

TO DANCE WITH UGLY PEOPLE

By Lorene Stunson Hill

Chapter One

Vulani Ringi Ring - Children Circle Dance – Celebration of youth.

To Whom It May Concern:

Even as a girl, four years old, the pain was worth something; it taught me how to dance, emotionally. The adults in the house did acquiesce in my situation, failing to be observant or even interested, as we joined together every Sunday for a family gathering.

The large yellow stucco house where we assembled, on Boston Street, in a quiet, luxurious, tree lined neighborhood belonged to my Big Mama. The huge and rambling house sat on a hill in Detroit, Michigan. The era, the mid-fifties, was a time that spawned the celebration of "Michigan Week." A celebration of the economic, cultural and natural resources, which made Michigan great. I imagined my great grandmother, an entrepreneur, who was lucky in real estate - rare for a woman of color - had contributed to that economic growth. She left that big old house to Big Mama.

The sun beats down boiling hot, as we climbed the tired, aged, cracked concrete steps that led up to its weathered front porch. The surrounding grass baked crisp, looked like straw. Mama mopped her forehead with a dainty white laced handkerchief, several times, along the dreaded journey.

Summer in Detroit was hot, lethal. The winters were brutal, bitter and cold. Mama always said, during winter ice, Big Mama was going to slip on those steps and break her neck. Mama told Big Mama, often, that she needed to move, but Big Mama loved her house and owned it outright. She told Mama, she was crazy.

I was anxious to reach the top because Big Mama liked giving me pennies and listening to me count. I often practiced counting on those exhausted, crooked and lengthy steps. I was silently counting on that day, too. One... Two... Three... up to Sixteen steps! That wisdom made me smile.

We had dinner at Big Mama's house, after attending church. The dining room table, always neatly set with gold trimmed china, sparkling crystal glasses and polished silverware was inviting. The smell of fresh baked peach cobbler overpowered the table. A table already filled with steaming hot aromatic and delicious homemade foods we called "Soul Food." The savory smells that filled the air had us all ready to indulge.

I always looked angelic, in frilly dresses, with a petticoat underneath. I wore ribbons in my hair, ruffled socks that matched my panties and white patent leather shoes. After dinner, the adults would spend time in the front room, laughing, dancing, drinking and playing cards. However, I was filled with sickening dread as Big Mama's third husband placed all of his attention on me.

"Give me some sugar, baby girl." He would say.

"Go 'head baby, give Grandpa a kiss." Big Mama would urge me on.

Reluctantly, I kissed him on the cheek. They all said I was his favorite.

To Whom It May Concern:

When no one was watching “Grandpa” would sweep me up into his flabby muscled arms and carry me to the stairs, off the kitchen, that led to the basement. I didn’t want to go down there! I hated descending those rickety stairs to where it was dark, damp and eerily below the surface of the land. The tipped, tiny and filthy windows, sat high near the ceiling yet bottom level with the earth. It made me feel like I was entering a grave.

At the foot of the stairs a single dusty light bulb and chain hung from the ceiling. Once Grandpa yanked on it; it only dimly lit the room. Disturbed by his touch, it rocked side to side, creating ominous shadows and shapes as ranks of light swept and swayed about the floor and walls.

I clung to him; afraid of the space we were in. The bathroom we entered had a sink, with a crumpled and dented, rusty metal bucket beneath it - no pipes. The small stained toilet, starting to sink into the ground, giving it a slumped, hunched-back look, sat so close that while sitting on it, his knees were against that rotting pail. He pulled the door shut, a makeshift group of left over wooden planks nailed together, and locked it. My stomach tensed listening to that splintered door scraping mournfully along the floor, groaning and straining until securely closed. The bathroom was dark, with a shadowy light streaming through the spaces between the slats of the door.

Rejoining the group, Mama is always smiling, dancing deliriously or playing cards, the sight of

me seemed to upset her. I didn't belong in the service porch room. She was having a good time at the drunken party, too impaired to see my fright, my predicament. She fussed at me instead. She said I was selfish. I didn't really feel her words affecting me then, because I was alienated from my body, from myself and perhaps, in some ways, I still am. Giving me a mean stare, Mama usually ordered me outside to play with the other children. Somehow, the play was gone out of my life.

