Someone Has Led This Child to Believe

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Regina Louise

August 2015

Thesis Committee:
Professor Susan Straight, Chairperson
Professor Mike Davis
Professor Tom Lutz
The Thesis of Regina Louise is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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Master of Fine Arts, Graduate Program in Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts
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SOMEONE HAS LED THIS CHILD TO BELIEVE is a true story and continuation of the best-selling memoir Somebody’s Someone. After 12 year-old Regina Louise, tired of being beaten, battles and escapes an illegal guardian; she jumps from a two-story window and runs to a local police station where she is taken into custody, locked in a holding cell, and delivered to the Edgar Children’s Shelter, in Martinez California. Regina is closed off about her parents, her past…until she meets Jeanne Kerr, a 31 year-old counselor who she bonds with and begins to trust. Gwen Forde, the unit supervisor notices Regina’s curious interest in Jeanne and directs Jeanne to get the otherwise sullen and reluctant girl to share her secrets of her parents’ whereabouts. Regina tells Jeanne that neither her father nor her mother wants her. She provides her fathers name.

Regina and Jeanne’s relationship continues to deepen, contrary to Gwen’s cautions, and when Regina is eventually moved to a foster home, she escapes and finds her way back
to Jeanne by counting light posts alongside the freeway. Jeanne realizes that she has fallen in love with this child and makes arrangements to adopt her. In the meantime, Regina is placed with yet another foster family where she is attacked and nearly raped.

As Jeanne’s desire to adopt Regina intensifies, Gwen works to derail the adoption, feeling that it isn’t right. Jeanne loses the adoption petition and Regina, now 15, is court-ordered to Guideways, a level 14 residential treatment center/mental institution. She is drugged, restrained, and placed in solitary confinement. At Guideways, Regina learns that Jeanne has moved away and, devastated, she attempts to commit suicide. After she recovers and is placed back into solitary confinement, Regina finally lets go of the hope of ever being reunited with Jeanne.

After being released from Guideways, Regina finally decides to take responsibility for herself as she enrolls in San Francisco State University and develops a business plan for her future. She graduates, builds a thriving hair salon business, and writes a book about her childhood in foster care, and about her relationship with the one influential adult in her life – Jeanne. After twenty-seven years of estrangement, Regina finds Jeanne, while on her book tour and they embrace. Jeanne finally adopts Regina in same courtroom that denied her original petition 27 years prior.
There’s Something I’d Like To Tell You, And It’s That

My father was almost famous. His album I Love You More and More was released in the summer of 1974. It was predicted to soar to the top of the R&B charts. The great Gene Page, who’d worked with The Four Tops, Barbara Streisand, and Marvin Gaye, arranged many of the songs on Tom Brock’s debut LP. The album had four songs on the A-side and four more on the B-side, and the Love Unlimited Orchestra backs him up. I can’t imagine what it must’ve felt like to have one hundred and fifty musicians show up just for me. Tom had it good. I suppose.

There he sat, my father, on a beige settee with embroidery stitching, wearing a red velvet tuxedo jacket with black lapels over a white turtleneck. Smooth. An oversized ficus tree loomed in the background. A chandelier dangled overhead. He held a glass of red wine in one hand, although I never remember him having a drink, while the other touched the arm of a dark-skinned woman. She was not my mother. Their eyes, like the lighting in the room, are lowered, smoldering. Locked.

While he wrote hit songs for The Sultan of Soul, also known as Mr. Barry White, Glodean James, and Gloria Scott, and although he played the piano faster than Jerry Lee Lewis and taught himself classical guitar, and his lead song: There Is Nothing In This World That Can Stop Me From Loving You, debuted on the pop charts at #90 for a week — his album was a dud.

He lived in Los Angeles, then. The Westside. In 1975, when I was twelve, I went to live with him in a bungalow in Richmond, California with his Norwegian wife, Nadine and their three children. By then he’d lost everything that mattered to him; his record deal, his relationship with Barry White. His mind.

Everyone had his or her own bedroom in that little house on Downer Avenue. I slept on the couch in the living room. Its arms were frayed.

I lasted nearly two months.

My mother was a mestizo girl of seventeen when she had me. My father was a “high-yellow” black boy. Eighteen. That was in Austin, Texas. Ruby, my mama, sent me to stay with my father. Her live-in boyfriend Mr. Benny asked me to let him touch my nipples. He wanted to “fuck” me. He chewed toothpicks in between his requests.

One night, after I had been in Richmond a month and a half, I wanted to hear my mama’s voice. I missed how she called me “Gina-girl.” Gina-girl she’d say, and I’d stop whatever it was I was doing and run to her. Fast. During the short, and random times I lived with Ruby, I wanted to make every word; look, touch, and the-way-she-called-my-name stick for as long as it could. I had to talk to her.
But Nadine controlled all access to communication in the house, including the kitchen phone. She said I didn’t have permission to call my mother given I had no money to pay a phone bill.
### Magic Eight Ball, Should I Call My Mama Anyway

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<td>19</td>
<td>Outlook not so good</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Very doubtful</td>
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I Snuck Into My Father’s And His Wife’s Bedroom

which was “off-limits.” There, atop one of the matching bedside tables, sat a pink princess telephone. I’d never seen anything like that phone in my life.

Tucked between the nightstand and the side of the bed, I slowly lifted the receiver. My fingertips fit perfectly into the grayish, indented squares. The boop boop boop of the keypad excited me. The phone rang twice. I was seconds away from hearing my mama.

“Hi, Ruby. It’s me—
“Get off my phone!” Nadine hollers from the kitchen.
“Hey now, Gin—“ my mama says just before the line clicks dead.
I slam the receiver down.
“You cain’t do that!” I yelled into Nadine’s face. She had a way of staying silent, her eyes fearless.
She was a school principal; my desire for my mother was forever in detention.

For a short while, I curled up like a prawn on that scratchy-to-the-touch sofa, and pleaded with God to send my mother to me.
I wanted to swim in the White Shoulders Eau de Perfume she slathered on.
I wanted her to never stop calling me “Gina-girl. Gina-girl Gina-girl”
I wanted the odor of Pall Mall’s on her breath mixed with watered down scotch to waft over me just once more before whichever one of us died.

That night, I snuck out of the house and walked the more than thirty city blocks to the big Laundromat on Rheem Ave. Whenever my friends and I ditched school—Downer Elementary, which was right around the corner—we’d go to the Laundromat and race up and down the aisles in the laundry baskets.
I waited for the last woman to pull her clothes from the dryers, and when everyone had left, just before closing, I laid the upper half of my body inside to stay warm.
I stared at the speckled black and white enamel dryer drum as though it was the night sky.
I looked for the big and little dipper, hoping to wish upon them that my father would snap-off on Nadine for my leaving. He’d make her sit down and write:
I’m sorry, Regina
I’m sorry, Regina
I’m sorry, Regina, a thousand times, until she meant it.

I’d wish that at any minute my father would come looking for me, and once he found me, I’d agree to go home with him.

I’d wish to believe that it was okay to let him touch me, carefully, and in so doing, I wouldn’t break, or melt like the Wicked Witch of the West, or be ruined, or even get accused of being a prick tease, like Ruby had said concerning Mr. Benny. Whatever that meant. Prick tease? Anyway. I tell myself she didn’t mean any harm by saying it.
If he came, I promised myself to let him take my hand, and hold it, if only long enough to lead me to the car, buckle me in, and tell me it was natural to want my mother, even if she didn’t want me.

I dug donut holes from the garbage can of the bakery next door. Sitting on the bench out front, I’d remove any trace of mold, or dirt and pop the sweet balls into my mouth. Every now and again, I saw my father’s metallic-green Lincoln Continental with the suicide doors drive by. Psyche. I made that up. I didn’t see him.

