Jeremiah 29:11

Hello, its Breast Cancer…

It was Friday, April 23, 2021, and I was waiting in the car pick up line at my son, Zions’ middle school to pick him up, I was early, so I began talking on the phone with my sister, Shantea (not biological) and 10 minutes into our conversation, my other line started beeping alerting me that someone was trying to call me. I told my sister to hold on, clicked over to answer the other line and it was my doctor, Dr. Scott-Terry, who informed me that she had the results from my biopsy that I took a few days before. She said, Cassandra you have Breast cancer. I took a deep breath, a single tear fell from my left eye, and I asked her with my voice cracking, what stage and she responded it was preliminary stage 3, however, we don’t know for sure until other tests and maybe surgery. I asked her if she recommended anyone or any hospital and she told me two Doctors, one was close, and the other was further away. I asked who was the best and she informed me, I told her I must let my husband know before making my choice so my doctor let me know she didn’t usually do this but she gave me her personal cell number and told me to call her back after discussing with my husband so she could set it up and I assured her I will. I clicked over to my sister on the other line and told her what my doctor told me, it was brief silence, then I told her I gotta call Joe (my husband) to tell him, she understood we both said bye and I love you sister (as usual) and hung up. I was still 15 minutes early for picking up Zion from school, I was first in the car line, people were just now starting to pull up behind my car. I tried calling Joe twice, no answer, I didn’t want to leave a message, I needed to tell him this now, so I made a U turn from the car pick up line at Zion school and headed the few miles home to wake up Joe from sleeping to tell him the news. My heart was in my stomach and my stomach was in knots as I drove home. I pulled into the driveway, raised the garage door, pulled into the garage, turned the car off and went into the house headed straight to my bedroom where I left Joe sleeping. He was sleeping so well; I didn’t want to wake him. I sat on the side of the bed where Joe was sleeping and gently shook his legs to try to wake him up, he was sleeping so well he didn’t wake up, so I kissed him on the forehead, he opened his eyes and jumped because I was in his face. I said baby, my doctor called me with my results of the biopsy, I have breast cancer baby. Joe looked at me with sadness and disbelief in his eyes, I put my arms around his neck as he sat up in the bed and we cried together briefly and I assured him God already told me no matter what, God got me so we gonna be alright. I consciously breathed in and out to make sure I kept breathing. Joe got out the bed and stood up to try to get dressed as I told him we gotta go pick up Zion from school, I let him know I was in the car line to pick him up when the doctor called me, and I had tried calling to tell him, but he didn’t answer the phone. As he was getting dressed it was clear he was distraught, tears were still coming from his eyes. I reached for his hand as he dressed and stood for us to leave and held his hand as we walked out our bedroom, down the hallway, past our children’s bedrooms to the 4 stairs leading to the main level, walked through the living room through the dining area off the kitchen to the garage. I drove us to Zion’s school in complete silence, picked Zion up, explained why we were late (Zion knows I’m punctual) and drove us home trying to act normally until we reached our house to tell Zion. As soon as we entered the kitchen from the garage, I stopped Zion from heading to his bedroom by telling him me and Joe had to tell him the results of my biopsy. Zion had a look of fear in his eyes as he asked me what the results were, I told him it was positive for breast cancer. He hugged me with tears in his eyes. I told him everything is gonna be alright, I told him we trust God especially for tough times like these. We stood in the kitchen, in an embrace until he stopped crying, and I calmed down. When I released him from my hug, he turned to walk to his bedroom, needing alone time. I allowed him to take his time processing this news, meanwhile, Joe walked out to his spot in the garage to smoke him a Cuban cigar and have a drink. I told him we gotta call my doctor back, together to discuss treatment options. I sat down in the garage with him, and we called my doctor back from my cellphone. She immediately expressed her prayers to my husband and myself for this journey. Her sentiments were so warm and calming. We decided on the Cancer Treatment Center, she put in a call for us to her associate there and let us know they will be contacting us for a consultation appointment in about 2 weeks. I was thinking two weeks is so long to wait to find out if I’m going to live or die?! What kind of breast cancer do I have? What is gonna happen to me? All my grandparents passed away from cancer. Life just got mad real! I can’t die, I’m only 44 years old! I don’t even have grandchildren yet! Me and Joe just found each other, bought a house, and got married. I wasn’t ready!!!!

I told Joe we have to tell our children, our parents, our family and friends. It was surreal. I didn’t have the words to speak, couldn’t formulate the sentence, “I have breast cancer” so I sent everyone a text filled with hope. The rest of the day was whirlwind. My sister friends all came over despite me saying in my text, I didn’t want any company. These heifers don’t listen! Then Joe’s cousin Aja and her husband came over too with breast cancer support gifts for me. I had no idea where Joe was while we were sitting in the basement. My mind was so cloudy. I had begun journaling days ago to document my feelings and emotions like I normally do for 40 days at a time when necessary. I had no clue this was on the horizon. I began each journal entry with “Dear God” (I think I got that from reading Alice Walker marvelous novel, The Color Purple), then I proceed to pour out my heart, prayers, tears, pain, joy, etc.

Journaling had been something I learned from going to therapy many years ago. Let me take you back…

Sweet home Chicago…

I was born and raised in Chicago, IL on June 19, 1976. I was the first daughter to my mother, she had my brother Alonzo, who was 3 years older, and I was my father’s first born, a daughter born a day before his first Father’s Day. I grew up in a family of 3 children, Alonzo and my younger sister Jeanette, who is two years younger than me. My mother, Helen, is the youngest child to her parents, Naomi and Charles, she has an older brother, my Uncle Gregory, and an older sister, my Auntie Bettye. My grandmother Naomi and my grandfather Charles broke up and married my grandfather, Clarence. My father is the first son to his parents, he has an older sister, Auntie Adrian who we affectionately called Auntie Aggy (like Age ee), then my aunt Cassandra (who I am named after) who passed away from crib death at about 3 months, then my father, Eugene, Auntie Sharon, Uncle Anthony who we called Uncle Boobie and Uncle Kimble who was about 10 years older than me. My father was 20 and my mother was 21 when I was born. They were young. We were always surrounded by love, both sets of my grandparents partied together with the family every weekend. We would usually gather at my paternal grandparents’ house every Friday night, Saturday and Sunday after church. Growing up I loved school, I loved learning and socializing with my peers. My grandma Janet (pronounced Jeanette) would cook along with my aunts and mother, the men would usually be talking mess, gambling, playing records or hanging out in the alley. My first cousins all grew up with me, most of us were a year apart from one another. We all fiercely protected each other, everyone knew our family on Ellis Avenue in Chicago, we grew up in the Woodlawn area. As children we played outside all day long until the streetlights came on. Once those streetlights came on, we were back in our neighborhood or in our home. We played rock teacher on the porch steps; we cracked jokes on each other to see who could take it or who would cry. We played double Dutch jump rope, we rode our bikes and big wheels, we waited for the ice cream truck to beg our parents for money to buy ice cream from the ice cream truck. In the hot summer days back then we would turn the fire hydrant on in the neighborhood, they would place something in the flow of water to escalate the water and it would shoot out like a large fountain to cool ourselves off. I remember how we would throw each other into the huge flow of the water, cars would either come through slowly or reverse from the block to not drive through the water to wet their cars. This would go on until someone called the fire department or police and they would come threaten everyone and turn it off. The summertime Chicago back in those days was so much fun, we would hang out with family, play with cousins late into the night catching lightning bugs, placing them in jars or putting them in our ear lobes like earrings. We would spend the night at our favorite cousins’ houses and make new friends by hanging out in their neighborhoods. We went to the Taste of Chicago downtown Chicago around the fourth of July they would do a huge firework show; we didn’t have a car, so we caught the CTA (Chicago Transit Authority) everywhere. Before school started and summer began, we all went to the Bud Billiken parade. My mother used to pack sandwiches and snacks in a cooler that we carried along with blankets to sit on as we waited to watch the parade, we had to wake up early in the morning to catch the bus and find a good spot. It was so much fun watching the bands, dance groups, and seeing local celebrities and classmates participating in the parade. But with everything in life there is ebb and flows right? Welp, back in those days, I also went through seeing my aunt and uncle argue and physically fight, I witnessed my parents arguing and hated being woken up at the sound of that so much so that I wouldn’t really spend the night at my cousins’ house because of the fighting, I couldn’t sleep, couldn’t rest, was always scared. After seeing my parents argue more, I would take the weight of it on myself by trying to be the best child, I would stay clean instead of getting dirty outside when we played, I would be an excellent student and get good grades in school, I would go to church with my great grandmother to give my parents something good in their lives, something worth sustaining in their marriage. Growing up living in poverty but being unaware usually until I asked for things, they said we couldn’t afford. That would boggle my mind as a child seeing my parents and family party, drink, smoke, play different records, play the lottery, etc., even in my young mind I would silently judge them. I would think like, if they didn’t do all these things, we would have enough money and at least have a car so that we weren’t walking to the laundromat or to the grocery store pulling our buggy or cart that we used to load up our groceries or loaded up with our dirty laundry to walk to the laundromat because we didn’t have a washer and dryer in our apartment. But it was cool because this was all we knew. Our community was filled with hard working families, that’s all we saw growing up, children going to school, adults going to work.

