

THE MAMA THAT YELLED:
BLACK MOTHERING THROUGH DEPRESSION
BY IRESHA PICOT

She yelled all the time.

Yelled about the house not being cleaned.

Yelled about my school work.

Yelled about spending too much time on the phone.

Yelled that the music was too loud.

She just always yelled.

I can remember thinking about cutting her vocal box out of her once. Or a few times. I told her this in a fit of rage, when I was about 16. She just looked at me and yelled some more. I am pretty sure that Audre Lorde was talking about my mama when she said, “I am deliberate and afraid of nothing”.

My mama didn’t always yell. When I was a young girl, my mama was noted for her laughter and the jokes she told to not only her own children, but to the children who would come over to our home. They loved my mama’s jokes and her eagerness to make everyone laugh.

I have fond memories of my mamas as a child. She used to let me rest on her lap all the time or ride me on the back of her bike as we went on adventures through our small country town. As the youngest of three girls, I used to have her all to myself when my sisters would go off to school and my dad went to work. And we had fun. Going to her girlfriend’s home, to the beauty salon, out to eat; wherever my Mama went, I was right there with her. Even when my sisters came home from school, there were good times to be had by all. On Saturdays, she would walk the three of us, hand and hand to the Three Guys restaurant for pizza across the train tracks from our home; telling us jokes the whole way. On Sundays, we awoke to pancakes being cooked, and the Alvin and the Chipmunks record being played on our record player. We danced, and laughed. We enjoyed our Mama.

Then things changed. My dad became addicted to crack cocaine. Things became hard. My mother started to laugh less. She started yelling more.

Her workload increased as well.

With my daddy’s addiction, his paycheck would be depleted in two days. Sometimes the same day. Bills weren’t getting paid and we struggled. We moved at least once a year. Sometimes twice. Our electric was never on. We couldn’t even afford the \$25 dollars for our books at school. My mother started working 2 to 3 jobs to compensate for my father’s habit. She rarely slept, going from one job to the next. We hardly saw her and when we did, we stayed out of her way if we didn’t want to be yelled at. Even moments that seem to be fun times with my mother turned sour. I can vividly remember on one of her rare off days, watching our favorite television show, *Martin*, together. We went from busting it up, laughing loudly at Martin’s punch lines, to her becoming upset. Her mood could change like a light switch, as if she would suddenly look up and realize that the house was dirty and the yelling and cursing would start. “Why is the house so fucking dirty?” or “I work all damn day and no one washed the dishes”. It got to a point where we started to enjoy her being away from the home. It was peaceful.

She also developed these control issues. Probably because her own life was spinning out of control. She couldn’t make our plight much better, even by working several jobs. She couldn’t stop her husband from smoking crack. The only little bit of control she had was overpowering her children. If we didn’t do something my mama wanted, she went into her rages, she hid the home telephone when she went to work, and we were trapped in the house without being able to communicate to anyone. She did this too with simple things such as the soap powder. If she was mad at us, we couldn’t wash clothes. This was the same for the iron, the cable cord, the soda. She had to have control over everything. Over us. But not herself.

I have great empathy for my mama’s plight now. She struggled to raise children in poverty by herself, and in return, she developed mental health problems. That does not negate the fact that as a young black girl, I

became impacted by her actions. As a mental health professional, I now understand that my mother was suffering from stress related mental health issues. My mama was unhappy in her own life. Even with a husband present, she was raising her children up as an overworked, Single Black Mother. She fell into her own stereotypes. In Black communities, Black women aren't supposed to crack. We are not supposed to become depressed, even when we experience factors such as poverty, poor and unstable living conditions, psychosocial challenges, and white supremacy.

Just because we are Black and Woman.

Black Women, as the keepers of children, suffer silently. They have to be present under this harsh system to raise vibrant children. A difficult task at best, because if our children do not flourish under our rearing, it is the mamas who have to answer for those failures. As the great bell hooks stated, we must "cherish our mothers", not just uphold them for the things that they do for us, but also assist them in making their load lighter. If we see a mother struggling, we have to be there as a community to lift her up and when we see her not doing well, we have to be able to assist in creating a space for her to be able to say that she is tired and needs help. Yes, we need to cherish mothers.

After I wrote my piece, I decided to not only share the content with my mother, but to also include her voice. What follows is an interview that I did with her when she came to visit me on 5/14/15:

Iresha: What were some of the struggles you faced with basically raising your children by yourself?