Why should I dance against the dust?

To Whom It May Concern:

Thinking about my youth, I recall many experiences at Big Mama's house, which often meant being shepherded past her immaculately clean living room, with plastic wrapped furniture. In fact, the whole sterile scene was roped off. As a child, I used to revel in what appeared to be a pristine and literally untouchable setting, but on one particular day I had been allowed to sit in there.

Part of me was confused by the formal sitting area (in name only). Why would people have areas that were so museum-like in appearance that they needed to rope it off. My favorite thing was Big Mama's white starched doilies perched on each end table. I was order to sit there and to not move. I sat dead still among this crisp and clean looking living room, on a day I will always remember. I could hear Big Mama and her third husband arguing,

"Get yo' ass out my house," Big Mama yelled.

I squirmed, although plastic covered furniture was very sticky to sit on.

"I ain't going nowhere," he yelled back.

"I'll bust you in yo' head ol' man," Big Mama continued.

I slid off the couch slowly as the plastic made a loud screeching sound, I was terrified Big Mama might hear. The plastic struggled to fall free from the back of my fat thighs. I wanted Big Mama to be OK. Peering around the corner, I could hear them moving around. Were they wrestling? I thought they were heading in my direction and in a panic I raced back to the couch and landed with a loud resounding "Whoosh! That continued to whistle for far too long. Then came the shock I had anticipated.

Grandpa, rushed down the hallway, past where I was sitting and out the front door slamming it with a thundering "Boom," that seemed to shake the whole house. I twisted around to peer through the sheer curtains, as he stomped down the street in a rage. Big Mama appeared suddenly and all she said, that day was,

"Now, that is that,"

We'd never heard from him or of him ever again!

To Whom It May Concern:

In case you didn't know, Big Mama was Mama's mother. I didn't know Big Mama had died. No

one told me she was gone. I just remember being dressed in my Sunday best and it wasn't Sunday. Everyone else was dressed somberly in black. I was five and a half years old. When we arrived at Big Mama's house I drifted around searching for her. Daylight crept softly through the house and I felt something was wrong. I finally heard someone yell,

"The cars have arrived!"

Mama hurried me out of the house and we climbed into a big black car. Silent, Mama positioned herself and vainly smoothed her skirt. Sitting in church, with my ankles crossed and feet swinging, I decided Big Mama had gone to the store and was probably back at her house. Puzzled and sad, I watched Mama, my aunts, uncles and cousins cry their eyes out. I was confused. We were in our church, but I hadn't ever seen it filled with so many people and beautiful flowers. Mama took me by the hand and led me down the purple carpeted aisle, towards a large dark gray box, surrounded by more flowers. I pulled ahead eagerly, full of anticipation.

"Just a second child." Mama whispered.

As she lifts me off the ground, I couldn't wait to see what was inside. I DID. I screamed. The sight astounded me! I gasped for air so rapidly my lungs burned. I went limp in Mama's arms. Big Mama was lying there! Mama lowered my shuddering, rag doll limp, body back down to the floor.

Carrying an angry look, she snatched me back down the aisle, my legs flailing about like a puppet, my throat had closed and I was terrified. It hurt to swallow. I was thirsty and the very way Big Mama looked was frightening. She had red lipstick on, and her hair was pulled back into a tight bun. Those were things she'd never done. I clasped both hands to my chest

hoping to hold back my cries. A strange woman, weeping, pulled me into her arms.

“That’s better,” she said, careful not to look too long at my face.

The spirits wailing all around us told me Big Mama would not be coming home. Later, at Big Mama’s house, as I waded through the heavy throng of people, I could hear, not every particular word, conversations cementing the fact that my relationship with Big Mama, as I knew it, had reached an end.

“She was too young. Just turned seventy-four.”

I heard another click her tongue,

“Livin with that old fool killed her. Wit’ his ugly ass.”

She started reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

Met him at the liquor store,” her companion interrupted.