Leaving little Cassandra…

I remember clear as day the night I was penetrated and when I was made to perform oral sex. Two separate events, two different people. Being that my family partied a lot and the partying included drinking, smoking, dancing to music, playing cards, talking mess, etc., The children were all left to hang out in the back of my grandparents’ house out of the way of the grown people. I was one of the first girls born in the family. It was mostly boys before me. What Sophia in the color purple say, a girl child aint safe in the house full of men. I was molested by two trusted family members on two different occasions. I didn’t tell anyone because I didn’t want to cause conflict. As I reflect on it now, I know I didn’t want to get them in trouble. They were only about 3 years or so older than me, so I didn’t feel as if they were doing it to harm me, but they did it because they had free access to me at a time they were growing up and their hormones were taking over their young bodies. Also, maybe something had been done to them. One occasion was oral (me as the giver) and the other occasion was actual penetration. I had to be between the ages of 5-7 when this occurred but the trauma of this would follow me the rest of my life in one way or another. I wonder why I felt it was up to me to protect everyone around me even above myself. Back then, I remember how I would fall or have any scar from playing physically and I would consistently peel the scar or wound until it bled no matter how much pain it caused, I would sit there and peel it every time the scar scabbed over. I began to feel so ugly inside because of what I endured. I began to not like myself. I would do anything to hide myself even from myself. I remember going down south one summer when my parents were separated, and my father and uncle Boobie were living in South Carolina. My maternal grandparents drove us down south one summer and we had a great time. It was my sister, my two cousins Teneshia and Tinesha and we used to spend our days eating candy, making dances or going to the swimming pool. My cousins Georgia and Carrie Jo lived down there; we hung out with them too. I remember seeing how dark people would get from being alongside the swimming pool in the summer and I wanted my skin to be darker toned. By this time I had begun to have problem skin, acne and because I had the habit of peeling my scars I would bust the bumps on my face and pic at them and at this time I was fairer skinned and it really looked bad so I said hey if my skin was darker people wouldn’t see these marks on my face like they could because I was lighter. I defied my uncle girlfriend who told us to wait on Uncle Boobie before going to the pool and I went anyway, I led myself and my sister and cousin to the pool, we had a ball. I remember having a great time and intentionally sitting outside the pool to get a darker complexion. And if I’m honest, that was also my way of fading into the background, embarrassed, and not wanting to be seen since I was molested. Hiding myself in plain sight. Eb and flow, right?

By the time I was in the 6th grade or, so my parents were together but struggling. We moved into the Burnside area from the Woodlawn area which was still working lower class. I was around 11 and my little sister was 9, our older brother was a freshman in high school, so he didn’t leave for school at the same time as me and our sister. Our school was far from our apartment, so we walked when it was warm or caught the CTA by ourselves to school when it was cold. The walk to school would take about 15-20 minutes, if it was too cold, we would use our money to catch the bus and that was usually 5-10 minutes, occasionally our classmates would let us catch a ride to school from their parents. I remember one time, we messed up and caught the wrong bus, I had to comfort my little sister who became immediately upset that we were on the wrong bus. There were two CTA buses that came to our bus stop, one was the 95th street bus (our bus) and the 4 Cottage Grove bus (the wrong bus). We were latchkey kids which meant that usually there was no one home when we left to go to school and no one home when we returned from school. My mother worked at a bank downtown Chocago and banking hours were usually 9am until 5pm and her trek downtown was brutal on the CTA, so she had to leave out early and didn’t get back home until homework was done. I recall my mother cooking dinner early in the morning before she left for work to put up for us to warm up in the oven and eat after school. Our apartment was on the top floor of a building that looked like a single-family home with an addition on the roof which is where we resided. Because our apartment was like an attic, all our rooms had a slanted ceiling. We were in a three-bedroom apartment, our parents had a room, my brother had his own room and my sister, and I shared a bedroom. We had a lot of fun in that neighborhood, it was nothing like when we all lived in the Woodlawn area on Ellis, Greenwood, or Ingleside with our family. We had to make friends outside of our family now and during this time I met my lifelong Sisterfriends; Maxine, Shantea and Nicole who all are still my sisters to this day. One thing about growing up in the city, you are forced to grow up quickly. One day when I was around 12 years old, I walked to our local cleaners to pick up some of my mother’s work clothes from getting professionally cleaned and pressed. It was empty except for the guy that worked there. The old black man that worked there began acting weird with me that day by smiling and winking his eyes and then he offered to give me some money if I let him see my chest, I had no breast at that time, I had little bee sting sized breasts. Up until that moment I had never had someone mention my body in this way. I remember I was frozen in place, scared to run or scream, thankfully two women entered the cleaners, and I was able to move my feet out that door. I went home and never told a soul about it until I was an adult in therapy. I avoided doing cleaners errands after that. But after that as my breast began blossoming men began noticing me and saying provocative things to me in my neighborhood. As a young girl roaming the big city you have to have a tough as nails exterior, game face always on in the streets, walk at a fast past, try to walk in groups and don’t go outside alone at night without a weapon. I remember when I went to college in Louisiana people would ask us Chicago people why we stayed frowned up and looking mean. They would always say Chicago girls got some smart mouths and nasty attitudes. As a Chicago girl I can say it is definitely an attitude we learned early growing up and surviving in Chicago.

