

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

*“Being gentle to one another and have forgiveness for one another. As the Lord forgave you, so also forgive each other.” Colossians 3:13*

I was not raised by my mother and the situation with my father was complicated. I was my mother’s fourth out of five children. We all have different fathers and we all had different upbringings. My oldest sister, Tammy, was raised by her father. My oldest brother, Eric, was raised by his father. My brother Mike, the middle child, was raised by a family friend and my little sister Toya and I were living with my mother. We lived with her until we were placed in foster care when she did not come to pick us up from daycare after closing time one day. After a year or so in the foster care system, my maternal grandmother became our legal guardian and she raised us pretty much until we became adults with a few gaps in between.

My mother, Victoria, really did not raise any of us, but she swears she wasn’t on drugs. How does a mother give away, refuse to raise, or lose custody of all her children if she is not on drugs or does not have a mental disability? To be honest, I think it would’ve been easier for me to mentally process my mother giving me up because she had a drug addiction or a disability rather than to hear that she was sober and in her right mind and still somehow chose not to love us, not to raise me.

To live with the knowledge that your mother, who was a mentally healthy, sober, 25-year-old woman when you were born, chose not to raise you is a cruel way for a child to grow up. I grew up with a hole in my heart that only a mother could fill. I wanted her to love me and to be present and focused on me, to be there every day showing me how to be a young lady, combing my hair, teaching me how to cook, creating a mother-daughter bond. Our lives would not take the path I desired.

Unfortunately for my mother, her childhood was not much better than mine. In her case, the adage about the apple not falling too far from the tree was true. My maternal grandmother had nine children; two boys and seven girls. Of the nine, there are multiple fathers for some and lingering questions about who the fathers might be of the others. From what I’ve been told, my grandmother’s oldest daughter raised five of her children (one died soon after birth, one was raised by my grandmother’s sister, and another was raised by someone else, I am not sure who). My grandmother supplied the housing, the food, and the clothes for her children, while my eldest aunt provided the mothering. That’s what I heard; it may or may not be how my grandmother tells her story, but it makes a whole lot of sense to me. The point is my mother did not have the best example of how to be a present and supportive mother to build from. Unfortunately for me, she did not recognize the trauma of the way she was raised before passing that trauma to her own children.

This is my story, the way I remember it.

I don't quite recall the first five years of my life, but what I have been told is that from the time I was an infant I had been bounced around to different homes. While I was still in her custody, my mother would leave me for extended periods of time with different people. One of those people was the man she said was my dad, let's just call him, Doc. and yes, he is a real doctor. My mother would drop me off at his private practice medical office. For whatever reason (I think he was married or had a live-in girlfriend) his secretary, Sandy, would take me home with her instead of me going home with him. I became a part of her family. I would stay for weeks at a time before my mother would return. One day, when I was two years old, my mother left my little sister, Toya, and I at a daycare center and went to New York City with her boyfriend. This may or may not be true, it's just what I heard. I've never gotten the story from my mother directly.

Ginger, the daycare owner, took us home with her and contacted the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services (HRS). The agency is also called Child Protective Services or "them people" who take children from parents and put them in foster care. Ginger and her family went through the process of becoming my legal guardians and trying to adopt me. Toya went to live with a lesbian couple, and they were trying to adopt her, too. I'm not sure if that part is true either. I'm sure it would have been easier to find a little green leprechaun waiting at the end of a rainbow holding a box of Lucky Charms cereal riding on a unicorn than it would have been for a lesbian couple to adopt a child in the mid-1980s in the deep Southern state of Florida. However, I know it is true that my sister did live with two women for an extended period of time. I believe she called them both mom and they shared an extraordinarily strong bond with my sister. They loved my sister and she loved them, too. She was happy there and I was happy with Ginger.

After living with Ginger and her family for over a year, she lost the custody case she had started and so did the women my sister was living with. By the time I entered kindergarten, Toya and I were living with our new guardian, my maternal grandmother, Erma.