I melted deeper into the crowd continuing to listen.

“Them chillins gonna sell this house.”

“Shame,” another answered, her eyebrows raised.

“Gonna miss her and this old house,” Big Mama’s best friend sighed.

So would I.

For hours, I prayed for my Big Mama to still be alive, for my mother's forgiveness and for a banana split.

To Whom It May Concern:

Big Mama was special, my best friend in so many ways. I started having dreams of my own death. I was always dreaming of and startled awake by the sensation of falling, but unable to remember most of the dream. To lull myself back to sleep, I would try to recall every curve of Big Mama's face and the sparkle in her eyes, sometimes crying myself back to sleep. Big Mama had been an ample woman. She was a tall, large framed lady with long silky hair that she parted down the middle and pinned behind her ears. She had soft, delicate hands in contrast to her big, plump, stout feet. The biggest feet I had ever seen on a woman. She most often went barefoot. Walking away from the bathroom sink, one day, I saw her step on a big, water bug roach with her bare feet. I thought she had to be a strong woman to do something like that! When I heard the crunching sound of that annihilated bug, I could not prevent an involuntary shudder. After swiping her feet across a rug, she kept right on walking.

Big Mama's favorite thing to do was to fish. I would sit in her kitchen and watch her mix her fish bait - Water and Wheaties cereal - rolling it into little balls. To my horror, she would pour from that same Wheaties cereal box a bowl of cereal for me! FISH FOOD! I'd dump it in the garbage the minute she left the kitchen. If I could have her back, I would eat every drop.

Sometimes, Big Mama took me along, when she went fishing. I loved to lie on the shore, near her, as she sat by the lake. Stretched out on the grass with my hands folded behind my head. I stared up at the sky. It was usually clear and blue with small white clouds floating by. I

enjoyed the feel of the breezes, the chirping birds and listening to the wind rustling the leaves of the trees.

Every now and then, I would give a sideways glance at Big Mama. There she sat wearing a print muumuu. Its hem sweeping the ground, barefoot with her shoes by her side. Her fishing pole always in the water, as she waited patiently. She always wore her favorite old wide brimmed straw hat, falling down over her eyebrows. Her high cheekbones and the slight point of her nose was prominent in her silhouette, adding to her beauty.

She had a bucket of fish, she'd caught, sitting nearby; a container of worms she'd dug up herself and a container of minnows she'd snatched out of the shallow waters. The thought of them made my skin crawl.

"Gonna help clean these fish, aint you girl?"

She knew I found I found fish to be disgusting.

"No, Big Mama," I answered hesitantly - praying she'd never order me to obey.

I would hear her chuckling, her shoulders shaking. That chuckle no longer filled my world and warmed my heart

To Whom It May Concern:

Big Mama had lovely soft skin, like silk. I would crawl into her lap, when she allowed, my

cheek pillowed on her breast. It was like sinking into a comfortable sofa. I would lay still against her, because if I squirmed too much, she would put me down off her lap. I loved caressing her fleshy arms, rubbing her plump belly with my fingertips as I dozed off. I heard people say she looked white. My skin was as white as Big Mama's. If there was anything in my life I was sure of, we were not white. Black people were referred to as Negro, colored or worse, but we were not white. I didn't understand how significant that was; how tormented my own life would be, until I started school.

Big Mama said she and her second husband, a stout man as black as shoe polish (Mama's Daddy) were run out of Alabama because white people felt she looked too white, like an interracial couple. Big Mama's first husband, hung by an angry mob, was something Big Mama would not discuss. She said after she and her second husband settled in Detroit, he vanished - my Mama was a babe in arms. She said she wasn't surprised. When she married him, it had mostly been a "longing." A kind of possession that did nothing to relieve the troubles they were having. She already had six children and then four more for him.

