

As Heavy As Lead

Looking back, I realize how telling the fact was. The fact that I could not remember how old I was when I saw my mother in her work uniform, storming across the front room of our house with a knife in her hand. Logically, I couldn't have been older than six as my oldest brother—Junior—was still living with us. My stepfather, Deshawn, was visible through the grainy glass of the vestibule room at the very front of our house. And now, even internally, it burns my thoughts to call him that.

None of us were even supposed to be home at the time: us kids should've been at school, Mama should've been at work, and Deshawn should've been working the corner. I can still hear it vividly: the stiff, metallic clinking of the handle he turned sternly to keep my mother from slashing her name on his other wrist. My siblings and I watched on the sidelines as if we were a theater audience. Silence all cell phones, or in our case—audible input. We never said anything when they fought like this. It was much easier to forget it ever happened that way.

However, one time, my baby sister Kya and I *had* to intervene. Our hands gripped onto our mother tightly, the coolness of the severity ensuring a sweaty palm wouldn't get 5-0 at our door, with Deshawn in handcuffs, making Mama another pitied single mother. Her body rested in midair as the steps underneath her frame refused to rise and support her, damning gravity. Deshawn was between me and my baby sister—though for different reasons. *He* was there to argue his case (cuss and fuss some more) because in this position, looking down on her, it was hard for her to protest. Oh, but protest she did!

This time seemed worse, much worse. Nearly as bad as the day my little, an age I can't recall, self peered through the back row of our rusted Chrysler Minivan and took in the painfully colorful show. Thick and metallic-tasting red smeared across the tan cloth headliner of the vehicle. Auntie Deena had mentioned her disgust and fright at the blue-black surrounding Mama's eye, and Deshawn, that motherfucker had to be taken to the hospital—the gash on the side of his silver-streaked dreaded head was far too deep for anyone who still had the sense God gave them to ignore.

And, I probably shouldn't call him that either because he was alright sometimes. When he wasn't raising the right corner of his lip and projecting his voice loud enough to be heard (since Mama had megaphone vocal cords), he was teaching us about our *Motherland*. He'd make us watch African documentaries, light African incense around the house, and try to engrave into our stubborn minds the significance of Bob Marley and Leekung. I was the only kid who bothered to pretend to actually pay attention. My best friend Swae participated in this, too—it was a game we'd play: who could pretend to be more invested in whatever the hell he was ranting about? Who could make him grab a dusty book from his closet and search endlessly for a minute detail of apartheid? But, sadly, today wasn't one of those days.

Today, he had a minimal role in the show. He was to just sit in that little cubicle of a room and hope to God Mama's ancestors were too busy with some sappy cousin, and wouldn't give her the strength to bust through that door dividing them—because if she did, he knew what he would, Mama knew what he would do, we all knew what he would do. Ergo, Mama was essentially putting on a one-woman show, going through the phases of a divorce that had not yet occurred. She did that a lot: “Keke, it ain't even happened yet, what chu so mad foh already?” my Auntie Sheree would say.

First, anger. She took to the stage, weapon in hand, and tried to slay the beast. She could feel her audience slipping off the edge of their seats as we exclaimed.

“Deshawn, I know who da fuck you think I am, but you gone learn today,” she said, no tears making themselves shimmer through her tone—that was coming later, when the critics would be itching for something (other than the shouting) to write about in their post-performance think pieces.

Next, acceptance would utter from her lips, low and sure.

“You know what, it’s cool, I ain’t even gon trip,” she said, sitting in a faux leather chair in the dining room. “Imma just get my kids and worry ‘bout me, cuz at the end of the day, we all we got.” At this, I can recall the floral scent of the perfume my older sister Naomi shoplifted from Forman Mills as I lay my head in her lap. I let my eyelids fall; maybe I could take a catnap while the show was on.

Naomi kissed my cheek, and cool, mint breath escaped through the gap in her teeth. I hated when she did that; it made the show all too real: TVs don’t kiss, and actors on stage rarely lean down to the front row and give them something they can feel. I tried to pretend the shouts were just a dream. Now they were coming from Deshawn, who still wasn’t over whatever grown-up thing I couldn’t understand (but Junior seemingly always did), which cracked the playwright’s mind and inspired them to create such a scene.

