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# Navigating the Conversation: Sexual Abuse in the Black Home and the Church

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**Navigating the Conversation: Sexual Abuse in the Black Home and the Church**

Saundra Johnson

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MA Capstone Project

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## **Abstract**

According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), sexual abuse is an all-encompassing non-legal term that includes crimes like sexual assault, rape, and sexual abuse. Often, victims of sexual abuse will rely on their own cultural biases, religious teachings or seek support from their faith communities to navigate their experience of victimization. Cultural norms and religious teachings, under the shield of repentance and forgiveness can normalize sexual abuse.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to first take the opportunity to thank God for allowing me the ultimate strength to live through all my experiences, good and bad with the ability to share them through ongoing testimonials as my conduit. With the most profound and heartfelt thank you, I would like to thank my children, my nieces, my sister, my mom, family, and friends for their continued encouragement, authenticity, and honesty as I navigate these difficult and sometimes turbulent waters of full transparency.

## Methods

My capstone project, consisting of an autoethnography and a mini conference, consists of study through a series of short vignettes of my personal life experiences intertwined through faith and culture as a survivor of sexual abuse. "Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences, beliefs and practices" (Adams et al., 2017). Through storytelling, song lyrics, colloquialisms, vehicles of expression, and emotion evoked through my own experiences, I intend to use this research method to engage an audience, inspire victims of sexual abuse to find their voice, and encourage families and church leadership to create a safe space for victims to take ownership in communicating their experiences in settings without judgment.

My personal life experiences will serve as the research tool in understanding the interconnection of Black family culture, faith, religion, and the historical interconnection as it relates to women who have been victims of sexual abuse. By sharing firsthand experiences, photographs, and connecting these stories to biblical scripture, quotes, and cultural proverbs, as they correlate to my own experience as a Black Female survivor of sexual abuse, I intend to bring full circle awareness, understanding, demonstrate healing, and forgiveness as a survivor.

This project is not for the readers or subject to be use as a method of formal accusation for the abusers, as judgment of the abused nor to critique church leadership, but to educate and bring awareness to the misinterpretation and misuse of scripture, cultural biases, and cultural proverbs as a means of advocacy for female victims of sexual abuse.

The primary purpose of my capstone project is to highlight the parallels between the Black Church and the Black Family as it relates to sexual abuse. In particular, the study

examines the issue of how these institutions work to cover up accusations of sexual abuse and marginalize victims of abuse. I will examine how the influence of Black family intertwined with Black church culture, cultural proverbs, power, and biblical teachings are used as a system to normalize sexual abusive behaviors. Through colorful textural content, this research methodology will serve as a conduit to demonstrate the truth in navigating a difficult topic.

In addition to my autoethnography, I hosted a one-day mini conference. This conference, entitled “Behind the Door/Behind the Cloth” was held locally in Suffolk, Virginia on April 22, 2023. The conference was an in-person faith-based conference aimed at educating spiritual leadership on how to create safe spaces for victims of sexual abuse to engage in conversation without judgement. The conference addressed the deep effects of sexual abuse, as well as the parallels of secrecy behind the doors of the home and the church. Through fruitful conversations and advocacy, the conference addressed positionality, transparency, judgement, and accountability as it relates to sexual abuse and faith.

This autoethnography is an opportunity to use my firsthand experiences as a research tool into understanding how a victim of sexual abuse, through faith learning and understanding or lack thereof, can provide others with similar experiences insight to healing and researchers an agent to study. I want to be clear that the purpose of my autoethnography is not to criminalize, cast judgement or to prosecute.

## Literature Review

### From Slavery to the Sanctuary

African slaves established and relied heavily on the Church. Relying on the teachings of Christianity, mandated by their slave-owners to colonize their stolen Africans and as a way of distancing the slaves from their customs, beliefs, and traditions of their mother land. The slaves would instead use these teachings to find solace through the practice of respite, worship and faith gathering. “The Africans who came to America had a myriad of religious beliefs and practices, including the belief in a transcendent, benevolent God who created the universe and was its ultimate Provider and though Europeans did not introduce the God of the Judeo-Christian ethic to Africans, seemingly intractable problems have faced those contending that African religious beliefs and practices survived both the "Middle Passage" and the effects of slavery” (Jones, 2022). Through elements of prayer, song and preaching, these elements of hope and freedom from political and social oppression for slaves hold true even in today’s worship experience in the Black Church.

From the middle passage of slave ships to the fields, African American Women have historically been the primary targets for sexual abuse by white patriarchal power. Sexual abuse, a behavior normalized by white oppressors, was a way that slave owners would satiate their rapacious sexual appetite while exerting their power over vulnerable African American Women. African American women were more than a means of wealth through their labor for slavery’s white authority. “They also developed an extensively racialized system for the full social and sexual control of Black women, men, and children. Among other things, the sexual violence targeting Black women (and often Black men) signaled and reinforced

substantial white male power. It directly expressed aggressive white masculinity, and often white stereotypes of the hypersexuality of the Black women and men they attacked” (Feinstein, 2019).