The next day, I crawled from behind the bakery’s garbage cans where I’d slept through the night. Hungry. I went to school. I loved school. Even though I got in trouble, a lot, for reading ahead, or solving a math problem and yelling the answer out loud.

At lunchtime, in the cafeteria, I pretended to be the *Six Million-Dollar Man* and I cut in the food line.

A boy, my same height poked me from behind. He asked me to move.

I told him to make me.

Another boy, standing in front of me also turned around; he was the twin of the boy behind me.

Despite their talking smack, and weak attempts to push me out of the line, I managed to get a tray, plate of food, milk, a butter knife, and fork.

I held my head high as I walked away from the cashier (I got free lunch), headed to a table. Out of nowhere, one of the twins pushed me. I recovered my balance in enough time to, turn, and slam the tray into his face.

I fought both of them.

Then I ran. I became Lindsey Wagner. I was the *Bionic Woman*. There was no one I could not defeat.

I headed to my friend Mary Cosentini’s house.

She always left her bedroom window open, just in case I ever got in a pickle and needed a place.

I didn’t go the night before because I wasn’t about to wear out my welcome. I knew better.

Also, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to stay long, and I’d promised myself to use her room, only, if I had no other choice.

It was good, her house with its mother and father, two sisters and an older brother who played drums in the garage. He let Mary sing back up for Stevie Nicks on *Rhiannon* while I did my best to drown them both out while he drummed along with Nick Fleetwood. Jimmy was going to be somebody in a real band. Me too. I was going to have a solo career like Karen Carpenter. Anyway. Hanging out with the Cosentini’s was better than wasting time trying to stay out of the way at Nadine’s and Tom’s with their three kids and not nearly enough room for “his bastard.” Not to mention, that by that time,
Tom had begun to hallucinate. He imagined the government had unleashed wild animals in the neighborhood. Sometimes he went hunting, bringing back half of a deer. A dog. Cat. Road kill.

At Mary’s they all sat around a table at the same hour every night. The mother, her bushy hair always flat on one side from her daily naps, would bring plates of food, and set them between a vase of dandelions and a Tupperware salt and pepper set. I loved the gold P and S on the slender-waist bottles and swore to myself that one day I too would buy a set from myself when I threw my first Tupperware party.

They’d all eat as if the salad, and gnocchi smothered in meat gravy was the best meal they’d ever eaten. The way they talked between bites, and laughed with mouth’s full of food, and hands whirling and flapping this way and that, made the hush between my own kin, deafening.

Shortly after that phone episode, my father received a call from a woman claiming she’d recently given birth to his son. Tom moved back to Los Angeles. I had nowhere else to go.
Two Month’s After My Father Leaves—1974

Ms. Rosecrans

you in there? I knocked on the backdoor of an unkempt house. I’m wearing Ditto’s Jeans, a white t-shirt with a red glitter rose and raggedy red Converse sneaker. “Ms. Rosecrans? Ms. Rosecrans if you in there I just come for my stuff!

No answer.

I peeked through the kitchen windows. It’s clear. I dragged a garbage can over to window, stood on it, and pushed my way inside the kitchen. I have to move fast. I’ve no idea when Ms. Rosecrans might return. One after the other I searched through kitchen drawers until I found a Glad garbage bag.
I’m a foster child.
I knew the rules. I did my best to go by them even if the adults who made them didn’t: Never use the Lord’s name in vain, i.e., Goddamit.
Lord have mercy.
For God’s sake.
Lord knows.

1) Don’t ask for anything, other than what’s given
2) Don’t even think about looking at anyone at the dinner table.
3) Never. Ever get so comfortable to think I have a right to anything in this here house

I head for the stairs. A raging Ms. Rosecrans stands right there to meet me.
“Little rogue! Ain’t nothing up in here belonging to you. Gimme my bag back now!

Ms. Rosecrans snatches me by my hair. I need the bag. I hold on.
She smashes my face into the corner of a wall.
The two of us fall to the floor.
The large woman tries to undress me.
We continue to wrestle.
I kick at Ms. Rosecrans.
Ms. Rosecrans grabs hold of my left foot and tries to pull my shoe off.
“These is my shoes Ms. Rosecrans! They mine! My father, Tom, gave me the money for ‘em.”
I thrash and kick at Ms. Rosecrans hands; using the base of the banister to hold on while doing anything I can to get free from that woman.
“Yo’ so-called daddy ain’t paid for a Goddamned thang up in here, freeloader! You not even worth the price of these here shoes.
Finally free, I ran up the stairs and locked myself inside the bedroom I shared with Anica, Ms. Rosecrans’s daughter, my friend, once upon a time.

Using a chair, I barricade the door. Ms. Rosecrans scampers up the stairs. Whatever I can grab, I crammed into the ripped garbage bag, and the back of my pants pockets; a mood ring, a cigarette, a plastic baggie.

Ms. Rosecrans pummels the door. Shuddering, I listen.

Ms. Rosecrans pounding becomes increasingly frantic.
“I’m a kill you.” Ms. Rosecrans screams.
I pick up a phone receiver and dial the Operator.

“Lord knows you nothing but a ingrate!” Ms. Rosecrans screams.
“Operator! Can you connect me to the police department?”

I whisper, watching the door, and listening for movement.
Boom!
Suddenly the door gives way.
Ms. Rosecrans rushes into the room towards me.
I disappear out of the window, and jump two stories, leaving the garbage bag caught on the windowsill.
She Was All I Ever Wanted On That

Sunday morning, May 2, 1976. It was my thirteenth birthday. I awoke in a two-window room, in Martinez, California. The windows were chicken-wired shut and reinforced with nuts and bolts, meant to squash any well-laid plans of escape. Edgar Children’s Shelter was an orphanage—by that I don’t mean a Victorian Era-Dickensian poorhouse. This wasn’t the Oliver Twist, or Annie version either.

Edgar was a place to deposit unwanted children.

A one-story ranch-style house on an acre of scorched earth, the county had painted the clapboard building yellowish-beige. An 8-foot cyclone fence surrounded the property, shielding it from the outside world, as did juniper bushes, which smelled like cat piss. A frayed American flag waved from a flagpole.

I arrived in the middle of the night. Two police officers—one male, the other female led me from the backseat of a squad car into the in-take room where a bald-headed man, who looked as if he’d just swallowed the moon, Mr. Porter, processed my arrival. Sweat dripped down his forehead and temples, and his belly pressed hard against his shirt, his elastic waistband, and his desk.

“Do you have any next of kin?” he asks.
I shake my head, no.
“Do you know your fathers whereabouts?”
I shake me head, no.
“What about your mother?
“I’m coming

baby. Your mama’s on her way,” My mama Ruby says for, the umpteenth time. This time had to be it. It had to be it! She really was coming this time. The umpteenth time. Just think about it. It took a lot to decide to call. The umpteenth time. Pick up the receiver. The umpteenth time. Wind her finger up in and around the pink curlicue telephone cord. Dial the number. Fix her lips to say all of those words?

“I’m coming, baby, your mama’s on her way.”

These things take time.
Once We Were Done

Mr. Porter pushed a white button on a silver plate screwed into the wall and spoke into the speaker, through the static. Within moments I was walking down a long hallway behind a small Filipino woman, the color of an uncooked pinto bean. I carry a blanket, a set of sheets and a toothbrush down a sterile, overly bright corridor. Panic doors open and close with the click of the metal air-handle, underneath a flickering exit sign.

My red Converse, the ones I’d stolen on a dare from K-Mart, screeched across the sterile linoleum floors announcing my arrival to the six unwanted teenaged girls already asleep within earshot of the counselor’s bullpen. And a heavy-duty ring of keys jangled like sleigh bells from her waistband every time she moved. This had to be better than Ms. Rosecrans’.

