

2 EARLY YEARS

I was born to a 21-year-old unwed white mother and an African American father. Interracial relationships were still somewhat uncommon in 1970, in fact just seven years before my birth, in the historic case of *Loving v. Virginia*, the United States Supreme Court finally held that anti-miscegenation laws were unconstitutional. Until the *Loving* case, most of the states had laws that either prohibited and invalidated interracial marriages or made the marriage between a black and a white person a punishable crime. Even in the relatively few states that did not have any legislative barriers to interracial marriages, the social stigma and challenges related to mixed relationships could be overwhelming and frequently led to confrontation or physical violence.

To further put the racial climate of this country in perspective, the world was still reeling from the assassination of the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr. which occurred in 1968, just two years before I was born. The US government, headed by President Richard Nixon, was fighting a war in Vietnam as well as waging a war against its black citizens right here on U.S. soil. The U.S. government utilized publicly funded programs such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counter Intelligence Program, or COINTELPRO, to specifically target and disrupt various political organizations deemed to be a threat to the government.

Under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover, black political organizations became the number one target of COINTELPRO, and the program's goals of discrediting and completely destroying these organizations were made clear to the public. This was all during the same political rule that saw good-ole President Nixon almost impeached for his involvement in the Watergate scandal. Nixon and Hoover's roles in the intentional violation of the civil and human rights of black citizens would not be completely understood or accepted until many years later. The war in Vietnam was still ongoing and America was experiencing inflation rates that were triple the rates of the previous decade. The "Free Love" and Hippie movements from the 1960's were dying out and America was beginning to get its first real taste of the effects of long-term poverty on urban communities. Racial inequalities were exposed and highlighted throughout the civil rights movement of the 1960's and now the US was forced to deal with open racial wounds and growing dissent from both black and white impoverished communities.

I entered this racially and economically divided country as we all do, totally innocent and clueless about race or hate or the state of U.S. politics. As any child, I understood the basics, I knew that my mother and grandparents loved me and I had no idea that I was any different than any of them until I was introduced to the word "Nigger." Jimmy's use of the word "Nigger" made me aware for the first time in my life, that the world I lived in was made up of groups of perceived inferior and superior people.

Unlike the rest of my peers, friends and family, I didn't belong to any of these clearly defined racial groups; I was not white enough to be considered white and I was not black enough to be fully accepted as black. I was something in between and I would slowly and painfully learn that I would neither be recognized by white society nor would I be easily accepted by black society. I was an outsider always

looking in at those that “belonged”. Thus my struggle for acceptance began.

My mother was born a few miles outside of Elmira in a small, somewhat rural community. She was the third youngest of five siblings born to my grandparents. My grandfather worked as a postal worker, delivering mail on a rural route which he worked for more than 30 years while my grandmother took care of home and the kids. Their relationship was what most would consider to have been traditional for that time, and although they were not well off, they made sure their five kids ate every day, had clothes for school and were still able to save a little bit of money along the way.

The town my mother grew up in was composed of other similarly situated, working, middle class white families. She went to school through the 1950’s and 1960’s and, although racially segregated schools were commonplace in most of the United States, she attended schools that were open to blacks. This was prior to any desegregation busing so the absences of blacks in her community meant the absence of blacks in her schools as well.

By my mother’s accounts, my grandparents were somewhat progressive for the time, believing that all people were equal and should be treated equal under the law but more importantly for them, should be treated equal as people and provided with the same support and opportunities made accessible to all the whites in their community. My grandparent’s ideology about race and equality were certainly not considered normal for the times, in fact in today’s world they would probably be labeled as extreme liberals, which is ironic as to this day, my grandfather is a staunch supporter of the Republican party and most of their principles and ideologies. My grandparent’s views had an obvious influence on my mother which was probably a contributing factor to her being involved in an inter-racial relationship, leading to my eventual existence.

Patrick was my best childhood friend since the age of three. More like a brother than a friend, he lived on the other side of town in Elmira in a section of the city filled with double and single-family rental houses and a few low-income housing projects. The majority of Elmira’s black families, including his, lived in his neighborhood making it much more racially diverse than my own.