A cycle of sexual abusive behavior that persists beyond slavery and leadership of powerful white men, exists among present day African American male leadership often hidden under the ruse of spiritual guidance. “The Black church has institutionalized the oppressive patriarchal position of their historical perpetrators” (Matthews, p.45). This behavior, often emulated, has continued a cycle of silenced behavior sheltered under the auspice of religion.

African American women are more likely to experience sexual abuse but less likely to disclose the crime. In fact, "A recent study discovered that black females are likely to experience three times the amount of sexual abuse as females in white churches" (Matthews, 2012). Additionally other scholars have noted that one explanation of the culture of silence among African American victims of sexual abuse. “For centuries, rape of Black women was both widespread and institutionalized, and the legal system — itself often weaponized by white people — offered little protection for black rape victims. In fact, through the 19th century, rape laws were “race specific” and did not recognize black women as victims” (*Black Survivors and Sexual Trauma* 2020). Creating a contentious divide among the Black community and the church, conversations around the topic of sexual abuse and how this issue should be addressed has typically silenced those dialogs and its victims, minimizing the response to the lack of moral ethics, and limiting discipline for perpetrators of sexual abuse.

By fostering a culture of sisterhood and nurturing, an extension of the black home, the Black church became a space where African American women come together for care, socialization, community, and fellowships through ministries such as pastor's aid, deaconesses,

ushers, choir, hospitality and more. The historical paradigm of Black women and church is long standing. “Women, making up 70 to 90 percent of Black congregations, have always found the institution of the church a place of refuge, of solace and hope. As far back as African American history begins, during a time when their bodies were bound by the violence of slavery, black women gathered to worship communally a God who gave freedom and liberation in the salvific power of Christ” (Thomas, 2016).

Externally, the Black Church has been foundational in American social movements. It is often defined as the “parent of the Civil Rights movement.” There is a clear connection between the Black Church, the Civil Rights Movement and its lineage to the now Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and many social movements alike. Therefore, as a parent and elder to these movements, the Black church has a responsibility to address sexual abuse by creating a safe space for knowledgeable and nonjudgmental conversations around the topic. Using autoethnography as a tool for research, we can begin to pursue the social change needed to engage in knowledgeable discourse on the topic of sexual abuse.

Until the topic of sexual abuse is no longer a taboo topic of discussion, the Black church and community will suffer, leaving victims uncomfortable in the space that should be their space of comfort and perpetrators hiding under the rouse of repentance as opposed to accountability.



## Chapter 1

January 17, 2019

*For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open*

*Luke 8:17 (NIV)*

In the height of the R. Kelly sexual abuse claims, I placed calls to family members and friends to gossip about the media frenzy surrounding the accusations of sexual abuse by R. Kelly and to gage the sentiments of others. I wanted to discuss the news of the R. Kelly sexual abuse and molestation accusations, link it with the news around Bill Cosby's recent charges of sexual abuse and other that were the latest hot news topics. These were easy conversations to have because they reflected the sinful behavior of strangers, seen through media networks and social media outlets. Because of what I learned through the media, I had already sentenced R. Kelly and Bill Cosby alike. I wanted to share my opinion with everyone that would listen. I had an opinion; it was mine to share. I based it on my own experiences and the media confirmed my belief. The media allowed me the right to examine a story that I knew so well but now I inserted familiar and intimate faces in place of R. Kelly and Bill Cosby. The victims of the R. Kelly and Bill Cosby gave me an opportunity to insert my story into their proverbial space.

On January 19, 2019, I made a phone call that would redirect my gossip of the news that was hitting every media network across the country. This call opened a pandora's box to my own family secrets of sexual abuse. The family member on the other end of that conversation disclosed an unexpected accusation of sexual abuse within my family that made the R. Kelly gossip no longer prudent. I no longer was able to hide behind the R. Kelly news. This

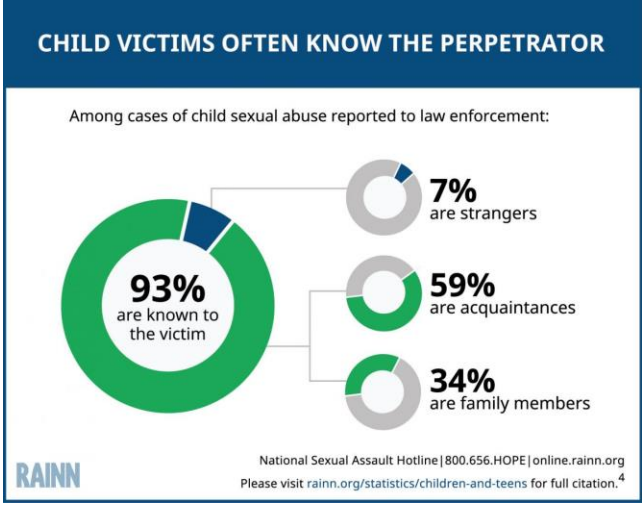
conversation would push me full force, without warning into my own truths about sexual abuse. This phone changed the narrative of secrecy about sexual abuse for my life. That day, I chose to no longer be silent about the generational curse that not only tormented my own family, but like many families with comparable stories, affected by the R. Kelly case, plagued African American families and communities, making this discourse prudent.

