

Growing up, we had a fan in our apartment that one day started making a loud clicking noise. We couldn't afford a new one, so we kept it. After a while, the clicking noise didn't bother us, almost like it wasn't there. We only remembered when new people visited and reminded us of the noise. That's how the violence in our city is during the summer. So many people are getting beat up, shot, and killed that it doesn't bother people as much as it used to, only when the news makes it a big deal.

There are zombies in every direction. That's what I call the drug addicts in the hallway of our building. My mother used to be one of them. My aunts and uncles were too.

Their arms are usually the first thing I notice, always clawing for something. Their eyes have no soul, like life has been sucked out of them. They are as thin as drinking straws and speak no words, only noises. I'm petrified every time I tiptoe past them. The stairs groan with each step and I inhale the smell of drywall in the hallway to block the noise from my ears. When I get to the first floor, I put the key into our door and hear Sam Cooke playing, which means something is wrong. Bad news is like a storm; you feel it on your skin.

I walk into my room, close the door, and lie back and stare at the ceiling. My mind wanders for about five minutes and then the door opens. My mother has a look in her eyes that I

have never seen. In my head, all I can think is, “Who died?” I am fifteen years old, sitting on my bed waiting for my mother to speak. If she had light skin, her face would be red. She is rocking back and forth with her hands shaking atop one another. It sounds like the radio is getting louder, but I know it isn’t. I can hear the song saying, “...that he loves me and he cares.” Who loves me and who cares? Looking back at my mom, I see her pupils floating in tears. She speaks and my life is forever changed.

“Arshay, my father, your grandfather, raped and beat me when I was younger.”

She says there were times he had that look in his eyes for her little sisters too, but every time she saw him look at them she lunged, because there was no way she was going to let him touch her sisters.

“I was the oldest and it was my duty to be a big sister.”

Suddenly, the noise on the radio doesn’t exist. My body shuts down, but my mind is on high alert. My head sweats. I feel as if my heart is pierced with a sword. I keep staring at this woman, my mother, staring right into her eyes, and I can see all her hurt and feel all her feelings. I don’t know what she wants me to say. I ask myself how many other families go through this. Is it normal for innocent young girls to be raped by their fathers? For God’s sake, I’m only fifteen—why is she telling me? She was probably around my age when it happened, so how did this happen to her?

If she wants me to say something, she is disappointed because I say nothing. She gets up to walk away.

“You deserve to know.”

I want to hug her, but we are not an affectionate family. I can’t do what I don’t know how to do. So I just sit there

in our one-bedroom apartment shared by the five of us: me, my mother Linda, oldest brother Shaundell, younger brother Isaac, and little sister Pamela. I begin seeing things I hadn't before. I notice the stain on the wall that looks like Abraham Lincoln's face, the rust on the bunk bed that looks like a string of ponds, the creaky wooden floors, the missing slats in the blinds, seven nail holes in the wall.

I start thinking about a time at my grandfather's house years ago, when I was maybe nine years old, and he pushed through the door drunk, yelling, "I am the warlord! I am the G!" He was a very big man. My grandmother came into the kitchen in her nightgown, telling him to calm down and cut the noise out. He grabbed her and tried to rip her gown off as he dropped his pants to force himself on her. My grandmother was screaming, so Shaundell jumped on my grandfather's back and I started pushing him off her as she was hitting him upside the head with a boot. My grandmother pushed him towards the stove, which had all the burners lit—it was how we got heat. I saw my grandfather put his hand onto the grate, directly over the flame. I got scared, so I tried to pull him off but couldn't move his arm. I put my arm under his to keep him from burning. I didn't scream, but I do remember thinking to myself that even though my grandfather was a bad man, I had saved his life. I also felt like I was cursed with weakness because he deserved to burn. My grandfather eventually passed out.

Remembering that incident alone, I can only imagine what my mother went through. She leaves the room, and I play out a scene in my head of finding my grandfather and killing him, but he is already dead from a stroke.

An hour later, my brother Shaundell gets home. I am lying

in bed scared with my eyes shut tight, my heart in my stomach, and my ears wide open. My mother is telling Shaundell exactly what she told me. I hear her ask him through tears, “Do you hate me?”

“No, ma.”

And he cries like I never heard him cry before. We have been beaten with hands, cords, belts, and sticks, beaten until we cry ourselves to sleep, but I have never heard him cry like this. He doesn't stop crying, can't stop. I am not sure if he is crying out of anger, but I don't have the heart to ask, so I will myself to sleep.