Mom: Trying to pay the bills. The bills were always on my mind. It was a constant worry. Also, for five years, I did not work, and with your father's drug problem, not only was I thrown into having to go to work, I had to work 2 to 3 jobs, which means I always had to go to work and leave my children around.

Iresha: The name of this piece is called "The Mama that Yelled". Do you think that you yelled a lot when you were raising your children?

Mom: To be honest, yes. I didn't know that at the time, but I see how it affected you now. My mother yelled, and her mother yelled. We were just a yelling family and it seemed normal. But yes, I can say I yelled at you all a lot.

Iresha: Do you ever reflect back on that time and wonder what you could have done differently? If so, what are you doing now with your children to change those patterns?

Mom: I could have been a better mom with my attitude and did family things with my children.

Iresha: Do you think that you suffered from depression at that time?

Mom: Absolutely. I just had so much on me and it was kind of hard. I was away from my family in DC and so I had no family here in Virginia for my own personal support. Your dad's family helped me out a lot with raising you all, but I had no one to talk about my husband being on drugs and having to struggle. I cried all the time. I cried in the morning, at work. Especially, when your father would come home on pay day and there was no money. He had spent it on drugs.

Iresha: What advice would you give mamas, raising children by themselves?

Mom: Whatever you do, put your children first. Be a good mother to your children. And for the mothers and their own health, use your support systems and look to God; because to me that is looking up.

INTERVIEW WITH LYDIA KIRKLAND

Lydia Kirkland is a mother from southern New Jersey. In 2013, she lost her daughter, Brianna. As with many grieving parents, Lydia has been living with depression and post-traumatic stress disorder since her daughter's passing.

Vanessa: When did Brianna pass away? What was the cause?

Lydia: She passed away on Feb.24, 2013. She was misdiagnosed by the ER and passed from Type I diabetes. Her original diagnosis was a virus that was supposed to take its course and I was told she would be fine. The next morning I found she had passed away in her bedroom.

Vanessa: Tell us about Brianna and some of your favorite moments with her.

Lydia: I have so many memories of Brianna that I cherish. However, one of my favorite times to think of is Christmas time. She was my decorating partner. We would decorate the tree together, [hang] stockings with our names on them and listen to Christmas music dancing around the house. I also think about how smart she was and when she was young all the books we would read together.

Vanessa: How are you handling the grieving process? Have cultural, religious, or spiritual based traditions played a role?

Lydia: With the grieving process many say I am handling it well, I'm not sure what that means. I suppose to many people because I am able to get dressed and function on what they may think seems to be a "normal" level they say I am doing well. I struggle like many do, grief comes and goes like the ocean waves of emotions come in and go out. I remember after Brianna died, I said I felt like I buried a part of myself that day and I did, she was literally a part of me for at least nine months. And she is forever a part of my story. I think with the death of a child you deal with guilt a lot. You struggle as a parent because this was a life you were to protect and help grow. With my child passing, I feel I wasn't able to do that. I wrestle with my emotions constantly because although I feel guilty I also know I cannot decide who lives and who dies. I have turned to God more than before and He is getting me through it. When you feel like you cannot relate to others because they simply have not experienced such a loss, I believe a lot of people reach within. I believe God lives within and so I turn there for peace. Even with a spiritual foundation, that doesn't mean we are automatically better. We still exist in this realm and the reality is my daughter is not here. However, understanding Jesus and who He is and His love, I have hope I will see Brianna again and that helps with my grief.

Vanessa: Are you seeing a mental health professional? If so, are they treating you for a specific condition (i.e. depression, PTSD, etc.)?

Lydia: I do see a therapist and have been since 2013. I am being treated for depression, anxiety and PTSD by my therapist and family doctor.

Vanessa: Do you have a solid support system (including, but not limited to: therapists, psychiatrists, friends, family, support groups, colleagues, etc.)? If so, in what ways do they support you?

Lydia: I have some support with family and friends as they participate sometimes with memorials or different events I have, when Brianna's birthday comes around or during the anniversary of her death. I have also gone to a support group for parents that have suffered the loss of a child called The Compassionate Friends. This group talks about their grief and their children, it helps to be able to relate to those who know your pain.

Vanessa: What kinds of things do you do for self-care?