By the time I entered kindergarten, my grandmother, Toya, and I all moved from Ft. Lauderdale, Florida to Gainesville, Florida, my grandmother's hometown. We lived there for about five years. My aunt Von also lived in Gainesville where she was the president of a program called the McKnight Achievers Society. My aunt became very instrumental in directing my education and overall growth during the five years we lived in Gainesville. As the director of the McKnight Achievers Society, (now called the Thurgood Marshall Society), she would get me and Toya involved in all of the programs they offered. In addition to becoming a McKnight Achiever, I competed in brain bowl competitions and performed African, jazz, and modern dance with the Lavern Porter Dancers. I did countless speeches at different churches, performed the National Black Anthem, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, through song and sign language. I sang and danced all over Gainesville.

I met and sang with both Melba Moore and Tevin Campbell. I even kissed Tevin behind a tree because I thought he was cute. This was BEFORE his debut album and way BEFORE he went to meet Michael Jackson and became what he calls "tri-sexual!" And, wait for it, WAIT FOR IT, my greatest childhood honor was dancing for South Africa's Mother of the Nation, Winnie Mandela! This was one of the highest points of my little life. To be honest, I did not appreciate the experience at the time (I was way more psyched about kissing Tevin Campbell). Years later, I realized the significance of performing an African dance for Mrs. Mandela in little ole Gainesville, Florida. Now, when people ask me for an interesting fact about myself, I always tell them how I met Mrs. Winnie Mandela first, how I sang with

Ms. Melba Moore second and then how I kissed Tevin Campbell before he went to Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch.

My mother also lived in Gainesville on and off during the same five years that we lived there with my grandmother. We would see her regularly when she was in town. She dated this local business owner who wore his hair in finger waves, had two open faced golds on his two front teeth, and had what appeared to me as a child to be a lot of money. He had a van with a disco ball in the back, a motorcycle, and a cherry apple red four-door Jaguar that my mom would come and pick us up from school in sometimes. My mother would step out of that Jaguar like she was dressed in 24-karat gold. She was a showstopper with her beautiful, brown milk chocolate skin and her thin, size six body frame with size 10 hips. She had a big butt and perfect bright smile which made her irresistible to many men and stirred jealousy in many women. Her attitude and personality were bigger than life, soaking up the attention from men and smiling in the faces of women who she knew were jealous of her.

When she walked into a room everyone knew it. She could either be this social butterfly - speaking and laughing with everyone - or she would be witty and sarcastically reading everyone who crossed her path for filth, throwing shade on every side. She was a woman who demanded to be seen and heard. Her presence was so great that people her own age would call her Ms. Vicky or Ms. Victoria, not just Vicky or Victoria. You had to put some respect on her name because she commanded it. When they didn't call her Ms. Vicky, they called her Queen B. It took me awhile to figure out exactly what that meant. We did not have the phenomenal performer and businesswoman R&B artist Beyoncé back in those days for me to glean the meaning from. Somehow, I knew it meant that she did what she wanted to do, when she wanted to do it, how she wanted to do it, and nobody was going to stop her.

I admired her and hated her at the same time. When she would show up for a school function or a holiday, birthday, or any other day, all was forgiven. I felt excited, loved, worthy, and proud to be in her presence and proud to be her daughter. When she wasn't there for school functions, holidays, or any other day I felt upset, disappointed, sad, embarrassed, and unworthy of having a full-time mother like the other kids. She was always in and out of our lives and I was always on this love-hate rollercoaster with her. She appeared to have it all together when I saw her; so why wouldn't she take us with her and raise us in her home with her well-to-do boyfriend? That is what a mother does, mother their children. I always asked myself that question so much it became torture.

To me, my family treated our relationship with our mother as if it was normal. They treated her lack of motherly behavior as if it was normal and maybe for them it was. However, it never became normal for me. Every time she left without me, the pain I felt killed my little innocent, confused childhood spirit. Each time was just as painful as the first time and that hole in my heart became a little bit bigger.