.....

At 6:00 a.m. my alarm goes off. I jump up quickly, as if last night was a bad dream. My mom shouts out to us, “Time to get up and pray!”

She is clapping her hands and singing:

*He that believeth
he that believeth
have an everlasting life.
He that believeth
in the Father and the Son
have an everlasting life.
When I get to heaven
I'm gonna walk all around
have an everlasting life.
When I get to heaven
I'm gonna put on my crown
have everlasting life.*

My younger brother Isaac complains about having to wake up so early to this noise.

“As for me and my house, we serve the Lord,” she claims. Shaundell is quiet, his head down, not saying a word. My mom and I both know he just needs time. Maybe after school he will open up a bit.

Morning devotion is a daily routine in our apartment Monday through Sunday. We wake up to my mom’s songs, we complain a little, and then we fight to get into the bathroom. We each have to find a scripture to read out loud, we sing a song (usually “Amazing Grace” or “God Will Make a Way”), and my mother asks if we have a prayer request. Afterward, we get on our knees and pray for a half hour. Most of the time, we just fall back to sleep, but if we get caught we have to stand the whole time. The weird thing is that sometimes my siblings will pray, sometimes they won’t, but you can always tell one from the other. The sibling who prayed always felt good afterwards and minded their own business.

My mom has her rules, but she is fresh out of the Victory Outreach Recovery Home after well over a year. My brothers are already lost to the streets and their own desires. There wasn’t always prayer in our home, but there was always a past.

.....

There are no pictures of me from before the age of thirteen; drugs took them. There are no memories of kisses goodnight or the smell of breakfast in the morning; rock cocaine’s to blame. There are no good grades, no junior high sweethearts, no ability to be popular at school, and no sense of belonging, thanks to alcohol abuse. This was not my addiction, but my mother’s, and bitterness was stamped on the tablet of my

heart.

At thirteen, I did something I regret. I chose to believe my mom was dead, even though I knew she wasn't. I had a funeral in my heart. I knew she was going to die in the streets. She was losing so much weight, she stole our Christmas gifts, and she would only come home two or three days a week. When she came home, she would cry aloud in the middle of the night and scream for her fix. I didn't know who she was anymore. She would dress herself in so many layers, one on top of the other, and when I saw her in the streets she was always with a different guy.

I counted her out. I didn't respect her and treated her like a dead woman roaming the streets. I didn't really know my dad and figured he left my mom for the same reason I wanted to leave, so I was bitter and blamed her. I have heard of other parents in our neighborhood dying from overdoses, and my mom seemed far worse than they'd been. I wanted to prepare myself mentally and emotionally for when my mother left us because of drugs, so I could be strong for my brothers and sister. I reached inside and decided she was already gone. It was the same feeling you get when the police or state troopers are behind you and it's only a matter of time before they stop you. I stopped thinking about her, I stopped worrying about her, but I still cried because I loved her too much and knew she couldn't stop. She had four kids she loved, so she would stop if she could, right? She was all I ever wanted and needed, but I felt like I had to be strong at thirteen. I wouldn't stay up at night waiting for her to come home with her usual hysterics just so I could fall asleep afterward.

A week passed with no sign of her. Two weeks, no mom. I was annoyed because she got a check and was supposed to buy

us clothes. Three weeks, no sign, and I thought to myself that maybe she was gone. I was worried, but not upset. It was as though my heart went cold. We were all living with my grandmother at the time, and after a month passed, there was finally a call. My grandmother said that my mother had checked into a rehab home called Victory Outreach and wanted us to visit. I figured it wouldn't last. Six months passed. My brothers and sister would visit, but I never did. I didn't want to see her. They didn't know that she was dead to me.

.....

A month later, around Thanksgiving of 1995, I found myself on the corner of 26th and Karlov Street, a wild Mexican neighborhood. The Two Six gang was hanging on the corner, and I wondered what was going on. If you are black and live in the West Side of Chicago, you know you do not cross the viaduct into the Mexican neighborhood. This is where the police drop you off when you mouth off to them and try to be a tough guy; it's like being dropped off in the middle of the ocean.

