choosing drugs over being a mother. Once, I asked her to do my hair. She said no, and suddenly I was furious. I called her a crackhead and punched her. And then I picked up a pair of scissors and cut off a chunk of her hair.

Granny called the cops on me. I was handcuffed and driven to a juvenile detention center. They made me strip in a cold room, and a white female officer

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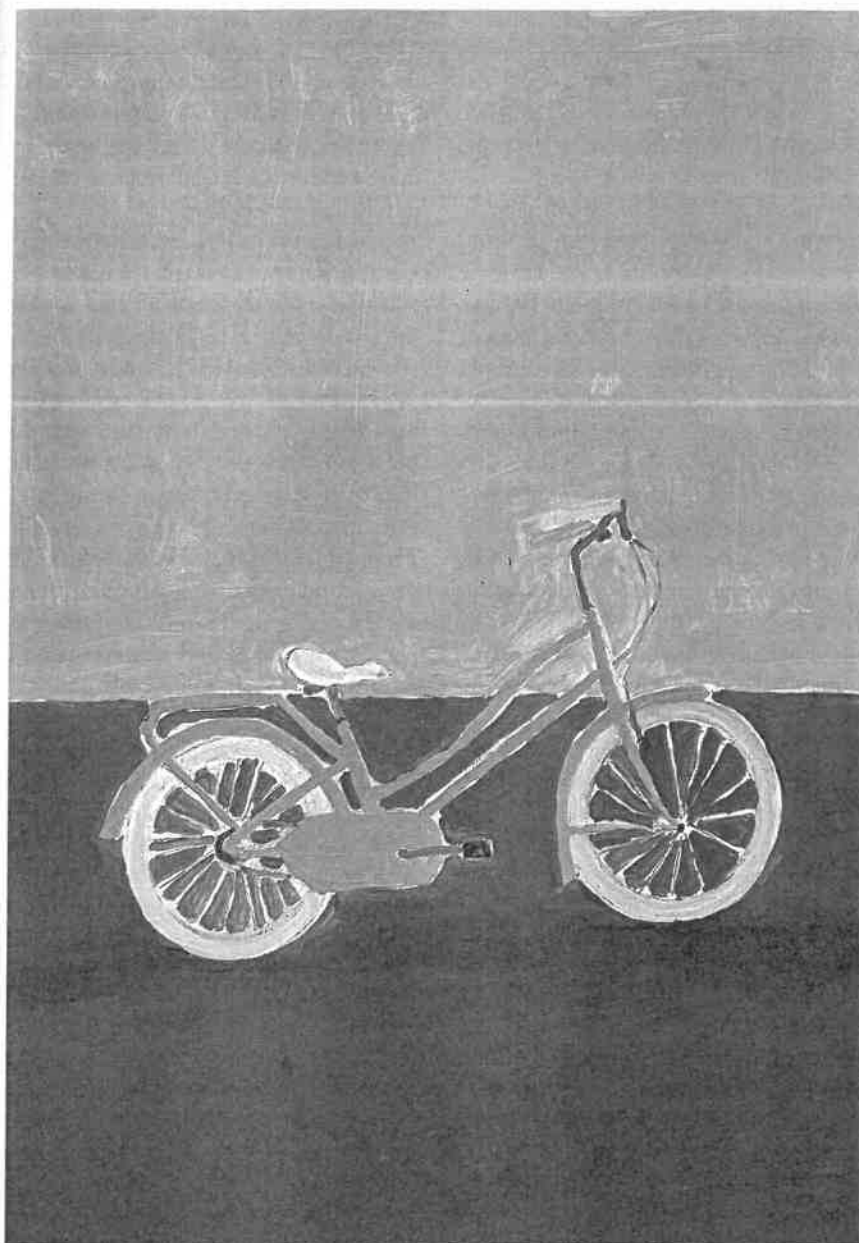
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inspected my body. I told someone there that I wanted to kill myself, so I had to wear a special shirt, alerting everyone that I was on suicide watch, until they let me go home a few days later.

