

## **L**AUGHING IN THE **D**ARK: **P**ROLOGUE

I stood with my forehead pressed as close as possible to the dark, tinted window of my jail cell. The window was long and narrow and the foot deep wall that framed it made it impossible to stand close. The thick glass blurred everything outside. I squinted and focused, concentrating all of my attention on the area where my mother said the family would stand and wave. It would be fine to see my grandparents and my aunt, but it was my daughter I really wanted to see. My daughter, who would be two years old in a few months.

A couple of minutes passed, and in that small space of time I rethought my entire life and how it had come to this absurd moment, when I became a 21-year-old girl in jail on a drug charge, a mother who had to wait for someone to bring my own daughter to glimpse me. I could not rub my hand across her fat, soft brown cheeks, or plait her curly hair the way I liked it. It was obvious to me, my life had to change. This was my first time in jail--and I promised myself it would be my last.

Men had helped to bring me to this place: my father, who I could not love and my boyfriend, who I loved too much. My father did not believe I could change. If he did, he kept his faith to himself, and thus, for years--even after his death--I would assume my father considered me just a little more than worthless.

Looking back, I see that I have no idea what he thought, this rigid Marine who played by American's rules. Parents are like mirrors for their children, the little girl looking at her father to see herself, her female self; in my father, I saw no hint of myself, no definition, or light, no shape of who I could become.

So when I was old enough, I tried to find myself in other places and other people. When I was old enough to want a man of my own, I chose young men who toted guns, burglarized houses, robbed stores and pulled flimflams. They were survivors, tough boys who said, "Fuck the white man and his ways." They made up their own rules and took what they wanted. When my school bus rolled pass their corner, I stared out the window at them swaggering and laughing, wearing the same clothes they had worn the day before because their night was just ending. I could smell their brazenness, their raw guts that I misinterpreted as power.

**When you're a black child in America, your inclination is to feel powerless--and you will in fact lack power, unless someone intervenes to teach you how to possess it. I had already bought into powerlessness. Being a black girl-child meant I had about as much influence in the world as there was in my itty bitty finger, or as much as I saw my mother hold in our family. I grabbed hold of these young men that other people called thugs, hustlers, or hoodlums. They were my power--and my freedom. What did I know about the power within me?**

**I did not want a man like my father, a flag-waving patriot, a Marine for eternity. He was a traitor, my young self thought, serving the very system that enslaved black people. When I wore an afro and refused to stand for the national anthem, my father proudly sported the same severe haircut the military gave him when he was 17 years old. When blacks in Washington took their anger to the streets after the assassination of Martin Luther King, my father laughed and told me, "Your people are rioting."**

**I thought I was revolutionary because I read H. Rap Brown, George Jackson, the Black Muslim and the Black Panthers' newspapers. But my intelligence was misguided. In my personal sphere, I was the perfect victim for men who preyed on women with low self-esteem, women who had not yet learned to say "No." Before and after my time in that jail cell, I would be physically and verbally brutalized and disrespected in an infinite number of ways by these men. I chose them; I attracted certain men just as a magnet attracts certain metal. One day I would understand this, that if I changed, I would attract a totally different kind of man--and, more astonishing to me, a different kind of life.**

**Before that day came, I would hit rock bottom more than once. I bounced back each time, but I didn't know how to hold on, to keep myself from falling again. I reached some dangerously low points, like the night I was brutally beaten and raped by a man I had dated just over a month. I thought I was getting over on Gabriel, a two-bit hustler with part of his earnings invested in a big gold tooth that shone in the middle of his smile. He bought me groceries, gave me money and paid for my daughter's daycare.**

**Then one night he took me to a friend's house, led me to the bedroom, and ordered me to undress. "He wants me to play whore while he plays pimp," I thought, turning coy to get in character. But once I was naked, he pulled out a black leather horse whip and shoved me on the bed. I felt the lash**

burn across my back. I cried out loud, shocked and in pain, rolled over, and scrambled to stand on the bed. The whip sank into my thigh. My back. Across my stomach. My chest. I fell on the bed. My flesh burned. Then I was numb. I could not hear or feel. It was as if I existed outside of my body and I was floating somewhere on the ceiling. I looked down and saw Gab stretch my body out like an old rag doll. He climbed on top of me and had sex while I watched him from above. I was dying--and I knew it. But I felt an overwhelming grief that trembled in my bones--a sadness for my mother. Someone was going to tell her that her oldest child had been found naked, beaten to death. For my mother, I returned to my troubled life and my wounded body.

