

## NOBODY'S FAVORITE

### HAPPY BIRTHDAY

Today was like any other Saturday of any other month of my life. As always, my TeTe had been in the kitchen all morning getting the brunch ready for the family time. Uncle Ray, he's lived with my grandmother since getting out of prison for running women, was setting the table when my mom and I arrived. Mom had been distant the last few days - since my 13th birthday to be exact. I'd overheard her and the current boyfriend arguing passionately. Had heard my name thrown around while they fought. What I didn't understand was why things had to change now that I had become a woman. I mean, I just turned 13. I didn't feel any differently; I had no idea what it meant to become a woman.

I love my grandmother. She's always been the one to encourage me when I'm down. Sandy, she's my mom, always finds something I've done to complain about. She bemoans some little thing about me and then TeTe gives her a verbal beat down and puts her back into her place. So, I'm loyal to TeTe. Whatever she asks me to do, I get it done. TeTe says that's how Sandy and I are different. Sandy doesn't take my grandmother's advice to heart. Even though TeTe knows what's best for Sandy's life Sandy doesn't listen; she makes bad life choices all the time. That's why she's nobody's favorite. But, TeTe loves her still. And, that's why she's still invited to family time every Saturday afternoon.

After we finished the meal, we sat around the table to chat. TeTe started in about how much she hates Sandy's current boyfriend considering how he's always telling her what to do. He does do that. He also wrestles her to the ground and holds her there until she complies with what he wants.

He tells her he loves her all the time. He gives her just enough money to buy what he wants her to have. He drives her wherever she needs to go. She says this is proof of his love and she loves him back. She's loyal to him, and she would never cheat with another man. She says that when he dates other women, it doesn't mean anything. He doesn't take care of those women. It's just sex.

"Essie," my grandmother said. "Essence. Is that guy your mother's dating as awful as he seems?" I don't know why she would ask me this right in front of Sandy. Honestly, he creeps me out. Once, I caught him peeping at me through the cracked bathroom door while I was drying off from a shower. When he saw me seeing him, he pulled the door closed from the outside.

All eyes were on me. Uncle Ray's eyebrow was raised, and his arms were crossed at his chest. Sandy pushed back from the table and leaned against the back of her chair. TeTe sipped on her sweet tea. Had I been able to walk away from the table, from this confrontation waiting to happen, I would gladly make my exit.

"He's a good guy; I guess," I said. Glancing across the table, I caught the scowl beginning to spread across Sandy's face.

"I knew it!" Sandy punctuated the sentence by slamming her fist on the table.

"You've forgotten your table manners? Or, have lost your mind. Don't raise your voice at my table!" TeTe said. Things were about to get real.

Uncle Ray, with a slickness about him, smiled and said, "Calm your resentful ass down, sis. My niece is as pretty as you. Prettier."

He always says I'm pretty and that he likes the way I'm filling out. Although I'm not sure what he means by 'filling out.'

"That little hooker has been taking showers and leaving the bathroom door open to trap my man into watching her," Sandy all but screamed at me. That isn't true! I don't even like being looked at.

"And, look at her! That tiny shirt stretched across all those boobs. No wonder he's always asking if he can..." She didn't finish the thought. She rested her face in the palm of her hands and began to cry.

To this day, I still struggle to understand what she meant. What current boyfriend was asking her for? I never had the opportunity to ask her. After everyone else had spoken their mind, yelled at each other, and blamed me for various things, my fate was settled. Sandy left me there with my grandmother and uncle. I was 13 years and four days old and abandoned by my mother.

My heart was crushed; how could Sandy think such cruel things about me? I'd never kissed a boy. I hated the attention men paid to my body. It made me feel awkward and I didn't want current boyfriend's attention. What I wanted times unsafe. I was to feel cared for, respected, safe.

#### INTO THE FIRE

Sandy leaving me was totally unexpected. I didn't have any of my belongings with me, and she refused to talk to me. So, while I really wanted my stuff, I knew I'd never wear my favorite snuggly pajamas again. I'd never get to reread my worn copy of *A Wrinkle in Time*. Or, any of my other books for that matter. The only escape I had existed between the pages of those books. Well, that and the parts of the year that school is in.