Around that time, I read *The Color of Water*, James McBride's memoir about his white mother's life, in which he tries to understand his identity as a Black man. I wasn't a diligent student, but I knew what I liked, and I liked James McBride. He wasn't a great student either—"my high school grades were sour, my SATs low," he wrote. He stole and did drugs. And yet he made a life from words.

Everyone around me wanted to go to the University of Kentucky. Many of my friends got in. But my ACT score was so embarrassingly low that when I saw it, I balled up the paper and hid it under the couch. I would have to do two years of community college first.

I kept this a secret. Community-college kids lived on the same campus as the University of Kentucky students, so even as my granny and Trina moved me into my dorm room, they had no idea that I hadn't gotten in.

I was placed in remedial classes, where I learned basic things that I should have been

taught in grade school. One semester, I had to select a word and write a paper illustrating it. My word was *condescending*.

But eventually, I was able to transfer to the University of Kentucky. I got a UK ID with my picture on it, and a UK wallet to put it in. Sometimes I'd pull out my ID and stare at it.

My friend Carrie was an English major and a writer. She was so free with her language, and could enunciate long, peculiar words. We'd sit on her dorm-room bed and share lines that moved us. She helped me tune my ears to the music of writing.

Another friend handed me *The Fire Next Time* and said, "You need to know this man." I loved that James Baldwin wasn't handsome like Langston Hughes. I read that he was often called ugly, ridiculed for his "frog eyes," and for the gap in his grin and his African nose. I saw beauty in him, but more than that, I admired how his intellect transcended what others thought about him.

I heard about a creative-writing professor who was supposed to be incredible, a poet. One day, I was walking with a friend, and we saw a tall, bronze-skinned woman with gold-streaked locs. My friend turned to me and said, "There she is!"

Nikky Finney. We were like teenagers spotting their favorite musician. I had listened many times to a clip of Professor Finney reading her poem "The Greatest Show on Earth," about Saartjie Baartman, the Hottentot Venus. She wrote about "the spectacle / of being a Black woman," and the "pornographic hands / fascinated with difference" that dissected her.

In the spring of 2007, I got to take Professor Finney's class. She acted like words were living, breathing, sacred things—like writing was serious. "Take a word on a date," she would tell us. One day, I submitted a poem called "Threadless." I used the word *panacea*, and when I read it aloud, I pronounced it "panaysha." Professor Finney stopped the class. "Never use a word you don't know how to pronounce," she said. I think she felt that I had disrespected the word.

And yet she was curious about me, and asked me about my life and my interests, and that made me stand up a little taller around her. She was the one who realized

PIDIER VIODE

how much help I still needed with grammar and arranged for a tutor, a graduate student who worked with me on diagramming sentences and the parts of speech. I resented it then, but now when I look back at the emails I was sending at that time, I cringe—they're riddled with basic errors. And no one told me. Professor Finney was the first teacher who told me the truth.

AS SOON AS classes ended, I was gone. I left Kentucky for New York on a Greyhound bus with a few hundred dollars in my bank account and two suitcases: one with my professional clothes—a pair of black slacks, a pair of gray slacks, a few collared shirts, my flower-printed sundresses—and the other stuffed with Shay's blow-up mattress. It was August 2008, and five days earlier I had gotten a temp job at *Essence* magazine—\$10 an hour to help move stories from an old version of the website to a new one.

The trip took 20 hours. I tried to lay my head against the window and sleep, but I couldn't. It was late when the bus pulled into Manhattan. My plan had been to spend that first night in a hotel. I found one near the Port Authority, but when I tried to go inside, the doorman lied and said it was closed. I think he thought I was homeless. Instantly, I regretted my travel outfit—sneakers and jeans, my hair undone beneath a baseball cap.

I was too scared to try another hotel. Instead I called the young woman who had offered to host me that first month—the daughter of one of my college mentors—and asked if I could show up right away. The taxi to Brooklyn cost a fortune.

I had no idea how to navigate this new world. But I was a very good beggar. As a child, I would approach anyone who looked remotely willing and able and ask them for money to buy my siblings and me a value meal at Rally's. When I was 8, success meant that we would get burgers and fries for dinner, instead of nothing. Later, it meant a mentorship, an interview, a job.