The intent of my desire to no longer be silent and my eagerness to expose the perpetrators and victims of my family's secret was not to create a divide among my family. The intent was to create an awareness that the foundation of faith, trust, and loyalty that our family so firmly stood on had been broken and to this day, has not been the same. The purpose of the exposure was to create a space for safe conversation to rebuild the trust in our familial relationships.

Trusting the care of your children to others is never easy. Whether to trust the care of your children to family should never have to be a question. There is an unwritten rule that says that family does not hurt family. But unfortunately, this is where the hurt for our family began. I trusted my family. I trusted that the faith that had been instilled in us was enough to limit our small squabbles to short periods of time, create love and trust that was unbreakable and allow our family to collectively withstand the sins of the world.

The family reunion that followed that January 2019's disclosure did not feel the same as the years prior. During that year's family reunion, there was a still in the air. There was an elephant in the room. The elephant in the room was the disclosure of sexual abuse within our own family. This was no longer a story that we read or watched through the news media; this was now our family's story. A trusted elder family member has molested and sexually abused a younger family member and the family's reluctance to discuss the situation.

Statistics show that 93% of sexual abuse victims are known to their perpetrators. Of that 93%, 34% are abused by family members. Until 2019 day, like many others, I never spoke about sexual abuse in the family. We never spoke about sexual abuse in the family. These discussions were limited to “other folks” family and the news. If it happened in our home, those conversations would be limited to the home only, the perpetrator would never be punished, the victim would be shamed and we would continue as “normal,” for whatever normal looked like or appeared to be.



## Chapter 2

### The Hollow Sounds of an Old Church's Wooden Floor

Kings 1 6:15 (NIV)

*He lined its interior walls with cedar boards, paneling them from the floor of the temple to the ceiling, and covered the floor of the temple with planks of juniper.*

To heal you, you must first acknowledge the hurt. To break generational curses, we must first acknowledge that they exist. The fear of shame, embarrassment and judgement make these hurts difficult to speak of and acknowledge and make conversations around the topic challenging. The topic of sexual abuse can create divides in families, in friendships, communities and even the church. My family is rooted in the church and grounded in faith but with those roots there is a history of hurt, a history of trauma, a history of secrets that share the same quiet space in our homes that they do in our church.

My earliest memories of church and faith started with my grandparents. I spent most of my summers through my teenage years in Sorrento, Florida with my grandparents. I spent every mango season as the southerners called it in Florida. I stress “every” because when I think about those summers, it was not until I became an adult that I learned to appreciate what those summers truly meant.

Those summers meant snapping green beans, picking oranges, leaning up against my grandparent's fence eating an entire half of a watermelon. Those summers meant the smell of slop, burned possum hairs and an occasional mad dash down the sandy road, meanwhile being chased and pecked by an occasional wild rooster. Summers in Sorrento Florida meant

temperatures of one thousand degrees or at least that is what it felt like and carefree shoeless play time every day except on Sundays for church, not out of necessity, simply out of desire.

My grandmom would ingrain in me the rules of our church culture. Most of those rules I still hold true to this very day, minus the long skirt or dress and nylons. Today I may be seen wearing long pants if I choose sneakers and even denim wear. I was always told that the bible said, “come as you are.” And so conveniently, like many of us, took that to mean that I had the right to dress the way that I wished, only to learn that this was simply one of those biblical terms that made it convenient for lay members to interpret scripture based on convenience rather than truth.

Cross your legs! No eating! No chewing gum! No talking! Stand up when the Pastor tells you to open your Bible! Sit down when the Pastor is preaching! Say “amen” when you agree with the spoken words! These were just a few of the “rules of the sanctuary.” There were so many that I could hardly keep up, but now most of them seem to flow naturally. Admittedly, these unspoken rules are still a little hard to remember. But a glance over to the right or to the left side of the pew could easily put one back on track. If the person next to me has the rule correct, then we will all be correct, if not, then we will all be wrong.

My grandmother was a church “Mother,” a title that is held in high esteem for the black church. When she died in 2012, her passing was held in the same regard. Thirty days of mourning with her seat in the sanctuary covered in black for the entire thirty days was the rule of the church. This was a tradition that until my grandmother died, I was not aware existed. After further research, I learned that this mourning period is more of a tradition for a Queen. A Queen my grandmother was, so the mourning period was certainly fitting.

