

Robbing the Cradle

by

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University Montgomery
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Liberal Arts

Montgomery, Alabama

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Acknowledgment

My thesis is dedicated to my daughter Miranda Jaylan Ross. She has been my motivation as a mother these nine years. I strive to make the right decisions daily so that she will have a better life. I cannot forget about my father Jerry Smith, he was diagnosed with stage 4 bone cancer the first week in April 2018. I pray he lives until I can hand him my Master's degree diploma.

Abstract

“The race is not given to the swift nor the strong but he who endures until the end”
(Ecclesiastes 9:11).

The last step of completing my Master of Liberal Arts Degree is to complete a thesis. I have chosen to compose a memoir entitled “Robbing the Cradle” that will focus on when I was raped at the tender age of twelve. There will be three parts broken down into the trimesters of pregnancy: First Trimester: “Robbing the Cradle,” Second Trimester: “Young Mother,” and finally Third Trimester “The Fire.” My goal is to point out the signs of a sexually abused child, the psychological effects, and the robust individual that this hurtful eventually made me.

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Introduction

"Smile! What's wrong?" Someone asks me this question daily, no matter where I go. My mind is always racing. I'm constantly thinking of a way to ensure that my daughter Miranda will have the best life possible. I never smile. I can spend the whole day by myself and be perfectly fine. I have OCD, I hate liars, and I'm addicted to lotion. These are just a few things that any person can notice by watching me for a while. Honestly, I hold everything inside. I'm afraid to get close to people because people are selfish, and you can never trust anyone fully. From my experience, people either love me to death, or they literally hate me. There is no in between. I don't fit into the traditional mold of the modern woman or single black female. During my entire life, I've had a bad attitude. My high school teachers even predicted that I would never graduate high school.

I break through the negative perspective of myself every chance I get. When I look back over my life, I realize that my parents set me up to be successful. They overcame tremendous obstacles to ensure that I had an excellent life, but somehow I still came up short, that is, for a 28-year old. I come from a huge family. My mother is one of nine children from a low-income neighborhood, with my grandmother being a social worker and my grandfather a pastor. My father is the oldest of five children, and I'm unaware of what my grandparents' occupations on his side were. He is seventeen years older than my mother.

I'm the oldest child on my mother's side and my dad's youngest, so I can say that I'm very spoiled. My dad was a barber, so he made money every day, and my mom is a nurse, so I had a comfortable lifestyle. I went to private school at a young age and was given the best education money could pay for at the time. I received all the love and attention that a child could ask for. As I said, my family is huge, so my childhood was filled with laughs and giggles as I played with my cousins and younger sister, Tiffany. In a picture dictionary, you could honestly place me beside any of these words: "happy," "blessed," "spoiled," and "loved." Even with this abundance of love and happiness, I still ended up feeling alone and misunderstood. I've been through some traumatic experiences that have shaped the way I think. My experiences make me look at the African-American community and conjecture why no one addresses depression and mental illness.

Google defines a memoir as a biography written from personal knowledge or special sources. I have read every tip I could find on how to write the perfect memoir. I need to make sure to include details, be honest, inform family members about including them, and not try to include everything that has happened in my life. I plan to focus only on the major events that have happened in my 28 years. I'm nervous! Still in disbelief that I'm going through with this memoir. I hope my parents don't get upset because they don't know the details of the story yet. My dad is just getting over cancer and continues to deal with heart failure. I hope that my first section of the memoir does not kill him. I know that it would make the pacemaker in his chest shock him.

-But here goes nothing-

My head spun around as I read through the instructions for the MLA thesis pages. How would I ever be able to conquer this task? As I browsed the website and saw examples of theses, the memoir's title "Cat Shit in the Attic" immediately captured my attention. After reading this excellent MLA thesis a few times, I knew that a memoir would be best for me. I need to release some stories from my mind. My memoir will focus on the mental, physical, and emotional effects I had to deal with after having sex at a young age. Then I'll transition over to becoming a teenage mother and dealing with untreated depression. Finally, I'll step into new beginnings when my apartment caught on fire. I lost everything but gained so much more in the end. My faith has been tested in so many ways, but my soul is anchored in the Lord.

Since I'm older now, I can understand the signs of undiagnosed mental illness. I have taken time to do research, and look up the signs and coping mechanisms. I don't see family members as that "crazy uncle" anymore. The unexpectedness of life can take a toll on a person and cause a downward spiral. Depression is a word that is not common in the black family. We are discouraged by family members and friends from going to the doctor and getting medication; because we are sad, there is no choice but to make it through the situation **by*** suffering silently. Getting medical treatment for depression is seen in the black community as a weakness. Our ancestors endured**d*** so much more than us yet survived. Google Dictionary defines mental illness as a health disorder that affects one's mood, thinking, and behavior. Clinical depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feelings of sadness and loss of interest.