School was my place!!! I loved school, I loved learning, I loved reading books, writing stories and talking to friends. I remember all my teachers at O.H.Perry were the bomb. They were dope. They were all black, educated, sharp, encouraging, take no mess teachers! How can you aspire to be successful as a black person if you don’t see representations of it. My 6th grade teacher Mrs. Holt was a stout lady with a heavy bosom, she wore her hair in a natural state, it was typically short, her face was always so nicely made up, she was gorgeous! My 7th and 8th grade teacher’s name was Mrs. Wright, she was so beautiful, hair was always laid, bouncing, healthy hair, she wore beautiful suits, minimal makeup, took no mess but loved her job. I also had Mrs. Pippion, Mr. Mays and Mrs. Sorceby. Mr. Mays was the only male teacher I had, and he was tough. He was about an average height man, looked like he could have been a drill Sargent in his past life, very smart, nicely dressed, good looking man. I wanted attention but not too much where someone would “see” me for fear of being sexually abused. I had begun to dislike myself and try to stay average. However, my grades were never average which brought on more attention from teachers wanting me to apply to math downs, spelling bees or junior authors contests. I would get far enough to win in my class and/or my grade but that’s where I stopped short, I would purposely lose in the school battle. I did not want to represent my school for fear of being “seen”. I still recall the word I misspelled in the spelling bee, “Scorpion” I spelled it “Scorpian” purposely. I wrote short stories, essays and poems and was placed in the young authors’ contest. I can still remember the story that I wrote and my teacher, Mrs. Wright submitted, it was good but not good enough to be featured in our local newspaper, which was my plan. My 7th grade Iowa test scores were high enough that I could choose the high school I wanted to attend and not confined to attend my neighborhood high school. I chose Hyde Park career Academy since that’s where my brother and cousin currently attended, and my parents graduated from this same school. It was in my old neighborhood, Woodlawn so I already knew some people at that school. The summer of 1990, I graduated 8th grade, and my mother bought her first house, a townhouse over east near 79th Colfax. It was a two story 3-bedroom, 1.5-bathroom house, we were so happy to be moving on up in the world. By now I was a professional at catching the bus, it took 2 buses one way to get to Hyde Park Career Academy from my mom’s house. My mother would give me “car fare” which was usually in tokens, because the bus fare is half off for students so my mother would buy like 20.00 in tokens for the week. I had to walk to the bus stop in the morning from 81st Colfax to 79th Colfax, cross the street to catch the 79th street bus going west, pay my money, find a seat or stand up on the bus until my stop which was either Stony Island or Jeffrey. Then I would wait for that bus to take me to 62nd Stony Island where Hyde Park was located. Since Hyde Park was not my local high school, I had to enroll in their college preparatory magnet program which meant that all my classes were honors except lunch and gym, and I had no classes with people in the regular high school program. I was dating a guy called Jay that lived near one of my cousins’ houses, that was about 3 years older than me. He was just about everything your parents warn you about who NOT to date but it didn’t matter to me, all I know is he was tall, dark and handsome like one of my favorite rappers, Big Daddy Kane! Jay was my boyfriend from the time I was 13 until I was about 17 years old, most of that time jay was locked up in Cook County jail. I wrote him letters but never visited him. When he was released from jail, I lost my virginity to him. I cringe at the mention of “virginity” because technically my virginity was taken from me when I was molested although it was before I hit puberty. Jay was very careful with me being my first time, he took the time to love every part of my body. I was 16 years old; my sister and cousin Tinesha would tease me often because I was still a virgin and how long I made Jay wait before we had sex. You grow up fast in the city. Most people around me lost their virginity around 12 or 13.

Losing control

After school was over for the day most students at Hyde Park Career Academy walked to the bus stop on Stony Island in the direction of our homes. Jay was back in the county jail, so he couldn’t pick me up from school. On this day, in my junior year of high school I was walking to the bus stop with a friend of mine named Naishon. As we were waiting on our bus, a guy in a nice car across the street called my name. I had just met him a few days before and found out he was my cousin’s boyfriend which meant he was off limits in trying to date me, we don’t do that. I waved back at him and kept standing there with Naishon waiting on the 27 south Deering bus. He made a U-turn and pulled up in front of us at the bus stop. There was another guy in the car with him in the passenger seat, he asked where I was headed. I told him home on 80th Colfax, he said I’ll give you a ride I’m going that way. I said, no, I’m cool, I don’t wanna leave my girl, he asked where she was going and she told him she was going on 80th Crandon, he said that’s cool I can drop both of y’all off. I had a funny feeling, but I blew it off because Naishon was with me. He stopped at checkers and bought us something to eat. Then he dropped Naishon off first because her house was on the way to mine. His pager went off, so he asked if I mind if he goes to his grandmother’s house to use her phone right quick, I shrugged my shoulders while eating my fries from Checkers. He pulled up at this house across the street from South Shore high school. His friend got out of the car with him, so he told me to sit in the front seat of the car. I sat there listening to his car system with the booming speakers, blasting some hip hop. After about 5 minutes or so he came back to the car that was parked in front of his grandmothers’ house and told me to come in right quickly because he was waiting for a call back. I entered the house, it looked nicely furnished but you can tell an older person lived there because they still had plastic on the furniture and stuff. All the furniture in the front room was white and covered in plastic, so he told me to sit down and wait for him in the bedroom right off the front room. The door was open, he turned the tv on to music videos, I sat in the chair by the door, he walked out the room and closed the door behind him. I was so nervous, looking around the room to see what I could possibly use as a weapon just in case. He came back into the room after about 10 minutes, grabbed my hands to stand me up from the chair I was sitting in, he told me how pretty I was while trying to pull me close and I reminded him that he is with my cousin, and we don’t do that. I said can you take me home now before I get in trouble for not going straight home after school. I turned towards the door and grabbed the doorknob trying to leave. He told me to lay my ass down and that he wasn’t playing with my little ass he put his hand up with the threat to let me know he would hit me. He looked so evil; I knew he was a drug dealer and violent. I was frozen in place until he forcefully shoved me onto the huge bed that took up most of the room. He was cussing me out as he began taking my pants down, next thing I know he forcefully entered me. What felt like hours was actually 6 minutes, I watched the clock on the nightstand and saw the time go from 4:13 to 4:19. When he finished, he jumped up off me, told me to pull my pants back up so we could go. I don’t remember the ride to my house or who was home when I opened the door. I just remember going to the bathroom and jumping in the shower, numb. Too shocked and hurt to cry. I washed my body all over as if I could erase the rape, erase him touching me, erase the smell of him on top of me, erase the experience. That night he had the audacity to call me, the sound of his voice scared me so much. It wasn’t a long conversation, he threatened that if I told anyone what happened he would tell my cousin that I came on to him. I had no intention of telling anyone but the Lord, I was embarrassed, ashamed and I knew if I told my family he would be handled with street justice, and I didn’t want that burden of causing Jay and any of my family members to go to prison or worse. This was one of my worst semesters in high school and thereafter it wasn’t much better. I was just doing the bare minimum trying to cope. My grades were mostly c’s and d’s, I even tried changing my bad grades on my report card by getting it wet and trying to trace over the C’s and D’s, but my mother saw right though it and called me on it. I said I would do better, but I didn’t care to do more than the bare minimum. I didn’t want attention for being too smart, too cute, too popular, or anything noticeable. I wanted to shrink myself. I no longer trusted men or the male species, I felt like I had to hurt them before they hurt me. This was one of the main reasons I wanted to leave Chicago for college, I didn’t feel safe or protected and needed to change my atmosphere. After I was raped, I became cold and maintained a stance of not caring about no dudes. I would hang out in groups because I didn’t trust a guy to hang out alone if a man would take advantage of it and sexually abuse me again. I began saying I would never get married or have children because I didn’t want that level of commitment and couldn’t trust men.