“In both secular and community settings, there are powerful and respected older women addressed by the title “Mother.” In secular setting, such Mothers are often the heads of black women’ organizations and hold positions of power and authority in more broadly based community and civil rights organizations. In sacred places particularly the churches, they are occasionally pastors, sometimes evangelists, more often pastors’ wives and widows, but most often leaders of organized church women (missionaries, deaconesses, mothers’ boards, etc.)” (p. 61. Gilkes).

As an African American female, these unwritten rules, because I have yet to see where they derived, was a culture of rules that would later define not only the rules of the church but in many ways the culture of the home. The Black women of the church would play an integral, if not leading role in shaping the ethics and culture of the church. “African American Christianity is not only a product of black women’s presence but also of their active and assertive role in shaping the spirituality and ethics of black churches” (Gilkes, 2001).

Those summers spent with my grandparents in Florida, I learned to worship, learned about faith, and learned the word of God. My grandmom would wrap my offering in a handkerchief, tie that handkerchief in a knot and we would walk down a dirt path to New Hope Baptist Church.

My grandparents played an integral role to this church. Through a lot of fundraising efforts, they helped to build this church from the ground up. This church still exists and remains an integral part of the Sorrento, Florida community. In fact, I recently learned that the current Pastor of the church and I attended pre-school together. Unfortunately, my most memorable moment of him is that I struck him in the head with a hot wheel ace car when I was five years

old. I assume that he no longer wears the scar from that almost fifty-year-old event. Being a Pastor, a man of faith, I would like to think that he has forgiven me for this past discretion.

My earliest memory of the design of the church is that of everything wooden. The benches, made of wood, had no cushioning to protect you from sliding. I assumed it was by design to keep the members from falling asleep or prevented me from sliding back and forth in my Sunday best (along with a slight pinch from grandmom to keep still). I later learned that the early church was completed in an analogous manner. There was something special about the wood. The care of the wood required meticulous work. Plank by plank, the pride that the church Sexton, responsible for the care of the building and the grounds and committed to do the “work of the Lord” showed through the shine of the floors, the scent of the air in the building and the manicure of the exterior. This was their Ministry. The care of the church carried a certain pride and humbleness for those that maintained it as well as those that worshipped in it.

The rules for the governing my life, the expectation set forth on how to live a righteous life started with my grandparents and New Hope Baptist Church. These first memories are where I often turn to when grappling with understanding the misfortunes of life.

My early years in the church was where I learned how gendered roles would take full form, all under the “work of the Lord.” I began to see how easily “the word” could be transformed to either give a better understanding of scripture or to allow misinterpretation and mis-teachings to happen.

These early experiences and first introduction to faith is where I first learn about the bonds of sisterhood that was created within the walls of the church. There is a sisterhood within

the Black church that is like no other. As an African American female, I would learn that the church was an extension of the home, a place of refuge and community.

Where culturally African American women have come together to fellowship through ministries, they have relied on the church and its leadership to be the haven from the negative exterior elements of the world. The church is a place where vulnerable women often seek peace, protection, love, and support, and has historically been found to be an extension of home for African American women.

There is something to be said about the bonds created in the Black church. The shared spaces brought together by faith, food and fellowship is something that would be the root of my existence. With similar discourse, this existence would be the culture in which I would learn how to communicate within the walls of my home and within the walls of the church.

The Black church, defined as ministering to a Black congregation, has historically been a safe space for African American women, fostering a culture of sisterhood. Spaces where African American women come together for fellowships through ministries include the Women's Ministry, Pastor's aid, Deaconesses, Ushers, Choir, Hospitality, among others. These spaces, traditionally structured within a place of worship, also became a place of socialization and community by default for the most vulnerable. African American women, the most religious people in the nation according to a nationwide survey conducted by the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family foundation, are “more likely to turn to faith in times of turmoil, about 87 percent of black women — much more than any other group — say they turn to their faith to get through”, get through difficult times. Black women, across education and income levels, say living a religious life is a greater priority than being married or having children, and this call to



faith either surpasses or pulls even with having a career as a life goal, the survey shows” (Labbé-DeBose, 2012).

On any given Sunday, a quick visual of the pews would reveal the ratio of women to men in the church. “Research shows that a higher proportion of women than men say they have a best friend in their congregation. Again, women were found to lean toward an empirical rather than a rational basis for faith than men. Women help build the faith in the family” (Fahmy, 2018)

As Black churches have historically been the extension of the Black home, it typically mimics similar behaviors, ethics, and ideologies, managing the topic of sexual abuse in a similar fashion. Historically, communication within the Black home, specifically regarding sexual abuse has been a topic that has been kept discrete. Because the church has traditionally been an extension of the Black family, the same communication dynamic has been translated in how members of the Black church communicate on the topic of sexual abuse to its members and to the public.

Managing sexual abuse internally not only opens the door to allowing leadership to be protected from the accountability of proper communication and discourse, but it also upholds the hurt of the victims, often leaving the victim with broken relationships within the church. Because most Black churches are autonomous, lacking a reporting system for indiscretions, abuse is typically only discovered when law enforcement has been alerted.