I bounced back, but I would be abused by other men in other ways. Before Gab, before this prison cell, I had been raped before, and used heroin, hallucinogenics, uppers, downers and nearly every drug available on the streets. Even after Gabriel's assault, I would return to jail for shoplifting and fail repeatedly at my attempt to turn my life around. I would learn that change doesn't happen overnight; that sometimes it takes years, particularly if you're trying to remake yourself from your roots.

I would, in fact, sometimes forget my goal because I was so busy just trying to put one foot in front of another, trying to live through one day, then another. Working in low-paying jobs as a clerk-typist and teletype operator; making it through periods of unemployment, working late nights with a catering group serving at white country clubs. Budgeting carefully, never able to save; searching for the right daycare center for Andrea, trying to turn an ugly, cheap apartment into a cheerful home a child would love to live in. And always, desperately searching for that man who would make me feel better. All of this made me forget sometimes that what I was really trying to do was to change my life.

But I did it. Before I could see the relationship between one part of my life and another, I worked on different sections of it, separately. I went to a community college to study English, took business courses to learn shorthand so I could get better secretarial jobs. I read self-help books, pop psychology that introduced me to the notion that there was untapped power within me. New friends entered my life, old ones fled. Throughout everything, I wrote. It seemed a natural progression: the child who read books to escape grew into a young woman who wrote to relieve herself of pain. Writing always consoled me, had always been my way of talking to God--and to myself.

Now, in my job as a reporter at the Washington Post, I run into young girls who remind me of my old self. I see them in courtrooms where they sit by loyally as their boyfriends are sentenced for selling crack or much too often, for murder. I see them standing in line during visiting hours at the D.C. jail, many of them toting babies on their hips. I have talked to them, told them my story even as I listened to theirs. But, like me at their age, they are largely silent victims. The media always cover their boyfriends, generally overlooking them. This oversight, I know, probably reinforces their own sense of powerlessness.

So this is my ode to those young sisters, those children with womanish ways, who give it up before there is really anything to give; those tender block girls who I did not have enough time to talk to because I was on deadline. I want them to know that no matter how low they fall, they can get back up; no matter how many times they stumble, they can still walk tall; that neither racism nor sexism can stop a determined mind, or a heart beating with love for the very body that carries it. My stomach hurt with excitement and fear as I waited to glimpse my daughter. I saw my grandmother first, her short, round body. Then my red-headed aunt. And finally, my daughter! She was in my grandfather's arms, laughing at him. Then my mother said something to my grandfather and he lifted my little girl onto his broad shoulders.

For years, when I conjured up this memory of them standing outside, I saw my father holding my daughter. Then just a year ago, my mother told me that it was my grandfather who had held her--and not my father. My father had not come to see me because he had to work. I realized then that I imagined the scene the way I wished it had been, because I cannot imagine a father not going to visit his daughter in jail and because I always wanted my father to be the father I created in my head. That father, the imaginary one, would have hurried to his daughter's side, and work never would have stopped him from going there to see for himself that she was okay. Once she was on my grandfather's shoulders, I could see my daughter's face more clearly, her big round eyes, her bushy eyebrows. She was wearing a play set that I didn't recognize. Who bought it? I ached from the fear that already her life was slipping away from mine.

Mother pointed up to the third floor windows, but not exactly to the one where I was standing. She blew a kiss toward the jail. Andrea watched her, then she touched her small hand to her mouth and threw a kiss, too, flinging her arms wide. She laughed and I strained, as if I could really hear her giggles; trying to remember the exact silliness in that high pitch.

**Mother pointed up again and Andrea looked, searching the way children do when they're not sure what they're looking for. She looked at the sky. The building. Her grandmother. I waved, but no one saw me.**

**Andrea was staring at the wrong window, in the wrong direction. I imagined mamma saying, "No, baby. Over there. Your mother is over there."**

**Tears dripped down to my ugly green prison dress. My shoulders shook, as I tried to hold back the fear, the hurt, the hopelessness, as I tried to be cool. My friend Patricia walked over to me and put her hands on my shoulders.**

**"My daughter can't find me," I said.**