I had gotten my first position at *Essence*—an internship—thanks to Susan Taylor, the editorial director. I loved the magazine because it was full of stories about successful Black women, and every

month I'd see Susan's face, smiling in the back of the book. In Kentucky, I'd gone to a talk she was giving, offered to carry her bags, and told her all about my ambitions.

At the office, I would watch people I admired, anyone who seemed proper and smart, and try to do what they did. I could make it in New York, I told myself, if I worked hard, wore all black, and persuaded people to look after me. I asked anyone I thought could help me for advice, or a connection. Most people, like Susan, were generous and kind, but there was also the occasional humiliation.

One time I was having lunch at a French restaurant with another editor from *Essence*. I was proud because I had connected with him over our shared experience of growing up in a small town. As we were walking back to the Time & Life Building, I told him how nice it was to "conversate" with him. "Did you just say 'conversate'?" he asked, and my face burned.

I was always a fast eater, but I'd never thought to be ashamed of it until I was having lunch with a beautiful editor from a different magazine. I guess I made a mess with the bread crumbs. Even though she was Black herself, she asked, "Why do you Black girls eat like that?"

EVERY WEDNESDAY, I went to Hump Day—a happy hour for young Black professionals where everyone talked politics and seemed to have answers to all sorts of serious questions. The men wore suits and ties and the women all reminded me of Michelle Obama: ambitious, credentialed, supremely confident. Most were Jack-and-Jill groomed. They came from intact families that understood the concept of internships. They didn't drink Olde English, and they knew how to eat spaghetti correctly. They read books at the summer houses of their parents, parents who sent *them* money—not the other way around.

At Hump Day, I hid my past. They knew I was from Kentucky, which was foreign enough. They'd complain about boarding school and I'd say, *Yeah, my private school was horrible too*. I told myself I wasn't technically lying—I *had* attended a magnet school with a dress code: khaki pants and collared shirts.

Growing up, I'd never wanted to be white, just the right kind of Black. I'd always assumed that I was proper: I didn't have children out of wedlock; I wasn't a ho; I went to college. I had never thought much about class, but I'd never met Black people like these before.

My deficiencies haunted me: my childhood, my accent, my lack of knowledge. Silly things, like the fact that I'd never seen the movies that well-off Black kids had all watched: *Coming to America*, *Harlem Nights*. I asked "Where you at?" instead of "Where are you?" I talked quietly because I was never certain I was saying the words correctly. When I said "picture," people heard "pitcher." Eventually, I trained myself to always say "photo." I even found an acting coach online who agreed to give me voice lessons to try to change my accent, and we practiced on monologues in her studio.

I told one Hump Day guy named Brandon that I was planning a trip to Paris. He asked if I spoke French and I said, "Conversational." All I could say was *Bonjour* and *Je m'appelle Jenisha*, and I definitely wasn't flying to Europe. Each month many of my credit cards went delinquent. After Sprint turned my cellphone off, my granny shipped me one that had belonged to her dead ex-husband, Big Dishman, with one instruction: Don't erase his voice from the greeting. So whenever I missed someone's call, they'd hear a man's deep voice telling them to leave a message.

At work I never met anyone with a background like mine, and I knew why; only people with money could afford to be paid so little. There were times when I couldn't pay for lunch. One day, I walked into a Chase bank to withdraw \$2—just enough for a hot dog and chips. I probably had about \$5 in my account, but the teller wouldn't let me make the withdrawal. She handed me a \$5 bill from her own wallet instead.

I thought constantly about my family. Colby was mixed up in drugs and getting in trouble. Aaron was married and raising two sons with his high-school sweetheart; Shay was living in a three-bedroom house with her boyfriend and four kids. I was closest then to Shay and her children, especially my oldest niece. I didn't go home

much, but when I did, I'd take her to the bookstore and spend more than I could afford on *Junie B. Jones*. My family knew I was working at a glamorous job in New York City, so they assumed I had money. I was too proud to tell them otherwise.

