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Young, Gifted & Black: Reflections, Commentaries and Girl Talk

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Young, Gifted & Black:
Reflections, Commentaries and Girl Talk

By Carah L. B. Herring
UC Berkeley | Graduate School of Journalism
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pieces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends with Benefits: A Bedtime Story</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strictly for My Ladies: I’m So OVAH it. I’m Grown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strictly for My Ladies: ‘Grown Woman’ Style? No, You Just Act Old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Engagement: To Bling or Not to Bling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money Looking Funny? Try Tithing…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Janet Cooke…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Intro:

My purpose for attending UC Berkeley’s School of Journalism was to create a magazine for young, Black women. My ultimate dream: To resurrect *Honey* Magazine.

*wistful sigh*

*Honey* was a hybrid of *Cosmopolitan, Vibe* and *Essence*, targeted for women of color, anywhere from 17 to 34 years old. I loved, cherished and embodied everything for which the magazine stood. To this day, I have old copies of *Honey* in an under-the-bed box at my parents’ house in Michigan.

My tweenage and teenage years were spent anxiously checking the mailbox. The mail carrier delivered magic. Yes, hun, MAGIC!! The stardust and boom-boom-POW came in the form of my magazine subscriptions: *Teen, Seventeen, YM, Vibe* and of course, *Honey*.

I LIVED for my subscriptions, which I paid for myself, thank-you-very-much. I’d cut pictures out of the mags for my ‘Image Journal,’ which helped me strategize how to take my style from ‘okay’ to ‘oh, wow!’ At the time, my periodicals weren’t all about celebrity worship. They embraced realistic teenage life. The focused was on celebrating oneself and being comfortable in that space. They helped me to navigate the rough seas of young womanhood in a way that the blogs of today haven’t quite grasped (or maybe they have, and I’m just not reading the right ones.)

Oh, how my self-image was shaped by these pubs... You name it, they covered it: relationships, make-up tips, fashion trends, peer pressure, tampons/maxi pads 101, world issues, and yes: methods for successfully preparing for the life-changing, end all, be all event known as Prom. The mags even addressed fiscal management to a certain degree (a subject I’d eventually come to love, laud and obsess). My magazines were like the Big Sister I never had... giving me the 411 on stuff I might not readily ask my parents.

The mags influenced my writing style... even to this day. And as a magazine lover, I organized my life as such: I wrote for my church newsletter. I created a newsletter for my household, *The Herring Insider* (Circulation: 4. We’ll round it up to 5, if you include the family dog). I was the features editor for my high school newspaper, *The Viking Voice*. I won state honors for an opinion piece that ran in the *Voice*. I majored in mass communications during undergrad. I was the editor-in-chief for Bennett College’s student newspaper, *The Bennett Banner*. I was selected to participate in journalism programs sponsored by *The New York Times* and the National Association of Black Journalists. I was all up in it!!

But I was in for a rude awakening in 2009. My first semester of J-School. This is when I discovered that the magazine industry wasn’t the most profitable or the most stable. In essence, my magazine dreams were squashed; going the way of the defunct mags I cherished:
• Jewel
• Vibe Vixen
• Suede
• Emerge
• George
• …and yes, include my ‘mailbox magic’ in this group: YM, Teen and Honey.

(Seventeen is still going strong. Vibe folded, but was later purchased and re-launched as a quarterly.)

I’m all about personal fulfillment and following my dreams, but not at the cost of sketchy job security and a measly paycheck. Add unrelenting deadline stress, a guaranteed lifetime of guerrilla promotion and a nation of folks who want something for nothing. Eh. I’d prefer office Christmas parties and end-of-the-year bonuses instead. I like benefits, 401(k) company matches and gossiping at the water cooler. In other words, I like stability more than writing for a magazine that may not even be here next year.

It’s not so much a dream deferred as it is a dream deflated.

Although my magazine aspirations are pretty much DOA, I’ve started dabbling with broadcast journalism at the suggestion of my academic advisor, Bill Drummond. Broadcast tickles my fancy. I’ve also decided to establish closure by crafting my thesis around subject areas that I would have pushed in Honey. The entire point of this collection is to share my knowledge and varied experiences with other young Black women; my “sistas.” It is my duty and my responsibility to reach back as I climb.

Every community has room for improvement. The African American community is not exempt. Here’s just a taste of some fun statistics: The Center of Disease Control and Prevention says that four out of five Black women are overweight or obese. The CDC also reports that although Blacks make up 12% of the U.S. population, they (males and females) account for half of all new HIV/AIDS diagnoses. 72% of Black children are born out of wedlock, says the CDC. Ah yes, we can’t forget all the recent news coverage about highly educated sistas embarking on the supposedly impossible task of finding a ‘good black man’ as a husband. A lot of this is media-overhyped poppycock, but nevertheless: there is work to be done.

I write for the sistas that reside in the not-too-great statistics above, but I also acknowledge that this grim reality in my community doesn’t plague everyone. My reality is far from the above statistics. The same is true for many of my Black female friends and colleagues at UC Berkeley. We make up the stats that you don’t always see: the ones who earn advanced degrees, who marry, who have children within a marriage, who break barriers. The Michelle Obama set, if you will.

I value my strong bond with Black women. I celebrate the richness and complexities of the Black community all over the U.S., be it in Atlanta, Brooklyn, Seattle, L.A. and beyond. It is for my people that I write -- to uplift, inspire, challenge and at times, offend. Sometimes, to enrage. Yet always with the goal of educating and improving.
It is so important for Black women to come together, encourage one another and share our life lessons. This community is our lifeblood; metaphorical marrow to our bones. Disconnection from the root causes us to wither. As a cautionary tale, I look to former Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke and her fantastic fall from journalistic grace. I'll elaborate later in my thesis, in a piece entitled, “On Janet Cooke…”

Many of my pieces apply to individuals of all cultures and creeds. If you don’t ‘get it,’ it probably wasn’t meant for you to understand in the first place... and that’s totally fine. Hence the term: niche.