Lydia: I read books on personal growth, have done yoga, pray and read my Bible. I have also returned to school to obtain my Masters. I try to take care of myself mentally and believe these things have helped me.

Vanessa: Tell us about the organization you started in your daughter's name.

Lydia: I started a foundation in memory of my daughter called Filling Buckets for Brianna. Brianna was 13 when she passed away; after she died I was able to get her notebooks from school. In one of her notebooks I

found a poem she wrote about filling buckets. This poem talked about people being empty and how we should fill their buckets (lives). I took this poem and made it the central theme of the foundation. Our organization raises money to help parents that have suffered the loss of a child from birth to 18 years of age with funeral and headstone cost. Right now we are only working with a local funeral home, in the future I look forward to doing more. Part of our mission is to help fill the lives of others by giving of ourselves. We can be found on Facebook and have a website www.fillingbucketsforbrianna.com, if you would like to learn more about our organization or donate. I believe by sharing yourself with someone else you can bring healing to others as well as receive healing for yourself.

Lydia Kirkland currently lives in Pine Hill, NJ. She has a Bachelors in Psychology from Rutgers University and is currently working toward her Masters in Admin. of Human Services at Wilmington University. She has been working in the human service field for 19 years. She is the founder of Filling Buckets for Brianna; a NJ Nonprofit Corporation. She is also a single mother and believes that is her most important job.

WATCH ME

BY NATASHA C. DAVIS

Natasha was diagnosed with learning disabilities when she was 3 years old. She has had difficulties with struggling with depression and narcolepsy. As a teenager, she was diagnosed with Aspergers (Autism).

I'm always told I can't do this...
So don't bother, don't try...

I'm told countless times to stop dreaming,
I won't make it at all.

I dream of becoming a dancer/choreographer and living in New York.
I dream of writing "best seller" books, acting and more.

Stop living in fantasy land and come back to reality...
With the way your mind works, I think you're losing your sanity.

I may be slow to learn and understand....
But don't think you can tell me what I can and cannot do....if I say I can.

So go ahead keep telling me no, it'll make this even sweeter when I do.
"You can't, you can't (never!)" Two words; WATCH ME!

The things I wanna do,
The places I wanna go, and the people I wanna meet...

It's exciting to me,
Knowing that I'm getting there....

That I'm pushing to make it happen,
To go all the way....
Some things are difficult,
And might be hard to pull off...

But I won't quit, I won't give in!
I'm very patient, stubborn and determined.

I want this, to make my dreams come true;
I'm gonna fight for it, and I believe in miracles!

I may be slow to learn and understand,
But don't think you can tell me what I can or cannot do...if I say I can.

So go ahead, keep telling me NO,
It'll make this even sweeter when I do!

"You can't, you can't (never!)"
Two words; WATCH ME!

I'm definitely the biggest dreamer in my family
To me, it's either dream big, or don't at all!

I've known what I want to do,
And what I want to be since infancy

I've been working hard,
And striving towards my goals in life

If at the end of this road,
I'll be living in the spotlight...
I may be slow to learn and understand,
But don't think you can tell me what I can or cannot do....if I say I can.

So go ahead, Keep telling me NO!
It'll make things sweeter when I do!

“You can’t, You can’t (Never!)”
Two words; WATCH ME!

A COMPLICATED NORMAL

BY VANESSA HAZZARD

I thought I was well. It's been over a year since I stopped cutting and almost two years since I've been released from the hospital after being treated for borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder and PTSD. Since then, I've held a steady job and re-enrolled in a Bachelors degree program. My life had been successfully recalibrated after years of trauma. That life was so far in the rear view mirror, so small, that it seemed just a blip on the radar compared to all the good things that lay before me.

I felt normal for the first time in my life. Not bland normal, just sane normal; a stable, healthy, functional normal. I should've known that my kind of normal is a bit more complicated when a seemingly innocent hug from behind triggered a rush of memories long forgotten. It wasn't even so much the memories themselves that bothered me. It was the feelings of being dirty, used-up, and insignificant that accompanied them. I'm not lazy when it comes to my mental health. I do the work, as tiresome as it may be, and yet this occurrence sent me into a tailspin. How can some people shake off their woes, while others, like myself, are just left shaken?