IN OCTOBER 2010, I got that call about Trina in the hospital. A friend loaned me the cash for a plane ticket so I could make it to her bedside.

The note on her chart read: "Pt. has no bone flap on right side." The doctors had taken it out because her brain was swollen and bleeding from a hematoma. The intake nurse had written that the details surrounding how she'd arrived at the hospital were "sketchy at best."

"You came all the way from New York to check on me," Trina whispered. She was wearing a diaper, and I changed it for her. She said thank you. She was too weak to use her arms, so I helped feed her a sloppy cheeseburger, watery mustard soaking the bun.

Trina's longtime boyfriend, Tim, had called an ambulance because she wouldn't wake up. She had been high, and it looked as if Tim had beaten her up. He told me that wasn't true, and claimed that she had overdosed. But I had witnessed him hitting Trina many times. They're still together, and I asked him recently why he hit her so often. "She was crazy," he said. "She's still crazy."

Sitting beside her, I couldn't bat down the flashbacks. I saw Tim pull her up by her hair like a fisherman would lift a trout. I saw her jaw widening to scream.

"What year is it?" I asked her.

"1985," she said.

"Who is the president?"

"Bush."

"What year is this?"

"You just heard me say what year it is," she said. Her memory was draining away like spilled water.

Whenever Trina woke up, I would ask her what I should do: Should I go back to New York? And she always said yes. "Go back. You got a dream there." I asked if she had any advice for me, and she said, "Don't be smart all your life. Always be yourself no matter who's around. You live and you learn and you learn to live."

After a day or two, she started asking me for crack. She moved her mouth from side to side as if her lips were playing an invisible harmonica. Spit bubbled on her lips. She didn't even know who I was anymore. She pleaded with me: "I want a hit."

My friends in New York had no idea what was going on. My bosses just knew that my mom was sick. She's still in critical condition, I told them. I wanted them to believe she was dying of cancer or something.

She survived that injury, survived withdrawal, and then went back on crack. For at least a year, she had to wear a protective helmet. I just went back to New York.

One night not long after I returned, I was covering a celebrity event for *People*. Ne-Yo was performing, and my assignment was to interview him after his set. I got the VIP treatment, skipping the crowd and sipping free cocktails. We talked about his work and his children. It was just a normal night in my new life. But on the long commute home, I started sobbing. I didn't understand what was happening. What if someone I knew saw me crying? I couldn't stop. I could barely breathe.

I'D SLEPT in a walk-in closet, stayed with acquaintances, lived for a while with a boyfriend. I couldn't afford rent. But I needed a steady place to live, and a family friend from Kentucky finally connected me with Marie Brown.

Ms. Brown was a literary agent who championed Black writers and artists, and she had a habit of taking in young people who needed help. Her Harlem brownstone was a library. Magazines and newspapers were piled everywhere. And books and books and books. She looked at me skeptically while I pretended to have a reasonable plan for the future. At last she offered me a room for a few months, until I got on my feet. I stayed for four years.

Much of the time, I could hide my inadequacies by working hard. Not with Ms. Brown. One day in the kitchen, she told me to add two measurements, but my math was wrong. "Why don't you know anything about numbers?" she asked. She ordered me some basic math books, and gave me a card with different percentages on it for tipping.



The author in sixth grade

She gave me beauty advice too—wear sunscreen, scrub your elbows—things I'd never discussed with Trina or my granny. When I ate quickly, Ms. Brown would tell me, "Take your time, Jenisha. Don't pick up the entire piece of bread; break off a small piece and eat it. Dip the spoon in the soup and slowly bring it to your mouth."

But the main thing she had me do was read. Read until I couldn't read anymore.

She was always saying "I left that for you." Her living-room table was covered in magazines and manuscripts, but amid the pandemonium I always knew exactly which article was meant for me. When I was at work, she'd email me links to breaking news, with the subject "Did you read this?" I'd reply, "No, I didn't hear about it. I'll check it out." And she'd write back, "What type of journalist are you?"

Whenever I was being small-town or closed-minded, or acting like a victim of circumstance, she'd say, "Quit being Kentucky."