So here is my ode; my hat tip to the traditional non-celebrity worshipping, non-digital magazines that nurtured me in my youth. No daily mailbox-anxiety necessary.

Yours,
Carah
Friends with Benefits:  
A Bedtime Story  

Heard any good bedtime stories lately? Well, I’ve got a good one for ya. It’s juicy — with relationships, drama, suspense and a whole lot of hot sex. Ow! Stay with me until the end — there’s a point to it all. This is a tale of the ever-eventful adventures in relationships – or rather, relations: Friends with benefits…

Once upon a time in a land far, far away, a guy and chick (both in their mid-20s) met randomly at the club. They immediately dug each other – looks, conversation and style. They exchanged numbers. Texted back and forth. Talked often. They hung out a couple times in the weeks that followed and the chemistry was undoubtedly there. They had a ball together, and couldn’t get enough of each other’s company. Eventually, they got intimate. And honey, once they started, it was onnnnnn. A few weeks later, you name it, they’d done it: on the kitchen table, in the shower, in the park, in and on the car, at work (talk about a high risk hump!)… yeah, they were gettin’ it innnnn and loving every minute of it.

It was the perfect situation – they were having harmless fun. They could still kick it with other friends of the opposite sex without feeling guilty or on ‘lockdown’ because they were friends with benefits.

But then, the inevitable happened (dun, dun, DUN): The chick naturally caught feelings. HARD. Yet there was a slight problem: Her boo wasn’t trying to hear any type of relationship talk. He made it clear from the get-go that although things were going well, he wasn’t interested in being tied down right now (*cue in “Tie Me Down” by the New Boyz f/ Ray J).

Our beloved couple continued to sex it up and even started playing ‘house’ a little, but things started changing. The chick started becoming clingy. Too clingy. Since they had been intimate on the regular for so long, the chick began to desire a smooth transition from her current Romping Partner status into the wifey/girlfriend role. She found herself getting perturbed and downright pissed when he didn’t call her every night. And sometimes, following a ‘sneaking suspicion,’ she tried hacking into his e-mail and Facebook account (and that was sooo not her nature!). She’d check his Twitter page, taking note if he tweeted anything flirty to specific followers. And when he was asleep, she would slip into the bathroom ever-so-quietly with his cell phone, looking for numbers or text messages from other women a.k.a. competition.

The chick, let’s call her ‘Wannabe Wifey,’ was definitely acting more and more ‘weird’ with the guy now. It became obvious that she was not as carefree as when they first started hooking up a couple months ago. So the guy slowly distanced himself from her – which made Wannabe Wifey even more frustrated.
In the meantime, the guy met another young woman while he was out with his boys. This new hottie was a gazillion times more fun to be around. Hottie was so delightful that he even took her out on dates. When Wannabe Wifey (yet another name change: let’s call her ‘Wifey’ for short) caught wind of this, she became absolutely FURIOUS. In Wifey’s mind, this new girl didn’t have sh*t on her in regards to looks, personality or freakiness. WTF was up with that?!

Wifey was devastated, to say the least. After she had invested all this time in this guy, opening up to him on so many levels, she got what in return? A broken heart. And nothing’s worse than feeling unduly rejected and horny. Yeesh.

Wifey continued to hump the guy out of desperation. As crazy as it sounds, she knew that at least when they had sex, she could spend quality time with him. And even if the QT was just 2 or 3 hours, it was 2 to 3 fabulous hours where she felt (or pretended) like they were actually in a relationship.

Wifey wasn’t a complete nut. She knew she needed to let go, but she couldn’t. He was like a drug. She enjoyed his companionship (well, what little she got). Wifey hoped her sometimey boo would eventually see the light, and things would go back to the way they used to be in the beginning. He used to be sooo sweet. Where did things go wrong, she often wondered.

Well, the sex was becoming horrible because the guy wasn’t really attracted to Wifey as much. He was attracted to Hottie waaaay more, and even thought about her while he had sex with Wifey. He wasn’t trying to be a douche. He sincerely made attempts to get away from Wifey, but she wouldn’t let him.

Soon, the guy stopped picking up Wifey’s phone calls, saying he was “busy.” Those text messages Wifey sent? He claimed he didn’t receive some of them (Riiiiight). Even when Wifey wanted to hang out, the guy always came up with excuses, because Wifey was such a killjoy. The only time he called her was late at night, during Booty Call hours. Randomly. And you know what that was all about.

After months of being the ‘back-up’ chick, Wifey finally saw the writing on the wall. She gave up and swore never to talk to the guy again. Why should she? While she was his plaything, this new b*tch was getting all the girlfriend benefits that Wifey desired (but never articulated) — dates, dinners, movies, concerts, weekends at the beach, etc. And what did Wifey get out of all of this? A yeast infection, some moscato and a whole lot of SportsCenter.

The end.

But it wasn’t really the end. Wifey was still horny and now she was slightly depressed. One day, she randomly met a new guy at the gym. They clicked. She promised herself that she would hold out and not hop in the bed with the new guy so soon. Wifey pledged to herself that she’d never do the ‘friends with benefits’ situation again, knowing firsthand the potential consequences. Yet one evening after a late night movie, she and the new guy had sex. He told her up front that he didn’t want a relationship; he just wanted to ‘have fun,’ since he had just gotten out of a relationship. This was a big
'no-no’ in Wifey’s book. But damn, he was hot, oh-so-sexy and irresistible. Sigh... so they became friends with benefits... and the cycle continued.

The end (for real this time).