My depression started during the 4th of July weekend in the Summer of 2003 when my older cousin Christy came to spend time with my sister Tiffany and me. Since

Christy was older, of course, she talked to older guys. A few happened to be my neighbors, around 17-18-year-old seniors in high school. Being only 12 at the time, I looked up to Christy and wanted to do everything just like she did. On the 4th of July, as the sun's rays beat down on us all day, we enjoyed cooking out with the family, playing outside, and swimming. That night she told me to come with her. It was around 1:30 AM when we sneaked out of the house through my bedroom window. WOW! I thought. My older cousin is taking me with her;* I looked up to her so much. She was a beautiful chocolate girl with long, silky black hair and the perfect shape; plus she was a cheerleader. With no idea where or what we were about to do, I followed like an eager child going into a toy store during Christmas time. Around the corner were the two guys she was talking to earlier. She motioned for me to go with one of them and left with the other, without even looking back again. I followed him to his house and snuck in through his bedroom window. Without as much as a conversation, he kissed me. Wow! My first kiss; I flash back now and realize that it meant nothing to me.

My mind is racing, and my adrenaline is pumping. I just snuck out of the house in the middle of the night, and I just got my first kiss. I could go home in bliss and not need anything else. Sitting on the edge of his bed, he puts his hand around my neck and leans in to kiss me again, whispering softly, "Lie down; this isn't going to hurt." As I lie on his bed, I watch him in the dark. He reaches for something and tears it slowly, lowering his pants and placing it on his body part. Without any hesitation, he lowers my shorts and is now entering my body. A numbness comes over me. The initial shock is gone as I murmur, "This hurt." In a very reassuring voice, he replies: "Baby, let me finish; I'm

almost done.” What is done? I don’t even know what we have started. This shit is hurting me. Tears are streaming down my face.

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Within minutes I’m speed walking back to my house. I’m in pain. I place my hands on in my shorts and pull them out to see blood on my fingers. I want to scream “What the f***?” I can’t [add comma]* though. I know that I’m not supposed to be out of the house. I look around for my cousin, but she is nowhere to be found. As I climb back into my window, I just lie in my bed. I’m scared, alone, bloody, and a nervous wreck. My mind is telling me to take a shower, but that would wake my mom. I knew that would lead to me getting in trouble; therefore, I had to lie there bloody and in shambles. Images are racing through my mind. I don’t understand what really happened to me, but it hurt like hell, and I did not enjoy it. Girls were supposed to be with boys and flirt with each other. What have I gotten myself into? Honestly, I don’t remember my cousin coming back in that night. I slipped off to sleep. Days, weeks, months, and eventually two years went by before I tried having sex again. The discomfort went away, and the bleeding ceased the next day. I was afraid of telling my mom or dad what I had done. I have gone my entire life blaming myself for what happened to me that night.

To this day, I will not blame anyone else. I knew better than to sneak out of the house, so the consequences that came with my actions that night are completely my fault! Although I did not know what sex was, I will continue to blame myself. Certain lessons in life need to be taught through mistakes. As parents, we can tell our children right from wrong, but ultimately it is up to them if they will listen or not. I decided to break the rules and leave the house. I’m forced to deal with the result of my action for the rest of my life.

Jamal, my current boyfriend, is the only one who knows this story. How ironic is it that I ended up dating a pastor? He counsels me for this traumatic event that happened when I was twelve. Until I started writing this memoir, I had pushed this and many memories to the back of my mind. I go through life pretending like it never happened. I am a victim of sexual assault. I am a woman who has suffered silently from depression for years. I am a conqueror because I have made it through.

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During the Fall of 2004, I started seventh grade. I struggled silently and stayed in trouble from then until high school. I'm a dark-skinned African-American woman, so I've always been picked on for my skin tone. Now the bullying resulted in physical consequences for my tormentors. Anybody, including teachers, principals, or a random person had to deal with my newfound angry attitude. My peers had to deal with my aggression and fighting. My attitude is horrible, but it is my defense mechanism. I want to keep people who I do not trust away from me. I want to create a wall that will make someone run away and not want to have anything to do with me. I blame my attitude from having to suffer in silence about having sex at twelve. I have been depressed **and have*** suffered from low self-esteem since that day. There was no one I could turn to and tell about my sexual experience. Other kids were not yet talking about sex in school. For a prolonged period, I didn't even know that it was sex until hearing about it in health class. We were introduced to the famous slogan, "Save sex now, have it later." Everything in me counted on no one ever finding out I had sex that night, because I didn't want to be in trouble for it. On top of that, middle school is about fitting in with your group of friends. I didn't want to be the first one to say I had sex. Parents of my friends

wouldn't want my friends to hang out with me anymore. Plus, I didn't want to have a bad reputation

The reality of him being 17 or 18 and knowing better never crossed my mind. I didn't have the courage to even tell on him. I was too afraid that I would be in trouble. I had put myself in a situation to be hurt, and now I wanted to protect myself from everyone. I'm knowledgeable enough now to know this situation falls under statutory rape because the offender was between 16-18 and the victim was under 16 and older than 12 (AAOC).