Ms. Brown wasn't my only mentor; I had a string of them—women who talked to me about writers like Sylvia Plath, taught me how to fact-check, and invited me over for holiday dinners. But one of the most influential was someone I never met: Helen Gurley Brown, the legendary editor of *Cosmopolitan*.

One day I found, on the pile left out for me, a review of a new biography of Brown called *Bad Girls Go Everywhere*. I couldn't understand at first why I needed to read about this plain-faced white woman. But I did, and then I ordered Brown's own book.

Helen Gurley Brown grew up in Arkansas. "I never liked the looks of the life that was programmed for me—ordinary, hillbilly, and poor," she wrote. She quoted Carson McCullers: "I must go home periodically to renew my sense of horror." She called herself a "mouseburger"—the kind of woman who wasn't Marilyn Monroe beautiful but knew how to work hard and highlight her best features. She understood me: "You may not be an intellectual or a scholar, but you are 'street smart.' Like a little forest animal, you are quick and adaptable. You 'know' things."

One night I saw a tweet about *The Messenger*, by Charles Wright. I'd never heard

of Wright, and I immediately ordered a copy. I found his *New York Times* obituary. A quote from his editor drew me in. "He was a very strange man, and after we met I thought, 'Well, this is not going to work.'" Then "he turned in the most perfect manuscript I'd ever received."

Wright may have lacked technical skill, but raw talent throbbed beneath his sentences. He wrote about walking through Rockefeller Center with a book in his hands, "sneezing and reading Lawrence Durrell, dead drunk from the explosion of his words. I suddenly looked up and encountered the long face of Steven Rockefeller. He seemed startled. Doesn't he think poor people read?"

Wright was an outsider in New York, trying to straddle two worlds. His grandmother had raised him in Missouri after his mother died of typhoid fever. He wanted to be a writer but worked as a messenger, walking through the "rainy New York streets" until his shoes were soaked through.

"I cannot connect the fragments of my life," he wrote.

Wright was sad, with pockets full of ambition. And so was I.

AROUND THIS TIME, I applied to Columbia Journalism School. I did it secretly, because I was sure I wouldn't get in. But I did. All of my reading had paid off. For the first time, thanks to graduate-school loans, I could afford to live comfortably.

I called home to share the news, but no one had heard of Columbia before. "Where's that?" my granny asked. I told her that Barack Obama had gone there.

Now, whenever I went out with the Hump Day crowd, people asked me for book recommendations. "You have to read *Liar's Poker*," I'd say. "You'd really love *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*." The truth is, I hadn't even read some of the books I recommended; I'd just heard about them while listening to Ms. Brown and her literary friends, or read the reviews that told me they were important.

In 2011, my old professor Nikky Finney was nominated for a National Book Award for Poetry, and she invited me to go to the ceremony with her. I was in the audience when she won, and gave

an acceptance speech that soon went viral: "Black people were the only people in the United States ever explicitly forbidden to become literate." That, she said, "still haunts every poem I make."

She invited me again two years later, when she was a judge. I met James McBride, and I told him that his book had changed my life. When he won, for *The Good Lord Bird*, I cheered and cheered.

The next year, I graduated from Columbia. Ms. Brown was throwing me a party, and I invited a bunch of my mentors, as well as Aunt Soso, Trina, and my granny. I had helped get some money together for Trina to ride that same Greyhound bus I'd once taken. But then I changed my mind. She was getting high a lot then, and I didn't want to babysit her. So I called her back and said to forget about it, that I didn't want her to come after all. She didn't ask why.

My granny didn't come either. I had so wanted her to see my life—my studio apartment with its bookshelves of novels and biographies, the campus filled with brilliant professors. But at the last minute she made an excuse and said she couldn't come. Many people were there to support me, but not the two women who'd raised me.

MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS and I have never talked much about our childhood. When I went to live with my granny, I became something like an only child, and each year their absence became easier to accept. Alone, I was able to rewrite my own story: I had a good life. I went to Florida every spring break and swam with my cousins. I decorated my own room. I had only myself to look after. I tried to bury the rest of it in the ground, and I was surprisingly successful. But our silence had a cost.