Big Mama's mother was half black and half white, married to a half black and half white man. She felt my knowing our heritage was important. My great great-grandfather was a white plantation owner, who had lived in a beautiful white mansion. He owned my great-great grandmother who slaved in her master's kitchen, but went home, at night, to an old ugly run down shanty to join her husband and children. Her master would visit the shanty to lay with her while her husband stood by helpless, a vile act, nearly driving him out of his mind. Big Mama said the reverend would have to chase him down the dirt road and hold him. One day they found him hanging from a tree, his mother never speaking another word. I saw an old, fragile, yellowing picture of him, my great-great- grandfather, once. I was too young then to understand slavery. He has been just a very tall, slender and mean looking white man to me.

I didn't care if my Big Mama looked white, she was always very beautiful to me. My Mama, if it wasn't for the fact that she wore Big Mama's eyes and high cheekbones, you wouldn't think she was Big Mama's daughter. But, she was Big Mama's baby girl, the youngest child and only daughter out of her ten children. Big Mama is so large and Mama so small was why we called my grandmother Big Mama. My uncles called Mama "Little Mama." I rarely saw my uncles, most of them lived out of state. They would surprise us and come to town. I'd hear a knock at the door, open it and happily jump into their arms.

To Whom It May Concern:

On rare occasions Big Mama, Mama and I got dressed up to go downtown to the prestigious J. L. Hudson Department Store on Woodward Ave. Everyone dressed up to go downtown.

Big Mama looked elegant when she wore her pearl gray sheath dress with matching gloves that fastened with a single white pearl button. She'd pin her hair back with the pearl hair combs, she wore only for special occasions. Mama was slender, shapely with ample breasts; she wore her hair all the way down to her waist. She was only five feet five. Her wavy hair was dark brown, with natural golden highlights, which accented her lightest of browns tanned complexion and shiny hazel eyes with flecks of green. I envied her skin color because I was so pale. The men turned and looked when we walked down the street making me feel proud to have her as my mother.

When we approached the J. L. Hudson building I would try to take it all in. I would stretch my neck to see all the way up to its roof. It was the tallest store I had ever seen. It was a

massive, fine building of red brick. I felt like I was entering an enchanted palace once we passed through the revolving doors.

Often, I took an extra spin around inside those doors, irritating Mama. There were floors and floors of sights, sounds and smells. Once we boarded an elevator, a colored man, in uniform, stood in the corner operating it. He would smile, looking down at me and I'd grin back. He would shove a lever back and forth causing the elevator to raise or lower, giving me a funny sensation in the pit of my stomach. As the elevator doors slid open and shut at the different floor levels I gazed at the sights. He would announce the items that could be purchased on each particular floor. When the elevator stopped at a floor, and its doors slid open.

"Household goods, Bedding and Draperies," he'd announce melodically.

The elevator door would shut and we'd rise up to another floor.

"Children's Clothing and Toys," he sang out.

I dreamed of getting off on that floor, but we always got off on a floor when he called out,

"Women's Fashion."

I remember that once I became an adult, years before the store shut down permanently, I would go there as often as I could. I couldn't afford to buy much, but I explored every floor, every shelf and every corner. I couldn't get enough. I explored everything I couldn't as a child, sometimes spending an entire day there. I wore my Sunday best, a habit from childhood, although it wasn't expected anymore. I'd travel through the toy department, that forbidden

floor, more often. Visiting their candy and peanuts counter was heavenly. I never left the store without the same goodies Big Mama always bought me – hot peanuts and pink coconut Bon-Bon's!

To Whom It May Concern:

Big Mama had said Mama got married, the first time, when she was sixteen. She had married so young that Big Mama had to sign papers. Mama fell in love with a seventeen-year-old classmate, in High School, an almost handsome boy, Big Mama said. With pock marks from acne and black as burnt toast he thought he was cuter than he really was. He dropped out of school and got a job so he could marry Mama.

Big Mama said that Mama was so headstrong, she gave Big Mama no choice but to give her permission. In the kitchen one day, she said,

“Those two was school kids filled with fire, Dani!”

She continued to beat egg into her cornbread batter.

“The only way I knew to fix it was to let them marry.”

She was pouring cornbread into a black cast iron skillet that had hot lard, sizzling with reaction, in the bottom.

“I had to think of yo Mama's reputation ya know.”