It was a cold day in Chicago, and my grandmother fought with me until I agreed to go to the Victory Outreach service. I guess my mom was sweating her to make sure I came. When we entered the building, there was beautiful music, different than anything I had ever heard. There were pictures of people of different ethnicities along the wall leading up the stairs. There was a black man and a white woman at the front door to the sanctuary, greeting me with a big smile. When I entered, everyone had their hands lifted. There were blacks, whites, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans. Young people and old, and they all looked at peace. I had never witnessed such a thing. There was ocean blue furniture, bright white walls, and fresh

flowers everywhere. The instruments were polished to a shine and the smell was invigorating. This was not a service but an experience.

I looked toward the stage and saw my mother up there singing. I was in shock. Her eyes were watering and her face was glowing, and she beamed when she saw me. When I smiled back, I churned inside and thought, She's alive. She was beautiful, devilishly beautiful, and she had peace like the sun in her soul. After the songs, a man went on stage and grabbed the microphone and spoke to us.

"Happy Thanksgiving and welcome to Victory Outreach Ministry. Take your seat. You are going to hear some live testimonies from people that were once not people." I wondered what that meant. The first person that walked on stage was a slim black guy with a black hoodie and blue jeans. He grabbed the microphone and began talking.

"My name is Daryl Vasser and I grew up in the hard streets of Chicago. I soon realized that for many families, including my own, violence was a way of life. I can remember far back when I was five, I literally watched out the window as my stepfather beat a man beyond recognition because he owed him money. That was the beginning of me witnessing many more acts of violence, drug abuse, and drug dealing. By the time I reached twelve, I already began to experience and get involved in all these things as a result of adapting to this way of life.

"I believe the drugs had the most effect on me personally. I started smoking weed at thirteen, and by the age of nineteen I was already a drug addict and didn't even know it. It wasn't until four years after that when I found myself behind jail bars frequently that I realized I had a problem. I became very angry towards my family because it was right at home where I

was introduced to drugs.

“My mom and stepfather sold weed, my big brother sold and used weed and cocaine, and of course, just as most twelve-year-olds who have a cool and popular big brother, I wanted to be just like him. Now that my life has been changed, we have forgiven each other. I have forgiven myself especially for the pain I have caused my mom in my addiction, and God has restored our relationship.

“This change came as a result of my mom praying for me. She started going to church and began to cry out to God for my life. Victory Outreach came to my neighborhood, I went into the home, and I’ve been clean ever since. I am not the man I used to be, and I know one day God will give me a family. Thank you.”

Everyone clapped and shouted. Then my mother was next, and my heart started pounding. I felt a little embarrassed, hoping she didn’t point me out. Very softly and slowly, her hands shaking, she said, “Hey, my name is Sister Linda Cooper. I am a mother of four and my kids are here today.”

Everyone started clapping. She went on, “I want to thank God for my salvation, because I was supposed to be dead in some alley by now. I can’t believe I didn’t lose my mind from all the drugs. I mean, every drug you name, I done it and I was addicted to it.”

She started crying and people shouted to encourage her. “Come on now, you got this!”

She continued, “I was all messed up, I was a cheater, and I stole from my kids. I didn’t know how to love my kids. I was angry, I hated my life, and so I made a decision after I spent all my kids’ money that I was going to kill myself. I mean, I was sitting there with rock cocaine in a TV antenna, smoking it.

I couldn't look my kids in their eyes anymore. I was walking down the street with my head down on my way to end my life, and then a guy handed me a flyer and said 'Jesus loves you.' When I looked back, he was gone.

"I walked to this woman's house to call this place on the flyer. Her name was Ms. Stella. She was an old wise lady in the neighborhood who helped me out from time to time. We called the Victory Outreach program, and they said they were full. Ms. Stella wouldn't let me leave her house. She said, if you go back out there, don't ever speak to me again. I stayed there in bed for three days until I got a call from Victory Outreach. They said there was room.

"So I got up and left and walked and walked. It was so far, it had to be miles. I had no money, my feet was hurting, but I felt something pushing me towards the Victory Outreach home. I wanted to turn around, but I couldn't. Something was pushing me. Ever since that day, seven months ago, I been clean, I been changed, I have hope and a future, and there is no looking back."

I was clapping; I didn't cry, but I wanted to. At that moment, I decided to try and let it go, all the hatred I had towards her, the pain, the memories of kids at school making my life hell because of her addiction, the sleepless, hungry nights. I said, "God, if you're real, open my heart eyes to see that this is for real." In my heart, I had forgiven her before she opened her mouth. I didn't want to, because that year had seen my darkest hours and my deepest depression. But I knew when she came home I had to be patient with her, love her, laugh with her, talk with her, pray with her, walk with her, and try to get to know her.