### Chapter 3

#### Grandma's Moles – Secrets Untold

Proverbs 17:6

*“Children’s children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children.”*

Every time that I look in the mirror, looking back at me is the face of my paternal grandmother. The moles, the moles on my face certainly belong to her. The little black markings that document my history, of whose lineage I belong to are a constant reminder of the God-fearing woman who birthed the man that gave life to me. They are the markings of the woman who so openly welcomed my summer visits, my first preschool adventures, and the person who as my Uncle Beau would often say “your grandmom thinks the sun rises and sets when you wake up in the mornings.” These moles would represent womanhood, a strong Black woman and more importantly, faith.

A while ago, I ran across a picture of my grandmom. In the picture, she was on her knees, next to her bed, scarf tied to the side (barely hanging on her head) and wearing her infamous muumuu (the name given to the nightgown with no frills). She was obviously in prayer. This was routine for her and would be the foundation that she would instill in her children, passed down to her grandchildren and generations to come.

Grandmom did not speak ill of others, at least that is what I always believed. I believed that although she never spoke of the wrongdoings of others, she knew of them and would store

them in her subconscious. I knew because as she aged, she would become more verbal, often speaking of stories of the past and expelling her first thoughts, no longer retaining them in secret.

One specific incident stands out. While visiting her in the nursing home, I met an older resident named Manuel. Mr. Manuel would sit in the hallway daily, blanket on his lap and would have few conversations with others. When he did speak, he spoke in Spanish only. I shared with my grandmom excitedly that I had a conversation with Mr. Manuel and our conversation was in Spanish. Grandmom immediately blurted out “I don’t talk to that man, with his mannish self” she exclaimed. I later learned that the reason Mr. Manuel had a blanket over himself was because he would masturbate while watching the nurses and the women in the nursing home.

Grandmom would end her rant about Mr. Manuel by exclaiming “he’s just fresh.” She certainly did not mean extra clean, with a splash of brut cologne. She would mean that his behavior by way of masturbation and promiscuity were disrespectful and unwarranted sexual acts. To think of Mr. Manuel as anything other than a cantankerous old man with natural desires was nothing that I could imagine. Besides, what else would he do with his worms? Yes, according to my mom and maternal grandmom, old men have worms. As per their non-medical credentials, old men reach a point where they no longer produce sperm, they produce worms instead.

I wondered if Mr. Manuel knew what he was doing. I wondered if this behavior surfaced as he got older and because of suppressed thoughts from his younger years. *“They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green,”* Psalm 92:14

I am forever grateful for my time spent with my grandparents, particularly my paternal grandmother. Generations watch adults and she certainly led by a notable example and with such a strong influence on my life today. Observing her and her diligence in how she conducted herself and her commitment to stand strong in her faith is something that I strive to emulate daily.

***Meet My God-Fearing Grandmom***



## Chapter 4

### Fighting Goliath – One Battle at a Time

1 Samuel 17:7

*His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels.<sup>[c]</sup> His shield bearer went ahead of him*

Goliath, the biblical Philistine beast, a giant as described in the bible, was one to be feared and David's battle to fight. If you know this story, you know that King Saul would offer David clothing and a sword, but David needed to fight the battle of the giant with his own clothing, and with his weapon of choice, a sling shot and pebbles. David knew that this battle was not so much about the size of his weaponry but his belief that whatever his choice would be, God would protect him.

My Goliaths are my experiences of sexual abuse, molestation, those that choose to allow secrets of abuse to exist and those that shut down the voices of the abused leaving them feeling unsafe to speak their truths, and thus limiting their ability to heal. My choice of battle attire are my experiences, and my choice of weaponry is my voice. I would defeat my Goliaths one by one, face to face, pockets loaded with words made of stones and a sling shot made of my voice in tow.

Goliath Number 1 first entered my life between the ages of five and six. He came in the form of a babysitter; his battleground would be our home and his weapon of choice he would describe as "an exercise." We would meet on the battlefield whenever this 16-year-old, with the mental capacity to know his wrong doings would babysit me and my brother. I will spare the

readers of the details, although very vivid, but between the ages of five and six years old, my faith would be tested. This is where I would learn the art of secrecy. At the early age of five, I learned the stench of a condom, the bad breath of a 16-year-old alcoholic and the pain of not knowing how to use my own voice as a means of protection. At the age of five, I did not have the mental capacity to understand how to fight the giant in my life, to learn that my voice could be a weapon. My 16-year-old giant would use his position of authority and power to keep my voice at bay with the threat of bodily harm.

Show us what he did? Can you show us how he did it? These would be the questions the adults sitting in our living room posed to my five-year-old self. They learned about Goliath's behavior through his sister. He had been molesting his sister. She eventually found her voice. Her voice became my voice.