Shortly thereafter, Gail Maddy and I sat across the desk from one another. The staff room with its white concrete walls, beige file cabinets and grey indoor-outdoor carpet was sparse except for a foot long, black tactical flashlight that lay on the desk next to a clipboard and a red leather book titled: “Daily Record.”

Miss Maddy explained that I’d arrived during the graveyard shift. I wanted to run right out of that place, never having heard the word used in such a way.

“I see here that Mr. Porter asked you about your mother,” she says looking straight into my eyes.
“Is there anything you wish to tell me?” I turn my head, quickly and stare out, past the extra-thick safety glass surrounding the room into the shadows of a darkened room just beyond where we sat.
What I Want To Tell You Is That

I believed my mama. I believed my mama when she called and told me she was on her way. It was never clear whether her arrival meant she was coming to take me with her, or if she was just coming.

It was never understood whether she was on her way to see Big Mama— the woman she’d left my sister Cynthia and me with— or, if she was just coming.

Was she coming for Cynthia? She was five years older, and already knew how to babysit, and Ruby had two small sons. Useful. Me? I was ten. Still needed tending to. A burden. Or was she just coming because she didn’t have anywhere else to go? I believed her coming was just. For me.

I let the believe in her words move me to wash the dirt rings from around my ankles. I filled the bathroom washbowl with water. Hot. I dunked the washrag into the water and smashed what was left of the mushy Castile bar soap into the nappy cloth.

I rubbed the soap into the rag until it caked on, until it smushed into the rough material, until the soap shrunk to the size of a potato chip, and broke. Not a drop of dirt. It all had to be gone. I let myself believe that if I worked hard, got clean, and believed in my mama’s words the way I believed in Jesus those thing alone would make her come. I ran more water.

This time hotter.
I scrubbed hard. The crack of my behind. “Down-there” between my legs, the back of my neck where dust mixed with sweat from the “hotter than a Mexican sweatshop” Texas heat, inside my ears. I dipped my wet index finger into the box of Arm & Hammer Baking Soda, and scrubbed my gums. Back and forth, up and down. Back and forth, up and down. My teeth. Tongue.

My breath smelled of the leftovers from the icebox: Catfish. Watermelon. Dirty rice. Wolf brand chili con carne. Soda crackers. I gargled the stank back with Safeway brand cinnamon mouthwash for my mama’s coming to pick me up. One time. Two times. Three. I threw my head back and gargled. One time. Two times. Three. I dunked the washrag into the bathroom sink until the dirty me circled, swirled and clung like the Holy Ghost onto the sides of all that whiteness. No more white. Clean. No more dirt. I’m magic!

I believed.
Not Only Did I Believe, But

I saw my mama
around that corner where
crossed Congress Avenue
new 1974 two-door
Cutlass Supreme.

speeding
24th Street
in a brand
Riviera
Burgundy.
I Used To Attend Church And

I learned in Sunday school that God so loved the world. That He couldn’t help but love me too, because not only did I believe that He gave away His only child to bleed for me on that cross, but also, I believed that His Son came back from the dead. If Jesus could do that, there was no excuse for my mama not to come.

She had it easy.

Anybody could do that. Keep their word. Come. I believed that God was sending my mama to me as a gift because I believed. I’m good.
What I Also Want To Tell You Is

when the other kids at my elementary school or Sunday school stood out in the parking lot calling out for their mama’s, I called out for mine too.

Ruby!
I called.
Ruby, I’m over here.
I called for Ruby, into the clouds: Whenever you’re finished doing whatever it is you doing just remember I’m out at Big Mama’s waiting on you.

Ruby is that you? I called out over my shoulder, to a woman turning a corner. It was the way her hair brushed across her back, all soft, shiny, the color of a brand new copper penny.

Ruby! Into the wind I called hoping it would carry her name over the tops of the cypress trees circling Big Mama’s property, and into the world.
Into the darkness of an empty closet:
Dear Ruby,
Please say that you can hear me. Say, “I hear you Gina-girl, you gone be alright, just hold on like you know how to do” Tell me there ain’t nothing in this old dark that can hurt me, tell me I’m bigger than the dark, stronger, meaner, and that I can kick the darks ass if need be.” Go on. Ruby. Tell me.

Once

I yelled into the palm of my hand and quickly put it up to my ear to listen for the echo.
Come and get me.
Please.
Come and get me.
Please.
My hand was a seashell.

When Big Mama grew “tired of feeding other folks’ kids,” and my sister and me fought the maggots for the strands of meat left on a chicken leg bone, I prayed to God, and His Son.

God!
Jesus!
Go to wherever my mama Ruby is and drag her drunk-as-a-skunk-husband-stealing tail back to me. I don’t care if she’s kicking. Screaming. Cussing. Go and do what I tell you to do. Now!
Another thing you ought to know is,

when the other kids at Molly Dawson elementary school waited for their mama’s to come and pick them up, I’d wait too.
For them.
After school.
Sometimes I’d squat down and wait behind a batch of Juniper bushes, a tree, behind garbage cans, on the side of the big yellow school bus, behind the 7Eleven store, the washateria.
Instead of reaching for their hand to walk them to the car, I’d reach out and slap and kick and bite and scratch them.
How (punch).
Come (bite).
You (Kick).
Got (scratch).
A (lunch).
Mama? I’d ask in between each blow.

If Big Mama, or her eldest foster daughter Lula Mae, where home when the lady from school came by to “inform” them of my latest “acts of tyranny,” I’d be instructed to go outside and pick a rosebush switch. A long skinny one. A thorny one. Together, they’d tag team and commence to beat the black off me.
That didn’t hurt. Is all I had to say.
Jesus had it worse.
He didn’t cry.
I didn’t cry either.

Once, on the way home from school, I turned around and made a girl go into the thickets behind our school and pick out her very own rose bush switch. She brought back a stick so small; I sent her back for a thicker one. I whipped her. She hollered. I felt sorry when she cried. She ran home to her mama, I imagined. I wished I could’ve done that to.
I cried.
I believed my mama.
That’s about all I have to say about my mama.
In The Meantime,

Ms. Maddy waited through the night and kept watch over us until the sun towed daylight into the sky. At which time she’d hand over the key ring to her relief staff and exchange details concerning the girls whose names were handwritten in the red book. Morning rounds would begin. It was also time for us girls to come back from our dreams and face the certainties of a world we were in no way prepared for.
Out Of Nowhere This White Woman Says

“Good morning, Pumpkin,” the key ring now jangling from her wrist. I wiped the sleep from my eyes, and sat up in the rickety bed. She had my attention. In between the spaces she moved, from bed-to-floor-floor-to-bed, shaking this one’s toes, picking up discarded blankets restoring them neatly at the foot of that one’s bed.

“My name ain’t no Punkin,” I say, rolling my eyes, swiveling my neck, two moves all little black girls I knew had; our way of establishing ground, letting whoever it was know; we weren’t to be messed with.

“I know,” the white woman says, and rests the palms of her hands upon the tops of my knees. I cringed. Big Mama had long ago warned me that white people were the only folks she’d known who could “go bare-footed with hot pants on in the dead of winter without catching they death in sickness.” She’d told me to stay clear of ‘em, unless, of course, I wanted they ways to rub off onto me.

“Your name is Regina. Welcome to the shelter.”

Cream of Wheat, warmed Pet Milk, vanilla with a bit of brown sugar— that’s the smell brought to my mind when Miss Kerr crouched down to meet my gaze. Her breath reached across the small space between the two of us. Pulling me in. The scent fixed itself upon me and clung to my skin in a veil as thin as a baby’s breath, staining me the way odor does a baby bird when a human hand touches it. Like the bird, I was marked forever: Love has its own smell.
Miss Kerr Says

“Please, come with me.” I slide off the bed and follow her lead. We bypass the small room I’d sat in the night before, and walk against a crowd of kids—no older than I was—who seem anxious to get outdoors. They slammed through the panic doors and assaulted the air with swear words and arm farts, and their angry feet stomped down hard against the sidewalks.