After service, my mother sat with us and had dinner down-

stairs in the church fellowship hall. I couldn't stop staring at her because she looked so different. She even sounded different. We laughed and talked, and she told us about the people she was living with and the early morning prayers and songs that changed her life. She had nothing but great things to say about her director Carol and this Victory Outreach place.

I never believed in God because of my situation and my environment. I was always very confused about this God. Growing up, I saw people shot and killed, and I heard their families say there was no God if all their babies were dying. Then there were those who would get hit and survive, and say it was only God who spared their life. I was indeed confused. That day, I wondered what it was that saved my mother. I was interested to find out.

Hearing the testimonies, I learned that Victory Outreach was a Christian-based but non-denominational church that could be found in nearly every inner-city in the world. I heard the pastor say that their mission is to reach the drug addicts, the gang members, the prostitutes, and the broken-hearted. Even the "goody two-shoes" who have never broken a plate in their life.

"What we have in common is that we are suffering from a void," he said. "So we look for love in all the wrong places. We try money, drugs, sex, fame, parties, pills. And because of that we end up crying out for help. That's where Victory Outreach steps in. We offer a home for men and women. We have youth programs, church services, sports programs, workshops. See, we are not just some other program, some social agency, or some little church on the corner. Some of our people tried AA, tried a psychiatrist, doctors, gang programs, jail, and nothing worked. It wasn't religion but a spiritual relationship with

God that changed us.

“It’s like a big watermelon: I can take it and split it open and eat it and tell you it tastes good, it’s so juicy, but until you try it yourself you will never know. God called us out of the ghettos to go back to the ghettos and make a difference. We are called to reach the treasures out of darkness, people that were once not people, but are now beautiful people of God.”

It made some sense to me what this man was saying after seeing how my mom changed. Everything my mom learned from that church she brought back to our household. I didn’t really mind it, as long as she didn’t go back to drugs.

.....

Now my brothers complain a lot and talk about moving out all the time. As I’m getting ready for school, I know it’s going to be a long day. All I can think about is my brother Shaundell, and the feeling of sadness and anger is still upon me. Our family still has our issues. I am thankful that we are not where we used to be. We are not where we want to be, but my mom works every day to get us there.

We head our different ways to school. My younger brother Isaac and little sister Pamela are at the local junior high school, Shaundell is a junior at Farragut, and I attend Manley Career Academy. The year is 1997 and Manley must be one of the most violent high schools on the West Side of Chicago. I am aware that Manley graduates less than fifty percent of its senior class every year and only sends ten percent to college. What I do like about Manley is the five career preparation schools within the school, like a trade school. They are Medical Arts, Graphics & Technology, Construction, Business, and Foods & Hospitality, which I attend. I want to be a chef.

During 4th period, everyone is cooking omelets, while I quietly work on a poem, trying not to think about home. As I'm writing my masterpiece, I hear footsteps behind me. Nisha—a tall, skinny, dark-skinned, very loud, and obnoxious girl—dumps a hand full of salt on top of my head and shouts, “Get up and cook, nigga.” Without thinking, I jump up and force my forearm in her neck. She starts punching me on the top of my head. With my forearm pressure on her neck, I stop and stare in her eyes and ask what her problem is. I realize that I'm freaking out and let her go. I know, and she knows, that I am a kind kid, and not in a million years would I usually react like that. She is just being her normal, obnoxious self. I like Nisha; she is responsible for most of my laughs. Chef Singleton, our instructor, tells us both to take a seat and he doesn't report us to the office. Chef Singleton likes me a lot, and knows I have what it takes to be great, but he knows I'm always in my head.