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Do you truly just want sex or are you trying to freak your way into a relationship? Some of us think we can handle the ‘friends with benefits’ set up, throwing around phrases like ‘I’m just doing me,’ ‘I’m having fun: I’m single,’ or ‘we have an understanding.’ And there’s no doubt that it feels wonderful to be laid up with somebody (he may not be Mr. Right, but he’s amazing as Mr. Right Now). But a lot of times, women can’t handle a situation with no strings attached. The temporary fulfillment is almost always depleted by the gnawing emptiness of reality.

Why do we continue to do this to ourselves when we already know how the story ends? Scratch that: it doesn’t end. It just repeats itself with a different co-star.

Remember Wifey and the bedtime story. Then ask yourself if your situation is worth the time, energy and emotion. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t. Goodnight, sweetheart…

Published on The Fresh Xpress
April 7, 2011
Strictly for My Ladies:
I’m So OVAH It. I’m Grown.

Ladies, have you begun going through ‘the change’?

Of course, we’re too young to be menopausal. No hot flashes or mood swings here, babe (well, only when provoked by certain co-workers). Yet you’re not alone if it feels like your entire being is evolving.

As I approached 25, I realized that I was starting to be on some new sh*t. I began switching up my style on a number of levels – where I went, what I considered fun, my priorities and my outlook on dating, among other things.

So what do we call this phenomenon? **G.A.W. Mode.** Grown Ass Woman Mode. It may not hit you at 25. Maybe earlier. Maybe later. But it’s inevitable. You get to a point where the “same ol’, same ol’” habits that you’ve established throughout life thus far just don’t work anymore. There are some behaviors and routines that you now look at, shaking your head, unamused, like: “I’m so OVAH it.”

Ladies in G.A.W. Mode can probably feel me on the following:

**Grown Ass Women are so OVAH…** the club. This is not to say we’ll never do the club again, but it gets so predictable after while. It’s the same people, the same music, the same overpriced drinks, the same camera guy taking pics for the same website... just different outfits and possibly a different venue. It gets old. So why be pressed every weekend? Perhaps every oooooooother weekend ;o) I’m so lovin’ lounges, events with live music, house parties and cook-outs, instead. They’re more personable, and they add a little variety to the tried-and-true-but-waaaay-overdone club scene.
And since, we’re on the club:

**Grown Ass Women are so OVAH…** droppin’ it like it’s hot. No, I’m not going to groan about getting old and only being able to drop it like it’s lukewarm. Please believe, I can still get it with no question and no hesitation (although it’ll probably only happen when I’m inebriated or out of town. Hey, I’ve got an image to maintain!) On the dance floor as a G.A.W, the two-step usually reigns supreme. And don’t even think about putting your crotch near my derriere unless (a) I know you like that or (b) there’s some pre-established chemistry. Quite different tune from our college days. Yow!

**Grown Ass Women are so OVAH…** the whole drink whore thing. The $5 to $15 you save by having someone else shell out the cash for that amaretto sour isn’t worth having a worrisome ass guy following you around the bar/ club all night. I’d rather foot the tab myself and have peace of mind. It’s okay to accept free drinks, but it’s so not worth being on the prowl for them. Plus, it’s not cute. If it happens, cool. If not, no sweat. A G.A.W. can even flip the script, and offer to buy the guy a drink. It totally throws them for a loop.
Grown Ass Women are so OVAH… friends with benefits. Well, in theory. I mean, we’re torn. We like the closeness, the intimacy and the >cough< head, especially following a stressful week or hearing Chris Brown’s “No Bullsh*t” for the 22nd time on the radio. Yet we know how the situation normally plays out. We eventually catch feelings and feel some type of way about being treated like an option instead of wifey (don’t believe me? Well, why do you sneakily go through his phone… and then become livid when you find text messages from other women?). Yeah, sometimes the short-term pleasures outweigh the long-term harsh realities. Other times, the sex doesn’t outweigh the drawbacks, but we do it anyway… and are grown enough not to fault anybody but ourselves when our emotions start going berserk. GAWs aren’t ashamed to seek a legitimate relationship.

Grown Ass Women are so OVAH… retail therapy. Okay, let me explain this one before I totally lose all my credibility. Lol. Who doesn’t love a new outfit? But honestly, our closets are packed; bursting at the seams. Instead of running to the mall every weekend, spending my hard-earned income, blowing my budget on items that will be out of style by next season, I now try to run to one of the following with the same intensity:
• to the gym to exercise
• to the bookshelf to read the oodles of paperbacks I’ve been meaning to tackle
• to the phone to catch up with friends I may not speak with that often (I don’t know about you, but sometimes I experience Text Overload)

I still love to shop, but I’m woman enough to possess the self-control of balling on a budget.

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If you still hit up the club every weekend, that’s fine. If you steady ball out at Sephora, spending money that you should be putting into your 401(k), hey, I’m not looking down on you (though you need to create and adhere to a budget asap). It’s all a process. Enjoy where you are, but continue moving forward. Trust, we’ve got hella road to cover and a whooooooooooole lot of drinks to buy — on our own, of course! ;o)

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http://thefreshxpress.com/2011/02/strictly-for-my-ladies-i’m-so-ovah-it-i’m-grown/
Strictly for My Ladies:
[Growing Ass] Woman Law

How are my Grown Ass Women (G.A.W.) doing today? Let me guess: Working hard. Putting money aside for retirement. Keeping the hair flyy; getting the toes spa pedicured from time to time. Wifed up, boo’ed up, navigating the dating scene or embarking upon the ‘know thyself’ journey. Staying abreast of current events and following the celebrity gossip...sometimes (well...okay, more than a little bit. MediaTakeout and TheYBF, holla!!). Eating healthy. Adhering to a sensible budget; splurging occasionally. You know, the usual.