In another room, the nurses’ station, Miss. Kerr studies an X on the outline drawing of a female body.
Jeanne turns the form towards me, points to the nearest X on my forehead. I sit quietly. Jeanne waits patiently. Mrs. Rosecrans gets away scot-free. If You Were To Ask Me About Myself this is what I’d say:
She wasn’t always lost. She knew her way back. She knew her way back along the rutted out footpath, with the pussy willow and hollyhock that led from Big Mama’s house to 7Eleven, past the washateria, on over to
Jetty Street, Epson Street, on through the parking lot of the Goodyear Tire Company where she’d dump the sorry looking brown paper bag with the bologna sandwich packed with left-out-of-the-refrigerator mayonnaise. Dangerous.

She knew her way past the S.H. Kress Five & Dime, Dunkin Donuts; how to get herself to Molly Dawson elementary at 3001 South 1st St, Austin, TX 78704. She knew the phone number: (512) 414-2070—just in case she needed to call the school and tell them that she regretted to inform them that, “my child, Regina Louise, ain’t gone be in school today.”

She knew how to tell the teacher: “these here places, where you can see the pink and white of my flesh is from Lula Mae, Big Mama’s oldest foster child. She beat me with a cut-off green water hose.”
All Of A Sudden I Turned Around And

The Greyhound bus pulled out of the station in Georgetown, Texas. I didn’t know exactly where I was going. One thing was clear: I had to leave. Big Mama told me: “Yo’ mouth gonna get you killed.”
If I Turned Myself Into A Narc

this is what I’d say:
A girl, ten-years old, all raggedy by the head, her pig tails matted and pushed out of shape waits at the Grey hound Station at 2434 Onslow Dr, Jacksonville, North Carolina, 28540. She wears a blue and white-stripped seersucker dress with a Peter Pan collar. White. It’s the same dress she used to put on each day when she returned home from school. She put it on for Huckleberry Finn.

She put the dress on to show Huckleberry that she knew how to be ready.
She put the dress on to show Huckleberry that she knew how to be ready just in case.
She put the dress on to show Huckleberry that she knew how to be ready just in case he and Jim the slave ever decided to come and get her, and take her with them. Down the river.

Her mother arrives at the Greyhound bus station, after some time.

“Will you look-a- here,” says a red-boned woman in a denim out fit, jacket cinched at the waste, pants highlighting her figure; coke bottle, and flaring at the bottoms Bell-bottoms. A filterless Pall Mall red hangs unsteadily from her mouth, between two fingers and her puffy mushroom lips glisten. Red.

“Ruby… is that you?” the girl asks, she almost bursts into a gazillion pieces from the wonder of it all. Her smile hooked upon her ears like a brand new pair of eye glasses. Tight. Uncomfortable. Necessary.

“Who the hell, else, you think it is? I am the mama!”
The girl stays with the mama and the moved-in-boyfriend moves in. He moves in “the mama’s” room. He moves in the mama all day. All night. And when the mama, goes to work, he makes his move on the girl.

“C’mon over her and let me touch on them nipples,” he says, and pulls a toothpick from behind his ear, and places it between his teeth, and blocks the television.
The Next Thing *the mama* Does In The

Winter,

1973:

The girl tells *the mama*
that moved-in boyfriend wants to do what the middle finger stands for.
There ain’t room here for both of us, says
*the mama*. The girl is sent to her father in California.

Summer,
1974:

The father sends the girl back to her mother. Jacksonville, North Carolina—

Winter,
1974:

*the mama* sends the girl back to her father. Los Angeles, California—
Summer, 1975:

Winter, 1976

_the mama_ sends the girl back to the father. Richmond, California—

The Ten Ways To Best Use Toilet Paper Is To:

- Blow boogers into it
Wrap it around your hand till the wad is thick enough to use a menstruation napkin
Stuff it into your bra to prevent you from looking like a bull-dagger
Make too-big-for-you shoes fit
Tear it, then twist into pieces and roll your hair up at night
Pretend you have the Kentucky-Fried chicken man’s moustache
Spit nasty food into it: Peas. Okra. Cod Liver Oil. Ambrosia Fruit Cake
Hock a loogie into
Wipe your arse.
Wipe snuff-juice from around Big Mama’s lips.
Dry your face before you really get something to cry for.

Hold the last kiss my mama’s ever going to give me. After Miss Kerr and I finish in the nurse’s station, she escorts me back to the girls’ section into the little room, or the staff’s office as it was called. I hand over my personal belongings: a) my clothes, b) a half-smoked Kool long cigarette, c) a mood ring and d) and a baggie with the tissue holding my mother’s last kiss, in exchange for a pair of shorts and a shirt. Even though Ms. Kerr promises it’ll be safe I don’t want to give her my tissue. It’s not hers to have. I don’t know how to tell her what it means to me. How do I say: Even though I knew what Mr. Benny wanted to do to me; I still didn’t want to leave my mama. Even though I hated planes, and would do anything to keep from going back and forth between my mama and my father, I boarded that Hughes Air West flight bound for Los Angeles anyway. Seconds before, I listened as Ruby promised that Mr. Benny would soon be gone and that I could come back to her. When my mama wrapped her arms around me I didn’t care what happened to me: I just wanted to stay right there, in her arms, in all of her Ruby-ness. I would miss watching her apply those Maybelline false eyelashes, running to the stove to light her filterless Pall Malls, and sneaking a puff on the way back to her, the way she opened her mouth when she laughed, all deep and wild as if she was pulling laughter up from the devils belly. Finally, she peeled me away from her, kissed me on my check, saying, “Bye-bye, Gina-girl. You know you won’t be gone too long, this time.” I went weeks, maybe a month without washing my face. Then one day, I’m caught off guard and the next thing I know is all I can think about is never seeing Ruby again, and the next thing I know my chest is heaving, and I can hardly catch my breath. My face was wet. I took a piece of tissue and wiped the place where Ruby’d kissed me. I’d had it ever since.
Inside Of Swanson’s Ice Cream Parlor

all the tables are filled to the brim and kids roam freely about the room and no one, seems to mind. The adults, instead of slapping the kids, and reminding them of how rotten they are, and how they’re going to burn in hell for causing too much racket, are sitting, enjoying their ice cream, celebrating someone’s birthday. Everyone, almost all of them are white, except me, huddle together with their families into red leather booths, and music pours from on-the-table-juke boxes. And so much happiness fills the air and I suddenly have an idea of what Heaven must be like.

Helium filled balloons hang from the ceiling, by colorful ribbons and I wanted to grab them all and run like hell all the way back to South Austin and shove them into Lula Mae’s face and say, “See, dreams do come true.”

Instead.

Miss. Kerr and I make our way to a back table. The workers in their white short-sleeve shirts with bow ties, khaki’s and silly hats that remind of Burt from Mary Poppins, sing happy birthday to a boy. He swings his head from side to side and licks his tongue out at all of the folks gathered around him, they laugh, they don’t hit him, or call him ungrateful. Stupid.

Before I can protest, the workers make their way through the parlor carrying a white cake, balloons, and bazookas, while singing happy birthday in my direction. I’m confused. They stop in front of me.

I laugh.
Nervously.
I wish that someone who knew me could see me. No one would’ve believed me had I told them.
I clapped.
Miss Kerr encouraged me to close my eyes and make a wish.
I close them. Miss Kerr grabs hold of my arms and hugs me out of what seems to be real happiness, in the moment. We hold onto one another. Somewhere in the holding-on, I make a wish to never let her go.
Don’t You Know That You’re Black.