I remember in my junior year of high school, going to a friend of mine senior prom and not telling Jay about it because I knew he wouldn’t like it and didn’t want me to go. Jay was locked up in the county jail when I went to the prom. When he would come pick me up from my mother’s house, I would hide that prom picture from him that was in my mother’s living room. Eventually Jay lifestyle turned me off since I didn’t want to date a drug dealer, gang banger, or anyone stereotypical of a girl growing up in the hood on the southside of Chicago. I just knew I wanted more. I had seen my fair share of female friends and classmates get caught up in that life because of their man. They had to deal with all the other women chasing after their man because of his money and power, they would be involved in shoot outs, armed robberies, all sorts of verbal and physical abuse. I just knew that life wasn’t for me. I didn’t want to have everyone’s attention by dating a drug dealer that was getting money and buying me all the flyest gear. Back then we wore Used jeans, cross color, Karl Kani, Gerbaud, Guess, Fila, Coach and you had to carry a Eddie Baur bookbag. I didn’t want to have to depend on anyone to get what I wanted for my life. I knew then that I would need to establish a high paying career and that meant going to college. Grandma Janet would get so upset with me not wanting to learn how to cook, I would tell her, I’m gonna make money Grandma, somebody gonna be cooking for me! I’m going to college so I can make my own money. For this reason and more, I KNEW I needed to start focusing on college and being around people with the same mindset. In the summer before my senior year, I began dating a guy named Anthony, that I went to high school with after breaking up with Jay for good. Anthony was smart and funny and going somewhere in life. We went to senior prom together and all the other senior activities. He applied and got accepted into many colleges but me, I only applied to Grambling State University where my big brother attended. My brother’s father took me to visit Grambling State in the spring of my senior year and I fell in love immediately. Seeing all the black people like me, going to school, furthering their education, investing in establishing a career or a better life. I knew that’s where I wanted to be, no matter what I needed to do to get there. So, when it came time to graduate, I applied and was accepted as a student at Grambling State University in the fall of 1994. That summer I hung out with Anthony and my cousin Tee tried figuring out what I needed for college and began purchasing some things I figured I would need. My mother bought me a big tv for my dorm room and a comforter set. My brother Lonzo was already down there in Louisiana, so I rode with Anthony, his mother and sister to Grambling in August to begin my college life! I am still forever grateful to his mother, Ms. Idella and sister, Tanara for being there for me as a college student. I was so nervous, excited and anxious about this transition. I didn’t know what to expect. I left my parents, siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, family and friends to pursue something I only saw in my mind. I dreamed of getting a degree, making good money, buying a house and travelling the world. I wanted to come back and live in Chocago in a neighborhood surrounded by my people so other girls and boys coming from where I am from know that it is possible. It is possible to be smart and cool. It is possible to make it out of the hood without selling my soul. We rode down there in a packed van with all our things to move in our dorms. The air smelled different when we arrived at Grambling, Louisiana. I didn’t know much about college, my first thought was, I would become roommates with my brother, however, the rule was freshman had to stay in a dorm their first year. So, I applied for my dorm assignment late and therefore had to get whatever they could find, I was assigned Jones Hall, 4th floor. I had to learn how to register, admissions, housing, figure out my day-to-day routine in a whole new place. My brother showed us around to get registered and complete the financial aid process and find out how much we owed after all aid was applied. Ms. Idella helped us complete our registration and enrollment. I signed up for work study because I didn’t have enough loans and grants to cover my first year. I chose to work in the admissions office. Working work study meant I worked in admissions but instead of paying me the wages went to the school to help pay my tuition, room and board. I signed up for work study in addition to student loans and a Pell grant and still had a balance due of a little over $100 and even that was difficult to get from my parents, they both worked hard, they just didn’t make enough money. That’s when I realized I was poor. When I went to move into my dorm room with my clothes, tv and comforter bedding set there was a huge cockroach waiting at the door and it flew! I ain’t never seen flying roaches until moving to Louisiana. My dorm roommate name was Amita and she was a tall young woman from Bunkie Louisiana. Her side of the room looked nice and coordinated. She introduced me to her cousin, Shonka, their friends Tylynn and Shay. Tylynn stayed down the hall from us on the 4th floor, her roommate’s name was Alison and she was from Newelton, Louisiana. My next-door neighbor was a girl from the DMV area named Kelli who was on the track team with my brother, they were friends. My first night sleeping in Louisiana in my dorm room, I remember I closed my eyes laying on my twin size dorm bed and heard this noise, it was disturbing, I asked my roommate what was that noise, she asked, what noise? The crickets? I said I guess that’s what I was hearing moving over to the dorm window and yes that was the noise I was hearing. She was amazed that I had never heard of crickets. I told her I am from Chicago; you don’t hear crickets at night on my block. You hear city life, loud music, cars, arguments, fighting, gun shots, ambulance, fire trucks and police car sirens at night, no crickets. And my goodness, seeing the stars in the sky at night in Louisiana was magical. I constantly got lost looking at the stars at night, I was mesmerized. You can’t see the stars in the sky like this in Chicago.

I began my classes as a Business Management major. I knew I didn’t want to work in the healthcare field and as much as I loved writing, I wasn’t sure how I could make it into a career making good money right out of college. I figured I would need to obtain an advanced degree plus make the necessary contacts to establish myself as a journalist or writer. I wasn’t interested in engineering or mass communications either. I made my choice based on things I was not interested in doing and to help figure out what I wanted to do. Most of my first semester courses were mandatory freshman level classes, I had two classes in the college of business, Business Management and Accounting 101. I remember my boyfriend Anthony looking at my schedule and seeing accounting class and saying, I shouldn’t take that class because it was too hard for him. In my mind, I heard, you’re not smart enough to handle that class so you know what I did, made accounting my major. I was intrigued by the challenge it presented and I don’t back down from a challenge especially about my intelligence. In my accounting class, I saw a girl dressed like we did in Chicago back then in the 90’s with oversized shorts, a cute hairstyle and earrings in her ear with the Nike check but instead of Nike it had her name, I ‘Esha. I asked her where she was from and she confirmed what I knew, she was from the Chicago area. I told her my name and I’m from Chicago too. We exchanged dorm room information before parting ways after class.