My mother worked as a nurse at the Elmira Psych Center, requiring her to work long shifts on the weekends as well as some overnights, so I ended up spending many of my weekends at Patrick’s house. We would wake up extra early on Saturdays so we could watch the Saturday morning cartoons. I loved Fat Albert, the Jetsons and the Land of the Lost, but my absolute favorite was the Super Friends and the Justice League. When they came out with Super Friends Underoos underwear that had the design and color of the various Super Friends characters on them, I begged my mother for a pair of Aqua Man Underoos! You couldn’t tell me that I was not Aquaman, I would wear those underwear every day and I remember quite a few times getting in trouble for jumping in the tub with my Underoos on because I was determined to “swim like Aqua man!”

Saturday mornings at Patrick’s house provided me with my first real introduction to black culture, specifically the black music and fashion scene. Patrick had two sisters that were eight or nine years older than us, both of whom were very much into the whole fashion and music scene of the time. I never really gave much

thought about Patrick’s family being black, I never looked at them any different than myself and they never treated me any differently. My comprehension of the differences between their household and my own didn’t materialize until I was introduced to black television.

Patrick’s sisters ensured that Saturday afternoons were reserved exclusively for Soul Train. Patrick and I would have control of the television all morning, until Soul Train came on, then they would grab a pair of pliers to change the dial on the old TV and wait, eagerly anticipating the start of the show. Every episode would start with a cartoon image of a train bopping to this bass-heavy, funky theme music and then the host of Soul Train, Mr. Don Cornelius, would say in his soulful deep voice, “Soul Train, the Hippest trip in America. Sixty non-stop minutes across the tracks of your mind into the exciting world of Soul.” Then Don Cornelius would introduce the guest artists on that particular show and always add “along with the Soul Train dancers”. The show’s introduction was immediately followed by commercials which were always targeted directly at the black audiences, including commercials featuring black hair care products such as Afro-Sheen, or a McDonald’s ad featuring a black family portrayed by black actors. I didn’t understand marketing at the time but I clearly remember Patrick’s sisters having many of those hair products sitting on their dressers and in their bathroom.

The Soul-Train dancers were composed of mostly black dancers, with a few white, Asian and Latin dancers sprinkled in here and there, and they would perform the newest dances while wearing the latest fashions. Male and female dancers would wear massive Afros that were meticulously picked and combed into perfectly round shapes, complementing their shiny silk shirts with huge collars, and skin tight polyester bell bottom pants, accompanied by ridiculously high platform shoes. Don Cornelius would always introduce the latest soul and funk records and Patrick’s sisters, Reese and Celia, would get up and imitate the latest dances and scream every time one of their favorite groups or singers would begin to perform, all while they both picked their own Afros and talked about which dancers had the best outfits.

Soul Train introduced me to groups like Con-Funk-shun, and singers like Minnie Riperton, and David Ruffin, while the dancers would do dances like “the Hustle” and “the Bump.” I was captivated with the music. While Patrick would usually go off to his room or head outside to play, I would remain in the living room, glued to the television, secretly listening to everything his sisters said, absorbing all the latest slang and watching them try to master the new dance crazes.

Music has always been a huge part of my life, partially because my mother was a huge music fan. Through her vinyl records and 8-Tracks, I was introduced to the Isley Brothers, Earth, Wind and Fire, Kool and the Gang and the Average White Band as well as many of the popular non-soul artists of the day such as John Denver, Linda Ronstadt, Carol King, the Eagles and Barry Manilow. I would often spend hours just going through my mother’s albums and listening to them while studying the artwork on their covers and trying to imagine what the artists singing the songs would look like if they were performing that song right there.

There was something about the energy and passion that Patrick’s sisters danced with and something about the soulfulness of the music itself that kept me fascinated and ensured that every Saturday afternoon was spent studying Soul Train, studying the black faces moving in unison to the rhythms of the music and

studying Reese and Celia's responses to each song. This was the first time that I can remember paying attention to black culture and trying to absorb and incorporate it into myself. I couldn't explain why I felt drawn to it, I just knew that for some reason it felt right, it felt like that was where I was somehow supposed to be. I never experienced feeling out of place on those Saturday mornings, I always felt comfortable and like I belonged. Looking back through eyes that have experienced decades of feeling like an outsider, just the thought of those mornings relaxes me and makes me appreciate the beauty and calmness of life's simpler times.