That night, I tried to sleep it off, but to no avail. Through all the tossing and turning and tears, I couldn't escape myself. I remembered that I had an expired bottle of Valium with a few pills left inside. Hoping they still had some potency; I washed down a pill with a sip of cheap wine and waited for my mind to settle but it wasn't long before the psychosis began. This trance-like reality was a familiar place for me, just a few years prior when the symptoms of PTSD were at its peak. I was slow and heavy, yet deliberate when I grabbed the razor in my drawer and did as I've done many times before. I cranked up the classical music station I was listening to and began slicing my inner thighs. The razor slid across my skin like a bow on violin strings. I always want to be a violin when I'm in this state. It's so beautiful, fine and delicate, attributes I always fell short of embodying.

At first, my slicing was a bit haphazard, a few cuts here and there. I just wanted to see my blood escape from the inside of my body. Then, as the music grew louder, I became increasingly more intentional with the cutting, as my need to be a violin intensified. I was focused and on a mission. By this point, my mind was completely fragmented yet a small part of me knew I was obsessed with an impossibility. But the orchestral violins, like a pied piper, led my other parts further and further away from the stable, healthy, functional normal that I worked so hard to achieve. I began cutting a musical staff in my leg. Then I sliced another. Then one more. I kept going until the violins released their hold and I was *re-minded*. I'm not sure how much time went by, but when I looked down, I had cuts that spanned the length of both my inner thighs. The drops of blood dripped out like notes in a fucked up lullaby, as it was successful at putting me to sleep.

The days and nights that followed were more of the same. I'd put on a happy, pleasant face at work. I'd help my son with his homework, make dinner, and then head upstairs to cut while he was playing with his uncles. I was good at faking normalcy when all the while I was slipping deeper and deeper into depression. Truth is, I was battling a depressive episode for a few weeks, but was able to keep it at bay. Between medication, meditation, and working out, I knew I was able to work through it as I have done in the past. This trigger though...it snuck up on me and pulled me under. For days, I was a melancholy mass of flesh and shame drudging through what felt like molasses towards the *mights* at the end of the tunnel. I *might* be healthy one day. I *might* be successful. I *might* never have to take medication again. The thought of my son was like dangling a carrot in front of me to keep me running towards those *mights*, instead of succumbing to my current reality...my inner thighs were full of fresh, self-inflicted scars... the results of a poor and dangerous coping mechanism. One that I sadly and shamefully enjoyed.

When bedtime came, my son came upstairs crying for his dad. His dad and I have been divorced and

living in separate households for a few years now. Even when I think that my son has processed our separation and accepted that he'll see his dad only on weekends, by mid-week he usually begins to cry for him. I do as I always do. I put him on my lap and rock and embrace him. The weight of his, lanky, seven-year-old body stings my scars and I am immediately filled with hypocrisy. How can I console him when I can't healthily attend to my own depression?

After his tears subside, he asks me to read him a book, *Something Beautiful* by Sharon Dennis Wyeth. The little girl in the book is in search of something beautiful in her neighborhood and questions her neighbors on what they think is beautiful. In the end, the girl's mother says that she is her something beautiful. I looked at my son and said, "...and you're my something beautiful". Without hesitation, he replied, "...and you are mine, mommy". I couldn't help but burst into tears while my son drifted off to sleep. This tainted, scarred body and complicated mind was his mommy...and he thought her beautiful. That was his normal and I hope that one day it becomes my own.

STRIPPED BY PIERRE PINSON

One by one men are siphoned into a pallid room. There are two prison guards waiting intently. One busies himself with his paperwork, the other dons a despotic mask, his own necessity, a defense mechanism. "Strip". It is an order, a foreign language to criminals, gangsters, and the underbelly of our society. The prisoner obeys, an acquiesce, given the circumstance.

"The underwear too," instructs the guard. His bottom lip is wrapped around a wad of chewing tobacco. His breath is putrid. His glare is a challenge to the young, black prisoner...an exercise of power. The prisoner concedes. Naked as a slave on the auctioneer's block, he is forced to follow the guard's instructions:

OPEN YOUR MOUTH. MOVE YOUR TONGUE. UP. DOWN. SIDE. OTHER SIDE. PULL YOUR EARS DOWN. LET ME SEE. LEFT EAR. RIGHT EAR. RUN YOUR HANDS THROUGH YOUR HAIR. LIFT YOUR HANDS TO THE CEILING AND LET ME SEE YOUR ARMPITS. HANDS IN FRONT. PALMS. BACK OF THE HANDS. LIFT YOUR PENIS. LIFT YOUR TESTICLES. TURN AROUND. LIFT YOUR RIGHT FOOT. WIGGLE YOUR TOES. LIFT YOUR LEFT FOOT. WIGGLE YOUR TOES. BEND OVER. SPREAD 'EM. COUGH.