Last year, I started writing what I thought would be an essay about my start in journalism, but I kept getting pulled back and back. I couldn't write about myself without writing about my family.

I always knew that I had privileges my brothers and sisters didn't have. All this time I thought that Colby and Aaron had lived with a nice foster family, but I found out this year that Colby, struggling with behavioral issues, had been sent away to

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live in a series of group homes when he was 9 or 10. How could I not have known that? "You were just off in your own little world," he told me. "We were all off in our own little worlds."

He told me about a time when he was alone downstairs in our apartment, and the cops barged in. He'd gotten a teddy bear on a school trip to some kind of medical clinic, and it had a big bandage on it. Someone was hurt during the raid. I'm not sure what happened—or how much of this is the dream logic of a traumatized child—but he said that "somebody took my Band-Aid off my teddy bear because they was bleeding that bad."

"I was so mad," he said. "I loved that teddy bear."

Listening to his memories, I felt like a wound was reopening inside me.

I talked with my aunts and my great-aunts, with my granny's cousin and childhood friend. But the one person who didn't want to talk was my granny.

"You don't want to open that can of worms," she said.

I ALWAYS SAW CRACK as the source of my family's problems. But I learned that addiction went back in our family long before the crack epidemic—as did poverty and neglect.

Irvin Smith, my granny's cousin, is the most educated member of our family—he has a doctorate in behavioral and analytical psychology and worked as a clinical consultant for the state of Kentucky. Ours, Irvin told me, was a "female-dominated family." The women were always getting in hair-pulling, skillet-raising fights—"mother-daughter fights" about the things "that all mothers and daughters argue about: the daughter's boyfriends, the grandkids." They lived in the '40s, '50s, and '60s in a part of Lexington called the Bottoms, where the juke joints were, where people went to drink and fight.

My granny was raised mostly by her grandmother, Addie Mae Fields, who worked in the Southwestern Tobacco factory and wove beautiful baskets out of tobacco leaves. My granny's mother worked in the factory too. Both her mother and grandmother drank heavily. Granny's

mother died suddenly in her sleep, in her early 40s or even younger.

My granny was 14 or 15 when she became a mother, to a baby girl who died. Trina was born the year after. Her father's name is Walter Watts. Walter's childhood was one of real deprivation. He told me that his mother gave him up and that he lived "in the streets." He was "the neighborhood child—people in the neighborhood at different houses would buy clothes for me, and I would have to go to their house to take a bath."

He was addicted to heroin, then to crack. "Drugs do not allow you to be a parent," he told me. "They consume your whole life."

So why did he use them? "My mother didn't love me, so how could anybody else love me? That's the way I always looked at it."

When I asked people in my family why their lives had gone so off track, they all seemed to point to the same thing: this void where a mother's love was supposed to be.

"You try to close that void, but it never happens," Walter said. "At least it hasn't happened for me."

"My mother never, never wanted me," Trina said. "She never wanted me."

TRINA WAS IN the shower one day when she heard the bathroom door opening. She was 14 and would normally have been at school, but it was a snow day. The shower curtain came back fast and there was her stepfather's towering body. She started crying and yelled out, "No, no, please, no!" He grabbed her naked body. "I was fighting and fighting and fighting," and he was "taking his hands and sticking them up in me." He pulled her from the shower and slammed her on the bed he shared with her mother.

"He raped me," she said.

I'd known for years that Trina had said she was raped by my granny's husband, Big Dishman—the man whose phone I'd inherited. But we'd never talked about it. This year I finally asked her to tell me what happened.

Eventually, she got free and "ran out of the house with no clothes on all the way up the hill" to a friend's house. "Snow was on the ground; it was cold, but I can't remember being cold. I was just trying to get away."

At some point the police were called, and Big Dishman was arrested. Trina said she was taken to the hospital, where doctors examined her. Trina told me that her mother picked her up from the hospital and then went straight to the police station to bail Big Dishman out.

The local paper reported his arrest: "Police Charge Man With Raping Juvenile," read the headline. "William R. Dishman, 42, of 1000 Valley Farm Drive, has been charged with second degree rape."