When I wasn't with Patrick on the weekends I was usually with my maternal grandparents. While my weekends with Patrick would lead to plenty of boyhood mischief and introduce me to black culture, my time with my grandparents reinforced my familiarity to the social norms associated with my family and white American culture. My grandfather was a huge fan of two television shows: The Lawrence Welk Show and Hee-Haw. Hee-Haw used bales of hay and a farm setting as a backdrop while the cast members, usually dressed in overalls and wearing straw hats, would sing country songs and crack jokes. Roy Clark was the host of the show and Minnie Pearl became famous for wearing these big country church hats with the price tag still on them. As much as I enjoyed Soul Train, I also enjoyed Hee-Haw, probably because I saw how much my grandfather enjoyed it and it was an opportunity for us to watch the show together while sharing Planters roasted peanuts and one of those old school glass bottles of Pepsi.

The time with my grandparents taught me the norms and socially acceptable patterns associated with white culture in America, but I never understood it to be a lesson in Americana, I just enjoyed my grandparents and the security and safety associated with being in their home. My grandparents were very typical for their generation, hard-working, middle class people that believed in spending quality time with their family. Their neighborhood was typical for the time, middle class, all white, neat and clean with nicely manicured lawns and neighbors that all knew each other and took the time to walk across the street to speak to one another daily. I do not recall any other people of color in their neighborhood but at the time it was never really an issue for me. I loved my time with them, their house was warm and loving and I can't remember very many times, if any, in which I was unhappy there.

It was not uncommon for five or six-year-old kids to spend all day outside playing during the summer time or on the weekends, with very little to no parental supervision. We knew the rules, be home before the street lights came on, don't go to the Parker's house because their father was always drunk and almost burnt the house down twice because he fell asleep while cooking; don't talk to strangers; stay on our block and don't ride your bike in the street. We would break every single rule almost every single day except for the street light rule, there was no defense to breaking that rule, that one was clear cut, be home or risk facing the consequences. The other rules were easy to break because they were not visible to our parents and they would never know unless someone reported us or someone got hurt.

Unfortunately for us, someone was almost always there to catch us and someone was always there to tell our parents about whatever mischief we managed to get into! Our neighborhood was full of parents that knew other parents and older folks that acted as if they hated kids like us and loved to get us in trouble so it was not uncommon for our parents to get a phone call from a neighbor if they spotted us doing something we had no business doing. Shit, depending on who the neighbor was, we might even get our ass whipped by the neighbor first and then have to deal with more punishment from our parents when we got home. The neighborhood watched and policed itself and everyone knew what the rules were, everyone knew that you were supposed to respect the adults and that any adult in the neighborhood had the right to tear your ass up if you misbehaved. And trust me, many of us fell victim to this type of "community policing" so we were all always aware that eyes were everywhere.

Kids being kids, that never stopped us from doing things we had no business doing. Once, while on the four-block walk home from school, I passed a group of older kids throwing rocks at the windows of an abandoned house. My other friends kept walking and encouraged me to do the same but I was fascinated by the way the windows would shatter when someone succeeded in throwing a rock with perfect accuracy through one of the windows. I stopped and watched for a few minutes before I finally got up the nerve to pick up a rock and throw one myself.

My very first toss was a success, the large picture window overseeing the front porch shattered and glass flew everywhere. Even the older kids were impressed! For a minute, I felt like I was the man, until I noticed Mrs. Burns looking out of her screen door staring directly at me. It seemed like everyone noticed her at the exact same time so we all scattered, running in different directions as we headed towards our respective homes.

Mrs. Burns called Tina, my best friend Antonio's mother, immediately after seeing me throw the rock, so within two minutes of my triumphant rock toss through that huge window, and the very second I rounded the corner onto my street, Tina came charging out of her house with a belt in hand and headed straight for me. I looked behind me thinking that she was after Antonio, or his older brother Chris, but by the time I realized she was coming for me it was too late, she had the belt raised above her head and it was already on its way down, headed straight for my back. "Whack, whack, whack," I couldn't even say a single word before she hit me three more solid times across my legs and backside.

By the time I gathered my senses and my instincts told me to run she had already hit me at least two or three more times, knocking my Spiderman lunchbox from my hand and spilling a half-eaten sandwich and chocolate milk from my thermos all over the middle of the street. I left that lunchbox right there and hauled ass towards home with Tina in hot pursuit, cursing at me the entire time yelling, "you little bastard, you want to break windows? I will break your ass!" I knew the only chance I had to escape Tina and that belt was to find a place to hide so I zigzagged through the neighbor's backyard and headed straight for the fort we built on the side of the doghouse in my backyard.

