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“Title TBD”

Our first artist showcase was in what was once a strip mall theatre-turned into a church. It took my mother, sister, and I a good while to find it, sequestered at the back of the strip with a vinyl banner as its only external signage. “That’s how you know it’s the hood” my mother said. She would know. Just a few months before, in late November, my mother informed my sister and I about the showcase. It was to be run by her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc and a family friend who is the head of her chapter was eager to have us attend. The event was created to expose the local community to art while giving exposure to local artists. All the while I had been fine, but upon pulling into the parking lot and seeing all the people I would have to interact with carrying art pieces into the building I felt my anxiety spike, so I did what I usually do. “I hate this I hate this I hate this,” I muttered to myself. Overhearing, Mama scolded me with, “Don't say *that*.” I of course only meant it as a way to get my jitters out, but my mom, who constantly worries for me and my sisters, takes it seriously. She also takes everything personally. The way she said “Don’t say that” sounds as if she herself has been the target of if my mantra. Rather than explain myself I ignored the comment and made my way inside.

Inside the venue, it *looked* like a movie theatre. What was once the theatre lobby served as a reception area, strewn with tables and screens for local artists to show off their craft to the community and potential buyers. Instead of movie posters, old poster frames displayed church ads and even what was clearly an old popcorn counter had been repurposed to serve reception

food. In the background people shouted and shuffled supplies to and fro. I found my sister at the edge of the hall, her screen and my table side by side. I felt slightly relieved knowing we were in this strange new experience together. Not for long though, because Mama came inside from the car, toting *all* of my pieces in one go. She was clearly excited. I was painfully anxious. An unfortunate mix.



My mother, born in Albany, Georgia as Kimberly Harris, is the youngest of five girls. My grandfather died in 1975, leaving my grandmother alone to support her girls who ranged from thirty to nine. She worked multiple jobs to keep what was left of her family afloat, sacrificing time for money. My mom struggled with the loss of her father, but despite it, she thrived. By the time my mother reached college, my grandmother had no more money to give, so my mom had to put herself through college, with three jobs. Because she couldn't afford to stay on campus, she commuted. I like to think this is where my mother's predisposition to "protect" us began. Maybe it's overcompensation for working, like her own mother, through our younger years. Maybe it was her own mother's inability to help her as much as her as sisters that pushes her to do things for us. Or maybe it's her own struggle as a parent to simply let go.



In her enthusiasm my mom would get carried away. We started by setting up my station, placing prints on the table and taping drawings to my poorly assigned chalk wall. And whenever something needed moving (to place a cloth on the table) or fell off the wall (because it was the wrong tape), or appeared in any sort of disarray, Mama would rush over in order to “help”. The tasks were not ones we couldn’t manage, but every time we turned around she was there, adjusting things we had already arranged and decided, overwriting our actions with her own. And if that wasn’t frustrating enough, Mama loved to ask irritating questions at the wrong moment. She would claim she was “just checking” and then proceed to pummel us with a barrage of “Are you sure?”, each one chipping away at our self-assurance. My sister, who had started off calm, became increasingly frustrated with my mother and it started to show. “Why don’t let us do it?” she’d frequently suggest in a restrained manner. Mama’s response was to reply dejectedly with “I’ll go sit in the car” but she never did.

We finished setting my area, so next was my sister’s. She brought her college senior project, over 20 pages of a giant comic book, in which the story centered on a black female protagonist. From my knowledge, this was the tweaked version of a story whose character she’d been working on almost her entire life. With limited space, the arrangement of her display was solely up to her, so I promptly backed off until requested. My mother couldn’t say the same. She held back for a little while, staring as her eldest slowly hung the pages, one by one. Finally she asked “Are you sure you don’t need any help?”. My sister sighed, rolled her eyes and breathed “Fiiiiine.” As they worked together to settle the screen, my sister in front, my mother behind a man, one of the other artists walked up to the printed pages.

“Wow, this is really good.” “Thanks!” “What’s her name?” My sister hesitated and in the brief silence that followed, I looked from the man to my sister to Mama while my sister and mom made eye contact. It was like a scene out of a family drama, one I’d seen so many times, I knew what would happen next. Before my sister could answer, Mama replied, “Her name is Superagain--”

“That’s not her name.” My sister shot my mom a quick dirty look, and then, to dispel the very obvious tension, quickly turned to the man with a sheepish smile to explain her character. At this point my mother turned to me, her mouth drawn in a line, frustration written all over her face. “I told her this would happen,” she whispered. “I told her that people are gonna come up to her and ask her the name of her character, and now we’re here and that’s the first thing that happened.” I nodded along, feeling both anxiety for my sister and the concern from my mother, and wondered: How much would this drama sell?



Make no mistake, despite the frittering behavior I previously described, my mom is neither weak nor dim-witted. In fact she’s far from it. I like to tell myself that unlike the big hair and shoulder pads, the popularity & charisma Mama had back in the 80’s never went away. She breezes through conversations as if they were natural as breathing, unafraid to speak her mind or share a compliment with a stranger. She charms many people with her kindness and is quick with a joke, but she is no pushover. She is never cruel or unkind (southern pleasantries taught her better than that) but she is purely honest. She often tells me, “Your word, besides family, is all

you have, so if people can't take you at your word life's going to be a lot harder," and I know she is right. She is the glue that keeps our dysfunctional family together, always ready with a course of action, always knows what to do, and seemingly unshakable in her faith. Basically, compared to her, my sisters and I look like chopped liver (the one food on Earth Mama hates). But that's why I remember the showcase. Because in all her strength, my mother for once looked lost.



A little while had passed me and my sister had finally finished setting up. The event didn't start until two o'clock but we had finished at least 15 minutes early. Mama continued to help, but she had back off a bit. I thought of her and my sister's little moments earlier and felt a wave of guilt, so I asked both of them to help me gauge the prices for my work since I had little experience in doing it myself. "You can sell these for \$12 each," Mama suggested. "And make a deal for two for \$20."

"Yeah and you can sell the other ones for \$15 and the larger ones for a minimum \$100-150."