I'm awesome at thinking things through. At least that's what Mrs. Kendall tells me. She's been my math teacher for every year in middle school. She helped my get my library started with borrowed books of hers that she eventually let me have. Sandy didn't know this, but Mrs. Kendall's been helping me fill out applications to private high schools. With my grade point average and other things, I have a real opportunity ahead of me. I hadn't told anyone in my family about this dream of mine. They only would have cared because it would give them something to tease me about.

As it is, Uncle Ray is giving me a hard time about having so few cloths. I've been wearing the same pair of jeans and shirt for the last three days. I'd been sulking the entire time having asked TeTe to get me something new to wear. She kept saying we'd go to the thrift store, but we haven't been yet.

"Why you sittin' over there lookin' all sad," Uncle Ray asked me.

"I always do whatever TeTe asks me to do," I was on the verge of tears. "But, she won't get me any cloths!"

He slid over to one side of the loveseat where he sat. He rubbed the seat cushion with his hand. "I know you wanna cry."

I didn't move. I couldn't. He crossed the room to where I sat and took my hands into his. It felt weird; him looking at me the way he was. But, it was comforting, and he was right. I did want to cry.

He wrapped his arms around me as he knelt on the floor in front of me and it happened. The tears started to flow. And, before I knew it, I was a heap in his arms as he held me there on the floor. I cried for what seemed like forever. Then I said, "I just need cloths so I can go to school and so nobody will make fun of me."

"Yeah. Everybody will laugh at you," he said confirming my fear. I mean my own mother doesn't care about me. And, she's supposed to. Uncle Ray continued, "you won't have any friends 'cause your cloths are from some thrift shop."

His words stung. He's right though. And, I don't want clothes somebody else wore. I want my own clothes. I want new clothes. I don't know how I'm going to get them. If necessary, I'll just have to be made fun of at school because I have to go. It's the only place where I'm challenged and where I actually accomplish my goals.

"I don't know what to do Uncle Ray. Nobody wants me. Nobody will help me," He held me tighter. And, he rocked me slowly. I relaxed into the motion; breathed deeply. He smelled nice. I guess it isn't that strange for him to comfort me like this. He's family.

“No,” he whispered. “Not true, Essie,” he said as he cupped my face in his hands. I started to feel sensations in my body. And, as he began to massage me the tensions I was feeling disappeared. My uncle Ray cares about what happens to me. He’s going to keep me safe.

“I want you,” he told me. And, I believed him because he didn’t look away when he said it. Whenever Sandy said something she didn’t mean, she would look away, and I would know that she was lying.

He didn’t look away from me. Not when he pressed his lips against mine to take the first kiss my lips had given. He didn’t look away as he positioned himself on me. “We’ll take care of each other,” he whispered. “I’ll won’t ever abandon you.” He said this as he unfastened my jeans and moved them toward my feet. I told him I was afraid and I tried to move; but, he kept me pinned there on the floor until had finished what he had started.

Afterward, he took me shopping. We went to the mall of all places! And, I tried on dresses that Uncle Ray picked out for me. He chose rompers and jeggings and crop tops. When he asked me if there was anything else I wanted, I just had to tell him. If he really cared about me, he’d do this one thing for me.

He didn’t say much as he drove away from the mall. So, I figured I had pushed my luck too far. I should be satisfied. I can go to school with style now. And, my uncle loves me, and he won’t leave me by myself. I was so deep in thought that I hadn’t noticed he had stopped the car. We were in a parking lot.

I could not believe my eyes. It was a bookstore! Bookshelves lined every wall. There were science books, math books, puzzle books! This was so much cooler than the school library. Browsing the store, I felt happier than I could remember being in a long time. And, Uncle Ray said I had become a woman. Now, I have somewhere to belong. I can go to school and not get laughed at because of my clothes. Most of all, I can explore the world through my new books! I have a good life.

THE NEW NORMAL

The three weeks before school became routine. TeTe is a nurse, has been for at least 20 years, she leaves for work around 10 o'clock at night. I still don't know what Uncle Ray does for a living, but he usually gets home about the same time TeTe leaves for work.

Everyday, when he gets here, he's had a bag of groceries. He brings them inside; I put them away. He chats with grandmother for a while and then walks her out to the car so she can leave for work. Once she'd gone, our cooking lesson would begin. It had only been a few days since I'd started cooking and, Uncle Ray said I was a natural and really good at it. But TeTe was not impressed. She thinks I'm being grown and trying to take over her house. I don't know why she'd think that.