I stayed in that fort until it was dark, not coming out until I heard my mother calling my name. When I finally emerged she ran towards me and picked me up giving me a huge hug and, wiping away her tears, asked me why I scared everyone like that. Apparently after Tina was unable to find me, she had to call my mother

at work. My mother's fear that something might have happened to me saved me from getting any additional punishment; she was so happy that I was safe that the window-breaking incident was not even discussed.

That was how things went in my neighborhood, at any given time any one of our neighbors might catch us fucking up and provide us with a whipping right there on the spot, no questions asked, no worry about what our parent's might say, they would efficiently and unapologetically administer corporal punishment. Because of this "community parenting" approach, our neighborhood was virtually free from the crimes that plague many communities inhabited by younger kids and it was rare that any of us got into any serious trouble. The community took responsibility for its own and everyone contributed to raising the children. It was a literal example of the African proverb that "it takes a village to raise a child," and it worked. We were certainly not angels but we respected our elders and were raised with a sense of community that is now virtually impossible to find anywhere in this country.

With that much supervision you would think that we would never be able to find enough freedom to get into any trouble, but boys will be boys and trouble seemed to have a way of finding us. As the weather would get warmer we would always manage to venture further and further away from our street and into new and unfamiliar neighborhoods. The opposite end of my street ran directly into a busy main road that contained a plaza which had a supermarket, McDonalds and a few other small shops. We were strictly forbidden from crossing that road, or going anywhere near it, so of course we spent a considerable amount of time trying to figure out ways to cross the road without getting caught by anyone in the neighborhood or getting ran over by one of the cars as they sped past. Accidents did happen, one of the older kids that lived in the trailer park at the end of my street was hit and killed by a car trying to cross that road on his bike and our mothers would remind us of that any time they caught a whiff of us acting like we might try to venture across it. For young boys with adventure and mischief running through their blood, that street separated us from freedom and independence, so crossing that road became our number one mission in life.

I can't remember the first time we successfully crossed over into the plaza by ourselves but I certainly recall our attempts to terrorize the McDonald's drive through as well as our raids on the P&C supermarket. We would roll up to the drive through window on our bicycles making a sound like a car engine until someone would say, "Welcome to McDonalds, can I take your order," then one of us would try to deepen our six and seven-year-old voices and say, "ah yes I'd like a fart sandwich and an order of shit!" We would all laugh hysterically and haul ass out of there before anyone could catch us, but one day the manager who had grown tired of our games, snuck up behind us and grabbed me and Antonio by our shirts before we could peddle away. He yelled at us and threatened to beat our little asses and we yelled right back at him, kicking and swinging at him until he finally let us go.

That was the first time I can recall feeling the power and sense of security that comes with being with a group of my boys. The more of us that were together, the more courageous we would become, almost as if we were invincible. I would have never attempted that drive-thru stunt by myself and certainly would have been scared out of my mind if the manager grabbed me when I was all alone, but being in a group gave us all courage, made all of us feel that much more tough and probably made the manager realize that he was going to have to back up his words

with actions because we were going to stand our ground until he let us go or took things further. This feeling of power generated from hanging with my boys would repeat itself throughout my childhood and into my teen years and would be the catalyst to much of my early troubles.

Those trips to the other side of that busy road also led to my first experience with the police. Four or five of us would head into the P&C Supermarket and steal every and anything we could get our little hands on. Usually just candy and snacks but eventually we started to follow the lead of the older kids and snatch cigarettes and chewing tobacco. This was before the days of placing the cigarettes behind the counter, they were still accessible and within our reach and anything within our reach was fair game as far as we were concerned.

One day, after we had gotten particularly bold with our thievery, we hatched a plan that involved me distracting the cashier by asking some random questions while Antonio and another friend grabbed some cigarettes and candy. We all waited in line and then when the customer in front of me finished paying for her groceries, I walked to the front of the cashier's line so that my friends would be behind her back. As I rambled off a bunch of questions and gave her my most charming smile, Antonio started stuffing his pockets full of Snickers Bars, M&M's and my personal favorite, Zotz. Zotz were hard candies that had this powder inside of them that would fizzle in your mouth when you bit into them. I haven't had one in over 30 years and my mouth still waters just thinking about them!

Antonio also grabbed a few packs of unfiltered Camel brand cigarettes, which would become our brand of choice, and just as he was reaching for another pack, the man standing in line behind him grabbed him by his collar. Antonio's first reaction was to take a swing at the man but before he could, the man grabbed Antonio's other hand and lifted him off the ground. That is when we realized that he wasn't some random customer standing in line with his groceries, he was store security and he yelled for all of us to stop. Our other friends took off running but I just froze, looking confused as my heart raced so fast that I was positive you could see it beating through my thick winter coat.

