

Hidden Testimony

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As Nykol Joseph watched her youngest son, Zichri, at the vending machine she was reminded of her past mistakes and how she ended up in her current position; serving a sentence of 20 years for Voluntary Manslaughter.

Zi had many questions and never hesitated to ask them. However she always evaded giving a true answer.

Her oldest son, Vaniah, was 7 when she was arrested, too young to know what she went through. Van only had the knowledge of what he heard from others. He had his own perception of why his mother was locked up.

Nykol was ashamed that part of what her son thought was true, but she kept other things buried deep, hiding it from others and trying to forget herself.

"Hey, Ma... Where you at?" Van's voice broke through her thoughts.

"WH...What?" She was coming out of her musing.

"What's on your mind? You looked like you were far away from here."

Van knew she was probably thinking about Zi's Dad. He saw that faraway look in her eyes. He noticed it a lot when she was looking at Zi.

Zi put her pizza, Orange Crush, and Sour Cream chips on the table. "You want anything else?" Zi asked before sitting down.

"Nah, I'm good, Thank you."

"What's up with your parole?" Zi never failed to ask that question.

Every time he asked it hurt, it hurt her heart. She couldn't give him an answer because she didn't know herself.

"I can sign up for the halfway house next year in July. If I'm approved I will get to go out and work and come home on passes."

"How long will you have to stay there?" Van asked.

"I want to be there long enough to save money so I can get the things I need. It's been 18 years and I have to start over from scratch." Nykol hated having to depend on others. After all these years she didn't want to be a burden to her family. She wanted to be able to stand on her own.

"You know we got you when you get home, so why you trippin'?" Zi stated. He was ready for his mother to come home.

"I'm not tripping. You have to understand you all have been down and taking care of me. Ya'll have done enough. I don't want to be a burden." Nykol felt helpless and wanted to cry.

I get what you are saying, but you family. You ain't a burden." Van spoke up. He hated to see his mother like this.

"I have to do this for myself. Enough about that. Zi, you graduate this year right? What are your plans?"

"I enlisted in the Army. I go to Basic Training right after¹ graduate."

"Van are you still working and going to school, staying out of trouble?" She had to ask. Van was known to get into trouble every so often.

"I'm straight. I'm working in Savannah now, making more money, and I'm going to school at night. I just got off probation last month. I'm looking for an apartment now."

"That's good. You have to leave after count right?"

"Yeah, I have to be at work at 5:00. I have to drop Zi off and go get ready. It's a 2 hour ride to Savannah from Grandma's house, and it takes at least an hour and a half from here to get to her house."

Nykol understood, at least they took the time out to come visit. The rest of the visit they talked about what her plans were when she got home.

As he sons were leaving Nykol held back her tears. She hated this part of visitation. When she got back to her dorm she went to her room and reflected on all that they talked about and the questions Zi always asked.

Nykol wanted to talk to her sons about her past, but didn't know how to say what needed to be said. She fell asleep thinking about when she would do it.

Wednesday Nykol got a letter from Van. She was shocked; he had never written her before. The contents touched her, and tore at her heart. It was time for her to talk to her sons and tell them the entire truth about things. They needed to understand why she made some of the choices she made, and the reasons behind them.

She went to call home. After the call was accepted, she talked to her mother, Linda for a few minutes, and then asked to speak to Zi.

"What's up, Ma"?

"I Love You." Nykol made sure she told them that first thing every time she talked to them.

"I love you too."

"Will you call Van for me"?

"Yeah, Hold on." The phone clicked over. A few seconds later Van's voice came through.

"Hey, Van I Love You."

"Love you too, Did you get my letter"?

"Yeah, that's why I'm calling so we can talk."

"A'ight. I know it shocked you. I never wrote you before, but I felt I needed to get some things off my chest. When I was in the county I read a book 'Letters to a Young Black Man' and it got me to thinking. So I wrote."

"That's good; I've always told you to let me know what was on your mind, no matter what it is, good or bad. That's the only way we can get an understanding of what each other is feeling and why. But there are a lot of things you don't know and I don't know where to begin. I know I hurt you, but your grandma and I never got along, and we were always fighting or fussing. I didn't want you to witness that. So to avoid it I would leave for a while." Nykol was trying her best to explain her reason for not being there without getting into the ugly details.

"I have heard about some of the things you use to do. You were always with some man. You put men before me. You could have taken me with you."

She could hear the hurt and sadness in his voice.

"Van I know I put men before you and I have admitted that. Now as for what you heard about me you know I have never kept anything from you. Some of the things are true, but there were reasons why I did some of the things I did."

"Grandma said you use to fight her all the time, and stay gone because you wanted to be with men more than be at home with me."

"I don't know what all Linda is telling you, but she's not telling you everything. She always took her anger out on me; beating on me, hitting on me all the time and saying hateful things. Like 'I wish you were never born.'"

"I don't believe you. Maybe you deserved it. She hasn't done things like that to me." Those words blew Nykol. This child didn't know what he was saying.