Everyday for the last two weeks Uncle Ray has thought me how to make one meal and one desert that he really likes. He says every woman is expected to feed her man well. So, he teaches me how to feed him the right way.

When he came in and saw that I had prepared the meal already, I didn't get the reaction I had expected. I had wanted to show him how awesome a teacher he is. And, how well I had learned his recipes. I hadn't had to shop for ingredients, but I did have to remember what ingredients to use and in what portions. It was not easy! I had tasted everything, and it was delicious.

But, he was angry. He took the dinner plate I'd made for him and swiped the plate from the table; sent it crashing against the cabinet and onto the kitchen floor. I was too shocked to be scared. I just watched as he sliced the cake and then devoured the slice. He didn't harm to my beautiful cake. I thought that whatever was wrong with him, my tasty cake would fix.

The anger on his face didn't go away. I wasn't worried, though. He'd also taught me how to ease his tension. I went to him and took his hand, but he remained tense; he didn't relax as usual, and I was confused. I positioned myself so that he could kiss me, but instead, he said, "Did you ask me what I

wanted to eat?" He moved away from me and sat down at the kitchen table. Then he said, "So, how are you going to know what I want? And, that thing you call a cake is too sweet."

I guess he was right. I thought I had done well by fixing one of his favorite meals. I had gotten it wrong; it wasn't what he wanted. Maybe I had sweetened the cake a little much. I felt so unsure of myself. All I could say was, "I guess you're right."

"I'm always right. Now get down there and clean up your mess," he said.

Initially, I was confused. Now, I felt totally bewildered. I don't know how he figured that was my mess. Or, why he thought I should be cleaning it up. I looked from the food that littered the floor to my uncle's face and did not move.

Seeing my inaction, he stood and closed the distance between us. He said, "When I say move, you need to move your simple self around." He growled the words more so than he spoke them. And, for the first time, I was afraid of him. So, when he told me to get down onto the floor, I did it right away. And, I did not resist as he took the sweet part of me. Only this time, it was not tender. He was forceful, and he hurt me. When he was finished, he got up and headed toward the door. Before leaving, he said, "Now, clean up your mess, stupid."

#### THIS IS A PROBLEM

One of the books I had gotten on my trip to the bookstore with Uncle Ray was a novel about a young woman who'd recently become a police officer. She was partnered with a seasoned officer who always

referred to the new officer's interpretation of situations as naive. I could see some things about myself in that young officer. So, I needed to know what exactly naive meant. So, I looked it up. And, I opened to the possibility that there may be something more to life than what I'm living. If not something more, then maybe something different.

Lately, I haven't liked the way that I feel about myself. I cook for my grandmother and my uncle. I clean up behind both of them. I give my body to my uncle. These things are expected of me. But, they are not appreciated. When I want to have a conversation with one of them, when I want to express my thoughts and feelings, I am told my ideas are dumb.

Once the school year had begun, I'd started experimenting with my hair and make up. But, no matter the style I chose I looked ugly. At least, according to my uncle. And, lately, he was always around. Take for instance this morning. I'm in my room getting dressed for school. I'd picked out a pair of black jeggings and a polo styled shirt that matched my Keds sneakers perfectly. I was in the process of styling my hair into an up-do when something in my bedroom door caught my attention.

Ray was watching me from the half open door. I couldn't tell you how long he'd been there. I can tell you that what I wanted so badly at that moment was to disappear; to vanish from this spot and magically appear anywhere else in the world. If any of the gods that people are always talking about were real, one of them could do this one thing for me. So, I waited for something mystical to happen.

My uncle pushed the bedroom door open. So much for divine intervention. I continued working with my hair; doing my best to ignore him. He continued watching me from the door, and as the tension in the room intensified, I could feel it in my body. I felt nauseous. I'd been experiencing this sensation often the last few weeks. In fact, part of my morning routine included a daily throwing up. I'd wanted to tell my grandmother, but I was afraid.



Ray came into the room and stood beside me. I turned around to face him, and I waited. I waited for him to tell me what to do next. I didn't try to anticipate his desires anymore. I remained still and awaited his direction. Doing this had become the safest way for me to interact with him since he'd become so unpredictable. I'd tried to decide which I liked least; the verbal beat down or having his hands all over me.

He finally broke the silence when he said, "Take off your shirt."

I removed the shirt.

"And, the pants, too," he said.