The man took us to a room at the back of the store and began to ask us our names and where we lived, what our phone number was and what our parent's names were. Neither of us would give him any information besides our own names; I'm sure we were both envisioning the ass whipping we would receive if our parents found out we crossed that street and even worse, were caught stealing. The security guard said he was calling the police and picked up the phone but we both thought he was just bluffing. We had seen Antonio's mother do the same thing hundreds of times; whenever we would do something she felt was deserving of a good ass whipping, she would always threaten to call the police first, then put the phone down and reach for the belt.

We sat there for what seemed like forever before a police officer walked into the room. My heart jumped into my throat and I thought I was going to pass out. We knew we were in deep shit then! Antonio started crying uncontrollably and immediately started emptying out his pockets and saying in between deep sobs, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do it." The officer stood there staring at us menacingly with his hand on his gun before he finally sat down next to us and asked Antonio to calm down so he could talk to us. The only thing that I remember him

saying was, "ok, I am going to let you go this time but next time I'm going to call your parents and you are going straight to jail. Do you understand me?"

Both of us sat up straight and said "yes sir, we won't do it again." I had never felt so relieved in my life! As the security guard walked us through the store and to the front door, he said, "If I see either of you little bastards in this store you are going to jail. Now take your little ass home." We walked away from the store fast with our heads down, not saying a word and waited until we were sure that no one from the store was still looking, then we both hauled ass home, running as fast as we could.

All of my earliest memories involve my mother or my grandparents; my father was an inactive participant in my life from the age of two or three, so I had no memories of him at all. I saw pictures of him that my mother kept for me, one in particular that I would look at most frequently was a picture of my father and I carving a Halloween pumpkin together. I must have been 2 or 3 years old in the picture. My father, a dark skinned large man, had this medium size afro and was wearing a white shirt with a big collar on it, typical of the style in the early 1970's. I was wearing my pajamas and we were both smiling. Looking at that picture always made me feel that we enjoyed being together as we both looked content and comfortable in each other's company.

That picture was really all I had of my father so most of my early thoughts of him came directly from that picture or from conversations that I would sometimes overhear between my grandparents and my mother. My mother never spoke badly of my father in front of me and I am sure that is why, despite him not being in my life at all, I harbor no ill feelings towards him to this day.

I can't recall ever asking my mother about my father but I do remember my grandfather sitting me down one day and asking me what I thought about the man my mother had been dating. I was about four or five years old at the time and I didn't know what to say to my grandfather, I wanted to tell him that I didn't like my mother's new "friend," but I couldn't articulate why I was feeling that way, I only knew that I didn't like him, so I just stared at my grandfather and shrugged my shoulders as if I was indifferent. People tend to discount children and what they feel in part because children lack the ability to effectively express those feelings and often those feelings manifest themselves in crying or acting out. My inability to express my dislike for him led to my simple shoulder shrug but my grandfather must have sensed something because he said, "well I don't like him one bit. Your mother thinks you need a role model that you can relate to but he is not the role model for you."

I didn't understand what a "role model" was or why my mother would feel that I needed one, more specifically why she would feel that he would be the appropriate role model for me, I just knew that my grandfather didn't like him and that provided me with comfort, made me feel as if I had an ally that somehow understood what I felt. Knowing that made me feel safer with my grandfather, like he was able to somehow magically see into my mind and articulate my thoughts in a way I could never accomplish. I knew that what he was saying was right but I

didn't know how to tell my mother how I felt. She was happy and smiling and as long as she was happy, I was happy, but that happiness would be short lived.

Many years later, when I was an adult, my mother confirmed my grandfather's thoughts and told me that she felt that I needed a black man in my life to act as a role model and help provide me with the cultural awareness that she could never provide me with. She possessed a smidgen of an idea of the struggles that I might have to face growing up identified as a black man, and she wanted to make sure that I was well equipped to deal with those struggles, she just chose the wrong black man as a role model.

My mother soon married Calvin and he became my stepfather. When my mother asked me how I felt about having the same last name as my stepfather, and now her, I just shrugged my shoulders. But after a few more conversations about the subject, I finally broke down crying and told her that I didn't want to change my name, that I liked my last name. I asked her why I should take the name of a man that was not my father.