We sit in the front office, Gwen Forde and I. She is my social worker. A Superior Judge from the Juvenile division has appointed Gwen Forde. Gwen Forde works for the county. I am now part of the county: A ward of the court.

Gwen Forde’s job is to make sure that I get what I need: somewhere to live, stay, a decent family that I will become a part of. Black. They must be “black” Gwen Forde, says. Black. The family will most likely be black, like me. Do you understand? She asks leaning towards me, creases deepening in her forehead, eyes staring me down to the bone.

Gwen is dressed in a suit. It is a lovely suit. The skirt matches the jacket. They are both blue, set off by a crisp white shirt. Gwen Forde’s shoes are brown. More like tired butterscotch-brown the way they sag around the edges.

Two strings of glossy pearls loop around her neck. Once. Twice. There is a dull spot on one of the beads where the pearl has chipped off. When Gwen Forde speaks it’s tough for me to listen, hard for me to stay right where I am. When Gwen Forde speaks my mind wants to leave the room, or wherever I am with her, in search of someone else. After the first sentence is uttered I am off and running. Searching. Confused. Gwen Forde says the word black every time she sees me. Black, she says. Black. And although Gwen Forde, like me is black, she is coffee with out milk black. I am caramel.

Gwen Forde’s Afro is cut tight, and close, military regulation style, and if I didn’t see her face-to-face, If I wasn’t right there in the room with her staring down the black moisture heavy mole that sat perched upon the left side of her upper lip, if I hadn’t seen her with my own eyes, watched her speak with my own eyes, I would have sworn that Gwen Forde, appointed by the county Superior judge was no one other than June Cleaver. White. Beaver Cleaver. White.
Gwen Forde Says

“It’s a behavior modification chart,” and points to a grid on a piece of paper. “Hopefully, your time here will be short and uneventful.

I started each day with three stars. This was the way to stay happy. One red mark, however, and I was on the fast track to hell.

Two red marks, and I could kiss my ass goodbye. Three red marks: I was unredeemable.

“Have any questions?”
I finger the hem of my shirt; bite down on the corner of my bottom lip.
Blink.
Blink.
Blink.
Blink.
Blink.
I fight back tears.
I win.

THE NECESSITY OF SELF-PRESERVATION
In 1972, at its first annual convention, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) passed a resolution vehemently opposing transracial adoption. The vigor with which this position was advanced can be seen from the statement of the 1972 resolution:
Black children should be placed only with Black families whether in foster care or for adoption. Black children belong, physically, psychologically and culturally in Black families in order that they receive the total sense of themselves and develop a sound projection of their future. Human beings are products of their environments and develop their sense of values, attitudes and self-concept within their family structures. Black children in white homes are cut off from the healthy development of themselves as Black people. Our position is based on:
1. The necessity of self-determination from birth to death, of all Black people.
2. The need of young ones to begin at birth to identify with all Black people in a Black community.
3. The philosophy that we need our own to build a strong nation.... Included in the socialization process is the child's cultural heritage, which is an important segment of the total process. This must begin at the earliest moment; otherwise our children will not have the background and knowledge, which is necessary to survive in a
racist society.... We the participants of this workshop have committed ourselves to go back to our communities and work to end this particular form of genocide. 

I had no idea what I was going up against goes up against going up against Gwen Forde.

Mr. Brocker I am here to discuss your daughter’s current situation. We’ve run out of placements for her. The situation is dire.

Tom Brocker: I’m sorry. I’m no longer certain that I am the girls’ father.

Gwen Forde: Then you will agree to a paternity test?

Tom Brocker: I’ll need to consult the Lord, first. I’ll get back to you.

Gwen Forde: Ms. Carmichael is there any chance of your daughter reuniting with you, anytime soon?

Ruby Carmichael: I’m sorry lady. I just want to be the girl’s friend.
Ruby & Tom Release Me For

*noun* adoption \ə-ˈdäp-shən\  
: the act or process of adopting a child  
: the act or process of beginning to use something new or different  
: the act or process of giving official acceptance or approval to something

To choose or take as one’s own

To rear,

The child of other parents.
I Was A Flight Risk

During the time I spent at Edgar Children’s Shelter, I failed more than twenty-seven trial runs to potential foster families in the Bay Area. The county vehicle dropped me off in:
Pittsburgh
Antioch
Stockton
Martinez
Sacramento
Richmond
San Francisco
Martinez
El Cerrito
Oakland
Martinez
Redding
Concord
Richmond
San Francisco
Pittsburgh
Martinez
Antioch
Richmond
San Francisco
Martinez
San Francisco
Martinez
Stockton
Martinez
El Cerrito
North Richmond
Stockton
San Francisco.
Each time, I stepped out of that white county vehicle carrying my personal belongings in either a Glad garbage bag or a brown paper sack.

Those twenty-seven times my placements “failed to take,” was sometimes because the men in those homes wanted to have their way with me; especially the home where the Preacher lived with his son and two daughters. Later, I learned that allegations of neglect and abuse were filed against this same family.
Gwen Forde also knew.

I went as far as to try and tell Gwen Forde—exactly—how the Preacher’s son really was.
I told Gwen Forde how he peeped at me while I undressed, through a small hole he’d drilled into the bathroom door. And how I stuck a Q-tip into the hole. He blamed the destruction of the property on me. An incident report was filed against me.

And then, there was the time he walked by me, while I was getting my hair pressed by one of the other girl’s in the house, and threatened to rape me if I opened my big mouf about our li’l secrets.

Gwen Forde, said that I was jealous that my hair was nappy, and not long and wavy and good, like the Preacher’s daughters’.

I tried to tell Gwen Forde about how the Preacher’s son waited until the household was asleep. How he’d open my bedroom door slowly. How he’d tiptoe towards my bed, pull the sheet back; the sound of his zipper-drowning out my heart beats.

How he led himself, dick in hand, between my sixteen year-old thighs and tried to force himself into me.

How his breath hummed of doo-doo and collard greens. The way he threatened to “bust my butt-hole” just for fun if, I ever told.

How he said that I was the reason my mama and daddy hated me, wished they’d never had me, and looked forward to the day I died.

I told Gwen Forde what he said: “You ain’t the first piece of foster girl pussy I ever had. You bastard girls, ya’ll all the same. Don’t nobody gives a damn about y’all.”

I told Gwen Forde how he visited my bedroom off and on for the next six months. I told her that I wanted to leave.

She accused me of “making things up again.”

She said that I was a natural born “storyteller,” with an “incredible” knack for exaggeration.

She said that there was no other place for me to go, that my reputation “preceded me.” I didn’t understand.

She threatened to place me in Napa State Hospital, in the “children’s psyche ward.” I saw no other choice but to run from that home too.

But mostly, I either ran away from those homes, or got myself terminated, because I wanted to be with Ms. Kerr.

Tell Me, What do You See
the white county car
slinked and skulked around
the hills of El Cerrito, California
and I learned to call the passenger seat shotgun.

Parked alongside a curb
Gwen Forde yanked the steering wheel, until the wheels pointed towards
the good doctors front door that was painted red.
I take the seat offered to me by a woman I imagine is the good doctors secretary and she is pretty, but not prettier than Miss. Kerr.

The not prettier than Miss. Kerr secretary leads me in to meet the good doctor he stands reaches for my hand and I barely touch him.

In no time at all he begins by pulling out a deck of cards and he holds one up for me to look at and I don’t like it, take your time, he says to me.

Tell me the good doctor says, tell me Regina exactly what you believe you see in this picture I am holding up for you to see.
This is what I see
I see two of them
bitty Mexican dogs
on tight, with all they
little
holding
might to a
pogo
stick.
Just So You Know

It’s June, of 1977. I’m finally having my semi-annual dependency hearing, during which my social worker and a judge decides whether or not I’m fit for a family setting, or should be placed in a residential treatment facility. My social worker presented the case of my “inability to stay put.”