Entering G.A.W. mode is all about making the steady move to bona fide adulthood. It’s an elevated state of mind. There’s no set age when the process overtakes you, but it’d be safe to say ‘the change’ begins somewhere in your mid-20s. For a more detailed explanation, check out my previous G.A.W. piece.

As we face ‘grown-up’ issues, like marriage, children (<—preferably in that order...#imjustsayin), higher education, career advancement, home-buying, vehicle purchasing, insurance coverage and the like, there are some unwritten rules that you just can’t get around as a G.A.W. It’s like the female version of the popular Miller Lite ‘Man Law’ commercials. We’ll bite off the Miller ads and call these realizations G.A.W. Law.

Here’s a sample:

**G.A.W. Law: No eating popsicles or Blow-Pops in public**

Well, actually you can do whatever the hell you want to do – you’re grown. But for me, treats on sticks aren’t worth the lustful, elongated stares from men that communicate ‘oh, your head game is like THAT?’ Now perhaps you’re on a date and want to make a naughty statement on the low by ‘innocently’ indulging. Fine. Or if you’re in a male-free zone, by all means, go for it. But in most settings, do yourself a favor and grab an ice cream sandwich!

I stopped public popsicling a couple years ago. Cold turkey. Me and my girls were in Atlanta for Morehouse’s Homecoming festivities. It was a warmer than average afternoon, so we decided to relive our childhoods by buying Firecracker popsicles (you know the red, white and blue joints) from this random ice cream truck parked near the campus. The popsicle was on point...until a guy hollered out ‘ME NEXT!’ from his car! A couple other ignorant perverts yelled out similar observations (locals, i’m sure. My debonair Morehouse Men aren’t ratchet like that). Ugh. I tossed my treat in the garbage can with no hesitation!

(Please note that bananas are the exception to the rule. Hey, they contain potassium!)

**G.A.W. Law: Stop playing dumb – free dinner ain’t completely FREE**

Omg, ladies can get extremely brand new about this one. Some of us get highly offended and downright flabbergasted when man starts pushing up for the pudding pop
after countless pricey dinners, movies, concerts and “insert your own phenomenal date”.
Um, yeah. What do you expect?!?!

I don’t blame men for getting upset. Put yourself in their shoes. You spend your hard-earned bread on someone you like: getting to know them, taking them out, giving a lil’ present here and there. You’d probably want a liiiiiiiittle bit more than a smile, a church hug and a weak ‘thank you’ after a couple months. I’d most certainly need some return on my investment – be it a kiss, PDA or the whole damn enchilada! Lol.

I’m not asserting that women need to show appreciation for dates by getting physical. And don’t get me wrong: Free dinners are fine, just as long as you truly know what you’re getting yourself into… or what your date thinks he’s gonna get into later. Pun intended. A G.A.W. keeps it 100. A couple free dinners are fine for hanging out and enjoying each other’s company. But a G.A.W. doesn’t lead a man on. She’s up front with her feelings (or the lack thereof). And if he’s cool with the fact that y’all are just friends without the potential for anything more — well, let’s continue to do Red Lobster and Olive Garden. One day you treat, one day I treat. Nobody is getting played.

The same logic applies to trips. It is super exciting to receive a man’s invite for a weekend getaway or a Caribbean vacay. Ahhh, Passport stamps. Fun! Fun! Fun! But be honest: There are some obvious motives and intentions that come along with the trip. Make sure you’re not putting yourself in a compromising position.

A G.A.W. ain’t greedy. She knows where to draw the line.

**G.A.W. Law: You are secure enough to admit it when you want a man**
The whole super-duper independent woman/ “I don’t need no man” battle cry (bad grammar intentional) is a bunch of bull, preached to help lonely women feel good about themselves. Yeah, I said it… and I meant it. You’re not a sell-out or emotionally needy for desiring a boyfriend, significant other or spouse. Over the years, we’ve learned that pushing commitment can scare men off — even if that’s what we genuinely want. So we put up this emotionally hard front, saying ‘I don’t want a boyfriend’ or answering coyly that you and the guy you’re sleeping with are ‘just talking.’

Stop the self-delusion!

You want that to be your man. He’s weird about committing. So you basically try to hump him into a relationship. If y’all were just friends, you wouldn’t trip when he gets phone calls from other women that aren’t his family or co-workers. You don’t want to share him. You don’t want to be one of many broods that he deals with. It is okay to feel like this.

Nothing is wrong with being single. It’s empowering. But is it a crime to want a companion to confide in; someone to care for and love? Hell no! And a G.A.W. isn’t afraid to verbalize that.

So no hun, we’re not going to f*ck without a title. No sweetie, I prefer not to be ‘friends with benefits.’ Been there, done that, ends the same way every time: with a lot of
jealousy, heartache and emptiness. I want a boyfriend. If you can’t handle that, let’s fall back from each other, as I will make myself available to a man that is more commitment-focused.

A G.A.W gets what she wants, because she accepts nothing less.

How about them apples? Until next time…

C*

Published on *The Fresh Xpress*
February 24, 2011
Strictly For My Ladies:  
‘Grown Woman’ Style? No, You Just Act Old

Despite the responsibilities, bills and office politics, I love being a Grown Ass Woman. In adulthood, you don’t have to answer to anybody. You can do what you want, when you want, and it’s okay (well, granted that you’re abiding by all laws). But let’s be clear, there are some distinct differences between being a ‘Grown Ass Woman’ and simply ‘acting old.’

Describing yourself as a Grown Ass Woman (G.A.W.) does NOT mean you conduct yourself as a card-carrying member of the AARP. And honestly, this statement is borderline offensive because there are a number of folks in the 50+ set who truly know how to get down. They might not always get loose around us, but place them at a cookout with their inner circle of family and friends, complete with drinks, ribs and Al Green’s greatest hits? Watch out now — they will cut a rug.