I didn't know Big Dishman well. He and my granny separated long before I moved in with her, so I don't remember seeing him much growing up, and he died in 2005. I couldn't find any court records, so I'm not sure what happened after he was released, or whether there was a trial.

But I asked Irvin what he remembered. He said that when my grandmother found out about the abuse, she kicked Big Dishman out. He said she was the one who called the police. But then she took him back in. "You gotta remember," Irvin said: "He was still the father of three of her children."

In Trina's memory, Granny was angry at her—as if she'd seduced Big Dishman and then lied about it. She was mad at Trina's younger sister Soso too. One time, Soso told me, when she was in high school, Big Dishman walked into her room naked and said, "I will give you \$20 if you let me eat your pussy." Soso, like Trina, went on to struggle with addiction, though she's been clean for decades; my granny has a similarly strained relationship with her.

When I asked my granny about the sexual abuse, she accused Trina and Soso of taking money from Big Dishman in return for sexual favors. She said she blamed all three of them, but Soso especially.

But she was a kid, I said.

"She knew what she was doing," Granny said.

I'd always thought of my grandmother as my protector, my savior. She was so put together and morally upright—I couldn't believe that she would have let her daughter be abused. Easier to not believe Trina, because she's a drug addict, because I've

resented her for so long. It was hard for me to see that she'd been hurt too. But I could hear it, in the way Trina said Big Dishman's name, low and quiet, as if he still might be nearby.

NOT LONG AGO, Colby overdosed on heroin. "I just took a little line of it and next thing you know, I woke up and everybody was crying."

Aaron texted me: "I gave him narcans and cpr and he came back." He also sent a video of Colby on the floor: He was sweating, his eyes half closed, and he kept moving his mouth back and forth in this way that looked deeply familiar.

THIS PAST JUNE, I booked a trip to Kentucky. I had so many doubts about this essay. Was it a betrayal to speak so honestly about my family? Was I "pimping my trauma"? I wanted to talk with everyone in person.

My flight was early, but my son, sensing that I was leaving, woke up crying. He wrapped his arms around my neck and wouldn't let go. Whenever I tried to put him back in his crib, he screamed. My husband finally intervened, but I'd already held my son for so long that I missed my flight.

When I finally got to Lexington, Trina was drunk. I'd been telling her for weeks that I was coming to interview her for this story. But everything, as usual, was chaos. Tim, her boyfriend, had lost his phone, and a woman who lived at the Salvation Army had found it. Trina needed me to drive her over there to get it. The parking lot looked smaller than it had when we stayed there, the entrance somehow sleeker. I didn't go in.

Then Trina insisted that she had to clean her apartment before she could sit down and talk. Enough. I stormed off. When I'm in Kentucky, the old Jenisha slips out. I drove around, steaming. Granny's old office looked the same, but the Charlotte Court projects were gone, a new single-family home standing in the lot where Trina used to hang our clothes.

Finally I went back to Trina's. She insisted that she wasn't drunk, that she'd only had a Long Island. We sat on the side of her bed. I'd always wanted to ask

why she chose drugs over us. Since her brain injury, it can be hard for her to recall things. But she answered my questions as best she could.

"It wasn't like I intentionally tried to do it," she told me. She said she would tell us that she was going around the corner to a friend's house—"I'll be right back. I'm going to get some sugar or something ... Don't open the door for anybody." But then her friend would have crack, and people would be there partying. "I would say, 'Well, I'm just going to take one' ... Then one turned into another one and another one and another one." She turned her head to the headboard and cried.

Later I went looking for Colby. He's still handsome—over 6 feet tall with a head full of hair. A decade ago he was in college, but now he doesn't have a job or a home. Back when we were little, I found a sheet of paper where he had written: "Dear Diary, I was born on May 10, and little did I know I was born a crack baby." I can still see his soft, left-handed cursive, wobbly on the page.

As we talked in my car, he described what it had felt like when he overdosed: "I didn't see no angels, no demons, no nothing."

"You think you died?" I asked.

"I was dead. I did die." His voice was so low, I worried the recorder wouldn't pick it up.