The courtroom was small, but larger than Andy Griffith’s. The walls, marbled black and white, were cold to the touch. I sat catty-cornered to the flagpole left of the judge’s bench. My back against the wall. My case, the only one on the docket that day.

“All rise,” says a large man dressed in dark chinos and a shirt that matched. The bailiff called out: “This is a dependency hearing for minor: REGINA OLLISON case#49990-(14)-Born: May 2, 1962, Austin Texas. Who is here to represent minor?”

My social worker rose from her chair raised her hand and swore to “tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.”

“Your honor,” Gwen proceeds.
“For all intent and purposes, both of minors’ parents have relinquished custody.”

I sat quietly, and waited. I hoped I’d get a turn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth about what I wanted.

That morning, Miss Kerr had told me to be brave, sweetheart. Miss. Kerr had gone as far as to say that perhaps one day we could live together. She promised to take me to Hawaii, to live amongst her relatives who lived there.

From that moment on I tried to piece the scenes together of what it would be like to live with Miss. Kerr. I saw myself in an “outside” school, where I’d get to raise my hand in hopes of being called on because I’d studied hard the night before. I loved everything about school. Miss. Kerr not only watching, but questioning and cross examining me until I got the right answer.

I saw myself peeling the crumpled dollar bill and fifty cents that she’d given me for my lunch out of the front pocket of my jeans, and hand it to the lunch cashier; I’d dodge the shame that came along with a free-lunch ticket.

I’d learn to look forward to my birthday and over time acquire a taste for my favorite cake. Maybe, during that same time, I’d gather up enough courage to ask for what I wanted without the terrifying fear of hearing the word, No! More than that, I saw myself, at the end of a long day, standing curbside, backpack heavy with homework, broken pencils, and crumbs from the cookies she would’ve sent with me, and picture-day forms requiring my parent’s immediate attention.
There I’d be waiting for Miss Kerr to swerve around the corner in her blue Oldsmobile. She’d named it the Blue Swan. And just when I thought she’d perhaps changed her mind, and had decided to leave me there, because how could someone like her want me, she’d pull up. I’d get in. Off we would go, just like that, the two of us.

“Will minor please approach the bench?”

4+9=13+9=22+9+0 is 31… 4+9=13+9=22+9+0=31… Most of the words the bailiff spoke held no meaning for me. Except, that is, for the five numbers that identified my case from all the other children in foster care.

4+9=13+9=22+9+0 is 31… In an effort to calm my nerves, to allow the story of Miss Kerr and I to come through, I added the numbers which identified my case together:

4+9=13+9=22+9+0 is 31… I let myself believe that in that moment, there was no number in the world more powerful than the number 31. It would become my magic number.

All I would have to do is chant it repeatedly — 4+9=13+9=22+9+0 is 31 — and somehow God’s power would be released to me. I would use it as I pleased. Couldn’t everyone in that courtroom see that the number 31 turned around became 13? That was the day I’d met Miss Kerr. She’d been the one to say, “Look, today is your birthday.” I didn’t know my birthday from any other day.

“Is there anything you’d like to say on your behalf, young lady?”

The judge spoke from behind a tan colored desk. A podium, and a long-necked microphone separated me from his face.

“I want a live with Miss. Kerr.” I said. The judge glanced at my social worker.

“Counselor, who is Miss. Kerr?”

“Your Honor, may I approach the bench?” My social worker asked.

She walked over to the judge and handed him papers in a file. Silence.

“I am to understand that this Miss. Kerr is a counselor at the Edgar Children’s Shelter, where you are currently being detained?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, thank you,” the judge said, closing the file.

“Bailiff, at this time, will you please escort minor from the courtroom.”

The Bailiff slanted his hand beside me and led me from the podium, down the short aisle, into the courthouse hallway.
I sat on a bench outside the courtroom doors and waited for my social worker. Shortly thereafter the judge made his decision.
Once I was back at the shelter, I ran to the girls’ section.

I needed to find Miss. Kerr.

I heard someone yell at me to “stop running,” but their words fell at the backs of my heels.

Someone was crying. Hard. I crossed the doorway leading from the long hall that separated the boy’s section from the girl’s, the main office from the living quarters, into the dinning area.

I found Miss Kerr, lying on the kitchen floor, her legs drawn up close to her as though she were a small child, crying. In seconds I was across the room, kneeling beside her.

“Miss Kerr,” I called to her, a hand on the shoulder closest to me, “What’s the matter?” For a moment, I was both surprised and yet electrified that I could touch someone, touch Miss Kerr and have that maybe, mean something.

“I…tried…to make you…my daughter, today.”

Before I Realized I’d Left Martinez

I’d arrived at Guideways just as the trees started to stand naked against the backdrop of a late September sky.

Guideways was a level fourteen residential treatment center. The staff at Guideways was going to rehabilitate my behavior.

They were a 24/7 facility with the ability to provide medication support. It was supposed to be “A ‘last-ditch’ effort” before I was to be shipped off to Napa State Hospital.

They had a wing for children just like me at Napa State, children who were so far beyond reach anyone who’d come into contact with us bypassed, and then exhausted, the effort it would take to save us.

Gwen Forde pulled her white county car into the slot marked “Visitor” and ordered me out of the car “Now!”

Gwen Forde popped all four-door locks at once setting my heart racing. I was a sprinter stuck in my running block, going nowhere fast.
Good Luck

going me to move.
All I could think about is when I’d get to see Miss Kerr again.
Gwen stepped out of the car. I sat there.
“Get out, Regina.” Motionless.

“You’re just plain hateful, Regina.”

Why don’t you ask me what I want?
You scared to ask me what I want?
Come on, do it! Chicken shit. Go ahead. Ask me.
Ask me what I want.
Ask me: What do you want, Regina?

Fine. I’ll ask myself.
What do you want Regina?

I want to walk down the street with Miss Kerr.

I want to reach for her hand
to thread my fingers through hers
swing our arms back and fourth,
up and over, back and forth,
up and over churning forever down
down into our bones
Down into our bones
I want to know what it feels like
to call Miss Kerr: Mama.
If You Ever Want

To see Miss Kerr again
You will do as you are told.
Will you agree to take Lithium?

yeah.

You need these pills to “level-out” the natural salts in your body.
The salt imbalance is to blame for your inability to control your behavior.
Have you ever heard of Manic-Depression?

nuh-uh.

It’s not your fault that you can’t behave, the in-house psychiatrist says.
Do you understand?

uh-huh.

You’re what we call, severely emotionally disturbed. So, you see, it’s not your fault.
Your body is to blame.

ok.

The Rules At Guideways Go Something Like This

You cannot:
Fraternize with girls on levels II-III or IV
Leave the premises without supervision
Neither request nor ride shotgun within first three months
Receive or make phone calls to:
Family:
    Mother
    Father
    Sister
    Brother
Stepbrother
Stepsister
Half-brother
Half-sister
Play-brother
Play-sister
Cousins
Aunties
Uncles
Nieces
Nephews

Friends:
- Boyfriends
- Best Friends
- Old Friends
- New Friends
- Previous foster parents
- Previous foster siblings
- Previous counselors
- Anyone not on your approved phone call list

Borrow other resident’s personal belongings without first asking:

Personal belongings:
- Cigarettes
- Toothbrush
- Toothpaste
- Underwear
- Bras
- Socks
- Nightgowns
- Pajamas
- Jeans
- T-shirts

Shoes
Record players
Albums
Hairbrush
Combs
Sponge rollers
Curling irons
Brace’s rubber bands
Stuffed animals

Touch anyone’s person including:
- Shoulder
- Arm
- Leg
Face
Mouth
Hair
Buttocks
Without first getting their permission.
There Is No Sex Allowed

Leave grounds to:
  Go to 7-Eleven
  Local bowling alley
  Anyone’s house
Visit your family
Leaving The Grounds W/O Permission You Will Be Considered: **AWOL** (Absent With Out Leave.)