I kicked off my sneakers and then pulled off my pants. I felt so vulnerable standing there in only my underwear unsure of what to expect.

He didn't hide his disgust as he said, "Look at you! Why are you getting fat?" He actually looked scared before he hurried out of the room. It was laughable to think there was weakness in him. I'd never considered that before, and it made me a little happy.

When he made his way back into my bedroom, he was not alone. My grandmother was with him. She took one look at me and released the longest and most depressing sigh I think that I have ever heard. The two of them looked at each other for the longest time. They looked like the two of them were in on a secret and I felt like I was on the outside looking in. Now, I felt awkward instead of afraid.

TeTe told me to get dressed. We went to the women's clinic, and she introduced me to Sally. I don't think she's a nurse like TeTe; she took some blood from my arm and asked me a bunch of questions. She asked me when was the last time I had a period. She had to explain to me what a period was because I had no idea. I had never had one. She asked me if I have a boyfriend and she looked honestly perplexed when I told her no. Sally finally asked a question I could say yes to. She wanted to know if I

was having sex. She didn't take the logical next step and ask me with whom I was having this sex. I wish she had. I had wanted to tell someone what my uncle and I were doing. But, I was ashamed. What would people think about me?

I'm always so busy hiding what's going on inside my house that I don't have time to enjoy my days like the other girls at school are doing. While they are all giggles and contemplating when they'll have their first kiss, I'm hoping that when I shower later in the day and step out into the bathroom, my uncle is not standing there to meet me with towel in hand. I can't explain how odd it is to listen to kids at school complaining about what their parents cook them for dinner. Especially since in my house, I'm the one preparing the meals. I'd love to come home to a plate prepared by someone else. I crave to have the freedom to care for my body without the fear of being violated inside my home by someone who should be protecting me. That's the thing about living in hiding. I know that I'm alive but I never quite feel like I'm living.

I snapped out of my thoughts when I heard TeTe say, "Let's go, Essence. We need to get home so you can start dinner."

#### FALLOUT

I was left on my own in the kitchen. The entire time that I had been cooking, I could hear TeTe and Uncle Ray talking in the dining room, but I couldn't understand what was being said because the kitchen door was closed. I started into the dining room; pushing the door open slowly because I was curious to know what the two of them were discussing.

I heard my uncle say, "But, it's not my fault!" He whined. Honestly, he sounded pitiful in his attempt to convince TeTe that he was somehow a victim.

She didn't sound convinced. She said, "How you figure that? You're the only one laying up in the bed with the girl."

He said, "Mom, you let that girl walk around here looking all grown. What am I supposed to do?"

"I'll tell you what you're not supposed to do,." TeTe said. "Keep getting thirteen year old girls pregnant!"

He sat back in the his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "She's pregnant," he asked. Then, with proud excitement, he asked, "We're going to keep the baby, right?"

For the first time in my life, I saw my grandmother cry. She said, "I have always loved you and protected you. But, Raymond, you are a disgusting person. I should have had enough sense to send you to your father's family after I made him leave. But, I didn't have it in me to abandon you," TeTe said.

Uncle Ray leaned forward and crossed his arms on the table top. He said, "Be very careful what you say to me." There was a very real threat wrapped inside his words. "Because I am my father's son."

TeTe poured herself another drink. She said, "Yes. You are just like him. You have the same lust for little girls. And, just like your daddy, you had to have my daughter. She was fourteen when she had your baby," TeTe knocked back another drink.

"And, now you've gotten my granddaughter pregnant!" She said.

He said, "I make beautiful babies. I'm a good father to my daughters. I teach them how to be good women. And then, I become the man in their lives. What could be more natural?"

"You're disgusting," TeTe slurred as she yelled at him.

“And, you’re just as guilty as you say I am,” He taunted. “You’re as weak now as you were when Sandy told you what my dad was doing with her at night while you were working. You were so concerned about being able to say you had a man in your life,” then he out and out laughed at her.

He said, “If I’m disgusting, then you’re pathetic. Aren’t we a pair?”

For what seemed forever, TeTe sat at stared into Uncle Ray’s eyes as he stood by the door sneering at her. When he blinked, she hurled her shot glass at him, and it landed squarely against his temple.