*"He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds." Psalms 147:3*

After I completed the fifth grade, we moved back to Fort Lauderdale and my life started to move in a vastly different direction. We moved to a home my grandmother owned in a neighborhood called Parkway. Parkway was right between the ghetto and the suburbs. The neighborhood was an all-black lower/middle-class community. Fort Lauderdale was a faster paced city compared to Gainesville.

Gainesville felt like small town living where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came. In Gainesville, kids still had fun playing in tree houses or riding bikes until the streetlights came on. This new group of kids I was around was not interested in playing in tree houses, riding bikes for fun, African dance, or brain bowl competitions. They were interested in kissing boys, smoking weed, wearing make-up, skipping school, and much more. I was not on their level yet. It was around 1993 and I was still wearing a Jheri curl, for goodness sake! The kids at my new school were way past that style and teased me every day about my hair.

"Follow the drip, the drip, the drip," they would say, or they called me juicy instead of Verhonda and asked to use my activator as lotion. I had to quickly learn the "Lauderdale" way. I had to learn to fight after being bullied on the school bus every day for an entire school year. I got into a few more fights after standing up for myself, but it calmed down the teasing because I was declared the winner by onlookers of at least one or two of the fights with fellow students.

When we moved back to Ft. Lauderdale, I was able to reconnect with my dad, Doc. He was a very accomplished infectious disease medical doctor. He was very handsome, tall, lean, and about 15 years older than my mother. He owned and ran his own general practice medical office back when he met my mother. He has four other children and they all look just like him; tall, lean, athletic build with a lighter caramel complexion and "good hair." The kind of hair that gets wavy instead of nappy when wet and grows fast and long. I am undoubtedly shorter, significantly rounder, and of a darker milk chocolate complexion (like my mom) with hair that gets all kinds of nappy, shrinks when wet, and requires all kinds of mixtures and blends of oils and herbs to grow just a few inches. He and I both had doubts about him being my biological father; but that was what my mother told us so the only way to find out for sure was to take a DNA test. I always believed that both he and my mother avoided the DNA route because if she was right, she would have him on the hook for a substantial amount of child support (since he was making that good doctor money). If he was right, she would lose the hook she already had in him (the occasional "can you do me a favor" phone call that would cost him a couple hundred bucks). I believe it was cheaper for him to avoid the test, so he did.

I saw him every day for the better part of a year when I was in the seventh grade. I switched schools and my school bus would drop me off close by his office and then he would drive me home. Our relationship developed over this time, but it was weird for me because I noticed the difference between the way he treated me and the way he treated his oldest son, Junior, who lived with him. He loved Junior, he sacrificed for Junior, he fathered Junior. He liked me, he took responsibility for me, he financially supported me. You see the difference? I felt the difference.

Deep in my heart and soul, I knew he was not my biological father, but officially determining that he wasn't through a DNA test would leave me as a bastard child. He was all I had and all I knew; so, I held on. I decided that the alternative of not having a father at all on top of having a part-time, in and out mother was a more painful choice than just accepting being treated differently than Junior. I wasn't strong enough to face the truth. This family picture of a part-time mom and a half-ass dad looked better to me than the alternative of part-time mom and no dad, even though ultimately it all felt the same. At least I could say I had a dad when other kids in my neighborhood could not.

While I did not have the greatest dad, at least I could represent to others that my dad was in my life. I put on a smile and told everyone how proud I was to be able to have such a professionally accomplished father that was so smart and so well liked by everyone. I masked the reality of my relationship with him

just like I had done with my mother. We did not have the father/daughter relationship you see on ABC's Family Channel, but he made sure I had pocket money and food and managed to teach me a few life lessons along the way. My favorite is, "Don't ever lend anyone anything you can't afford to give them."

My parental relationship with him wasn't perfect, personal, or filled with unconditional love, but it was how I survived. I learned to make lemonade out of the lemons I was handed. But I soon grew tired of lemonade after realizing it was severely affecting my happy. It led me to a very dark place, a place the devil often leads vulnerable children who feel abandoned and unworthy of love. A place where there is no hope and no future.

*Proverbs 17:22 - A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*