As an adult, I know this situation is considered rape on every level. The minimum age at which an individual can grant consent to sexual activity is 16 (AAOC). I was taken advantage of, and I had no idea what was going on. This is one reason why I'm saddened when rape victims step forward and reveal the truth, yet people ask, "Why didn't she scream?" The most common question is, "Why didn't you say anything when it happened?" Screaming was not my impulse reaction, but getting out of the situation was. So, I did! Years of trouble followed this sexual experience. I can honestly say that counseling should have been my first step, but I kept it a secret. The statistics are traumatizing on what rape victims go through. "94% experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress" (RAINN). "13% attempt suicide. 38% experience work/school problems. 37% report getting into frequent arguments along with a strong distrust in people" (RAINN). I want to open up the door for children to build up their confidence to openly talk to their parents about what they are going through.

I have a broad platform. I have people looking up to me. Crazy, right? I am one of these statistics, but I'm also a role model to others. I experienced everything that many

rape victims have reported, but I made it through, and I want to help others. I still become shocked when I get messages on social media about how I encourage people. When I'm at my lowest emotionally, I find a scripture in the bible to get me through the day. One word sticks out more than any other: perseverance. Perseverance is steadfastness in doing something despite the difficulty or delay in achieving success. This has not been a smooth sailing road. I still hit speed bumps to this day. No matter what I encounter, I still persevere. With the approval of my thesis, I will be the first in my family with a master's degree. Little old me—the girl with a bad attitude who was told she wouldn't even graduate from high school. I'm already part of the 2% who graduate from college while being a teenage mother, but that isn't enough. I'm destined to receive this master's degree. Next up will be a Ph.D. program wherever the Lord leads me. Buckle up: here's the tale of my memoir entitled "Robbing the Cradle."

I hope you're ready.

First Trimester

“Robbing the Cradle”

My life drastically changed that 4th of July weekend. I never seemed to recover from the traumatic experience of being raped as an underage child. I never realized the effects until I became grown. If I'm not mistaken, I started 7th grade that August, and it was one hell of a journey. As older black grandparents would say, “She’s smelling herself.” This phrase means that a teenager is getting older, becoming attracted to the opposite sex, and behaving in ways that will lead to trouble. I was smelling myself, and my anger problem had gotten out of control. I stayed in trouble for something at school and landed in I.S.S. for an extended period. This change of behavior lasted well until I graduated high school. It seemed like the simple joys of life had been sucked out of me. I tried to blend in with the other teenagers, but I was ultimately crying out for help and attention. No one heard my cries. They could only point out my flaws and sentence me to time in the dungeon of in-school suspension.

When I started working on my memoir, my mom still didn't know that this happened. I gradually asked her a question a few weeks ago, and she said, “Jessica, when you started middle school, you completely changed, and I promise you never recovered.” With hesitation, I mumbled these words, “I was raped and never said anything.” In fact, only about 39% of victims report the crime to police (SARSSM). Of children from grades 5-12, at least 29% of them had told no one (SARSSM). I'm not a very emotional person, and I never had the courage to tell anyone. I watched as her eyes turned into a sea of

water, becoming red like a stop sign. In that second, I realized what a broken heart looked like. She muttered, “Why didn’t you say anything?” and “I would have killed him.” Although my mom would have been willing to be the judge, jury, and executor in my case, she wasn’t given the chance. Statistics show that 61% of rapes never get reported, so the rapist goes free. This raw emotion is that of parents who by nature protects their children, who are going through life attempting to provide the best that they can. I’m certain that in their minds, the parents* never knew a predator has achieved his mission of taking their child’s virginity. I needed that mother’s rage at an earlier age when the same cousin who had snuck me out of the house was being sexual with me. It never surfaced. I thought my mom never cared.

The statistics of rape are staggering: “every 8 minutes child protective services find evidence of child sexual abuse” (Rainn). 93% of the time they know the victim, and 34% of the time it is a family member. I can’t explain the taboo of rape and how many time victims reach out for help. Many times, someone in their family is raping them, and it is swept under the rug. I hear the stories all the time, but I lived through it also. My female cousin did it to me and to other family members. My younger sister is the one that told on her. The problem was never resolved: we simply could no longer spend the night with her. I was much younger when this happened, long before I could wrap my tiny innocent mind around sexual pleasure and who was supposed to put their mouth on me. I just remember when the adults found out, it seemed like nothing happened. So, I had no inkling that help was available to me. Or that anyone could ever care that I had been sexually abused once again. My first time having the sex talk was in health class, and by

that time I had already been taken advantage of. I was born with a disadvantage of not having parents who talked to me about sex.