A number of learned behaviors that we associate with ‘being grown’ are simply excuses for laziness. Need examples? Certainly. Here are 4 major G.A.W. Misconceptions:

As G.A.W., you’re not pressed for the club every weekend, but hey: going out is still a fun nightlife option.  
You act old when you think ‘grown’ means not wanting to do ANYTHING.  
I know you have a homegirl that doesn’t want to do SH*T. She’s always ‘too tired’ to go out. She’ll be the first one to complain about being single or not having anything to do, though. And when you try to be proactive by inviting her to a lounge or a mixer, what happens 95% of the time? She always has more pressing things to do on a Friday or Saturday night, like cooking, finishing her laundry or washing her hair. Or maybe she cancels at the last minute, as you are conveniently pulling out of your driveway to pick her up.

“I’m just a homebody,” she moans in her sweatpants and head wrap. No boo, you’re just a snooze.

As a G.A.W., you realize that your every day actions determine whether your figure screams FAB or FLAB.  
You act old when you let your body go and don’t giving a rip.

Even though we don’t want it to happen, there’s this generally-accepted rule that as you get older, your body loses its cute shape. Okay, maybe at age 48, but definitely not at age 25. Not at 30. If you’ve had a child or if you’re on medication that has a side effect of weight gain, then you have somewhat of an excuse. But many folks reading this are 20somethings and 30somethings that suffer from chronic cases of long hours on the job, poor dietary choices, too many happy hours and too little gym time.

Some people wistfully reflect on their high school days as the time they were in the best shape... ever. What happened? Our day-to-day grind becomes all-consuming, and >gasp< that once-tight tummy and those thighs seem to take on a mind of their own.
Of course everyone can’t be a Size 4, but stop complaining about your figure flaws and take the necessary steps to get it right and keep it tight.

**As a G.A.W., you look flyy.**
You act old when your whole look is tired and drab. You don’t try. Your eyebrows are bushy. Your legs are hairy. Your under arms are unshaven. Pantylines are showing through your skirt. “I don’t need to impress anybody,” you grunt.
Indeed, you don’t have to impress anyone, but take pride in your appearance. Even if you’re the youngest person at work by at least 10 years, wear a sexy thong anyway. Even when your man (or partner) loves you with or without make-up, MAC it up anyhow. Even if you don’t have the energy or the motivation, keep your hair done just because. Show yourself some love. If you can’t be a Dime, at least dress like you’re worth something significant! Nickel status, dammit. Or take it to the next level: Silver dolla, holla (Y’all remember when Miami rapper Trina said that in ? Lol).

**As a G.A.W, you keep an open mind to how the younger generation gets down.**
You act old when you turn up your nose at the newest teen trends in music and fashion.
Funny, we conveniently forget that our generation had eccentric style, too: Parasucos, dookie braids with the faux gold balls at the end, clothes worn backwards – a la the Kriss Kross days. Yet we’re appalled by the dances we see middle schoolers and high schoolers doing nowadays. “OMG, they’re literally having sex with their clothes on!” we shriek in horror.

Our selective amnesia allows us to remember that we do a classy two step when we go out now, yet it causes some of us to forget that we got down and dirty at one point in time, dancing nasty and twerking it out on the wall. And if you were really off the hook, you may have broken into the splits (and BOUNCED) at a party. Don’t get that brand new!

I’m not condoning 12-year-olds grinding and winding in a pole-worthy manner or bouncing their booties like they’re auditioning for the Twerk team (don’t know who they are? Do a YouTube search). It’s a bit much. And I’ll be the first to say that I can’t listen to commercial hip-hop as much as I used to (The 2010 hit “Toot It and Boot It” has a dope beat, but the lyrics appall me!). It makes my head hurt. But let’s not forget what we used to do, wear and listen to — or what we still do when we’re inebriated and out of town.

So are you being a Grown Ass Woman or are you just acting old? And if you act old, do you even give a damn? Lol. Probably not, but hey — knowing is half the battle.

XOXO,
Carah

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Published on *The Fresh Xpress*
April 18, 2011
Terms of Engagement:
To Bling or Not to Bling?

It’s damn near equivalent to winning the Super Bowl. Well at least for women, it is:
Receiving a drool-worthy engagement ring. Y’know, the kind of ring that cause
girlfriends and associates to surround you, enviously ‘oooh-ing’ and ‘ahhh-ing’ while
ogling the sizeable blingage that adorns your left hand.

And you know it’s a contest.

We’ve been spectators long enough to witness both the winners and the losers in this
game:

**MVP status**: The proud femme with the massive, sparkling rock[s] that seems to catch
every. single. frickin. ray. of. light (Behind her back conversation: “OMG, what does her
man do for a living again?”).

**Last place finish**: The sheepish chick with the teeny-weeny pebble (Behind her back
conversation: “BWA-HA HA! What was that mess?” Hmmm, maybe we shouldn’t have
laughed so hard. Karma can be a bitch.)

It’s not about the ring – it’s about what the ring represents, right? Yeah. Right. Whateva.
But come onnnnnnnnn, we’re human. And though I’m all about the practical, money-
saving gospel of frugality, I’ll be honest: If my engagement ring is weak…

>&belabored sigh<

The thought alone is hard to fathom. Look, if that’s the case, just give me a plain gold
band instead. Or you know what sweetie, let’s just forego rings period. Lol. Save me
from the horror! I’m not about to be the laughingstock of the year! (Cue up the episode
of BET’s *The Game*, when Derwin gives Mel an engagement ring with a minuscule
diamond. The ill will and drama that ensues isn’t pretty… yet it’s completely
understandable).

