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This Ain't Nothin' New

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This Ain't Nothin' New

Until the great mass of the people shall be filled with a sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice can never be attained. -Helen Keller

"I hate I had you!"

Those were my mother's words, the woman who gave me life, right after my stepfather walked out on her seeking whatever he thought the underworld had to offer. As much as I love my mother, I know with everything I am that she meant every last syllable she uttered. Perhaps she had a right to feel as she did. I mean, it's not like I had enough sense to comfort her at a time when life had her twisted in a figure four. Today, I'm certain her words had nothing to do with me and everything to do with the fight she had on her hands. It was a fight that determined the success or failure of her children born out of wedlock and in the absence of willing hearts and helpful hands that would carry her through the struggle of motherhood.

In my stepfather's mind, he was the man of the house and possessed the unchallenged power to do as he saw fit. He and my mother were married on paper, which didn't have the value of the ink on the certificate, much less the significance of the bond that God placed between Adam and Eve. The era in which they existed demanded that she keep her mouth shut while he moved amongst society's underclass, pretending to be one of the fellas. No matter the number of nights he spent at clubs and in the streets, nothing about him could be called a rolling stone. I mean, he knew all the right people who made all the right moves to get things done. Nevertheless, he was not a street dude. Trust me. If anything, he was a robber, a thief, and a drug abuser. I would love to say he suffered just as much as mom, particularly when the streets discouraged him from getting in too deep. They must have done something to him, considering the heat he tended to bring back to the house.

So, while I watched him beat my twenty-something-year-old mother the way a boxer would his opponent, the only wish I had in my mind was to be bigger. If I was bigger, I knew I'd teach him the difference between men and women. But I wasn't bigger. I was no taller than two feet until I reached middle school.

My mom taught her children to stand up for each other. No matter how mean I was to my sister, I was of the opinion that I was the only one with the right to mishandle her like that. Nobody else was allowed to pull her hair or toss her dolls onto the roof of the house. For some reason, I assumed mom's two older brothers felt about her the way I did toward my sister. Like my stepfather, they were not street dudes. But I just knew in my heart and soul that both of them would bring the pain to this clown for beating their sister. I was wrong about that.

I was wrong about them.

I was also wrong about the rest of the fam. They were not from the streets, either. They didn't know the difficulties derived from financial deprivation, the mind's tendency to wrestle with concepts that have no position in reality, or the inconsolable cries of a heart that so longed for its Source that she became blind to the needs of her own children.

How or when things fell apart is beyond my ability to comprehend. I say that now as a forty-six-year-old man clearly remembering his childhood. "I hate I had you!" I know those words were full of grief, the kind of ache that declines to simply fade away. They were the words of a young woman with no clue as to her importance or how to make the best out of a life she hated. With this being true, it stands to reason that if she didn't know what to do with herself, she didn't know what to do with us.

It is an observable fact that police brutality, cruel legislative guidelines, faulty administrative rules, and biased judicial verdicts have all contributed to social injustice. But those are minor in comparison to the ignorance and cowardice that plagues our society. I have literally seen women give up their children for crack. I have known many fathers too afraid of their responsibilities to be men against all odds. I have dated girls screaming at the top of their lungs due to the fear of changes they were ill-equipped to manage. I have been the victim of that ignorance and told too many times about the impossibility of achieving a higher calling by those with more influence over my mind than myself.

I have been in prison since I was twenty-one. April 24, 2021, marks twenty-four years of incarceration for me. After a bit of calculating, it recently hit home that out of my forty-six years of life, almost thirty of them have been spent in some form of institution. Like my mother, I didn't know what to do with my mind, body, or soul, and found it difficult to understand what most people assume is simple. I make no excuses for bad decisions, but I'd be lying if I told you I knew what a good decision looked like prior to attending college in prison, of all places.

Contrary to conventional beliefs, the genesis of all learning rests at the breast of one's mother. She carries the responsibilities of feeding, clothing, and sheltering the child's body, if not the mind and soul. And she does most of these things by her lonesome. See, people of African descent have never stopped living in perilous times, despised for things over which we have no control. That's crazy. But even crazier than that are the women, every single mother striving to impart into her children the best she has to offer the world. Whether or not she comes up short is overlooked by the masses. That is, until one of her children is found in the backseat of a police cruiser. To top things off, this same child blames his or her mother for years to come because someone failed him. Not once does it cross his mind that the whole of society has helped fashion him into a crook.

Even if mom was to blame for this capital life sentence I'm serving, I get it now. I understand her plight better than most, as God has increased my own capacity to demand more from my mind. More importantly, I now realize that many of the injustices society places at our feet are in our hands to change. I know the girl next door may not be the best choice for a wife since she's been through too much. But when you hear her expression of hurt in the form of "I hate I had you!" what she's really saying to her children is

“I hate I had you...baby, because I really and truly love you more than I love myself, and I don't have the slightest clue how to make you into a king, a queen, a prince, or a princess, 'cuz I want better for you than the injustice of loneliness in a society that don't care about us.”

Genre: Autobiography, Essay

Tags: Race; Gender relations; Poverty; Drugs; Domestic violence; Intergenerational trauma; Family; Motherhood; Forgiveness