I didn't know how to deal with my anger, so I resorted to fighting. Looking back on my actions now, I don't understand how my mom or dad failed to see the red flags. The school put me in anger management training, but I wouldn't talk in there. I kept everything bottled in like a genie. Junior high was the exact same cycle, just with more freedom. I joined the track team and made more friends, which kept me occupied, and I didn't fight. My parents worked a lot, so I never felt like I had the support I needed from them. At fifteen I became sexually active with my boyfriend. The average age is 15-17 years old for the first sexual experience (Gutmacher). I felt like it was the right thing to do with my boyfriend; we were in love, or so I thought. Common sense told me that the action was still wrong because we would sneak to have sex. I still hadn't talked to my parents about sex. Friends told me that sex was what I was supposed to do with the person that I loved. However, I still felt a sense of emptiness on the inside. Sex was easier to talk about now. I didn't have to wear a cloud of shame about not being a virgin anymore. I could drive with my learner's permit, which meant absolutely nothing, but I had a car and would leave whenever I felt like it. I felt above the law, and I did not want to listen to any authority figure, and my parents weren't giving much guidance.

High school is when I realized that I was really lost. I just wanted to fit in with people who shared the same similarities and interests. I ran track from the time I was in seventh grade, and honestly, when I was on the track, it was my only sense of relief. I could run away from all my problems. I didn't have to pretend to be anyone but myself. The track was my saving grace. To this very day, the people I ran with in high school are

like my sisters and brothers, and I have the closest bonds with them. Track kept me emotionally balanced, and I knew that if I wanted to remain on the team, I would have to keep my grades up, which was never a problem with me. I always did my work and never failed. Most importantly, I had to control my messed-up attitude. Please, don't get it twisted. I still got into fights in high school. I was never the person to back down or walk away from anything. Now I would be more cautious and take my fights to the streets, which is the worst idea ever now that I'm a legal adult and look back on it, but thinking as a child it seemed good at the time. The anger that I kept bottled up was bound to explode at any time. I was a walking ticking time bomb that needed to be detonated. The time would eventually come, but until then I was just a hopeless high school teenager with the financial needs to have access to everything I wanted without the knowledge and power of controlling my actions.

At this pivotal point in my life, I point out the breakdown of African-American family structures and how depression, mental illness, and other disorders are swept under the rug. To add a little insight into my home structure, my mother was a Registered Nurse at the local hospital and my step-father is also a nurse. So I did not come from a family that wasn't educated; we lived in a middle-class subdivision, and I cannot honestly think of anything I lacked physically. My biological father has been with me since birth and takes care of me financially and physically to this very day. On the outside looking in, my family structure would be considered desirable, healthy, and conducive to a good upbringing. My parents are nurses who see and treat patients suffering from depression on a day-to-day basis, so how did they overlook my problems? When a child has behavioral problems, Caucasian families are more prone to take their children to be

evaluated so that doctors can research the underlying reason for the problem. *Science Daily* is cited for reports that black youth are about half as likely to get mental health counseling than white counterparts (*Science Daily*). In fact, black students receive disciplinary actions, such as suspensions or in my case being put in anger management sessions, from schools more often than white students. My mom had a reason for why she didn't physically discipline my sister and me. "I don't hit or beat on my kids because that is what the slave masters did to slaves to make them act a certain way. That animal-like behavior is passed down in the black community because it happened during slavery and now we think it is acceptable to keep it going." Our (African Americans') minds* are shaped by what we have been told happened during slavery, I've been told by my parents. There is actual proof of the acts along with pictures and other artifacts, but I do believe that the beating/whipping each other stage should be stopped.

Tuskegee Study

In the larger scheme of things, I can see why African Americans grew to distrust doctors. The fear of doctors comes from the 1932 Tuskegee study in which our black men were treated as lab rats for a syphilis experiment. This horrific and unethical study was called "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" (CDC). What a sickening name! This study was done by telling the participants they were being treated for "bad blood," and the incentives offered were food, free exams, and burial insurance, but the victims never consented to be in the study (CDC). My heart pours out to the men who had to suffer through this sickening study that was meant to last only 6 months but lasted 40 years. 40 YEARS! For 40 years the government held out the treatment that

could have cured these black men from syphilis; for 40 years black men were experimented on like they were not human beings and didn't deserve the same rights as white men. For 40 years our black men suffered just so research could be done to see the health effects. Families lost the man of the household because the government decided the black man wasn't worthy enough to be treated. In October of 1972 the announcement was made that the study would be stopped immediately (CDC). So now many people in the African-American community don't trust doctors and don't want their kids to be diagnosed by them either. "We know what is best for our kids" is the stance that many parents take when it pertains to their children, but the kids are suffering because of this lack of trust. I'm black, and I've been black my entire life. I know there are times when I could have used a psychologist to talk to and medication that could have helped me. I have seen mental breakdowns first-hand, and people of my race suffering from an array of mental disabilities, but we are told by our families: "No, you can get through it. You don't need to be drugged up on medication letting 'them' destroy your mind." The mindset that the white man is out to get us will never leave for some. I wish I could change that mindset. I wish I could shed light on the resources available to help people, but I know there's a cement wall that I can't get through to some people.