I don't remember my mother's response but she asked my stepfather to talk to me and help her explain why he wanted to be my “father” and what that would mean to him. This only made me more resistant to the idea and it was the first time I can recall becoming angry with my stepfather to the point where I yelled at him and my mother and stormed out of the room. When I finally stopped crying and just laid on my bed, I could hear them talking in hushed tones in the other room. Calvin was telling her that I would get over it, that I just needed a man in my life because my mother was babying me too much and that she was making me “soft.” I was waiting for my mother to defend me, to say I wasn't soft and to tell him that he was not a part of our family, but she didn't say anything, she was silent.

This was the beginning of a very tense relationship between my stepfather and myself. He was intent on breaking my mother from her “bad habits” of “babying” and “spoiling” me and I was intent on showing him that she was my mother and that the way she treated me was none of his god damn business. Despite my open dislike for him, we eventually all ended up at some lawyer's office so that my stepfather could officially adopt me. The lawyer asked me if I was happy that we would all have the same last name now and I told him flat out “no.” My mother tried to explain her reasoning in the gentle, caring way that was her nature but that didn't matter to me, I did not want to change my name. I was born Jason Hutchings and I felt a loyalty to that name, and strangely to the father that I had never really known, and the last thing I wanted was to take my stepfather's last name.

I was determined to not take his name but I was seven years old and unable to articulate my reasoning, unable to explain to my mother that I felt a loyalty to my father, that although he was not a part of my life, that name represented me and represented who I was, it was a part of me and I didn't want that to change. My stubbornness on the matter led to a small victory for me. My mother suggested that I keep my last name, Hutchings, as my middle name and I eventually agreed. We signed the paper work and I left the lawyer's office with my new name, Jason Corbett Hutchings Bost.

My stepfather came from a fairly large family and all of his family lived in or close to Elmira so we ended up spending a considerable amount of time with them. His grandmother, they called her “Mamma,” lived a block behind us, and his sister Renee

lived in the housing projects across the street from the psych center where my mother worked. Their proximity to our house and my mother's job, soon made them the go-to babysitters for me. I never really felt like I was welcome at Renee's apartment, she seemed fake and distant and was always full of negative comments about everyone, and she always made me feel as if I was an outsider. The one thing I did enjoy about going to Renee's house was the opportunities it gave me to spend time with Patrick and Jon-Jon.

Jon-Jon lived in the adjacent housing projects to Renee and his mother would babysit Patrick so whenever I was at Renee's house, the three of us would spend most our time outside together. Jon-Jon was a chubby, red-haired, pale white kid with lots of freckles. No matter what, he seemed to always have a big, dull red Kool-Aid stain around his mouth. He was good natured and laughed and joked all the time. The three of us became inseparable partners and spent hours and hours riding big wheels. Jon-Jon was the first person we knew to have a Green-Machine, a big wheel that had levers on each side of the seat as opposed to a steering wheel. We would take turns riding that Green-Machine up and down the sidewalks over and over again.

We spent entire afternoons playing GI Joe, Dukes of Hazard and Battlestar Galactica, all using only our imagination, that Green-Machine and whatever sticks or rocks or trash we could find in the parking lot. We were all poor but Jon-Jon was really poor. I remember hearing Renee talk on the phone and saying, "I don't know why she allows Jason to play with that Jon-Jon boy. He's always dirty and his family is white trash." I didn't know what poor meant but hearing her say those things about my friend made me dislike her even more; in my eyes Jon-Jon was a friend and his mother always treated me like I was her own. When Jon-Jon ate, we would eat, as little as they had she would always make sure we ate as well. That was the way most of my friend's families were, they would treat all their children's friends as if they were their own children; my mother was the same way.

My stepfather had two more sisters, Gladys who was the youngest of all his siblings, and Valerie, both of whom treated me like I was truly their family. Gladys was very much a free spirit; she was light hearted and mischievous and loved to tell me jokes which she would hysterically laugh at even if I didn't understand them or find them funny. She was pretty, brown skinned, short and well-built and she was very popular with the young men in her neighborhood. Gladys introduced me to Afro-Sheen and showed me how to properly pick out my afro. Like Patrick's sisters, Gladys was a huge Soul Train fan and she would always have me stand up so she could try to teach me the latest dances. I loved her and admired her free spirit and rebellious nature.