There were so many Chicago people at Grambling, we loved seeing each other make it down to Louisiana from the crib. That’s what we all called it, whenever we needed a ride to go back home, we found people going back to the crib to ride back home with. We had a club called the windy city club; Grambling had clubs for people from all over the world that attended Grambling. The East Coast club, The west coast club and everything in between. I absolutely loved it here. I joined the windy city club and the national association of black accountants’ organization. I met people from all over and made friends/family for life. My childhood friend, Larry was also there and his sister Ramona so that helped me too that I had familiar faces from the crib to hang with or to call when I needed a ride to the store or to get something to eat. Coming from a big city to the country is hard, there is no public transportation, no fleet of taxicabs. People walked or had cars. There was only one franchise restaurant close to campus, Sonic, otherwise we would have gone to the village or the student union besides the cafeteria of course. I learned to appreciate the cafeteria after that first night without any money or food. I had a snickers bar for dinner. I met a new guy in the cafeteria and that sparked a relationship to my surprise. Me and Anthony broke up in January 1995 and I began dating my college boyfriend in March of 1995. He had been at Grambling for a year before I came. He was a psychology major born in Inglewood California, however he also lived in Monroe, Louisiana with his grandfather so he had a country accent. He could cook well, and anyone that knows me, knows that’s the way to my heart, I am a foodie! That first year was a struggle because I had no car, so after my first semester of my second year, I went back home to try to buy me a car. I took two semesters off from Grambling, moved back home. My father got me a job where he was a chef at the Hotel Inter-continental, I was a hostess at their fine dining restaurant. I also enrolled into Harold Washington college where I attended two days a week, taking some of my prerequisites. I worked 5 days a week and attended school on my two off days. Me and my friend Naishon agreed to be roommates and found us an apartment on 76th South Shore Drive. We both worked at the Hotel Intercontinental, so it worked out for a while. I maintained that for about 6 months or so before I was worn out. In order to be at work on time, I had to leave out at least an hour and a half before my scheduled time to catch the two CTA buses I took to work one way. One day after working my shift from 6:30 am until 2:30 pm, I came home from work so exhausted I fell asleep in my clothes. I woke up thinking it was the next day, so I began running my shower and went back into my bedroom from the bathroom, turned on the tv to the weather channel and noticed the date was the same day and not the next day like I thought when I woke up. To really save my money to try to buy my first car so I can go back to school at Grambling State University, I had to move back in with my mother, quit school after the two semesters and found a new job at Zonta International. I eventually saved enough money to buy my first car, a sky-blue Pontiac Grand Am with tinted windows, my cousin Terry went with me to the dealership. I was so excited to finally have my own car. I drove all around the city that summer you couldn’t tell me nothing and when august came around I got ready to go back to Grambling State University with my car to finish school. Two days before going back to school I went to the free clinic to check on my private parts, something I had begun doing since being raped. There was a rumor going around that they guy that raped me had AIDS, I secretly worried about getting it because of that. Thank goodness all my tests were negative for AIDS or HIV. I went to my friend Maxine grandma house to hang with her before I left for school this week. I told her my test came back negative for AIDS, she pushed my shoulder to say quit playing girl you know you aint got no AIDS and when she pushed my left shoulder, my left foot twisted in my red air force ones, and it was very tender after that. I tried putting it down but ended up limping to my car after my visit thinking nothing of it until that night when I went to bed. I had to elevate my foot on pillows because it had started swelling. In the morning I tried getting in the shower, but I couldn’t walk or stand on my left foot. I knew I needed to go to the doctor. I cleaned my body, got dressed and went to pick up Maxine so she could go with me to the ER since she messed my foot up. We went to Trinity hospital ER, and they determined I broke my baby toe on my left foot. They gave me an ugly shoe to wear and said it will heal after about a month or so. I purchased me a fly cane to help me walk instead of those horrible crutches. I left for Grambling State the next day. I drove the 12 hours it took to get there by myself. Luckily some good friends, Worm and Zeno allowed me to stay with them for a semester while I worked at a law firm to make some money, I wasn’t enrolled in school that semester, I was able to enroll the following semester. My friend Shay was looking for a roommate and I needed my own place, so we decided to get an apartment in Ruston, Louisiana. January 1998, I was back in school at Grambling, working on campus and having an apartment with Shay. Just about two weeks into the new year, I found out I was pregnant. I always secretly feared that I couldn’t get pregnant because I was raped. After being raped I would go to the free health clinic to make sure I didn’t AIDS or any other sexually transmitted diseases (STD), I heard that the dude that raped me had STD’s. This was another of my secret fears. Thank God each time I went to the Doctor I tested negative for AIDS. However, there was a time in college, my first semester, that I had a foul odor and thick discharge coming from my vagina. At that time, I was not cleaning properly inside of my vagina mainly due to the sexual abuse I experienced. I didn’t like to touch myself inside or really get to know my body. I had a love/hate relationship with my body, more hate than love. I had no one I felt comfortable to discuss these issues with. I had a bacterial infection; thank God it wasn’t worse. Going back to January 1998, I was visiting my girl Tumeka in her dorm, Martha Adams, and we were just talking, and I kept eating all her snacks including pickles and she noticed. She said, you are greedy but not this greedy, you might be pregnant. So, she rode with me to the store to purchase a pregnancy test, I took it back at her dorm and it came back positive for pregnancy. I was shocked but not surprised. Me and my boyfriend had been having unprotected sex a short while after we began dating in March of 1995. I always said I didn’t want to ever get married or have children. I just wanted to be wealthy and travel this world as a lawyer. I always loved the character Claire Huxtable on one of my favorite childhood sitcoms, The Cosby Show. I loved how she was no nonsense, dressed sharp and Classy like my mother. I was happy that I could get pregnant after the rape, however, but sad because I was a broke college student trying to accomplish a goal of graduating. I went to the housing department to apply for low-income housing and/or section 8 housing in anticipation of being a mother so I included that I was pregnant on my application and looking for a two bedroom. They said they would contact me when my name came up on the waiting list to receive my voucher. I made a doctor appointment at the local free clinic in Ruston, where Shay and I apartment was. My results came back that I was about 6 weeks pregnant. I needed time to process before sharing this news with my family or the father of my unborn child father. I worked hard in my classes because I now had another motivating factor that was going to depend on my success. I also had to recover from being on academic probation the semester I left school to move back home to work and earn my car. I had a 1.9 GPA which was from me hanging out, smoking weed and not doing enough studying. My friend Esha would be on me about going to class and doing better. Me and Esha had begun hanging out more and getting to know each other since we both majored in accounting and were from the windy city area. On Sundays we would attend church service for fellowship at Zion traveler Baptist church. My relationship with God was my strongest relationship. I began my prenatal care doctor appointments regularly throughout the semester. By the time I was 4 months I was showing, and my stomach was pretty big. So much so that my nurse at the clinic where I received my prenatal care told me I need to get an ultrasound because I am bigger than the months that I was. One of my neighbors at the apartment complex where me and Shay lived named Pac introduced himself to us. I had seen him around the college of business too. He was from New York and had the confident swag about him and plus he was funny and knew I loved to laugh. He would tell me so many stories about his life, his women and whatever else was going on at the time. He didn’t like my boyfriend because he felt like I deserved better, he saw first-hand how hard I was working and didn’t see him doing anything but kicking it. Through Pac I met Zell who was from Chicago like me, Red from Shreveport and a bunch of other cool people who I still know and love to this day. Pac would consistently put me on to jobs and hustles I could do to help make me some money. What I loved most about Pac is he saw me as himself, respected my ambition and never tried crossing the line with our friendship. I felt safe around him. After the semester ended in May, I went to the local hospital which was in Monroe, Louisiana, about 30 miles from Grambling. This was a “free” hospital, and they treated patients as such. I waited for hours to finally be seen and when I was seen, a resident came in and said she read my chart and although she isn’t good at doing ultrasounds, she would do one on me. After the ultrasound was done the same nurse let me know the results and said my baby was fine in size and nothing to worry about. I was happy to hear that because I had plans on going back home that summer to work and make money. I was still able to work at Zonta International in downtown Chicago and the Lord knows I needed the money. So, I drove the 12 hours from Louisiana to Chicago by myself while I was 5 months pregnant to my mother’s house to stay for the summer while I worked.