The sadistic dance is done. A rite? A ritual. Violated, dismissed, confused, essentially a victim of a molestation that required no hands, only eyes. What does a man feel after this first impression, when this can be done at the whim of his overseers? He feels nothing.

Desensitization is the first symptom of a man suffering dehumanization. Dehumanization is the primary instrument utilized in the psychological warfare of prison. Men are stripped, literally and figuratively, with deliberate intent. God-given names are replaced with numbers to ensure the "system" keeps track of its chattel. All elements of individuality are thwarted with rules and regulations to guarantee conformity. Clothing is replaced with garments issued by the administration. Hair "styles" are forbidden. With physical evidence of the man removed, he is left clinging to memories of who he was, and in many cases, what he could have been.

Prison is a monotonous assembly line of redundancy. Many men lose their minds in the complacency that routine creates. Like a child that is carried far into its years, some prisoners forget what it is to walk on their own volition. Soon, those that forget lose the desire to be ambulatory at all, hence institutionalization. The slave finds comfort in being relieved of problems assigned to the master. Those who grow or evolve in such sociological decrepitude, do so with diligence and a supreme enlightenment. It is a commonly held belief among prisoners that one plateaus at the age that he was incarcerated. It is against the odds of this stealth psychological warfare that despite being restricted by prison walls, men with self-taught discipline, purpose, and rebellion remain functioning human beings.

Some prisoners are never able to see the war being waged upon them. They are blind. Incessant barrages of Pavlovian tactics are poured into the prisoner's subconscious mind; numerous count bells that require the prisoner to stand and be accounted for. Bells that signal chow lines, bells that signal recreation, bells that signal passes, bells that signal superiority. These bells effortlessly move herds of men through the agonizing monotony. Even the walking dead are compelled to move by sheer habit.

Men and boy alike fight this war willingly, unwittingly, many who were never considered men until they were charged with a crime. Most who were never viewed as equals of their white counterparts until they were forced to choose a jury of their "peers. In proliferation, black youth are marched in front of judges appointed by a system that has no regard for their futures or the composition of their communities. These men survive anticipating a freedom under the thumb of the "system", others are reduced to clinging to slivers of hope. Hope that hopelessly dangles in the hands of judges, small embers of hope that men within the system recognize their fellow man's humanity.

Stripped of his humanity, the prisoner is deemed useless by society. He is like a vampire, a being with

human characteristics, but rarely recognized as human by his fellow man. Though he may have served his time, paid his debt to society, he cannot vote. If on parole, he cannot leave his state without permission, let alone leave the country. Employment opportunities are sure to keep him at or below poverty level. That is the future of the incarcerated...a freedom-less freedom. Facing these futures, many attempt to corral faith they never had or were unable to grasp. Seeking that which is greater than man to justify their suffering and in it, their existence. Religion becomes the foothold of the fallen. With minds unable to understand the deterioration of their humanity, only faith has the answers that logic has failed to supply.

In his state of dilapidation, man's primal instinct of self-preservation pushes him to survival. He will strive to heal his broken state by any means. With no concern or effort on the part of his captors, the prisoner finds a blessing; the greatest educations he many not have learned otherwise. Self-education, the education given by self and of self. Self-taught and self-produced forms of psychotherapy and/or spiritual redemption aid in this effort. Boldly, the prisoner throws himself on the table and performs open-heart surgery to mend his brokenness. A surgery performed by his own cumbrous hand, ill-equipped but diligently, the prisoner traverses a redoubtable terrain; a terrain within...a place inside of him. Through all he has endured, a prisoner should be able to face himself, recognize himself, understand himself, and most of all love himself. The prisoner will always emerge victorious, able to save himself in the throes of psychological warfare.

Pierre Pierson is a native from Pittsburgh, PA. He is a writer and is currently working on several poetry books with the group Living On Vital Emotion Writers Group at SCI-Fayette.

*Pierre can be contact at:
Pierre Pinson #EK2844
P.O. Box 999
50 Overlook Drive
LaBelle, PA 15450*