Valerie was more reserved than Gladys but they both shared the same love of laughter. Valerie introduced me to Bill Cosby albums and Marvin Gaye and I would spend hours laying on the floor in the living room listening to Bill Cosby tell stories about the "donut glazed snotty nosed kid" and we would both laugh out loud until I had tears in my eyes. She taught me how to play Backgammon and Checkers and she would take me everywhere with her, always introducing me as her nephew. Right after my 11th birthday, while Val was nine months pregnant, she took me to every single shoe store in Elmira trying to find a pair of shoes to fit my narrow feet. We spent so much time running around that she went into labor and eventually later that day, my cousin Paul was born! That is the way she has always been, totally selfless and caring.

My stepfather had a daughter from his first wife named Tara. I was about a year older than Tara so when she would visit with us, we were usually able to participate in activities that we both enjoyed. Seeing my stepfather interact with Tara made me realize

that his interactions with me were unnatural and forced. His affection and attention to her seemed much more genuine, even my mother confronted him about this on a few occasions which I overheard from behind my closed bedroom door or their closed door. My mother would question him about why he wouldn't take me places or do things with me in the same manner he did with Tara. He would dismiss her comments and chalk them up to jealousy on her part and continue the blatant unequal treatment of us both.

Despite this, I really liked Tara, especially after she confided in me her own secret dislike for her father. He had been married to her mother just prior to marrying my mother and their relationship ended with a lot of arguing and fighting. I remember hearing my mother talk about Tara's mother and comment about how unstable and crazy she was. My mother encouraged my stepfather to seek custody of Tara and from what I recall, he had the opportunity to take Tara full time but he didn't do it. He seemed much more interested in hanging out with friends and going out drinking whenever he could.

My mother was careful about starting an argument with him as any argument often ended with him physically abusing her. He was abusive to us both and it was not uncommon for him to beat me with a belt, or a wooden spoon or anything he could get his hands on whenever I would do anything that he felt justified punishment. I don't remember the first time I saw him hit my mother but I remember that it happened often enough that it became a usual occurrence and that anytime voices became elevated, I would get tense with anticipation that soon he would raise his hand against my mother. To protect me, my mother would usually make me go outside to play or send me to a neighbor's house. When I would return, the house would sometimes be a wreck, furniture overturned and dishes broken and my mother would be crying as she nursed whatever injury he had just inflicted upon her.

I would spend hours in my room with my fists clenched so hard that my nails would cut into the palms of my hands, just crying and trying to gather up the courage to open my door and confront him, to yell at him "stop hitting my mother" but I just couldn't do it. My six-year-old mind could not formulate the courage to stand up to this grown man but I was painfully aware of the anguish my mother was suffering, and knowing that I could do nothing about it made me feel powerless which in turn made me angry, extremely angry.

There were so many instances of abuse that they all just seemed to blend together, but there is one instance that will forever be a part of me. It was a hot summer day and my mother kept pacing back and forth in our house, obviously irritated and upset about something. I overheard her on the phone with someone discussing that she found out my stepfather had been cheating on her with a woman down the street from our house. Apparently, my mother had confronted the woman and the woman confirmed what she heard so she was waiting for my stepfather to return home from work.

My mother told me to go outside and play but I made excuses as to why I had to stay home, I felt like I needed to protect her and that if I left, things could only get worse. I think my mother may have felt the same way because for some reason she let me stay and every so often she would sit down and hug me and in those brief moments it felt as if her stress had dissipated. My stepfather eventually came home and before my mother could even confront him about the affair, he opened the door, headed straight for my mother and started choking her, both hands around her neck, lifting her completely off the ground. He yelled at her, "what the fuck is your problem? Why are you starting trouble with Ellen, you need to learn to mind your fucking business bitch."

My mother's face was turning a reddish-purple color and she began to frantically struggle to get free when she looked at me as I stood in the living room, my eyes wide open in fear. At that moment I could see my mother's eyes asking me for help, asking me to do something, asking me to stop him from killing her but I stood there completely frozen. He must have seen the same thing in her eyes because he looked into the living room for the first time and saw me standing there and he hesitated for a moment.

I snapped out of my frozen state and rushed over, balling my little hands up into fists and hitting him in his legs with everything I had in me while simultaneously screaming at him to let my mother go. He was stunned for a moment and released his grip enough to enable her to slip free from his hands and slump down to the floor. He made a fist and pulled his arm back to punch me but my mother leaped from the floor and grabbed his arm while pushing me behind her at the same time. She pushed me towards the open front door and yelled at me, "go to Antonio's house and call the police. Hurry and go now and stay there until they come."