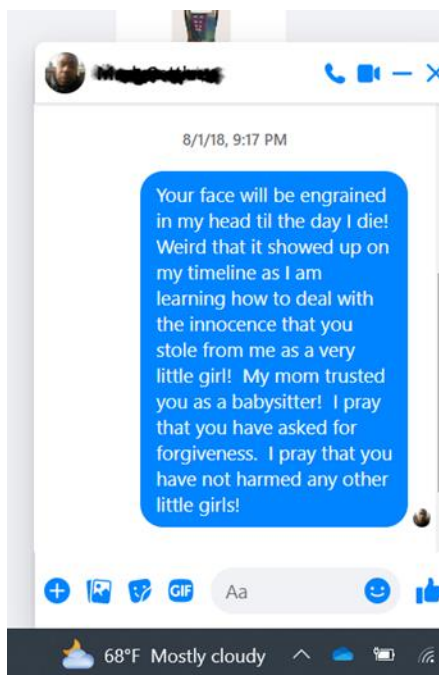
We, the family, did not talk much about "that time" after that. In fact, until recently, my mom never spoke about it at all. And although their failure to create any sort of discourse around my experiences with Goliath, I would relive the moment often. In fact, I would have the opportunity to face my Goliath on an open battlefield on more than one occasion since that 5-year-old little girl.

The first time that I faced Goliath number one was in our local 5 and 10 store. I was in my mid-twenties. Our second encounter happened in 2018. His profile appeared on my "person you may know" list on my Facebook. I recognized him immediately on both occasions. On both occasions, I donned my battle gear, my voice and my words and prepped them for battle. I approached him in the store and said to him as he was carrying a little girl in a papoose pouch

attached to the front of his body, “I hope you are doing the right things to that baby, and I do mean the right things.” I know at that point that he knew who I was, even over twenty years later. Our second encounter, I sent him a note through Facebook messenger. Once again, my weapon of choice, my voice, let him know how he showed up on my page. I recognized him immediately and I wasted no time to be on the front line.

Pictures, people and even scents can be triggers for victims and survivors. At least for me, these are my triggers. These are the elements of my battles with dealing with being a survivor of sexual abuse. These are the forces that the creating the revisiting of my traumatic experiences.

### ***Meet Goliath #1***



## Chapter 5

### Stolen Virginity

Exodus 22:16-17

*“If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.”*

How many times can a woman, child in my case, lose her virginity? If your virginity is taken, does it count as being a loss or is it considered stolen? If anyone asks me, and obviously no one did, I will say that if it is not given away, with the ability, understanding and mental capacity to give consent, then it is stolen and under the eyes of the law constitutes rape. But since I agreed that my autoethnography would not be the vehicle for judgement or prosecution, I will focus on the thievery alone, the act there of and not the punishment.

I have said that my virginity was stolen twice, once at the age of five and secondly at the age of twelve. And if I count the passive offerings of fifty cent pieces by an older male cousin as “hush money” in between those years and the ones that I never consented to be a willing participant afterwards, there would be more than two but who is counting? I never thought about the count, I simply remember the names and the incidents. According to the scripture, Exodus 22: 16-17, someone owes my dad a wealth of money. But since my father is deceased and was only aware of Goliath Number a, then at this point, these debts may not be worth the lives of the predatory precedent who prey on vulnerable children and women.



These conversations that were not spoken of in my home and certainly not preached about in the church. I am always looking for the healing aspects of the word. In my later years, this is what attracted me to church, this is what keeps me engaged. The needs of my individual experiences need to match the tone and the biblical teachings and preaching of the gospel. The two places where a victim should be able to find comfort, peace, refuge, and support without judgement should be their home and their place of worship. There are stories within the bible that address these issues, these are stories that Preachers gloss over. Perhaps because these are the ugly stories and truths that create uneasiness when preached about or that these stories trigger painful memories for lay members and even clergy.

Rarely do you hear a sermon about Tamar, at least from a heroic perspective. I will leave the entire story up to the reader to digest, to “peel the onion” back on. In short, Tamar was raped, and her virginity was stolen, stolen by her half-brother Prince Amnon at that. She tried to fight him off, saying no in many ways, Tamar expressed disapproval in seven ways. In fact, she told the prince that was he was doing to her, to their family, to their empire and community was wrong. These actions not only affect the abused, but they are also all encompassing.

Tamar would lose that battle and succumb to Amnon’s power over her. He stole her virginity because he was in a position of power, and she was in a position of vulnerability. But Tamar was a hero, her voice would be her weapon of choice. What may be minimal sound to some was a voice of strength to me. *“But now Tamar tore her robe and put ashes on her head. And then, with her face in her hands, she went away crying”* 2 Samuel 13:19. Tamar’s voice and her cry had been heard by others, by servants and by her brother Absalom. Her brother Absalom would get revenge for his sister, killing Prince Amnon. I am not saying that I am an advocate for

this type of vigilante justice. And although this is a biblical story, I admittedly do not feel any love lost for Amnon. I wanted Tamar to be victorious in her own right.