*PAUSE BUTTON PRESSED*

Many of us aspire to live this celebrity lifestyle of shopping on the regular, rocking
luxury items and keeping up appearances that exceed our financial capabilities. In other
words, many of us overextend our bank accounts by frontin’. Trying to impress. It’s
definitely more fun than doing the boring, responsible things like curtailing our spending
at the mall, fattening up our emergency funds and contributing to our retirement
accounts. But at the end of the day, I’d choose a simple, debt-free lifestyle over a
fierce, flyy state of being where my credit cards are maxed out and where bill collectors
are blowing up my phone.
So back to engagement rings (armed with this reality check): Is there some law that one HAS to get a massive rock? Yes, that’s ideal. That’s the fairy tale. That’s most definitely what happens on *The Bachelor* and in Celebrity-ville…but who says it’s mandatory? To be completely honest, I’d prefer my boo to drop $250 on the ring. I didn’t make a typo. $250. And then we’d use the rest of the money (which would have been spent to simply impress other people) to travel to Fiji. Or sky dive. Or put on the down-payment for our first home.

I hate losing, but I’ve already accepted the fact that in the ongoing engagement ring contest, I probably won’t win for size. I’m sorry for throwing my current boo under the bus, but I’m just being realistic here. Lol. I don’t want my future hubby to be in debt (which would eventually affect me), so I’m gunning for an honorable mention for ring congeniality or carat-creativity instead. I’ll be happy with something that’s cute, non-tacky and eye-catching. Maybe a ring that features a pearl instead of a diamond (because having a ring featuring a barely-there diamond ain’t gonna work for me, honey!). Or potentially looking into a ring with Moissanite, which is a diamond substitute. Unless you’re a gemologist, you really can’t tell the difference between Moissanite and a real diamond. As our net worth increases, we can upgrade the ring at the 5-year mark and again at the 10-year mark.

Would I prefer a huge rock off top? UM, YEAH!!! However, you have to play with the hand that you’re dealt and delay gratification.

Now remember, the spending doesn’t stop at the ring, hun. Y’all still have a wedding to plan — which isn’t exactly the cheapest thing to get together. And with nearly half of all marriages ending in divorce, I guess it may be somewhat beneficial to focus on your actual relationship, instead of being preoccupied with the engagement ring… Just my 2 cents.

Do y’all feel me, or do I just sound cheap as hell?

*shrug*

Full disclosure: If I am presented with a ring that’s TOO foul, I’m not gonna lie: I may have to take matters into my own hands with my American Express. I’m just sayin… I mean, there are definitely some limits to this rant!

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Money looking funny? Try tithing...

Every other article I post on Facebook is about managing money. Why? Being broke ain’t cute and it ain’t my definition of a good time...

I have a part-time gig as the Social Media coordinator for a financial planning website. One of my duties is to scour the Internet for all things ‘personal finance’ and Tweet about it (follow us at @goalgami). I’ve noticed that most of the advice from these articles and blogs fall into a few general themes:

** Pay yourself first
** Save more than you spend.
** Have an emergency fund.
** Live below your means.
** Contribute at least 10% of your take home pay to your retirement.

All are very true. Yet there is one missing principle. It’s been the key to my financial peace of mind for years. I’m debt free, y’all. And happy.

Now does this mean I’m “in the Ferrarri, the Jaguar, switching 4 lanes. Top down screaming out: Money ain’t a thang”? Not quite. Lol. Well, at least not yet ;o)

Does it mean I’m hitting Macy’s and Neiman Marcus every weekend or keeping Happy Hour poppin’ multiple weeknights? Sigh, I wish. Lol. But unfortunately not.

This is my reality: I’m not losing sleep over debt. I don’t get cold sweats when a private number pops up on my phone, thinking it’s a bill collector. My paycheck is not spent before I get it. All my needs are met.

The secret: Las Vegas, baby!

Just kidding. The real secret is tithing. 10% to God. No matter what.

Herrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
you could call for your personal prosperity prophesy? O_o No bueno!!

All that aside, by putting that 10% in church, you’re letting it be known that it’s not the economy that determines your financial situation. It isn’t your job that is keeping you on solid financial footing. No boo, it’s God.

The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it. – Proverbs 10:22

...You brought us to a place of abundance – Psalm 66:12

“Well, I just can’t afford it.”
You can’t afford to tithe, but you can afford DVR? And you maintain that Droid/iPhone, right? I mean honestly, it’s all about priorities. If you believed God’s Word 100%, you’d know that He’s going to work out your financial situation. But you’ve got to meet Him halfway. People want God to do His part, but don’t want to do their part.

“Tithing is something they did in the Bible’s Old Testament. It doesn’t apply to us now.”
Welp… the 10 Commandments are in the Old Testament. Should we brush that off, too? From my experience, the people who find so much fault with tithing oftentimes have a number of financial problems. Don’t knock it until you try it.

But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. – Matthew 6:33

I’m not some ‘Holy Roller’ just spouting a whole lot of ‘over yonder’ sanctification. No, my friend. I live this. I’ve seen it firsthand through my family, friends and people in the ministry.

Now is money going to just rain from the sky? Not exactly. Will you wake up to a briefcase of hundred-dollar bills at your front door Monday after tithe for the first time on Sunday? Probably not. But one thing is for sure: God will supply your daily needs.

Be clear: Tithing isn’t just about the money. Tithing ensures prosperity in your HEALTH, your family, your relationships, your friendships, your employment situation and your overall quality of life.