No Swimming In Swimming Pool **WITHOUT** Staff Supervision.
No Sleeping In Other Residents Room/Bed
No Using of Staff Phone For **ANY** Reason!
No **STANDING** In Staff Room Unless Accompanied By Staff Member

Any Infractions To These Rules Will Result In Disciplinary Actions.
Dear Punkin!
I am sending this letter to you through Ms. Forde. I pray that things are well with you, that you are, as you said: “doing your very best,” and letting the people at Stepping Stones get to know you—showing them the Regina I know and LOVE! Regina, it will be up to you how you adjust at Stepping Stones, which will determine when you will hear from me again. Many people who also care about you have told me that it will make it hard for you to adjust, and settle in if we keep writing, talking and seeing each other until you have established roots in your new home. I’m counting on you to let yourself settle in and do your very best to let this placement work. Those old key words: it’s up to you honey. Until I am given permission I will not write you nor will I accept any phone calls and I will not see you.
You know Punkin; a period of silence and separation is a very small part of time when you look at a lifetime. I know... I know with all my heart we will be close friends our whole life long.
I am behind you Punkin, rooting for you all the way. Some things we must face alone, but I am always with you in spirit. You are always in my heart. You need to discuss things with your social worker, share your thoughts and feelings, confide in the staff there and make new friendships.
As you said, “Think about your actions” and the consequences of those actions before you act. Do your very best to work on those basics, sweetheart.
It doesn’t happen overnight, have patience. Each day is a new start—a new beginning. You may have to start new each day.
I have faith in you; if you put your mind to it and keep plugging away it will eventually happen.
One suggestion is to each night ask yourself if you have done your very best that day; see where changes have been made, and then try again. It takes concentration and will power; you can do it if you really want to!
Another suggestion is to ask yourself what nice thing you have done for someone else that day. You are very good at this, it’s one of your special qualities that make you, YOU!
I keep remembering that you are in god’s hands; the very best hands, and that you have decided to settle in, and do your very best. Once you do your very best the rest is up to God. Trust Him, Regina; He loves you more than anyone.
With All My Love,
When The People At Guideways Talk I Push The Ignore Button In The Middle Of My Forehead And Say:

Hummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph
Hmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmph.
You Ain’t God So I All I Know Is You Better

“Get yo’ hands off me, Fatman!”
Morris, arms thick as bologna logs, hands, the size of a Rawlings Alpha catcher’s mitt,
gripped my wrist and ankle.

He dug his nails into my flesh, squeezed and kneaded until it felt as if I were going to pop right out of me.

With back and forth motions he used my body to sweep away everything in our path: rugs, chairs, and forgotten about shoes.

I was a windshield wiper. He was a motherfucker committed to reinforcing the rules.

We tripped on the legs of the plastic table, where the rest of the nobodies sat with inhaled faces fallen in at the mouth from eating pink spaghetti soaked with crumbled hamburger, and cold rolls.

“Whatthefuckya’lllookinat? I yelled. He swung me. We do-si-dood.

“I can call anybody I want, Morris!”
The way the nobodies sat there, not helping, nothing staring back at me from behind their sunken eyes, reminded me of forgotten about old people in a convalescent home in wheel-less wheel chairs.

If I couldn’t be with Miss Kerr:
I should have every right to hear her voice over the phone.
Shouldn’t I?

That dumb-ass M*A*S*H theme song wafted from the bulging eye of the Zenith TV, as Fatman raked my hundred-pound body across the tiled floors, their splintered and chipped edges so sharp nobody’s bare feet were safe, even with shoes on, let alone with my legs dangling from shorts.

I imagined chunks of reddish brown pieces of me spackling the places where the tiles used to be.

I prayed that my next breath might lift, then sling my soul straight on up towards the heavens and right before I met the face of God, I’d turn around and flip Fatman the bird.

“I didn’t use no staff phone to call anybody, Morris!”
Hello…

Miss Kerr? It’s me, Regina.” She picked up on the third ring.

I’d waited a month too long to hear her voice.
Gwen Forde, the staff, and the psychiatrist, they all had it figured out.
They told me all I had to do was wait a month. “Get onto level one, maintain it for thirty days, and afterwards, the phone call will be your reward.”
Thirty days of good behavior later, I was told that since I’d done such a great job, that another thirty days would really prove I was “vested in my own progress.”
Fuck that noise.
“Hi Sweetheart,” she said.
Barely able to contain myself, I cupped my hand over my mouth and the receiver. Lowered my voice.
“When you coming to see me?” I asked.
“Do you have permission to speak with me, Sweetheart?”
“When you coming?”
“It’s after 2AM.”
“Are you? — “Sweetheart, I can’t talk with you.”

You Mustn’t Call Me Without Permission

Fuck you! I ain’t going in there!
I ain’t going,” Fatman kept hauling me through the room.
I didn’t ask to come here no way.
I tore at him
the tabletop
the plates
and pots
and bowls that’d crashed to the floor
trying to hold on to something.
Anything.
I became so slippery with food and sweat from kicking and fighting him. Fatman let go of my arm long enough to lift that silver gym teacher whistle to his lips and blow sissyness and spit all over the place.

I flipped around and sank my teeth into his calf. He yowled. He was a wounded beast.
Game changed.
“We’ve got a biter!
Need back up NOW!”
Fatman screamed into a two-way radio.
Somebody should’ve told him.
He pulled back. Too late.
I was a rabid dog who wasn’t about to let go of him.
Hell no.
They’d have to kill me first.

I’m Not Going In That Room.
Morris.
Not today.
Not again.
Not ever.
Startled, he kicked and batted at the air. But like a pit-bull, my jaw sank deeper into him.

With the sticky palm of his hand he smashed down on the side of my face.

His fingers pried into my lips, clawed my gums, my teeth, my grip.

Fatman screamed and danced around as far as his free leg would allow him to move, then toppled to the ground.

Somebody wound my plaited hair round their hand and jerked me from behind, while another somebody bum-rushed their entire hand inside my mouth.

My head yanked back, my jowl unlocked, Fatman cried out like a kicked-in-the-belly bitch and through the splay of fingers, I watched him palm-and-slide, palm-and-slide his fatness all the way down the hall, out of my sight.

Maryanntekeyesman had her arm around my throat in a chokehold.

I tried to kick my way out of it, but she dragged me down anyway.

I flailed and she snatched my black self down a flight of twenty-two stairs.

I lost a footie, the one with the yellow pom-pom on the back the one Miss Kerr had given me, and I couldn’t get loose.

Breath was hard to come by.

Somebody grabbed my feet, footcuffed them, and wheel barrowed me

Forward and down.

Down to the last step.

I knew what was coming.

I knew where they were taking me.

I knew that once I went inside the Security Housing Unit, all hell was going to break loose.

Once inside, there’d be no coming out until I could “learn to self-soothe.”

Once in the S.H.Ubox, there would be no me.
No God. I would not remember how to recite John 3:16.

“Please… I’m sorry… I didn’t mean for myself to bite him.”

Maryanntheeyesman ordered somebody to open the door.

The door hinges squeaked as though they were ghosts laughing out loud at the colored girl, nigger girl, “Na na na na na na. That’s what you get.”

“I’ll be good, now!”

Five, six, maybe even seven sets of hands pushed me into a room no bigger than a burying plot.

A blurry group of gowns and pajamas crowded the stairwell.

“Back to your rooms NOW!” Maryanntheeyesman said.

I spent more time in the S.H.U box than I did in the general population at Guideways.