“Mane, that ain’t even the point,” Deshawn said. “He’s a boy, he gone be around manly talk with me, and he—” I could feel his lean finger pointed straight at me, “need to stop running back and telling you every lil’ thing.”

That comment sent me swirling inside. I thought of my real dad in the darkness my eyelids, as heavy as lead, provided. I wondered what prison looked like and if he was thinking of me. Was he drawing pictures of him pushing me to and fro on the swing set, which made me think of if real men even drew pictures at all? Deshawn sure didn’t. He never drew anything except a gun from his waistband when some opposing dealer tried to slang on our street. I thought about how sharp the fences must’ve been—how powerful was the steel that kept my daddy from me for what felt like a lifetime. At that age, Deshawn started to look more and more like my father in my head, and I hated that. I hated anybody I could for letting me be so young when my dad was taken away. So young that I could hardly remember the face under his beard, since the coarse, kinky hair on his face was the only thing that seemed to stay engraved in my recollection.

Then, I wondered how long it would take for this to all be a memory—the bargaining from my mother.

“Maybe if I ain’t keep him so close to me, then he wouldn’t be the way he is now,” my mother said to my grandfather. My siblings and I all called him G-Pop. He was a radiant and loving old man, but don’t ever let him hear you call him that: he’d drop his cane and square up with you—and if you still didn’t take it back, he’d chin check you.

We had been staying with him for over a week now, which was longer than usual. Mama needed to cool off, get her mind right—as she would say. It was well past midnight, and I was definitely supposed to be asleep, but my grandfather didn’t have a TV in the basement where the boys were sleeping, or in the bedroom where the girls were sleeping, for that matter. So, I crept quietly up the stairs, just high enough to clearly make out their conversation and the soft sniffing from my mother.

“If I wasn’t such a fucking bitch back then, maybe their relationship would be better. He don’t even call him dad, and he’s the only dad he’s had since Chris been gone.” Her voice was soft yet powerful, like sweet ad-libs on ‘90s R&B tracks.

“You gotta stop doing that, Keke, blaming yourself for everything,” my Grandfather said, sitting beside her with his hands resting on his cane. “Jesus himself can’t keep that sucka Chris from the penitentiary, and you know that.”

She sniffled some more, “What I’m gone do about Prince, Daddy?” she asked. My stomach turned at the mention of my name, and knots swelled up and twisted around the pulp of the swelling—forcing even more knots to rumble deep within me. She continued, “He don’t hang with the

other boys at school—he play with the girls all day on the block, and he couldn't throw, or catch, a ball to save his life. He'll listen to Deshawn, but every time they out at like the barbershop or somethin', they always come back home with some drama..”

A chair shuffled, and the refrigerator opened, then closed. Next, there was a sound of a bottle cap opening, followed by a strong gulp, before she continued. “Deshawn takes the boys to cousin Pootie’s boxing ring every weekend, right? Junior gets in the rink, Kadeem definitely gets his wanna-be-gangsta ass-” she caught herself, then apologized for cursing. “But, Prince—he acts so scared, he refuses to even try and learn, let alone get in the ring with somebody else. I just- I just don't know what to do, Daddy. I really don't. I-, I don know how to teach him to be a man.”

A long pause settled between them, and I begged for one of them to change the subject, for my baby sister to slink down the steps—vomit drying atop the crust of her lips, as she did back at home. But she didn't, not tonight.

“You can't, Keke. Just don't worry none 'bout that, let that boy be him. He'll be a man in his own way,” said G-Pop. A herd of buffalo stampeded across the knots in my gut as I took notice of the absence of a G-Pop in my life; I wanted fucked up adult problems just to have something to run back and ask my own Daddy to school me on—but never scold me for. I used to think that if it was something really special, like a talent show performance at school or making the Principal's list, they'd *have* to let my Daddy out to see me—if only for 5 minutes.