It's easy for me to see the problems and want to fix them now, but even I'm considered an outcast by some people in my community. I left and went to college, so I don't know the struggle like they do. I drive a nice car and have expensive items, so they don't think I can relate to them. However, I can relate to so many African Americans because of the times of deep depression that I endured, the failures of a teenage mom, and the struggles of being a young mother in college with a daughter. I will never forget

where I came from and who I grew up with, but at the same time, just because I won't forget it doesn't mean I'm trying to go back.

Second Trimester

Young Mother

I remember that when I was in middle school, my teachers told me that I would never graduate from high school. However, in May of 2008, I walked across that stage with my class. I had endured so much in my eighteen years that it felt good to know I had accomplished something that finally made my parents proud. It is one thing for someone to give you something and they take credit for it. It's another to earn something such as your education and know that no one can ever take it from you. I had already been accepted into college, and I couldn't wait to venture on this new journey. Unlike my classmates that night, I was tired and went back home early. My summer had already been planned, and that fall I'd be the new freshman on the block at Jacksonville State University. The joy was literally soaked out of my body once I found out that I was pregnant because that shit was not in my plan book. My dreams were to run track and live the college life, whatever the hell that was, not to be the mama of someone's baby. I was no longer dating my ex any more, and having a baby with him had never crossed my mind. I had made an adult decision to have sex, still thinking with the mind of a child and not using protection, and now I would have to live with it for the rest of my life. My mission to hide my pregnancy was in full effect, and I honestly hid it until it was time to leave for the fall semester. Then I told my mom. I remember the day back in seventh grade when I had to tell my mom that her dad has passed, and the cold empty glaze in her eyes. Finding out her 18-year-old daughter was pregnant had to be somewhat the same feeling because I could see the horror all over her face. She still thought of me as a child

back then because I was a child. I have no idea why I thought hiding a pregnancy would be an ideal solution.

The consequences of my decision to have sex and become pregnant were still not registering with me. I sympathize with young mothers. I remember the filthy looks older women used to give me when I walked around while I had a baby bump. I remember some of the hateful comments about how my life was now ruined, and mothers telling their daughters that they shouldn't be friends with me anymore. Those scars have healed, but the memory is still here. Becoming a mother is much different than I envisioned. Something that was intended to be sacred between married couples had happened to me at such a young age because I abused the pleasure of sex, not thinking of the consequences. I never got the chance to learn that sex was to be enjoyable or to value myself and not just have sex freely. Maturity tells you to wait until you're old enough to know the effects of indulging in sex before marriage. I was never given the chance to save it until marriage, but I was over the decision to start back having sex recklessly without a condom. I was robbed out of the cradle, an innocent child whose life drastically changed when sex and lust were thrust upon me by an older man. I will never enjoy the pleasure of falling for a guy and talking with him about having sex, or my first time being with that dream guy who I thought I loved. Who knows: maybe I could have made it to marriage, and my first time could have been with my husband. I was never given the chance, and my mind had been altered at such a tender age.

Freshman Year

I went to JSU in August of 2008, knowing that I was due with a baby in February of the spring semester, because I was determined to experience college. I don't regret that decision. I'm glad that I did it because if I had stayed at home, I do not believe that I would have ever received my bachelor's degree. I was a child having a child by another child. Terrell didn't graduate high school until May 2009, so here we were: two kids trying to figure out parenting, and before I knew it, he had bailed on me. I can remember days when I knew that death had to be better than living and being a single teenage mother. I went through the worst depression of my entire life after giving birth. To this day, I can't fathom how I made it through, but I'm writing this memoir, so I did. Old habits are hard to break. I started back hanging with old friends, fighting, and ending up in trouble. Not realizing that I'm a mother and I had to put my childish ways aside because I have another life I'm responsible for. The best decisions I made for myself were to continue to work and enroll in a community college. The only problem was that I was still in the same bad environment, and I couldn't stay away from what was normal to me. Financial support was ordered for my baby by the courts, but now I was raising a child by myself while her father was free to do whatever he wanted, and at that moment I knew I had let hate enter into my heart because he had left me for leaving me in this situation with a child to fend for ourselves.