Before I could make it to the door, my stepfather closed it and said in a calm, relaxed voice, completely out of place for that moment, "go to your room. Your mom and I need to talk, everything is going to be ok, she is just upset." I looked at my mom for guidance as to what I should do as he was holding her by the wrist so she couldn't get closer to me. My mom, fearing that he might turn his anger towards me, told me to go to my room and that she would be ok. I slowly walked towards my room, never taking my eyes off of him until I was standing inside the door to my room. He followed me, bringing my mother with him by her arm and closed the door to my room.

I stood there, stunned at what had just taken place and fighting back my intuition which was telling me to go to Antonio's and call the police. I knew it wasn't over, I knew that both of them, for very different reasons, were attempting to remove me from the situation and my gut was telling me to run, run out the front door and run all the way to Antonio's house and not to look back or stop until I got there. But I was a child and I knew that I would have to get past him in order to make it out of the door. How could I make it past him when I hit him with all my might and he was able to simply ignore my attack, able to calmly talk to me and act like he hadn't even felt my hands as they struck his leg, as if I was a breeze of wind that could easily be ignored. So instead I ran to my bed and cried into my pillow, hitting my bed as hard as I could and cursing as I cried.

I don't know how long I stayed in my room but eventually I was drawn out by the muffled sounds of my mother's cries for help. I stood with my ear on my door, holding my breath while trying to make out what she was saying. I had to convince myself that I needed to open that door, that my mother needed my help and after a few minutes of weighing the consequences of opening that door, my instinct to protect my mother kicked in and I found the energy to exit my room.

As I walked towards the living room, the muffled sounds became louder and as I turned the corner into the living room, I could see my stepfather's feet and legs on top of my mother's feet and legs as they both lay on the couch. I entered the living room and froze as I saw him naked, on top of my mother, covering her mouth with his hand and saying in a quiet, evil, menacing tone, "you do what I tell you to do. You mind your fucking business and listen. Do you understand me?"

Furniture was pushed out of place, lamps were knocked over and their clothes were scattered around the living room, with my mother's ripped shirt hanging off of her body. She looked up and saw me standing there and her eyes widened and got bigger than I'd ever seen anyone's eyes before. She struggled and bit his hand, he removed it enough for

me to barely make out what she was saying, "Jason," she struggled and grunted, "please go call the police right now. Tell them he is hurting me," moving her head to try to free her mouth from under his hand, "tell them he is hurting your mother."

I didn't know what to do, I only knew that my mother was being viciously assaulted and she was in desperate need of my help. I started to walk towards the telephone in the kitchen when my stepfather told me to stop and go back to my room. "This is none of your business, go back to your room and your mother will be in there in a few minutes." Then he whispered something into my mother's ear, I could only make out a little bit of what he said, something to the effect that if I touched that phone he would beat the shit out of me. I froze not knowing what to do or how to proceed. My heart was caught in my throat and my eyes were beginning to blur with tears, my mind told me to go get the phone, to call the police, to help my mother, but my legs wouldn't move, my body refused to respond. Before I knew what was happening, the phone was in my hand and I was standing on my tip-toes reaching my finger towards the rotary dial when my father said, "put that fucking phone down and mind your business."

I looked and saw him whisper something else to my mother as he viciously pushed his hand over her mouth. When he slowly moved his hand away, my mother said, in between sobs, "go to your room, mommy is ok, we are just going to talk and I will be in your room in a few minutes." I wiped the tears from my eyes and my vision cleared enough for me to see both of them looking right at me, my stepfather as he lay on top of my mother, holding her arms down with the weight of his naked body pressed fully on her, and my mother as she lay there unable to free herself, face red and bruised and tears running down her cheeks. I wanted to stick my finger in that rotary and pull it down so that I could alert the police but fear took over and I found my emotions at odds with the life lessons that had always been instilled in me, respect your elders, follow their directions, do as your told.

I stood there with that phone in my hand for what seemed like an eternity before finally hanging it back up and slowly walking back to my room. I felt sick and dizzy and I could feel the anger raging inside of me. That was the first time that I thought about killing anyone, and I seriously considered running into the kitchen, grabbing a knife and plunging it deep into his neck until the blood would ooze from him all over my mother and eventually drip down to the floor. I could see it clear as day but I just couldn't gather up the courage to leave my room. I couldn't let go of the fear that engulfed me, I couldn't make my 6-year-old mind convince my little 6 year-old legs to leave that room, so instead I just lay on my bed and cried.