“I can’t take no threats I got a set of twins” Jay Z

Delivered my twins with faith

I began receiving my prenatal care in Chicago after applying for Medicaid which was public assistance for low- or no-income individuals. On one of my appointments, the nurse told me the same thing my nurse said in Ruston, Louisiana that my stomach was bigger than it should be for 5 months, so she sent me to Trinity Hospital to receive an ultrasound. My father and Uncle Boobie went with me to my ultrasound appointment on June 9th, I remember the date because it is also my brother Lonzo birthday and 10 days before mine. Once again when you are on Medicaid, they treat you like shit, they don’t care about your time regardless of what time your appointment is they make you wait. By the time they called me back to get my ultrasound I was hungry and frustrated. The technician that performed the ultrasound explained the process before she began, once she started another nurse knocking softly before entering and asked what the technician wanted for lunch because they were placing their orders. The technician told her she was unsure because she would be awhile because it is multiples. The nurse said OK and closed the door as she exited. The technician turned to me and said did you hear me, you’re having multiples? I asked what you mean multiples, can you quantify that for me? She said you are having twins. Long pause, heavy blinking. I said can you tell the sex; she said I can see one is a boy and they both are because they are identical twins. She then asked if I had any questions for her. I responded, “No, I have questions for the Lord”. I had made provisions in my mind to prepare myself to have one baby and finish college. Now, I had to consider being a mother of two babies? After the technician finished, I walked back to the lobby where I left my father and uncle. They were standing up waiting for me to come out, my father shouted happily, tell me it’s a boy, I shook my head no, I said two boys. My father and uncle were so happy I was having twin boys, they were ready to get a drink to celebrate. Me on the other hand was still in shock. I couldn’t wait to get to the phone to let my boyfriend know. I called him when I got to my mom’s house, he was still in Louisiana. We didn’t have cell phones back then, so I had to call around to find him. I found him when I called his auntie’s house. He knew I had an ultrasound today, so he was waiting for the results. I told him we were having identical twin boys; he dropped the phone. I was calling his name, he finally got back on the phone, he yelled out with excitement to tell his auntie and cousins that were there, that we were having twin boys. Everyone was so excited. His family began saying that we need to get married, which I ignored. I may not have been able to pursue my life of no children due to my carelessness of lacking birth control, but nobody was rushing me to marriage especially when I said I never wanted to get married. I had a fear of commitment and wanted to maintain complete control over my life. I had deep control issues. His family were from the south and didn’t believe in having children without being married. My family was from Chicago and while they may have wanted me to be married before having children it wasn’t an expectation. By the time I was pregnant with my first child, my sister Jeanette had been a mother for two years and was pregnant with her second child. Then we were told my brother Lonzo girlfriend was also pregnant with their first child. All 3 of my mother’s children were having babies in 1998. I kept working as usual after learning of carrying twin boys. I caught the bus and walked everyday from the bus stop. To get to work from my mother’s house, I had to walk from 80th street to 79th street to catch the 79th street bus to Jeffrey Blvd. and then catch the #14 Jeffrey bus downtown and walk over two blocks to Zonta for work. I didn’t have to do much walking at work as the receptionist, I sat at the front door. After work I did the same travelling in reverse, although I had a car, paying for parking in downtown Chicago was too expensive. About a week after finding out I was carrying twin boys, and a day after my 22nd birthday, I began feeling labor pains, so I called my father to go to the hospital with me, I didn’t want to wake my mother and stepfather. We arrived at the University of Chicago hospital where I was born on 58th Maryland. Upon entering we attempted to check in at the front desk, the lady working at the desk asked me questions before they could get me to a room. One of her questions was, “Have I ever been a patient there”, I responded no I haven’t. Then she looked at something else on the computer and said, it shows you have been here before according to your name and birthdate you were here on June 19, 1976; I said OK, I was born here. I immediately turned my head from facing her to looking at my father, like do you believe this? He chuckled. I was so annoyed due to the pain in my lower back and now this lady is asking silly questions. Once she checked me in a triage nurse came in to check my vitals, then the Dr. came in to check my cervix, do an ultrasound to make sure the babies were alright. The tests determined the babies were doing well and I was 25 weeks too early to give birth so they informed me that I should have been on bed rest somewhere around my 4th month of pregnancy. I in turn let them know, I didn’t know I was carrying twins until recently. They got my contractions to stop and sent me home with strict orders to rest. I dropped my father off at home on 73rd Jeffrey where he lived with my stepmother, stepsister and little brother, Elijah. I went home and updated my mother and stepfather, Larry, about what the doctor told me. My mother said next time wake them up and they will take me to the hospital, I agreed to do so. The very next night, I began having terrible back pains, I tried lying on the floor and that only lasted but so long before I was totally uncomfortable and having lower back pains again. I knocked on my mother’s bedroom door, Larry said, come in. I opened their bedroom door and informed them I was in pain again and wanted to go to the hospital. My mother and Larry got ready, got dressed and met me downstairs in the garage. I sat in the backseat behind Larry while my mother rode on the passenger seat. Larry got us to the hospital very quickly, he was also in pain from having severe back pain. My poor Mama had to deal with 2 people in pain. This time the front desk person was quicker with getting me registered and into triage. After the triage was completed, they put me in a room. The doctor came in and said welcome back! He explained that I am in active labor and the hope is they can somehow stop them so I can carry out the rest of my pregnancy because 25 weeks is too soon, he explained their lungs were not developed among other things. I had been in the hospital in labor for 7 days when another doctor came in to speak with me and my parents early one morning about what was going on. He said baby boy #2 didn’t have enough blood to exist outside the womb and that if he didn’t make it, there is a good chance baby boy #1 wouldn’t make it either as he explained it is hard for identical twins to live without each other as babies. He told me this as if he was telling me something good. I was in shock that I would go from zero to 2 children and now possibly back to zero. My mother and I sat in my room quietly, both possibly holding back our tears. Once the doctor left my room my nurse told me she had seen me in the hospital and I seemed like a young lady with faith, she said hold on to your faith, the doctor told you what he must tell you but that doesn’t mean that’s what’s going to happen. From that moment on, I kept my faith, held my head up and changed my outlook. A couple hours later, I felt my water break because it was fluid coming from me and I knew it wasn’t urine. I told my mother, and she called the nurse to my room, they helped get out of the bed and stand up. I mean I had 3 monitors on my huge belly, 1 for me and 1 for each of my babies. They cleaned my bed after removing the soiled linen, put me back into my bed and told me although it was 26 weeks it was time to have my babies. The pains were coming more advanced and at one point I felt like I had a bowel movement so I reached for the bed pan, lifted myself up, moved my gown from my butt so I could defecate. My mother sat in a chair in the corner of my room watching me and laughing to herself because she knew that’s what it feels like when you are ready to push for the babies. My nurse came in and said, “what are you doing? You can’t just push them babies out yet; we are setting up the labor and delivery room for you. They quickly dressed me to give birth, my father said he was coming with me as they wheeled me to the back. They got me in a position to push the babies out, they were coaching me, and I felt so hot on the inside of my body. I kept saying, I’m hot, they said no time for ice now Mom you’ve got to push, the babies must come out. I had no more energy and was so hot, I closed my eyes. My father later told me it was a cold blue, they kicked him out of there and had to perform an emergency c-section to get the babies out. Later I was told I had no more oxygen going to my lungs and that’s why I passed out. When I finally woke up, I was surrounded by family, my parents, stepparents, Grandma Janet, Granddaddy, my cousin Karen, Auntie’s and Uncles. I recall asking if my babies made it alright. They shook their heads saying yes, they had made it. I was relieved and exhausted. When I woke back up, I was in a different room. A nurse was there checking my vitals. I asked about my babies. The nurse confirmed they were in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) and they would take me down to see them after my doctor makes his rounds. The nurse took me to get an MRI and CT scan so they could determine why I passed out in labor. My mother told me someone told her that they wanted to do an xray to check to make sure they didn’t leave any instruments inside me when they performed the emergency c-section.

One of the members of the staff came to get me in a wheelchair after the doctor did his rounds. They took me down to the NICU while explaining the rules, the visiting hours and the current condition of my twins. I was told there were seven sets of twins in the NICU. When they wheeled me over to see them, my yes lit up because they were here, outside of my belly where they lived for 6 months. They had beautiful shining eyes, they were so tiny, their skin was translucent, you could see their ribs, their lungs were not yet developed so they made no noises or sounds. Baby boy #1 born at 11:11 am weighing 2 pounds 3 ounces and baby boy #2 born at 11:13am weighing 1 pound 10 ounces. One of the first things that came to my mind when I saw them was the song by Frankie Valli but the Lauryn Hill version, …”you’re just too good to be true, can’t take my eyes off of you, you’d be like heaven to touch, I wanna hold you so much, at long last, love has arrived and I thank God I’m alive, you’re just too good to be true, can’t take my eyes off of you, I love you baby!” I used to sing it to them everyday at each visit. I couldn’t touch them my first few visits because it was unsafe, they were hooked up to so many things that were monitoring their heart rate among other things. I watched those monitors beep for hours each day, praying my babies make it out of the NICU. I constantly felt guilty about them being born early, I felt like I didn’t protect them and it crushed me. I walked around all that summer until they were released as if I was ok and Lord knows I was a mess inside. Visiting hours were from 7am until 7pm when the nurses switched shifts.

it was all a dream…98 til infinity!

Philippians 4:13

Using my faith to escape poverty.

I jumped out the bed, embarrassed that I wet the bed as a grown woman who is now the mother of identical twin boys!! I was twenty-two years old. I jumped in the shower, kind of numb, not a tear came from my eyes, but no doubt I was heartbroken and in pain. This thing had been like a nightmare I would have off and on but now I recalled that it was not a nightmare but my reality. I had been molested. Whew. I said it outside my inner thoughts pushed the words out my mouth forcefully. Once I finished showering my body and drying it off with a towel, I grabbed it from the towel rack hanging over the toilet seat. I exited the bathroom with a towel wrapped around my body and told my children’s father what I recalled of my nightmare and that it had happened to me in real life as a little girl. I didn’t share who it was, just what I remembered. I let it out and walked out of the bedroom away from him because I couldn’t take any stares or look at me in a way that I would feel ashamed, dirty and ugly. It always made me uncomfortable when anyone stared at me too long, it was as if the person looking at me could see into the ugliness that happened to me. I had consciously stayed hidden under baggy clothes, not trying to fix myself up to look attractive and at one point in high school after I was raped at 16, I used to layer my clothing, mostly my pants. I would wear an extra pair or two of sweats or whatever under my pants. I was skinny back then, so all my clothes were like a size 0. Sometimes the clothes under my clothes would have blood stains on them from my menstrual period. In my mind, if I had a smell and didn’t try to look attractive then no one would want to sexually abuse me.

Crazy how becoming a mother now brought up these feelings and emotions in me. For days after this happened it stayed on my mind. I was walking around like normal but my thoughts in my mind were killing me. Had I repressed these memories since I was a little girl? My world was forever changed because not only was I raped at 16, I had to mentally battle my reality of being molested too. I called my Great Auntie Mimi and shared it all with her, in which she shared with me her experience of being sexually abused as well. My Auntie and I were now trauma bonded for life.