When he realized what she’d done, he leapt across the room toward her. She rose to her feet before he made it—she looked ready for the fight. When I saw her stand, something inside me rose up too! And, I pushed through the kitchen door and rushed to her side. Uncle Ray stood his ground; looked back and forth between the two women ready to confront his anger. He mumbled something under his breath and then left the house.

#### BABY AND ME

I finished the school year and graduated middle school at the top of my class. My academic strengths lie in math, and I’ve been developing my skills in engineering. Once Mrs. Adanya noticed the baby inside me beginning to stretch my small frame she began to take on more of a mentor’s role in my life. She helped me apply to and gain entrance to a prestigious boarding school with a specialized engineering program. I would be attending a private high school this fall.

I’d confided in Mrs. Adanya about my uncle Ray, and she was horrified. Her reaction toward me was the opposite of what I’d expected. She was sorry that I’d endured so much—that I’d had to pay the price for other’s bad choices and actions.

Mrs. Adanya had come through with getting me into the MIT enrichment program and that had made me trust her more. And, when she became involved in helping me to report Ray to the authorities,, I started to believe in her.

Today I saw my OBGYN, Dr. Diarra. Mrs. Adanya had driven me to my appointment since I'm not old enough to drive yet. And, she was with me as doctor explained what's going with my health.

Preeclampsia. Teenagers who become pregnant have a likelihood of developing the condition. There's no cure for the it, other than to deliver your baby. So, the catch is being able to manage the symptoms long enough for the baby to develop to a point that it is safe for her to be born.

#### SURPRISES

When Mrs. Adanya dropped me off at home, my grandmother's car was in the driveway. This was unusual for this time of day. I followed TeTe into the dining room. On the table was a file folder with official looking papers stacked on one side.

We sat down at the table. I glanced at the papers. The first page was titled, "Consent to Emancipation."

TeTe said, "What do you know about emancipation?"

Hadn't the emancipation proclamation been what had given the slaves in America their freedom? I guessed emancipation had to do with freedom.

TeTe continued, "It basically means that no one can control you; that you get to decide things for yourself. You provide for yourself. Wouldn't you like to have that kind of freedom?"

Of course. I don't like people making decisions for me when their choices impact me negatively. But that's a totally different thing than being able to make a living and provide for yourself. TeTe is about to leave me without any resources.

My grandmother picked up her keys and slung her purse over her shoulder. She pointed to the folder and said "Make sure to show those to your teacher. She'll know what to do with them."

My heart was heavy. I was in all kinds of pain; emotional, physical, physiological. I wanted to cry, but tears would not come. All I could do was to rest my head on the table and close my eyes.

I woke up to the worse back pain I've ever had. The muscles in my back were so tense I could barely stand upright. But, I made my way up, and that's when I noticed how heavy my belly felt. And, it was sore; tender to the touch. I remembered my doctor's warning, and I decided I needed to call her right away. As I began to dial the office, I felt something warm beginning to make its way down my leg, and I thought it was my water breaking. I looked down to check, and that's when I saw it. I was bleeding — a lot. I could only think of two things to do. I dialed 9-1-1. And, for the first time ever, I prayed.

My baby died. She never heard my voice or saw my face. She never had a chance to feel the love my heart holds for her. My baby never lived, but she has a name—Sarah Ann; she is my angel. Mrs. Adanya helped me plan the service for my daughter. Only she and I attended as Sarah Ann was laid to rest. And, as her tiny casket was being covered by the earth, I felt as though the best part of me was being buried too.

#### POSSIBILITIES

I had turned fourteen two days ago. The day came and went without any celebration. I felt like I had crammed an entire lifetime into the last twelve months. And, I wondered whether everyone has years like this? Surely, there comes a point in life where things settle down and run smoothly? I feel like I've reached my tolerance level. I don't know if I can survive any more tragedy.

I needed help with the house. I didn't know anything about how to pay bills. I didn't know if any of the bills had been paid before TeTe ran away. I called Mrs. Adanya because she was the only person I could go to for help. When she arrived, we looked at the documents together TeTe had left with me.

Inside the folder was a notarized statement signed by my mother giving her consent for me to become emancipated. There was also check inside the folder. A cashier's check for \$35,000. Also, inside the folder was the deed to the house. It was notarized and signed over to me.

I'm going to sell this house, go away to school. I'll have a chance to build relationships and make friends. If I work hard, I bet I can graduate early and then go straight into university. This can be a good thing for me, something positive, for once.