The move

In January 2011, I packed what little I had and moved to Birmingham, AL, where I started my first semester at The University of Alabama Birmingham. This move saved my entire life, and while living in Birmingham I began to know myself. I started to dream again, and I was around like-minded people who shared similar goals. The transition wasn't easy: I left Miranda in Auburn with my mom so that I could go to school with hopes of creating a better life for the both of us. As I said earlier, old habits are hard to break. I did end up fighting at UAB, but this time it was much different. University officials told me, "No, Ma'am," this savage behavior won't be tolerated. I had to prove myself to the board to be able to stay in school, and there were steps that I had to take. I had to do it. I couldn't return to Auburn to my baby as a failure because I didn't have enough sense to grow the hell up. I made real friends at UAB. For the first time, my friends sat me down and explained that girls aren't supposed to fight, that I couldn't act like this, that I had a daughter that I needed to worry about, not drama or fighting. To this day, that talk saved my life. Never before had friends told me that I couldn't act a certain way; my previous friends were always ready to fight with me. As I said, I had finally met people who had goals and wanted to see their dreams come true. I knew my life had a purpose, and to many, that may be easy to say, but honestly, for so many years I felt as if I just existed. There was no specific reason for me to be here; I was simply another girl in the world that no one cared about. Now, I was a mother, college student, and a young adult with a purpose.

My purpose

At such a young tender age, I was forced to juggle being a distant mother, a college student, and an employee. There were times that I knew giving up would be easier. I had the world on my shoulder and the stress of so many other things at that. I was made to feel like a failure because I didn't have my baby with me, which led to me questioning myself and my true intentions of attending college. Classes were hard, and I was dropping them like dead flies before I would fail. One semester I failed 3 courses while trying to be supportive of my boyfriend. I had lost my train of thought and reasoning for being in college. I knew my purpose for attending college was to provide a better life for my child and to become financially stable. It was time to stop making excuses and start thinking like an adult because I had made decisions that placed me in the category of a grown woman. There is nothing like a good heartbreak to get one back on track. I got my act together and stopped dropping classes, and then I saw the finish line back in sight.

How time flies

Time waits for no man or woman. Before I knew it, three years had passed, and it was time for Miranda to start kindergarten. The motherly thing to do was move her to Birmingham with me. This was the final event that inspired me to finish college. My moves had to be accounted for. I had to make sure that I passed all my classes because now I had my daughter looking me in my eyes. My heart was finally beating again, but this time it was to the rhythm of Miranda's. I loved taking my daughter to school and picking her up every day, and just being with her. My life completely changed. The

journey wasn't smooth sailing [add comma]* though; there were so many obstacles that I had to overcome. There were two courses required for graduation that were taught only from 5-7 PM on campus. I felt ashamed because I had been* taking my daughter to class with me twice a week, until I realized that there was nothing to be ashamed about. I had no other choice; it wasn't like she was a small child that could disrupt the class. She sat there with her I-pad and watched movies. I promise that was the longest semester of my entire life; I was taking 18 hours, but my goal was finally in reach. If I could hold on until December of 2015, I would be walking across that stage.

Third Trimester

“New Life”

“For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind” (Isaiah 65:17).

For this memoir, I will refer to the final stage in my life as the third trimester of pregnancy. I prepared mentally for everything the baby (my life) needed, **and*** I had purchased the desires of my heart; now all I had to do was sit and wait until December 12, 2015 to come and this baby would be born. I would officially be a college graduate from The University of Alabama Birmingham.

Close your eyes.

Imagine seeing the sky painted with flames, as the building has a mass supply of water being showered upon it. The orange and red blaze is fighting with firefighters, and my goodness, the blaze is winning. You can hear the screams of people standing outside, and in that instance, you travel back into reality. This is my f***ing apartment building on fire. Summer classes had just started, and I was filled with glee as I could now intern. My graduation was just one semester way. My Friday started like any other; I dropped my daughter off at school and went to my part-time job on campus. Within a few hours, I received a phone call detailing that my apartment building was on fire, and my mom said: “Jessica, I’m sorry, baby, but you lost everything.” Time seemed to stop. I was no longer functioning as a regular human; instead I had become numb. Every red light caught me

on my travels home, and what usually was a ten-minute drive seemed to take thirty minutes. I parked and gazed at the fire; the building didn't stand a chance. Sinking to the curb, I sat there and stared in awe! Never in my life had I seen anything like this before. My mind was in a pit of emptiness; this had to be false labor; there is no way it is time for this baby to be born. This pregnancy is not over! I must make it through this last trimester. I've carried this load too long for these false contractions to make me give up.

“Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it” -- Charles R. Swindoll

How You React

I had nothing, and Miranda had nothing. We lost everything that Friday when my downstairs neighbor decided to light a candle, knowing there was an oxygen tank in his house. The support was overwhelming, but the agony of actuality **was*** detrimental. I love relating this chapter to the last trimester of pregnancy because although the journey is coming to an end, the last part is the most trying. As in pregnancy, sleep becomes difficult. There is no such thing as being comfortable; it takes a longer time to complete a task, and when people think daily activities are becoming too much, bed rest is recommended. I didn't sleep for the next 72 hours. I was insensible. The life I had built for my daughter and myself was burned down right before my eyes. Monday was Memorial Day, but Tuesday I returned to work. I had to restore our home, so I could not quit. There was no giving up, no folding. Pressure may burst pipes, but these pipes had been frozen solid the Friday before. Imagine returning to class, but this time with no books, backpack, or laptop “giggles”—those are the fancy things. I didn't even have pen

and paper. The advice from my elders was to take the semester off to give me time to get things back in order. I was told to take time to myself and not to stress too much. I had to remind myself daily that I had not miscarried; those were simply contractions, and my due date was still December 12th. This baby was still depending on me, I had to nurture it, provide shelter, continue to exercise, and take care of my mind and body. I was a walking zombie. Even though I was completing my daily tasks, I no longer felt like myself.

So, I took the summer slowly. I sent Miranda back to Auburn to stay while I focused on finding us another place to live, which came easy, and refurnishing the place all while trying to make things normal again. Nights were long and lonely. The tears sometimes wouldn't stop, and depression kept telling me to just give up. I had overcome so many obstacles in life, and when I finally got within arms reach of completing a major goal, here came a fiery curveball. I literally had to put on my big girl panties and just make it through this last trimester. As summers always do, it flew by, leaving just the horrid memory of the gloomy day in May. I learned how to channel my energy into things that were positive. I found myself making new friends, working out more, and spending time with people my age, which I never really did before. The best life lessons sometimes come from listening to stories from others and hearing what they went through.

I met a coach during my internship. He would come into work with the basketball players each day. One thing I noticed about him was his funny accent. I knew he had to be from Louisiana. During a casual conversation one day, he asked about my life, so I began to tell him about the fire that happened a month earlier. I expressed that I was

depressed but [close gap after “depressed”]* was taking things one day at a time and that being out around kids at the internship was really helping me. His exact words were, “Baby, you’re lucky.” I couldn’t wrap my mind around how in the world I could be considered lucky. I had just lost everything, and it seemed like he didn’t care at all. So I listened as he went into detail about his arrival in Alabama. He was washed away during Hurricane Katrina. He said, “Washed away!” I remember Hurricane Katrina vividly because I was in high school, and many students were placed at Auburn High to finish their education. The news media reports surrounding the hurricane showed the devastation, with thousands of displaced people living in the Superdome. I can remember hearing about young children being raped in there, and no one can forget the famous quote from Kanye West: “George Bush does not care about black people.” President Bush said that was the worst moment of his presidency. This man detailed losing everything that he ever owned, just like me. He went days living under a bridge swamped with water. Alligators shared the same water with him, but that wasn’t the worst part. Dead bodies were also floating around. Although I would have never thought that I was lucky in that moment, when my story was placed beside the story of someone who had been through such a traumatic experience, I knew I was lucky. Hurricane Katrina washed away family structures and the fond memories that had been built in the city. Here I was depressed about my life, but in that moment, I grew to appreciate being able to finish my education at the same university. I didn’t have to relocate to another city or state. Although I met this coach for just a moment in life, he had an impact on my life. I learned to appreciate what I have because things could always be worse. The pain I was

dealing with didn't go away in that moment, but for the rest of the summer, I was at ease about the fire.

Fall Semester

The first day of classes for the fall semester was here. This is a day I dreamt of since I was told I would never achieve anything, after becoming a teenage mother. My feet were on the ground. I was ready to get this pregnancy over and meet my new life of (becoming a college graduate). The waiting game was not easy. It seemed like the assignments kept coming, and these seven to twelve-page papers were killing me. I was still battling with deep depression from losing everything just a few months ago. On top of that, Miranda had just started first grade, which was a big milestone. I was running like a chicken with my head cut off all day long. I was fortunate that UAB had an elementary school on campus, so between classes I could walk over and visit Miranda. I assure the reader that on many days, visiting Miranda was the only thing that kept me going.

As weeks flew by, my routine became settled, and with my mind being focused on school work, I didn't have much time to dwell on the fire. I finally accepted the reality that I wouldn't get any of our things back. No matter how sad I was about it, there was absolutely nothing I could do. I can't pretend like some days I didn't have a brief mental breakdown and revisit the spot of the fire, because I did. I sat outside that building for hours sometimes and wept at the thought of my life being ruined. Sitting in the car and thinking about that day made me accept the fact that life goes on after a tragedy. I found comfort in knowing that God had provided me with resources and funds to rebuild my life. At the same time, I wanted to question why this had to happen to me. In my heart, I believe that God brings us out of our comfort zone to prepare us for greater things. My

greater purpose arrived in December, but I was so comfortable with the life I had built for Miranda and me that I never thought that anything could or would break that routine. My breakdowns didn't last long, and luckily, it was easy for me to reconnect with reality.