We sit down and everyone is quiet. I can feel her looking at me with tears in her eyes, still in shock. I never look back up. I feel really bad—I've never done something like this before—but I know it is a result of how I felt last night. Some of the class is happy and thinks Nisha got what she deserved. I am ashamed; I go back to writing. I only have a couple sentences so far:

*Sometimes I wonder, sometimes I think,
As I am lying in my bed, hopeless, will the sailboat really sink?
What I mean is, like the great big Titanic,
As the boat was sinking, people love to start to panic.
I don't have the looks or the charm or the smarts
But what I do have is a huge, pure, undivided heart.*

*I don't have skills that are recognizable by all,
To some, I am probably a shepherd boy, waiting on God's call.*

I write this poem for the one and only Grace, the smartest girl in our sophomore class. She has light, caramel-colored skin, half-inch dimples, a perfectly round head, and neck-length, natural black hair. Plus, she looks so good in purple. Her eyes are brown and shine like a diamond. I love to hear her talk in the hallways. Her voice carries a southern lilt; it is sweet and she speaks only goodness. Her body isn't important to me, but she does have a heavenly body— she is a cheerleader. She is different from any girl I know, as if she was made whole. She seems easy like Sunday morning while the other girls seem hard to deal with like Monday morning.

Freshman year, she chose Derrick. Light-skinned, handsome, swagged out, tall, in-shape, basketball-playing Derrick. He is the perfect gentleman and an affable scholarathlete; he ranks number one in our class. If you made a movie of our class, Derrick and Grace are the ones you would make a couple. I have heard through the grapevine that they are broken up and she is not taking it well. This is good and bad news because for some reason I feel like I am the one that can open up her heart. It's been a long time coming, but the problem is we never speak. I don't even think she knows I exist.

The bell rings and it is lunch time. My pride won't allow me to apologize to Nisha. I am just glad to have favor with Chef Singleton. Walking into the lunch room, I see a long, skinny, white boat, and behind it a television monitor showing people racing in the same boat. I have never seen this before. I look closer at the TV and see nothing but white people. I lose interest and walk away. A white woman grabs my shoulders

and asks me if I'd like to be on the rowing team. I tell her, "no, thanks," and walk to the snack station to buy a soda. In front of me is some pretty boy classmate asking to buy super donuts. When the lunch lady turns around to get the donuts, he steals chips and tosses them to his friends. When she turns around, he says, "It's okay, I don't have my money."

I sit down at a table with my homeboy Preston. We've been in the same school since fifth grade. We know each other's families well. We are best friends. Preston is a tall, skinny kid with clear brown skin, tight eyes, and short hair with amazing waves. He is by far the smoothest and most confident kid I know, and the ladies love him. He is also a very curious person. It seems to me that Preston gets his swag from his mother, who is considered the coolest mom in our neighborhood. Her name is Michelle, and people say she has sold weed for the longest of anyone. I'm not sure and never judge because she plays no games when it comes to raising her children. She makes sure that her kids' grades are good, and if they're not, they are punished. Michelle always welcomes me in her home with open arms and feeds me when I have a bad family situation. I have never told her what's going on; she just knows, I guess. A mother always knows. That saying is true.

.....

Preston and I did a lot of bad kid stuff together, like ringing door bells and setting off car alarms. Anything bad, we've done it. One time in sixth grade, Preston, our friend Jermaine, and I were walking down the street after smoking our first joint—which I hated—when a pimped out drop top car pulled up. It was Big Mike, one of the local neighborhood gangsters.

Preston said, "This is a nice ride."

Big said, “You guys want to get in?”

Preston said, “Hell yeah, let’s go, Coop!”

My friend Jermaine told us not to get in the car, but I thought to myself that riding around with Big Mike would probably get us women and status. I told Jermaine I would see him later. He shook his head in disappointment. We rode a single block in style, but by the second block about ten police cars screeched in from every direction and surrounded us. They pulled out their guns and ran toward the car.

“Put your damn hands up!”

One cop said, “So you guys stole a car, huh?”

I didn’t know what the hell was going on. Preston and I were screaming with our hands up. A cop yelled for me to shut up with a gun pointed at my forehead from a distance. Another cop told me I was going to jail and would get raped.

They pulled us out of the car and put Big Mike in one police car, and Preston and I in the other. We started crying in the back seat and people were walking past laughing. I wasn’t sure if I pissed myself, my heartbeat stopped, or I got slapped in the face, but I was scared senseless. No doubt about it, I was terrified of the cops. I’m scared anytime there is a group that can smack you, search you, talk to you whatever way they want—or even shoot you—and get away with it. I figured they couldn’t lock up themselves. I promised myself I would never be in a police car again. At the police station, Big Mike told the truth and we were set free.

“See what happens? This is the last time I’m smoking weed.” To which Preston laughed and said this was also the last time we’d be getting in Big Mike’s car.

.....