As a result, the Lord is truly taking care of me. Although He would take care of me regardless, tithing takes things to the next level. I’m living in California – debt free. God blessed me with a scholarship for grad school. He blessed me with the opportunities to make money on the side while attending school – teaching aerobics and coordinating social media. Even though I live in one of the most expensive areas in the U.S., I’m doing all right. The blessings are too consistent to be ‘just’ luck or ‘merely’ good fortune.
“Carah – *that just happened to you because you came from a 2-parent, Middle Class home. You’ve always been an over-achiever. You’re just lucky. That won’t happen for me.*”

Just try it.

You situation won’t work out exactly the way mine has... it will work out in the way that best fits your life. Blessings aren’t one-size-fits-all. Blessings are tailored.

If you’ve read this far, you’re *clearly* giving tithing some consideration. Test God... that is, if you actually trust Him. Most people say they trust the Lord, but their actions don’t match up. Put God first by praying more and blowing the dust off of that Bible. Tithe your 10% and place all your faith in God that He will take care of you... and He will. Even if you have no clue as to how He could work out your situation, don’t trip. You’re not supposed to have all the answers. That’s why God is God, and you are you. Lol.

God doesn’t want us walking around broke and dejected; struggling from paycheck to paycheck. Jesus came that we may have life, and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

But remember, *you’ve* got a responsibility in all of this, too. God provides – but *are you* wisely managing the resources that He’s given to you? Do you go shopping for clothes every pay period, when your closet is already jam-packed? Are you buying that $200 Indian weave when you know good and well that money should be going toward student loans and credit card payments? Are you hard-pressed to buy a new car, when the more realistic option is to pay cash for a five-year-old, not-so-shiny used vehicle?

You’ve got to be responsible with all that the Lord blesses you with. This means practicing discipline, self-control and identifying your financial priorities. However, don’t be so tight and stingy with your bread to the point that you refuse to help others (within reason).

Stop making excuses and begin living the abundant life. Oh yeah, and keep a record of your giving – tithing is also tax-deductible. #winning
On Janet Cooke…

I’ve always been intrigued by former Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke and former New York Times reporter Jayson Blair. Both are guilty of committing the most atrocious, despicable career-ending journalistic sin (slightly worse than payola and plagiarism): fabrication. Or put more colloquially: making sh*t up. Both did it in the most fantastic manner at two of the Nation’s largest, prestigious and highly respected daily newspapers. I’ve always wondered what the heck drove these two to engage in such deplorable, unforgivable actions.

A liar is a liar, regardless of color. Plagiarism is plagiarism, and has been done by individuals of every race and creed at some point or another. Yet, I felt compelled to research Cooke and Blair. I can relate to both parties to a certain degree. No, I definitely don’t write fiction and try to pass it off as legitimate reporting! That’s not how I roll. However, I too am a younger African American in journalism. What caused them to go left, and me to go right?

I originally intended to compare myself to both Cooke and Blair. However, due to time and space restraints, I will focus on Janet Cooke.

The similarities between Janet and me. And there are many:
Janet was 26 when the infamous fictional account, “Jimmy’s World” was published in the Washington Post on Sept. 28, 1980. I am currently 27. I entered J-School at UC-Berkeley at age 26.

Janet was born and raised in Toledo, Ohio. I, too, am a Midwesterner. I was born and raised two hours north of Janet in Lansing, Mich. My family and I would pass through Toledo at least twice a year, as we road-tripped to North Carolina to see my grandparents.

Janet was described as “a conspicuous member of the newsroom staff,” in a Washington Post article written by the paper’s ombudsman entitled, “THE REPORTER: When She Smiled, She Dazzled; When She Crashed . . .” published four days after Janet admitted that her Pulitzer prize-winning article, “Jimmy’s World,” was a hoax. The piece went on to say, “Her wardrobe seemed always new, impeccable and limitless.” Executive editor, Benajmin Bradlee said that "Janet Cooke is a beautiful black woman with a dramatic flair and vitality.” This ‘flair’ was accentuated with beautiful hair and long acrylic nails.

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My personal style has been described in this manner (to some degree) many times. I won’t toot my horn to say that it’s ‘impeccable’ nowadays, as I have adopted a sort of a Bay Area clothing-for-comfort, grunge chic style. However, in previous years when I worked in office settings, I have been known to step out in form-fitting ensembles (always classy!), jazzy accessories and stiletto heels for a well-put together look. And yes, the acrylic nails blessed my hands from 2002-2007, which were my late teens through my early 20s.

Janet attended Vassar for one year, ultimately graduating from the University of Toledo. I attended Bennett College for Women in Greensboro, NC. Bennett’s nickname back in the day was “the Vassar of the South.”

The similarities continue...

Janet had a middle class upbringing. Her parents were married for over 40 years, before divorcing. Ditto. I’m a card-carrying member of the Middle Class. My parents are going on year ‘36’ of their union, although they have no plans of divorcing any time soon (thank God!). Janet’s father was ‘very smart… [and] very rigid.’ Ditto. My curfew on Prom night was 12:30am. Prom ended at Midnight. Ugh, need I say more? Lol. And as GQ’s Mike Sager wrote, “Janet’s father had instilled in her, from the earliest age, one great and overriding philosophy: Because you’re a girl, because you’re black, you must do everything twice as well as anybody else.” Many, if not most, young Black girls hear this sermon from their parents. My father definitely made sure this fact was etched in my brain throughout my childhood.

Janet’s parents encouraged her to have a voracious appetite for reading. Ditto. In the 7th grade, we had a reading competition in my English class. Over the course of the year, I read over 100 novels… and loved every single minute of it. It’s been said that a good writer is usually a good reader.

Janet’s English teachers praised her for her skillful writing abilities in high school. Ditto. How could I ever forget Mrs. Marty Crowley, who taught my 9th grade Honors English class. She exclaimed to the entire class after grading one of our writing assignments that I was one of the best writers that she’d ever seen in the history of her teaching career. At the time, I was embarrassed. Now, I’m humbled.