After our last interview, he wanted me to buy him a drink, but I said no. When I left him at the curb, sadness hit me like a glob of spit.

The last thing I did was go to my granny's. She lives just across the border in Indiana now, in a nice house with a four-car garage and a pond in the yard filled with goldfish. I wore a white lace dress and made sure my hair was straightened and concealer covered up my blemishes. She stared me up and down, saving her compliments for later.

She told me that she didn't want to be part of any story that included Trina or Aunt Soso. She gave me a glass of water and I patted her dog, and then it was time for my flight home. But just as I was about to leave, she said that I could call her later with my questions—we could do my "little interview."

I'd spent so much

time pushing my

family's history aside,

and now here it was,

circling back at me.

FOR TWO MONTHS, she dodged my calls. The whole time, I was worried about the story of the rape. Could I really write about something so painful? I love my granny, but we'd never talked honestly about the past. I had to remind myself that it wasn't a secret. It had been in the newspaper.

Then a researcher who was helping me on this story found something—files from a court case involving Big Dishman. At last, I thought, I'd have the legal record of Trina's accusation. I looked at the PDF of the crooked documents, the word **DISMISSED** stamped across a page.

But I was confused. The incident the complaint described was from 1988. One page was particularly blurry, but I could make out the words: "Dishman, William ... did rub his granddaughter in the vaginal area while waiting [in] the car at Northpark Shopping Center."

The papers said the child involved was only 3 years old. Her initials were J.W.

I was 3 in 1988. My initials are J.W.

I called to ask Trina if she knew about this, and she said she'd had no idea. She seemed genuinely shocked, and insisted that she would never have let that happen to one of her kids. I called my granny next, and she said she didn't know anything about it either. She had trouble forming a response; I didn't know how to respond either.

She called me back later to say that "J.W. could've been any J.W."

She didn't understand why I wanted to dig all this up. "He's dead," she said. Yes, he's dead—and she was still trying to spare him. I was done with that.

That Sunday, I stayed in bed until late in the afternoon, trying to sleep it all off—my initials; 3 years old; granddaughter; **DISMISSED**. I'd spent so much time pushing my family's history aside, and now here it was, circling back at me.

Over the following days, I learned that there were other cases: The Fayette County court had records of four more criminal complaints against a William Dishman alleging sexual abuse of a minor. The first was from 1986, the last from 2002. The cases are sealed because they involve juveniles. I don't know who the alleged victims were—only that there were more.

I kept thinking of something Irvin said. "Secrets never stay secret, no matter what you do."

TWO YEARS AGO, when I was pregnant with my son, I was angrier with Trina than I'd ever been. As I was becoming a mother myself, the weight of it hit me. I couldn't understand a mother not being there to protect her child. I still can't.

I've talked with my husband about my childhood, but he grew up in a stable household, and he can't really understand what it's like to come from a family like mine. We're both Black, but it's like we're in a mixed marriage.

Our life is comfortable, but *comfortable* feels like the wrong word. I still worry all the time about money, about losing the opportunities I've worked so hard to achieve. I still get flustered when trying to communicate my thoughts or ideas—still worry that I might never catch up. I've spent my whole life trying not to be like my mother. I've spent my whole life trying to belong, to show people that I'm not like "them," not a Black person living in poverty, not a Black person with an addiction.

My son is one and a half now. My husband and I take him to the zoo and try to read to him every night. Before he was born, he had more books than baby clothes. I don't want him to have to hustle like I did. I want to give him the words he needs to open any doors, and if I can't, I want him to know where to find those words: in books. He already likes to pull my books off the shelf. He wrinkles the pages, bites the corners, wets a bookmark with his drool—and I don't mind.

Charles Wright said he couldn't connect the fragments of his life. That's how I feel too. How can I connect the fragments when the ground is still heaving up new ones?

Many people told me not to write this. Trina was the one who said to do it. "The truth is the light of the world," she said. "The truth will set you free."

So this is the beginning of the story of Jenisha Watts. *A*

Jenisha Watts is a senior editor at The Atlantic.