My days consisted of living in a small 1-bedroom apartment with my boyfriend and our twin baby boys on 67th Jeffrey Blvd in Chicago. I was working at Zonta International from 8 am until 5pm Monday through Friday; I found a local home daycare center ran by an older black woman and her husband, Medicaid helped us pay for childcare services. My first car, my blue Pontiac grand am had broken down, I now had a white Buick skylark that Larry cosigned for me. Now we had a more reliable vehicle to take the boys to their physical therapy, pediatrician and other specialists’ appointments to make sure they were getting all their health services needed for preemies. On one appointment with a specialist, he told me he looked over our medical files and says we have a lawsuit against the hospital if we wanted to pursue it because I wasn’t supposed to be in labor for 7 days, that was too much on my body which is why I passed out and he would be willing to help. At that time, I didn’t have the capacity to think of anything other than making sure my babies were getting healthier, stronger and that I could keep paying the rent and car note among other things. I had 99 problems and starting a lawsuit wasn’t one. The twins received SSI because they were born under 3lbs and that helped greatly. We received a monthly check of about $500 a piece. My father got my boyfriend a job at hotel inter-continental in the kitchen where my father worked, he worked 3pm until 11pm shift. He worked there for several months, he began calling off and having attendance issues and eventually was fired. It caused issues in our relationship, but I didn’t complain much, who had time to complain? I had to maintain my employment to make sure all bills were paid for us and the twins. We moved into our apartment around September 1998 and signed a year’s lease. My job at Zonta was ok however, I longed to finish college, I investigated transferring my credits to Chicago State University, however, it would have me losing a year of credits and hard work that I did at Grambling. I felt depressed about my babies being born too soon, I felt like it was my fault. I was a college dropout with two babies and had no idea how to get back on track towards my goals. I was still fighting the battle inside my head of reliving being molested and raped. Not knowing what I could do about any of these things drove me crazy and I felt like I had no one. The year 1999 came in like all the years before, filled with new years resolutions and hope for a better year. My twins were coming along nicely hitting their marks slowly but surely.

June 28, 1999, was the twin’s 1st birthday! I was so happy that they were here, my miracle babies had beat the odds already in their year of life. We threw them a big 1st birthday party outside at the park across from Hyde Park Career Academy high school. My sister and her boyfriend gave birth to their second son 2 days after the twins were born, a healthy, happy baby boy named Savon. We had their first birthday party together, all our family and friends gathered to wish all three of them happy birthday. Their father barbecued; he was a good cook. It was a great day.

A month after the twins turned one, I was at work and a new position opened which would be a promotion opportunity for me. I applied and spoke to the director about the opening, The director, Janet, told me the job is going to Pam and she wanted me to train her. I asked why she would get the job over me, when I already knew the job. The director explained, because Pam had a bachelor’s degree in liberal arts, and I didn’t have my bachelor’s degree in accounting yet. I was fuming at my desk after that conversation. I called my favorite accounting professor Dr. Cunningham and told him about my frustrations, he asked about school, and I told him how many credits would transfer from Grambling to Chicago State and he said Well come back to Grambling. I mentioned the twins, housing, etc., he said Cassandra just come back to Grambling, you can get family housing, I can put your classes in the system now, you don’t have that much time before you graduate. I couldn’t think of any reasons that he didn’t have answers for. I wrote my two-week letter of resignation that day. That evening I told my boyfriend about going back to school, we began thinking about where to say when we get down there, how much would it cost. My great grandmother who used to babysit and absolutely loved those babies was upset when I told her I was going back to school in Louisiana, she told me, you not taking these babies. I said Grandma, they must go with me, they are my babies. His aunt Carrie loaned us the money to get the U-Haul and gas to get back to Louisiana. I found someone to take over our year lease and made plans to go back to school. He drove the U-Haul; I followed him in the Buick Skylark with our 1-year-old twin sons. I called Grambling Housing prior to coming down and they told me my name is at the top of the waiting list for a 2 bedroom for me and my baby. I informed them that I had twins, so I have 2 babies. Me and the twins stayed with my friends Esha and Vex at their 2-bedroom apartment for about 2 weeks while waiting on my section 8 voucher from Grambling. Esha and Vex were so welcoming and I’m forever indebted to them for allowing us to live with them until we found our own place. I called around and decided to select the 2-bedroom, 2 bathrooms, furnished apartment closest to the university just in case my car broke down, I would still have a way to get to my classes. I tried to think of every little thing. I signed up and got approved for Medicaid, food stamps, WIC and childcare. One of my professors, Dr. Nwokoma, mentioned he and his wife operated a childcare from their home. He said they have 11 children; they are Nigerian and will take very good care of my babies. I set it up with the childcare vouchers. Two of my friends, Shon and E, also had baby boys and we all worked out a system for the drop off and picking up of our babies daily, 5 days a week. Shon was married to my friend Pac, and they also had an older baby girl named Mariah, she was around 5 or 6 and so cute! I worked work study on campus, attended classes full time and had my twins to take care of. They were not really crawling yet; due to their developmental delays they were behind other babies their same age. I didn’t care, I was just grateful God heard my cries of making sure they make it alive unlike what the doctor told me. After we had settled into our apartment, with our schedules intact and setting up a budget, my friend Tumeka called me and said her and her baby girl were coming back to school too and wanted to stay with me until she got on her feet. I said sure, I made room for them in the twin’s room. Tumeka didn’t have a car, so I let her use mine from time to time if she needed to run around and get things in place for her and her baby girl the same way Esha and Vex had done for me and my babies. My best friends Maxine and Shantea called me and told me about a great concert coming to Chicago, it was the How high tour with Method Man, Redman, Jay Z and DMX. I was a huge fan of them all, especially Jay and DMX, so I told them to buy my ticket and I would pay them back. I decided to leave my twins at home with their father and my friend Tumeka so I wouldn’t have to take them with me for this short turnaround trip home for the weekend. I found out later from him that she came on to him and when confronted she said he came on to her. I did nothing. Eventually Tumeka and her baby girl went back home to the DMV area because for some reason she couldn’t get back in school or at least that’s what I recall. My boyfriend cousin, Chelle would come down from Monroe, Louisiana with her daughter that was the same age as my twins to stay for the weekend. My boyfriend would take the car and be gone the whole weekend in Monroe or wherever he was and come back late Sunday night so I can go to school and work on Monday. I said nothing. Hi niece moved down to Grambling from California because her mother, his sister was having problems with the young teenager and wanted her to get out of California for a while. She lived with his sister’s best friend who lived near us in Grambling. I used to drop her off at school and pick her up. I had 2 friends that I hung out with around this time too, Nikki and Crystal. Crystal was from the west side of Chicago and Nikki was the girlfriend of my friend Larry, they had 2 little girls, and she was from Elgin, IL. My first semester back in school was very difficult, however, I made the dean’s list with my full schedule. I Made my class schedule for the next semester, Spring of 2000 in December 1999. Me, my boyfriend and the twins took a trip home for Christmas to Chicago to stay at my mom’s house. As usual when I visited home, I went to my Aunt Sharon and Uncle Jobe house to pick up my cousin Karen and we go get our hair done either from Paulette or Toya and we went shopping at the mall. Karen graduated from Dunbar High school, class of 1999 so she was excited about starting college in January. I saw most of my family and friends while visiting home for Christmas and drove back to school after New Years Day.