I never did get used to going quietly. The residents ignored the order, their laughs, sniggers, “ooh’s,” and “ah-shit’s” ricocheted off my fear.

“I’m gone die in here,” I said, trying to ram past the staff members’ bodies that were blocking the doorway. They held onto one another’s torsos and shoulders. They wove a thick net.

“I’m gone die.” I continued to push past the hands arms, and legs that jammed my only way out.


I used my small shoulders, until someone pushed back with such force I was knocked down, and onto the wooden floor.

For a second, my breath caught like a giant fist in my throat.

I scrambled to get up onto my hands and knees in time to reach for the door, as it slammed shut. It barely missed my fingers.

“NO… I… cain’t breath.”

I pounded with both hands.

“God? Somebody, HELP ME!”

“You’ll get as good as you get. Now shut the fuck up!”

There was no handle.

No windows.

No air.

The ceiling plunged towards me.

The walls pressed in.

My fingernails scraped against the floor.

I was dog tap dancing n hard wood floors
I scrambled down into the space where door and baseboard meet
I opened my mouth to scream into the slit of light barely showing
through

Everything was upside down
I needed air

I sucked it in through my mouth my nose into my lungs.

Wishing.

Hoping.

Wanting.

It’s not *your* fault that you can’t behave,
the in-house psychiatrist says.
“You’re what we call, severely emotionally disturbed. So, you see, it’s not your fault.
Your body is to blame.”

Stellazine: Trifluoperazine is an anti-psychotic medicine in a group of drugs called
phenothiazines (FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens).

Say it: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens
Say it again: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens
Again: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens
One last time: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens

It works by changing the actions of chemicals in your brain.
Trifluoperazine is used to treat anxiety or psychotic disorders such as
Schizophrenia.
I was schizophrenia

It’s not your fault that you can’t behave,

the in-house psychiatrist says.
“You’re what we call, severely emotionally disturbed. So, you see, it’s not your fault.
Your body is to blame.”

Millaril

Thioridazine is an antipsychotic medicine called a phenothiazine

**WARNING**

MELLARIL® (THIORIDAZINE HCl) HAS BEEN SHOWN TO PROLONG THE QTc INTERVAL IN A
DOSE RELATED MANNER, AND DRUGS WITH THIS POTENTIAL, INCLUDING MELLARIL
(thioridazine hcl) , HAVE BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH TORSADE DE POINTES-TYPE
ARRHYTHMIAS AND SUDDEN DEATH. DUE TO ITS POTENTIAL FOR SIGNIFICANT, POSSIBLY
LIFE-THREATENING, PROARRHYTHMIC EFFECTS, MELLARIL (thioridazine hcl) SHOULD BE
RESERVED FOR USE IN THE TREATMENT OF SCHIZOPHRENIC PATIENTS WHO FAIL TO
SHOW AN ACCEPTABLE RESPONSE TO ADEQUATE COURSES OF TREATMENT WITH OTHER
ANTIPSYCHOTIC DRUGS, EITHER BECAUSE OF INSUFFICIENT EFFECTIVENESS OR THE
INABILITY TO ACHIEVE AN EFFECTIVE DOSE DUE TO INTOLERABLE ADVERSE EFFECTS
FROM THOSE DRUGS. (SEE **WARNINGS, CONTRAINDICATIONS**, AND **INDICATIONS**).
(FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeen). It works by changing the actions of chemicals in your brain.

Say it: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens
Say it again: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens
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One last time: FEEN-oh-THYE-a-zeens

Thioridazine is used to treat schizophrenia and other antipsychotic conditions.

Thioridazine is usually given after other antipsychotic medicines have been tried without success.
Once, While Swimming In The Deep End Of The Pool

at Guideways, my entire body slowly began to go lifeless. Each attempt to move my arms in the freestyle manner like Miss Kerr had showed me when she’d taught me to swim:
Stroke.
Air-in.
Air-out.
Stroke.
Air-in.
Air-out.
Stroke.

Resulted in my arms and legs become heavier, faster. I tried to warn the staff member in charge of watching me that something was wrong:
Yayyy, ouuu…
Yayyy, ouuu…
Peeesss…elp eee…

My words slurred.
My head and neck began to twitch. Violently.
The staff member waved me away.
“Stop being silly,” he yelled.
I was suddenly the girl who cried wolf.
No sooner did my brain transmit to my legs to kick, or else drown, that it became evident:
I was going to die.
I didn’t remember being pulled from the pool.
It took the medic nearly fifteen minutes, a team of doctors and nurses another thirty, to figure out that I was not a Parkinson’s patient, but instead, a child who had been over medicated.
I awoke to the taste of bile and vomit.
A male nurse grabbed a handful of my butt-cheek, pinched it up into a mound of flesh and shoved a four-inch needle loaded with Cogentin into me.
Within minutes, I slid my tongue back into my mouth.
Using the back of my hand I wiped the slobber-vomit cocktail from the corners of my mouth, my chin. My fingers, which had earlier moved on their own and froze to look as if they were fiercely holding onto an imaginary ball, slowly released their grip.
It’s not your fault that you can’t behave,

the in-house psychiatrist says.
“You’re what we call, severely emotionally disturbed. So, you see, it’s not your fault. Your body is to blame.”

Litium: Lithium affects the flow of sodium through nerve and muscle cells in the body. Sodium affects excitation or mania. Lithium is used to treat the manic episodes of manic depression. Manic symptoms include hyperactivity, rushed speech, poor judgment, and reduced need for sleep, aggression, and anger. It also helps to prevent or lessen the intensity of manic episodes.
It’s Not *My* Fault That I Can’t Behave,

I say to the in-house psychiatrist says.
“I’m what we call, severely emotionally disturbed. So, you see, it’s not my fault. My body is to blame.”

By the time the green — S.E Rykoff truck — with the slogan “Eat Out More Often” tattooed on each side —pulled out from the back of the building; I’d already saved-up a month’s worth of pills. Thorazine.

Each time the nurse handed me the daily dose of 50mg from the Daisy cup, I’d cheek the capsules or plant them at the back of my mouth, beneath my tongue.

I had a plan. Right after the night shift exchanged keys with Edith, the graveyard worker; I’d get out of bed.

Edith was fat.
So fat, that when she walked, you could hear her thighs, crushing the thread from her polyester slacks.

I knew where she was at all times.
Once Edith made her rounds to the other side of the facility, I was up. Earlier that day I recovered the pills from the throat of the tree stump where I’d buried them.

I’d enclosed them in Saran wrap, and for extra security used a red rubber band to prevent them from getting wet and or dissolving.

Pills in hand, I tiptoed down the corridor between my bedroom and the kitchen.

From my sock, I grabbed hold of the butter knife I’d saved from dinner. I shoved the butt end, the thickest part of the knife, into the space between the U-shaped shackle and the body of the padlock.

The door housing the milk vat was always locked.
We weren’t a family.
We weren’t allowed to drink milk, juice or water anytime we wanted.
Such luxuries were only for meals and counselor-sanctioned snack times. Everything was controlled by time.

I had ten minutes to pop the lock.
It took one.
I’d spent the last month practicing how to break the lock. I’d used the money I’d earned for getting straight A’s from the Redding Junior League to buy a pack of locks the same size as the ones used in the kitchen.

I placed the deformed lock on the counter.
I opened the front of the milk vat. Using the knife, I slit the top of the gigantic plastic bag, which held a week’s worth of milk.

I pulled the pills from the waistband of my underwear, unwrapped them and dumped all thirty Thorazine capsules into the milk vat that the entire facility drank from.

The pink and black poison, floated on top of the white liquid. I didn’t need to watch them melt into the milk — the way they’d floated on my saliva, and then dissolved into my blood.

I was terminated from Guideways. I was unwilling to abide by their rules.