"You don't have to believe me. I know what I went through, and if she would be real she would be honest about things. Some people hide behind secrets by building lies as truth because they are scared to face what really is."

No child deserved to be told that they should have never been born, nor did a child deserve to have a gun pulled on them. She couldn't bring herself to say anything about the real things that were buried deep in her and Linda's past.

"You ain't half the woman grandma Linda is." Van spit out with venom.

"I never claimed to ^{be} half the woman she is. Hell I don't want to be her either. I can only be me."

"You have one minute." The automated voice interrupted.

Damn she thought. "Look I love you Van and you can think and believe what you want, but I know the truth. I'm going to write you back okay, so please read it and think about the words you read."

"A'ight."

"Thank you for using Securus, Goodbye."

Nykol was upset and hurt the words her son said were like poison eating at her heart. She cried and cried. She couldn't form a single thought through the pain. She would write the letter once she got her mind settled.

Van was full of bitterness and sadness, but Nykol knew it stemmed from hurt he held inside. It made her wonder if Zi felt the same.

~~She was pregnant with he~~ ^{he} was three months pregnant with Zi when she was arrested. God only knows what stories he has heard regarding the reason why she was in prison.

Nykol didn't like dwelling on things regarding her charge. She never went into detail about the events that led up to that fateful day. She was scared she would lose her sons love and what little respect Van did have for her. The things she has done in the past were things she was ashamed of. Having to admit that she was weak was something she found hard to do.

In her mind, ^{if she} ~~is he~~ had stayed at home fussing and fighting with her mother, she was afraid she would end up taking out her anger and frustrations on Van like Linda did to her. Her mother took her anger with Charles, Nykol's Farther, out on Nykol. When Nykol got older and big enough she ^d had enough and started standing up for herself, which only made things worse.

Faye, Nykol's grandmother, tried to intervene, but so much bitterness towards Charles was in Linda's heart she didn't realize the pain and sadness she was heaping on her daughter or the burden she placed on her shoulders.

There were so many spiteful words..."I wish you were never born" was the favorite. Everything that went wrong in Linda's life was Nykol's fault. That's how her mother made her feel. Nykol would leave seeking love and approval from anywhere she could get it. Those times were more peaceful than living in a house with a mother who seemed to hate her.

When Nykol was pregnant with Van, she was scared to tell Linda for fear she would beat him out of her. Once Linda found out, she didn't physically abuse her, but the mental and verbal abuse was far worse.

"You ain't shit" ... "You're so stupid." ... "you ain't anything but a hoe, don't know man want you." ... "Bitch I can't stand you." With things like that always being said to her no one could make Nykol believe that her mother loved her or even liked her for that matter. Those words hurt worse than any licks she'd ever taken.

The worst incident was when Linda pulled a gun on her and said "Bitch I'll kill you."

That day was the day that Nykol knew for sure her mother hated her. Who would say that; do that to their own child.

It started when Linda asked Nykol to tell some boy to stop bouncing a ball outside her window, because she had to get up and go to work that night. Nykol did as she was asked. She came back in and sat down to watch TV. Nykol turned the volume down so low she could barely hear it. She didn't want Linda to come and say anything to her about it. Unfortunately, the boy started back bouncing the ball. The next thing she knew Linda had come in and slapped Nykol so hard it turned her head. She jumped up, grabbed the bat that belonged to her brother and started to swing, but Faye stepped in and told her to go outside.

As she was going out the door Nykol heard her grandmother tell Linda "Now I done told you if you keep treating that child like that she's going to snap. She doesn't deserve what you do."

Not even five minutes later Linda comes out with a gun and points it in Nykol's face and says, "Bitch I'll kill you."

She decided then that she would not take anymore. She was 18 now and had a son; she would not allow this woman to continue breaking her down.

"If you don't pull that trigger I'm going to beat your ass." All the anger, pain and sadness were boiling over and she couldn't hold it in. That was the first time Nykol had ever put her hands on the woman who gave birth to her. For every slap, punch, verbal assault, Nykol gave double; releasing all that was pent up inside.

She regretted that day, and wished she could have avoided it. However her grandma Faye had a point... "Even a dog gets tired." And "if you back a cat up in a corner, it will come out scratching."

Nykol left that ^{day} with her mind made up. She would not be back. As she was getting her things together to leave Faye slipped her some money. She went to get Van, but Linda wouldn't let her.

"If you take that boy out this house, I'm going to call DFAC and you will never get him back if I can help it." Linda spit with hate.

Nykol's anger began to stir. Faye put her hands on her shoulders. "I will make sure he's okay."

She left with tears in her eyes and bitterness her heart. She went to a friend's house. Nykol called every day to check on Van and when Linda was at work she went by to spend time with him. Nykol figured she was doing the right thing by avoiding another scene like that one. In between the visits though Nykol was with this man or that man searching for a love that she needed and wanted. It never came... she was lost, confused, hurt and disappointed. Her anger was replaced by depression. Nykol sought to fill the void in her heart only to end up in a situation she should have seen a mile away. The pain and sorrow that came from her past experiences blinded her into accepting a warped love that would change her life forever.