The spring of 2000 classes were off to a great start, I had mostly all accounting classes which I loved getting into my major more. At the end of January, my babies seemed to have caught a cold or something, they had asthma and began exhibiting symptoms of breathing harder, so I took them to the ER. I hated seeing my babies sick, being in the hospital with them triggered me to when they were born and in the NICU. They put them in crib beds with some sort of plastic around them like a huge nebulizer treatment. I asked the doctor if there was something I could do to help them with their asthma, the doctor suggested that I don’t smoke around them, not in our apartment nor in the car. That automatically became my rule; no one can smoke in my apartment nor in my car, especially around them. We were so happy to finally go back home after being in the hospital for almost 3 days getting them the best care for their asthma issues, we came home with their own nebulizer and asthma pump for both. I began unpacking our hospital bags, getting the boys ready for bed and I had a phone call. I answered the phone on the side of my bed and heard a sound I will never forget, it broke my heart, my father was crying and telling me my cousin Karen had died from an asthma attack. From that moment until God knows when I was in auto pilot, survivor mode, broken hearted and never to be the same. I had literally got home from the twins’ hospital stay due to their asthma and now I’m hearing my first cousin, like my best friend and little sister died from what could have been an asthma attack?! I was beyond pain. It seemed that everything would come against me while I was trying to get my degree! I felt defeated. I mean, here I was almost 6 years out of high school, 2 times college dropout, with a set of twin babies, 1,000 miles away from home and help and now THIS?!!! Lord, have mercy. I told my boyfriend what happened and that we gotta go now to Chicago. I couldn’t think about packing a suitcase. I grabbed the dirty laundry bags and clean clothes and threw them in the car along with anything else I could think of. I was numb and felt like I was in a trance, but I knew I needed to get home immediately. Me and my boyfriend were not in a good place in our relationship, but I knew I needed him to keep the boys while I did whatever my family needed me to do and to help drive. We encountered an ice storm on the highway around the time we were going through Arkansas. We had to pull over because we were both too sleepy to drive, we couldn’t really afford to stay at a hotel, so we slept a few hours in the car bundled up with the twins. Then we woke up and got back on the road to Chicago. I cannot recall the days, hours or minutes of this trip. I don’t recall who I visited or who visited me. I knew my Auntie Sharon asked me to pick an outfit for Karen to get buried in since me and Karen went shopping together often. Next thing I know I was at Karen funeral, seeing her lying in that coffin messed me up! She was too young, too beautiful, too good…January 29, 2000, messed me up. I went back to school severely depressed. I was merely existing. I truly could not be bothered with my relationship with my boyfriend, I had to think of the twin’s well-being and getting my degree so I can take care of us. I had to have tunnel vision. I lost weight on my already small frame body. My friends Lolita and esha had graduated already. I had 2 semesters to go before I could graduate. Phil 4:13

My relationship with my boyfriend was on/off so I said let’s just end it. We had a slight scuffle in our bedroom, where he grabbed me by the collar of my t-shirt, scratching my neck and I pushed him off me, he flew over the bed and fell to the other side of the bed, jumped up grabbed my car keys and stormed out. My cousin Karen had been gone only about a month at this point, I was emotionally drained and unhinged. I couldn’t take this relationship anymore. Then one day in my business management class someone caught my attention that was a nice distraction from my life right now.

Enter Brick city! His swagger, his smile, his skin, he walked around with an air of not being impressed by anyone. He wasn’t trying to fit in, he just did whatever felt right to him and that included how he expressed his style in how he dressed. I began flirting with him with my eyes until he approached me asking if I knew how to braid hair. I said yeah, lying my ass off, I would have said whatever to get close to this dude. Those braids were so bogus, and I was so embarrassed, but it was my excuse to spend time getting to know him. No one had caught my attention in years. We talked about so many things from music to geography, his intelligence was so refreshing. We began hanging out after class, he was like a breath of fresh air to me from all the stuff I had been going through.

He called me beautiful everyday, showed me so much tenderness. At a time when all I saw was mostly men wanting and expecting performative resilience in their women for their love which could possibly include their loyalty. Wanting a woman willing to prove she will ride or die with them, through infidelity, abuse, etc., Brick city didn’t ask anything of my love just that it’s present. I will never forget one day we were hanging out at my apartment and his roommate DC called to see if he wanted to go hoop with them. I heard him say hold on let me check to see if it’s cool with my Queen. YO! Not a man coming to check in with his woman before making plans with his friends, I had never heard of it. I was turned on, I felt seen, I felt considered, I felt like it mattered to him what I wanted before going with his boys. You know my era was all about bros before hoes, so this level of maturity was unheard of. So when he came and asked me if we had any plans today because his boys wanted to go play basketball, I told him to go and have fun, I had no plans today. This is how most of our relationship functioned with him at a high emotional intelligence level and me being an unhealed little baby. He would offer to pick up my boys for me after his classes to give me a break somedays. He would make us playdates at the park with my boys. He was so good with them and had plans on us getting married and our honeymoon being in Egypt where they had black sand beaches. I had never had a conversation with a man planning his wedding to me, let alone talking about visiting Egypt. We dated for about 9 months and in that time, I was at his graduation from Grambling, met his family, visited Newark, he visited Chicago but when I went back to school, we ended. Brick city taught me so much about myself, about love, respect, trust, how I desired to be treated and that it’s possible. Chicago raised me tough; I kept a tough exterior and nonchalant attitude in relationships that certainly came across as heartless but it was my way of protecting myself never being out of control. Brick city constantly challenged that about me by adding more love to my meanness. When I went back to school for the fall 2000 school year, my ex-boyfriend called me and immediately came back to Grambling to visit the twins when we returned to my apartment. I had not heard from him all summer; he didn’t call to check on the twins, but he was here now. He stayed and helped me get us back settled in, cleaned up the place while I gave the twins their bath to get ready for bed. Eventually we got back together, and I had to call brickcity to break up with him. That was the hardest thing I had ever had to do. Breaking his heart broke my heart too. I had never felt that way. I had been using the I hurt you before you hurt me act since getting raped at 16 years old. But I knew I owed him a conversation, an honest conversation. I just understood that for my twins to have a relationship with their father, I had to be with him too. I was raised my entire life with my father and my mother and knew how important that was to a child, so I felt like regardless of what I needed, my sons needed their father too. So, I adjusted my emotions and played the role I was in. I concentrated on raising my twins and getting my degree. My heart was still raw from missing my cousin Karen, and her first birthday since she passed was approaching, September 17th, I was in pain. I couldn’t try to manage the relationship, we were together, but he came and went as he pleased, I couldn’t afford to care. He never asked me about my classes or when I would graduate, and I never asked him his whereabouts. I knew I couldn’t depend on him from prior experience, so I didn’t. I made sure I made enough money to cover the rent, car note, gas, food, utilities, books, childcare, etc., He would chip in when/if he was working and that’s pretty much how our relationship went from beginning to end.

I had been on a great roll with my grades since returning to school with my car in 1997. The spring 2000 semester after losing my cousin Karen, I wasn’t on the deans list so I knew I had to work even harder the next two semester so I could graduate in the class of 2001 with a decent grade point average. I knew this semester so much was on the line, I needed to set up an internship, I needed to research companies I was interested in working or schools since I was considering going back for my Masters immediately after graduating undergraduate school. I was working on helping my babies reach milestones in their development. Thankfully they had not had anymore asthma issues this year since January. They were my joy and inspiration but also my fears about whether I would be a good mother for them. The fall semester I pulled off excellent grades that put me back on the Dean’s list. As I was registering for the spring 2001 semester, I noticed if I take 7 classes this semester, I could finish with one class in the summer. To take 7 classes/21 credit hours you must get approval for the head of your department. I remember going to Dr. Wilkerson office who was the head of the accounting department at the time pleading for him to sign off on the 21 credit hours. He was concerned about it being too much with me having my twins, full class load with all senior level accounting courses plus work-study. I told him all those reasons he should sign off because I have a lot on the line and was willing to put in the work it takes to achieve. Finally, I was able to convince him, and he allowed me to take those 7 classes and work study. I don’t know when or if I slept at all that semester, but I crushed it in my classes so much so that I got all A’s in all 7 courses. I remember the Internal Revenue service came to one of my accounting courses to discuss careers with them and let us know they were here for our job for this week. I got my resume done in the career center and grabbed my best navy blue pant suit to wear to the job fair. I had recently come back from visiting home for the weekend and got my hair done from my friend and stylist since I was 16, Paulette. I add that here because I recall the representative from Internal Revenue Service said she remembered me because she loved how my hair was cut in layers and looked nice and healthy. She began telling me about the division that she worked in which was criminal investigation division, I remember their claim to fame was bringing down Al Capone. She began informing me of the duties required to be a special agent for Internal Revenue Service. It didn’t fit for me as a mother of 2 year old twins. However, she said there are other careers that would be great for me so she forwarded my application to another division who in turn contacted me to come in for an interview which would have been before my college graduation. I let them know my graduation date and we were able to schedule my interview 5 days after my graduation. The interview would be in Cincinnati, which meant I would need to pack up before graduation to be prepared to drive from Louisiana to Chicago and then drive to Cincinnati.