My Prince was not a Prince at all. In fact, he was a 17-year-old Pauper. Although, I was not his sister, being the best friend of one of his sisters should have at least counted for something close. The 17-year-old thief that stole my virginity at the age of twelve was already the father of three and would end his mass production of children with thirteen in total. Thirteen children, nine different mothers, an obvious defiance or lack of knowledge of the western definition of nuclear family. He unknowingly had a slave mentality of forced (or lack thereof) reproduction.

I wish that I could admit to this being a violation that happened once and of course not at all or that I used my voice to bring attention to the transgression, but instead this was on repeat. Any time that I would sleep over with my best friend, there would be an encounter with her older brother. One would ask, as I am sure that you are “why continue to stay over”? Why have a friendship with this person that continues through this day? By the way, he and I are connected through social media. Unfortunately, I have asked myself the same question. Tupac sang it well. He understood it; understood me. For a minute, I was Brenda. In fact, a few of the lines of his song Brenda’s Got A Baby made me think about this relationship or should I say lack thereof and where it was then for me at twelve years old and unfortunately a story of many other twelve-year-old girls being molested regularly by someone that they know well.

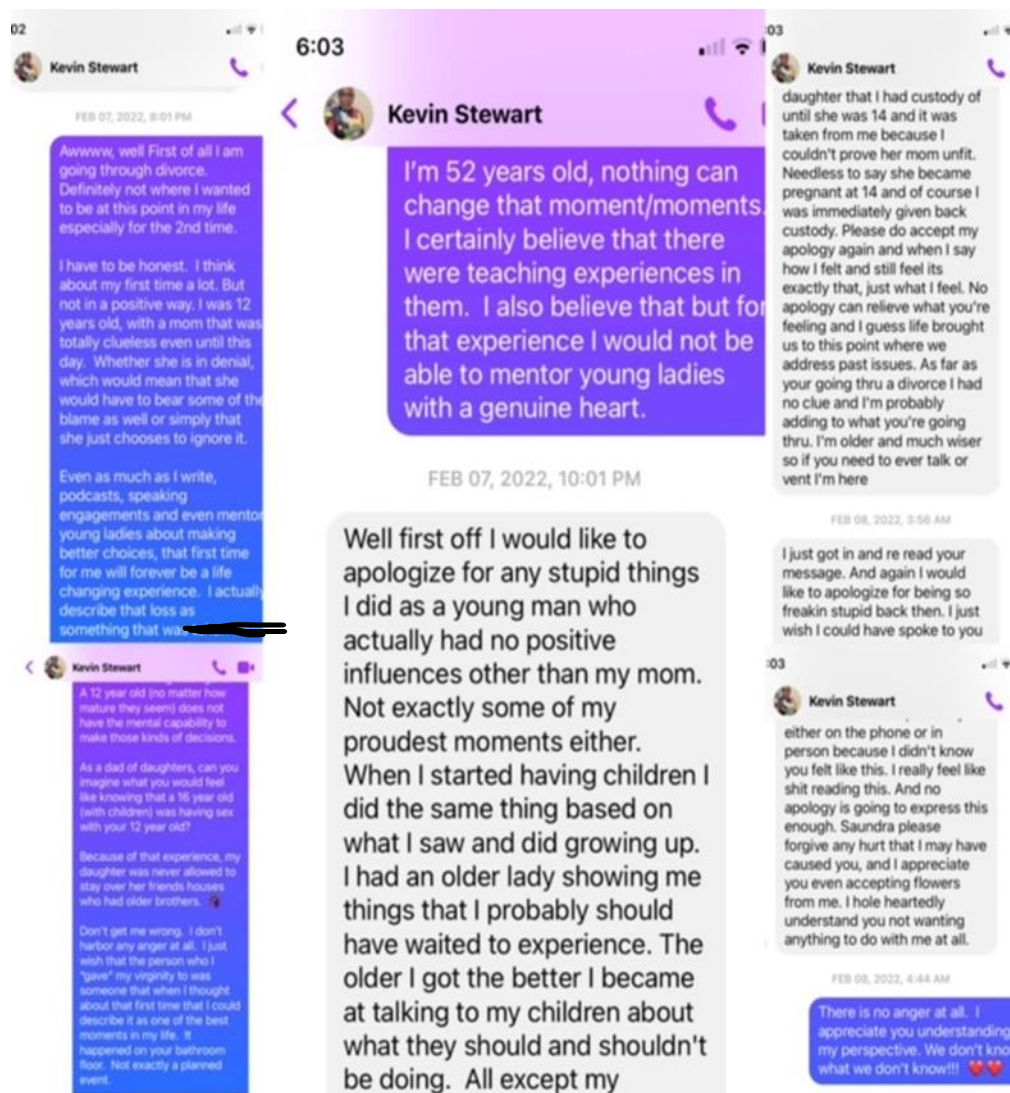
“In love with the molester, who's sexing her crazy

And yet and also, she thinks that he'll be with her forever

And dreams of a world with the two of them are together

I can say that I recently addressed it with him. His view of the experience was of course different from mine.