G-Pop continued, his voice bellowing like a lion, “Besides, that don't have anythang to do with what be going down between you and Deshawn. I'm bout sick of that shit too. Junior came and talked to me,” I could somehow feel my mother's eyes dart to his, “he getting fed up with that sucka putting his hands on you. Whatever it is y'all done created, it's dying, Keke, and it's useless watering a dead garden.”

“No, it isn't,” my mother said, adamantly denying G-Pop's position. “And I know it's hard on Junior—he got the strongest memory of how life was with they daddy. Chris neva, *ever*, hit me back. Ya know,” she laughed, but it was hoarse, forced—almost, “his fat ass would just sit there and take it, let me get all my frustration out until I slide down to the ground, balling my goddamned eyes out. But, Fat Grandma always told me: *you keep hitting a man, one day he gone hit you back*. I guess I done found out wit Deshawn, huh.” She forgot to excuse her cursing this time. I wondered if I'd grow up and be so wrapped up in my own thoughts that I'd forget the notion of respect for elders like that too. Something I know grandma preached to her as she preached to us.

“Yo Fat Grandma from *that* age, they'd beat on they women like punching bags if they wanted to, and not a daddy, or an uncle, or a brother of hers would step in because they knew they'd do the same thing to they woman. But *me*,” the heavy thud of his cane reverberated through the space, “I ain't neva hit yo mama. Even if she did slip up and slap the dog shit outta me—you know yo mama had that man strength,” I almost let a fit of laughter escape at this, “but that was it, just a slap. Plus, y'all got something more in y'all situation, a cancer. It's too late to cut it out, baby, you gotta part with that limb of y'all life.”

“*Daddy*, ain't no cancer or nothing in our relationship. We love each other, that's all that matters.”

“Baby, sometimes love just ain't enough.”

Just then, I could feel the knot unraveling, straightening into a fine line my thoughts could safely gain way on. I had never heard such a thing. Love was always enough—growing up, it seemed that if there was some kind of love there, God would handle the rest, at least, that's what Ma always taught us. But here, my grandfather was teaching me something else, something I seemed to grasp much quicker than my mother could, something she still doesn't understand.

My daddy loved me—but he loved the streets too.

After that night, my mother put on another performance and fell into a familiar episode of hers. She locked herself in her room, used up FMLA hours at the plantation, and turned her cell phone off. My siblings and I didn't quite feel a part of the audience anymore. We were written as a part of the show in this scene. My oldest sister cooked our meals and held my baby sister close to her chest as the child sucked her thumb skinless. She made sure we didn't miss the bus in the morning and that we did our homework as soon as we got home—before we ran outside and dirtied our bodies. Sometimes Kadeem didn't listen, then Junior would step in. He became the man of the house while Deshawn was off to wherever he'd go when my mother was down bad, like she was. He'd take out the trash, make sure all the windows and doors were bolted shut at night, and whack his little brothers upside their heads when they needed it.

I tried to cling to my mother as much as possible. The other kids never thought about going into her room during his time, but since I had heard the conversation she had with my grandfather a week before, I felt like I was partly to blame for this particular scene. That my obvious peculiarity was the ax that picked through the frozen lake of the playwright.

I quietly entered her room, stage left.

“Close my door!” she yelled, a lubricant exhaustion in her tone. “You letting all my good air out, boy.”

“Mama, are you okay? I gotta paper that Ms. Fielder need you to sign, Junior can't find any more trash bags, Naomi don't have any more meat to thaw out for dinner, Kadeem...well, he's just been Kadeem. And Kya, she misses you. She cries for you all nite long.” At this, she turned over in her bed, and I saw her eyes for the first time. Not just the darkness of their canvas, but the texture behind them.

Right there, in the darkness of that bedroom overlooking the dilapidated houses across the street, I took in the mawkish, disconsolate chords of their gaze.

“I love you, baby—my prince,” Mama said—as heavy as lead—as she leaned over and pulled me close, placing a familiar wet kiss on the scar above my left eyebrow. “*Our* prince,” she paused. “Deshawn loves you too, ya know.

“Mama, sometimes love just ain't enough.” At that, she smiled a grin so wide that the sun was forced to cower in fear and shame, and Mama never smiled during these episodes—it just wasn't part of the script.