Before long, I had gotten my cap and gown for graduation. Receiving my cap and gown was like finding out the gender of the baby I was carrying. That excitement fills your soul, and your heart skips a beat because now you know that this is really happening. I was achieving a milestone in my life that no one could ever take away from me. I love the saying "Knowledge is power." There's also another great one that I like: "If you ever want to hide something from a black person, put it in a book." Upon embarking on this journey of higher education, I had the privilege of doing something that wasn't even thought of by my ancestors. People had lost their lives just to vote and desegregate schools, and here I am was, about to become a college graduate. I knew that if no one else was proud of me, my grandmother and father were the happiest people alive during this time for me. Life had given me lemons, and I was using them to make lemonade. My goal is always to make the best of the opportunities placed at my feet. The college experience isn't easy; there are so many semesters when you meet friends, and they never return because maintaining solid grades is essential. My commitment to finishing college and my drive is what kept me going through so many semesters because the moment that you lose focus, it can all be gone. My focus had shifted during the last two semesters, which were truly the hardest of my life.

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Miranda Jaylan Ross

I'm about to walk into this new life, but all I can see is a face. This pretty chocolate girl is running around the playground. It is a warm summer day, and children are playing, having the time of their life. This one little girl has my attention [comma] * though; I see her vibrant smile showing her pearly white teeth. Her long black hair flows down her neck, reaching the top of her back. There's so much joy and happiness wrapped in this little body. Without a single care in the world, she plays and enjoys her childhood. Every now and then she runs up to her mother, and they laugh and play together. The mother protects her child by keeping her eyes glued to her, with hopes of preventing any harm from ever coming her way. Like lions protect their cubs, and a bird watches its nest even when leaving for food temporarily, this child is guarded. She has been fortunate enough to never have to worry a strand of hair on her head because from birth, she has been treated like royalty, gifted with the most favorable desires of a child. She has been an unexpected blessing to so many, but to the woman who bore her, she is a life-saver. The baby of a huge family, she captivated their hearts from the womb, and she surely gifted her great-grandmother with 8 more years of life. To her mother, the scared teenager carrying her with the thought in the back of her mind that a trip to the abortion clinic would end her worries, she is her world. I'm the lucky mother of this energetic 9-year-old. Little does she know that I was a wreck—a lost teenager at sea who was shipwrecked and would have never made it to shore without her. Miranda is the reason that this memoir ends happily. Without the motivation of this compassionate, animal [hyphen]*loving child of mine, I would never have awakened from my wicked ways. My

goal is to protect Miranda at all costs. I want to be an active parent who is aware of Miranda's surroundings along with her emotional and physical needs. I can look over my life and name so many things that my parents missed and how things could have been different for me, but it would not change anything at this point. Instead, I'm using my energy to shower Miranda with love and be present during her life changes so that she will never have to worry whether anyone cares. I plan to set realistic expectations for her tender life [comma]* of which I'm in charge. When the time comes, I want to embark on the sex talk with her that no one ever had with me. She is aware that she can talk to me about anything, and if there is ever a problem, Mommy is there to support her. She won't have to go through life living with dark secrets in fear of getting in trouble. I love her innocence, her zeal, and the fearlessness she exhibits when it comes to new adventures in life. I will do everything in my power while I'm alive on this earth to protect Miranda Jaylan. We all want the best for our children, but I want to protect her in the ways in which I was left vulnerable. I jokingly say we grew up together, but we actually did. I was still a child who now had a baby. My little ray of sunshine blessed me in more ways than she will ever know. Therefore, I'm dedicating this memoir to her. December 12, 2015 belongs to Miranda.

December 12, 2015

My water has broken.

The moment is frozen in time. I am walking into a new life with the people with whom I completed my program. We have struggled, laughed, cried, went out, and become close friends together. Now it's time to deliver this baby. The lights are bright, and the arena is filled with people who are cheering for a safe delivery. I'm numb to the fact that this is happening. When I finally hear my name, I just smile, reminiscing on memories. I think of the long journey I had to endure in order to become a college graduate. Entering my freshman year of college as a pregnant teenager to growing into this fearless woman, I am one of the millions of young girls who find themselves pregnant with no earthly idea of what the future will hold for them, or even the slightest idea of what to do with a child. My goal is to one day become a motivational speaker and lower the rate of teenage pregnancy. I want to be the change that I want to see happening in my community. Becoming a teenage mother isn't the death sentence that some will make a pregnant teen think it is. Young mothers have so many resources available to help them be successful. I am a teenage mother, and this is my thesis for my graduate degree. The time is now 9:30 A.M., and my baby has been delivered to me by Dean Dr. Watts, as he hands me my diploma book, and we turn to take a picture. I know that I have become part of the 2% of American students that graduate college after becoming a teenage mom.

I did it!!

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August 30, 2017