

## REMOVAL

*"You are the designer of your destiny; you are the author of your story."*

*-Lisa Nichols*

Hearing the nursery rhyme "Where Is Thumbkin" triggers a blurred, tearful memory. It reminds me of a time when I saw my mother's hands and feet shackled in handcuffs as she was guarded by police officers. While trying to understand the correlation, the full scope of the moment never comes to mind. I have asked questions and heard stories, but everyone I turn to has different versions or hardly remembers anything. It sucks that either I was too young to remember or suffer from suppressed memory.

My conscious mind stores the reminiscence of being a young girl living at Nile Gardens Apartments in Opa-Locka, Florida with my mother, Gina, and my older siblings, Craig and Ashley. I can't recall the number of bedrooms or the decor of our home. I loved for my hair to be styled with red beads while my arm was accessorized with gold bracelets. I enjoyed playing hide-and-seek and getting into the neighborhood pool with my friends. I followed my mother's rule while playing outside. She had only one: "If you hear gunshots, do not go near the front gate of the apartment complex."

I remember spending one summer with my maternal great-aunt, Auntie Mae, and her husband, Uncle John Henry, in Palm Coast, Florida. During the four-hour drive in my Auntie Mae's cream-colored Lincoln, she described the city like it was a special island. Her stories left me eager to arrive at the destination. Auntie Mae's home was beautiful. It was a mansion in my eyes. It was the only house on the block, surrounded by acres of trees. She told me it was her own special design built from the ground. It

included a two-car garage, garden, walk-in closet, jacuzzi, built-in pool, a lake, and my own room. Uncle John Henry even had his own room outside of the bedroom they shared.

That summer, I learned how to fish, hook bait, and scale a fish. I got scared when it jumped. I learned it was taboo to eat with elbows on the table, how to garden and make up a bed. I was introduced to salmon croquettes, southern fried corn, shopping sprees, and Golden Corral Buffet and Grill. Uncle John Henry was the man of the house, and cutting the corn off the cob to make fried corn was a job only for a man. Auntie Mae spoiled me with seasoned T-bone steak any time my taste buds craved them. I always had to be pretty and dressed in my Sunday's best. It was painful to get my hair done. She would hot comb my hair and blame it on the steam when she burned me, then we'd laugh about it. She'd say, "You have to suffer for beauty" as we admired the pretty sleek ponytails she'd styled in my hair and the sweet scent of Pink Lotion.

I hold those memories near to my heart. They're special to me.

But my return to Miami was unfamiliar. I returned home to chaos. My aunt Shawn screamed as she badgered me, asking if this was the home I wanted to return to. People rampaged through our apartment, taking all our stuff. Some of our belongings were already on the front lawn. We had been evicted. Shawn was aggravated with me and my return to Miami. We all lived in the same apartment complex; her home was just on the other side of the building. She called me a cry baby and left me alone in her apartment.

Gina showed up and tried to find a way to get me out through the window but failed due to its structure. What I didn't know was she would never be my mother again

once she walked away that day. I was too young to grasp what was happening and what was soon to come.

Kids should only be concerned with having fun, watching reruns of their favorite television shows, and eating candy. But not me. My kidulthood started at the age of four. I was making decisions that should be made by adults because I didn't know a thing about life.

It was the summer of 1996. Unbeknownst to me, what I knew to be a summer vacation was a premeditated safe haven. It made sense. The plan was for me to live with Auntie Mae all along. Gina had been deteriorating as a parent before I'd left for Palm Coast. But I didn't stay in Palm Coast because my cries for my sister, Ashley, were too much to deal with while my auntie and uncle tended to their health. I used to run out of my room screaming, "I want my sister!" At least that's the story Auntie Mae told me before passing away. I wish she hadn't allowed my tears to determine her decision because returning to Miami resulted in me being removed by social services followed by a slew of custody battles and trauma.

The thought of my parents abandoning me for cocaine and heroin never crossed my mind. My mother's partying and poor money management, my father's absence, and both their drug addictions led the judge to agree with the Department's recommendation—to be legally removed from the custody of both my parents. The judge ordered that I be placed in the custody of Grandma Rose. Ashley told me she had refused to leave the courts without me that day. She didn't want me to be separated from her and Craig.

You never know what life has in store for you ...

Life as a foster kid does not exempt you from detrimental environments that the system intends to shield you from. It seems being removed from my parents left me more vulnerable to them.

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