Janet dated her Caucasian co-worker/fellow journalist Mike Sager while at the Post. I, too, dated a Caucasian co-worker at my job prior to attending J-School. He was the head basketball coach at the junior college, where I was the administrative assistant to the Academic Dean.

You can definitely see how much I identified with Janet on a number of levels. It sort of freaked me out!

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4 Sager.
5 Sager.
Yet there are differences between Janet and me. And there are many:
Why – as I mused in the beginning – did my life take an alternative route? Am I at risk for following in Janet Cooke’s infamous footsteps?

Let’s revisit my similarities with Janet in the above order:

Style: Janet’s editor at the District Weekly (a publication of the Post), Vivian Aplin-Brownlee, described her appearance as off-putting. “A whole lot of glamour and flash, as opposed to substance.” I possess both style and substance. Please reference my resume, which is completely factual. I’ve worked entirely too hard to live a lie.

Aplin-Brownlee went on to say that Janet was all about high-end designers like Gucci, [Pierre] Cardin and Yves St. Laurent. Yowww! Those brands are not in my price range – especially as a woman in her mid-20s. Even if I could afford it, I’d rather buy okay-quality, lower-priced clothing from TJ Maxx, Marshall’s or Ross. The majority of my money does not go toward fashion. It instead goes into my Money Market account or Roth IRA.

Janet’s champagne tastes were not financed responsibly. Her former roommate and fellow District Weekly reporter shared in a Post interview that Janet “bought clothes lavishly.” The article goes on to say that “[Janet] had money problems. The check for her deposit on the shared apartment bounced. So did others.”

Again, her behavior is totally different from mine. Fiscal responsibility is one of my strong suits. If I cannot afford to pay my American Express bill off at the end of the month, then an item will not be purchased. Period. I think it is extremely silly and immature to be debt-ridden in the name of fashion.

Though Janet and I both had Midwestern, middle class upbringings, we still differed greatly. Janet reportedly never had Black girlfriends and never dated a Black man. I cannot relate at all. Although my parents encouraged me to have friends of all ethnicities, there was an unspoken expectation that I should at least have a couple friends who looked like me. My church was predominantly Black. I also took Spanish lessons at The Black Child and Family Institute, a community center in ‘inner-city’ Lansing. Plus, I attended public schools. Therefore, if anything, I’d have to work hard not to have Black girlfriends.

My father always urged me (and continues to do so today) to date Black men in order to avoid the struggles, societal discomfort and discrimination that often accompany interracial couples.

I am more secure than Janet in my identity as a Black person. In the wise words of Popeye, “I yam what I yam.” Janet used her ethnicity as a crutch for obtaining her job and securing certain Post stories. Ironically, it was extremely difficult for her to connect

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6 Sager.
7 Green.
8 Green.
with African Americans in all the stages of her life – grade school, college and adulthood.

Janet was raised Catholic and attended a private school, Maumee Country Day School from grades 3-12.9 I grew up in a Protestant church, attending Trinity African Methodist Episcopal church all of my life. I attended public schools from K-12.

Janet’s resume caught the eye of Post’s executive editor Ben Bradlee because of her amazing achievements: “Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar, master’s of literature, [fluency] in two foreign languages.”10 Unlike Cooke, my credentials are legitimate. I have no reason to falsify, fib or embellish. I am proud of my work and professional experiences as is. If one is not impressed: no worries. I’ll just move on to a place where someone appreciates me and is impressed by what I bring to the table.

Like Janet, my workplace romance could also be described as a “special friendship.” However, it was nowhere near being categorized as a “painful, exhilarating psychodrama, complete with pills, scenes, stalking, dead roses, incredible tales and ripped bodices,”11 as Mike Sager describes his relationship in Esquire. The excitement level was much, muuuuuuuuuuch lower. My guy and I are still friends, although we live at least a thousand miles apart.

Janet’s professional aspirations and definition of success are where our life paths truly begin to diverge.

Janet said that as her 25th birthday approached, her goal was to create ‘Supern*gger.”12 In other words, she wanted to become some type of mythical over-achiever that never made any mistakes. Basically, a Polaroid of perfection, personified. Moi? First of all, I’d never ever refer to myself as a “n*gger.” It’s offensive, derogatory and downright ridiculous. Clearly, she needs therapy.

“[Janet] set enormous goals for herself,” Karlyn Barker, a Post Metro reporter, said. “She wanted a Pulitzer Prize in three years, and she wanted to be on the national staff in three to five years.”13 And clearly, Janet chose the ‘by any means necessary’ approach to achieve these goals.

My ultimate career goal is not to work at the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal nor the Post. Ditto, The New Yorker. If it happens, great. If not, oh well. I’m satisfied with doing a job that I enjoy and where I am compensated well. I also place a huge amount of importance on being valued and respected by the African American community as well as the folks at my former educational institutions and jobs. Pulitzer prize? Eh. Just give me a pay raise. Is this to say I’m lazy and that I lack drive? No. I’m just laid back and I keep life in perspective.

9 Sager.  
10 Sager.  
11 Sager.  
12 Sager.  
13 Green.
Although we share a plethora of similarities, I am far different from Janet Cooke. Thank God! Her sin of fabrication isn’t the only cautionary tale we can take from her life, though. What we’ve read about Janet also yields lessons in the importance of a healthy home life, which goes even further than simply having married parents, attending a ‘good’ school and excelling academically. One must have emotional balance. One must take into consideration the long-term effects of socialization (or lack thereof) within one’s own ethnicity. Last, but not least, one must fully grasp the need to teach youth that winning at any cost may not necessarily be winning at all. Living a lie in order to be accepted and successful is twisted, unethical and unfulfilling.

God bless you, Janet.

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