

DADDY

by Jalondra Davis

You have reached the voicemail of Jeffrey Davis. I got my phone off, right now, to save the battery, you know. Leave a message. I'm out. Gangsta Movement.

This is what I hear when I call my father. I am strangely proud of his OG status (Original Gangsta) of Eastside Crips. His sign throwing when we drive through the neighborhood, his love of anything blue.

Jalondra, dammit, just go read a book or something. I didn't realize that having a Crip father and a mother from the projects and splitting my time between Inglewood and Compton had any meaning beyond kicking it with my adopted uncles on the porch and catching butterflies in my grandmother's backyard. I grew up protected and oblivious, with no street smarts whatsoever. I accepted my role as the dingbat, the book smart one, because it meant I was left alone with the stories in my head. She's reading. She's studying. She's going to get out of here and make us some money. When you publish those books and make all that money Baby, buy Daddy a hoopty. Royal blue 54 Chevy on dubs. Early realization of my academic potential combined with awareness of my lack of common sense gave me a certain freedom from obligation to the reality around me. My family managed to protect my dreamy world from almost anything-of course, except from them.

For as far back as I can remember, there has been something wrong. We are not anything like the Cosbys, the Winslows. Daddy blows bubbles on my stomach like Cliff Huxtable did on Rudy's sometimes, but he doesn't always come home. He and Mommy don't talk like that, all smoothness and playful laughter. There is no slow, affectionate choreography on the foyer's cool, clean hardwood floors. There are late night trips to fetch Daddy from Uncle Greg's dookey green house on Main and 111th, where hard-living looking men and women drink from large brown bottles and laugh too loudly in the grassless front yard. I sit on my knees in the backseat and cry with my face pressed against the window, knowing my crying is part of the script, that my confused and snotty face is a special effect to accompany my mother's torrent of cussing and accusations. This is so Daddy will come home, so he will give us money for groceries, for the kind of cereal I like, so he will sit in his sagging recliner and watch TV while I play tickle monster with his stinky feet.

Words and images I didn't understand but somehow understood became a part of my consciousness before I was ten. I am just learning their actual meanings now:

The rumbling in the hallway while a girl from school and I played Barbies, after my mother ran in breathlessly and told us to lock the door.

Wack attack: A violent episode of withdrawal from a dependency inducing stimulant.

Calls on our phone where people don't say anything and then hang up, a royal blue Chevy pickup parked in a driveway of a home that is not ours.

Strawberry: A woman of low morals.

What gets shouted when she protests the late nights, asks where the money goes, expresses the suspicions, is irritated about the bleach stains on the clothes he attempted to wash as a favor.

Bitch: my mother.

I am in the tenth grade and the baby fat is sliding off. Despite chronic and obvious self-consciousness, the swing of my cheer skirt and success of my recently removed braces has reeled in my first real boyfriend. He wants to go to the movies and I ask my father for money for the ticket, for popcorn. If the little niggah ain't paying, you don't need to be going. He's supposed to get a ride and come to the door to get you and take you to see what you want to see and hold open your door. He's supposed to buy your ticket and drink and whatever else it is you want. I call the boy and tell him what my father said and he agrees to the terms for now, not wanting to miss a night of attempted grabs at my newly minted curves. However, I look at my mother's tears, at what he is telling me to demand, and I am confused.

I just found out about a half sister I never knew existed. We have to give away the dogs we couldn't feed anymore because even with my mother working three jobs, we are barely eating ourselves. But my Mommy tells us, "your Daddy loves you." He is writing her letters from rehab, letters she lets me read, beautiful poems in which he calls her his angel, his queen.

My twelfth grade boyfriend tells me he loves me after coming two hours late to the dance show I have the lead in, and I believe him. He tells me he wants to be with me though he doesn't want to take me to senior prom, and I believe him. He tells me I'm special though he doesn't call me for a week after he became my first in his musty room, and I believe him. For some reason I cannot grasp why I shouldn't believe him.

I am a young woman in college, unwillingly home for the summer. I walk through the door and have to gulp for air. I have had months without hearing the word bitch, a semester of freshman psyche, and a growth in confidence. My parents argue and I ask my father what he would think of a man calling me a bitch. I am his princess, stainless and sweet, and maybe I think this will trigger some kind of epiphany. If that's what you act like, that's what you are, and that's what you get called. I shove the plant on the dining room table in his direction. Eyes wild and crimson with hurt and rage, he pushes it back, much harder and further. It flies onto the floor and the soil my mother feeds with rotten egg water sprays my face, my chest, and the closed curtains behind me.

My mother cries. However, he does not make it easy to hate him. We go to Disneyland on my eleventh birthday, and all gruff fudge and blue two hundred pounds of him swoops

to grab a little white boy out of the way of one of those trolley things rolling through the park. All my life, as I stomp and shake on the dusty track at Pop Warner games, I look up at him in the stands leading the crowd in cheers, yelling advice to the football coaches. He has to be dragged to ballet recitals and award assemblies and parent conferences, but when we bring home art and science project assignments, he gets grumpily, grudgingly excited. Under his rough hands, my little sister's barge holds the most coins; my nephew's volcano actually erupts. He spends three days on the Popsicle stick log cabin I have to turn in with my report on Laura Ingalls Wilder in the fourth grade. His shirt is stained with paint, his fingernails full of papier-mâché, his mind occupied with new ideas: a stone fence, a window, and little Lego flowers in the yard. This is my teddy bear, my protective grizzly, and the source of my creative spirit. I adore him.

There is no soft way to say a word like bitch. There is no love, no tenderness, no appreciation in a word like bitch. But there are those who have mastered its harshness, so that the force of the consonants thump at your chest and make you two inches tall and swallow your voice along with all the air in the room.

I am a senior in college and yet another guy has bailed. The statistics aren't foretelling that it's going to get any better. I don't get it. What's wrong? Should I start looking at white boys? Resign myself to bitter Black female loneliness? I go home for Thanksgiving alone. I have been bringing a different guy every year for the last four years, and my family has learned to stop asking, "Whatever happened to what's-his-name?" Still, my father notices that I am driving my own car and packing up food just for myself and shakes his head. Maybe you need a real thug who would appreciate a woman like you. I don't understand these hard headed college boys. Do the niggahs have twenty-twenty? My daughter is so fine.

Yeah, Daddy, but my mother is beautiful as well. You know that picture of her at nineteen, in the black wraparound dress? Her skin was so smooth and golden brown, her arms were flung open to the world. She was laughing and her smile was hard and big and perfect, that was before you hit her in the mouth and deadened one of her front teeth. You and Mommy are getting along pretty well now, but what you don't know is that she could establish an intelligence agency for suspicious wives. She has the codes to your voicemail, your bank accounts. It's all stored up now, the things she learns, closeted missiles of mass destruction.

One day soon it will be too much and she will open her mouth about what she knows, what we all know, and you'll turn on the defense, fight attack with attack, Shut the fuck up, you crazy bitch!

You have taught me how easily diamonds at Christmas become shards of glass of angrily busted car windows. How sweet poems on handmade cards become insults, nastiness, rage. You cannot hate a daughter's mother, even if it's just sometimes and expect the daughter not to, at some level, hate herself. You can't expect boys and men not to see that in her eyes- no matter how pretty you tell her she is.