Meet Goliath #2



## Chapter 6

P.U.S.S.Y. Doesn't Have a Face!

2 Kings 9:30

*“Then Jehu went to Jezreel. When Jezebel heard about it, she put on eye makeup, arranged her hair and looked out of a window”*

Why my mom would always spell out the word pussy when referring to the female genitalia never made any sense to me. She would spell it out as if spelling it out made it less vulgar or less intrusive. She often uses colloquialisms like these. These are the terms that have been passed from generation to generation, whether through our own families or simply as shared terminology to make the truths easy to bear.

Any time we would have conversation around sexual abuse or men who cheat on their mates, she would always say the same thing “girl...p.u.s.s.y doesn't have a face.” I understood what she meant. She meant that men do not care who they have sex with. To her, a vagina is a vagina, and the face of the woman does not matter to a man. Admittedly, as much as there are some truths to her opinion, I would err on the side that all vaginas do not look the same. Not that I planned to do a google picture search or anything like that, there is no doubt that there are differences.

She would have many of these sayings and with each one, there was always a curiosity in the truth in their meanings. “Old men have worms,” her way of saying never date or have sex with a man that is too old. These men do not have sperm, they carry worms. This would be her motherly advice for dating older men. To her, this meant that older men carried sexually

transmitted diseases. Of course, I did my research and no there is not any documented validity to this motherly information nor any medical research that claims this information to be tried and true. This is a common belief passed on from many of our Black moms through generations. I have certainly given my daughter the same advice. Although her message was not intended from a biblical perspective, perhaps it is how it came to existence. *Isaiah 66:24* “*Then they will go forth and look On the corpses of the men Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm will not die. And their fire will not be quenched. And they will be an abhorrence to all mankind.*”

“We sit on millions of dollars every day” my mom says and “women should never be broke.” What? And she always follows it up with “And I don’t want nothing old but a dollar.” In translation what she meant was this: Women are powerful. They have an uncanny ability to use their body, right or wrong for money. With that, no dating old men. The only thing that an old man is good for is money! I am sure that one would think of this thought as shallow and certainly women have more to offer than our bodies but amid “girl talk” and over a glass of wine, these are conversations that we simply have.

There is a lot to take away from her spirit about the relationships between women and men. I would take these sayings to mean that they are the symbol of the vagina is more than an anatomical part of the woman’s body but the power that being a woman holds. From the beginning of time with Eve, women hold an undeniable strength in the anatomy. The ability to pass life through is powerful alone. So, in reality, P.U.S.S.Y does have a face, it is the face of women, it is the power of women, and it is the voice of women.

No one ever speaks about Jezebel in a positive way. Typically, when the name Jezebel comes up in conversation it usually relates to the spirit of a woman as having that of a “Jezebel Spirit.” Referring to a woman who is evil with a demeanor of whoredom.

Our spirit is not about Jezebel, covered in makeup, wig and fine clothes as she would appear in today’s design, adorned in locks or natural hair or fake eye lashes, manicured nails and the latest trend of high-top sneakers and skirts.

Jezebel was a queen, respected for being a Martyr for the cause. It was not about her last move, sexually charged and made up to entice her killer. The focus is less about the gruesome way that she perished but rather that for which she perished. She perished for her own right, to choose life and her death as she wished.

“The emphasis on Jezebel’s womanliness is not about sex. Jezebel will be thrown to her death by eunuchs, men on whom seduction skills would be of no avail. It is Jezebel’s own sense of herself. Jezebel is a woman, culturally constructed through the artifice of beauty, that she will go to her death. She is a queen until the end, determined to go to her death on her own terms” Jezebel lives on her terms and dies a martyr to her people, representing her gods, her husband, and her place as queen mother.” (p. 41 Jezebel Unhinged – Tara Lomax)

I will take this spirit any day of the week. The willingness to share your personal trauma is not easy. The risk of scrutiny, of judgement to be a voice for change and justice is worth having a Jezebel Spirit.

## Chapter 7

### Vulnerability

*But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.*

2 Corinthians 12:9

Being in a space where one is willing to be transparent means being comfortable in allowing others to have insight, opinions and unfortunately caste judgement. But I also believe that through the writing and reading of an autoethnography that it can help researchers and others with shared experiences to foster a deeper understanding of topics that are hard to digest like sexual abuse, molestation, and religion.

Being vulnerable has allowed me to take a chance that my personal information, no matter the shame, guilt, grief or fear, will allow me the opportunity to give voice to someone that may not be able to speak, allow places of worship to give space for victims to heal without judgement and to educate on the prowess used by perpetrators to abuse.

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