She shoved the cast iron skillet into the oven, slamming the oven door shut, turned and looked at me while wiping her hands on her apron. Big Mama had little patience with those who choose to sin without marriage.

“Now, don’t you go being a fast-tail girl when you grow up! Do you hear me, Dani?”

“Yes, Big Mama.”

She turned her back to me to stir a large pot of collard greens. All I really understood was Mama had a husband before Daddy and I really wanted was to eat! Their marriage lasted three months and afterwards Mama went to a different High School.

Big Mama also said Mama lost a baby. I would have had an older sister or brother. That confused me. Lost it where? I didn’t question it. I watched Big Mama place the lid back on the pot of collard greens and wished the food would hurry up. Big Mama looked over her shoulder and said,

“You gonna do what I say girl, be good, good reputation?”

“Yes, Big Mama.”

“Set the table.”

“Yes, Big Mama.”

Big Mama said she was happy when she married Mama “off” to Daddy because he was an

older man. She said she'd hoped he'd calm Mama's ways. I discovered that Mama was Daddy's second wife and no one ever spoke of the first one. I was born four months after Daddy and Mama married – premature by only two months. That was difficult to figure once I discovered my birth certificate, but I counted on my fingers and realized I was conceived before they were married.

I had crept into their bedroom – forbidden unless allowed entrance by one of them – and squat near their dresser as I took a peek. I couldn't imagine Daddy not following any rules of correct behavior. Big Mama was the only person who ever cared to explain my heritage. When Big Mama died, Mama had just married her third husband, Ray – having divorced Daddy when I was two. Daddy had also married his third wife – Ernestine when I was three.

To Whom It May Concern:

Over the years Mama began to fight, scream and curse Ray increasingly. She did not have her specially made clothing sewn by a seamstress or go downtown shopping at J. L. Hudson, anymore. We were always moving and Ray couldn't seem to keep a job. Ray was always beating Mama because of the things she said. Mama walked around with swollen eyes and busted lips, sometimes bent over in pain more times than I care to remember. She often wore dark glasses.

Policemen dressed in dark blue uniforms, with badges pinned to them, were always showing up to our house to break up their fights. Over time I could identify them, particularly by their hair. A bald headed officer generally held Mama back. A blond restrained Ray. Sometimes it took several to restrain Ray.

The one with shaggy red hair always stood back with his hands folded below his big belly, watching, staring with his cool blue eyes. I feared he was there to restrain us if we got out of hand. I eventually discovered he was the superior officer over them all. Often his eyes would dart around the room and then lock on me. I stood with the other children clinging to me, the youngest in my arms staring back. Concentrating on him gave me some relief from the reality of the moment. He was dressed neatly. Knife-like creases ran down the center of each pant leg and he was wearing a pistol.

During her marriage to Ray Mama was sick all the time and having more babies. When she was due to deliver her fifth child in a few months Ray's drinking worsened. Ray drank whiskey every day, called it his medicine. He was always telling me how much he loved my Mama. He said he loved the kids and me. Sobbing, he'd say he didn't mean to hit Mama. I hadn't ever seen a man cry. I was confused. I would stare at him as if I was seeing him for the very first time.

"Are you scared of me?" He asks.

"No," I said, frightened to death.

Ray would drag a kitchen chair close to me and sit there, leaning close to my face.

"Honestly, are you scared? I hate to think I scare you or the kids."

He'd reek of the smell of booze. I'd hesitate. Finally, speaking up I said,

"You scare me when you hit Mama."

I didn't like him sitting so close to me. I wanted him to move back. I wanted the conversation to end. I was sure he saw it in my face. He'd drop his head.

"Is there anything I can do? Do you want a new dress?"

He was crying again. All I wanted him to do was stop hitting Mama. But, somehow his posture and tears made him seem powerless.

To Whom It May Concern:

In worn out faded gold letters, William and Ernestine Dobson was on the mailbox where Daddy lived. The other mailbox beside it belonged to the owners of the house Daddy rented. The owners had the larger house up front. Daddy's house was a tiny house sitting far away behind it.

My stepmother, whom everyone called Tina rarely paid attention to me in the few days a month that I visited. Tina's daughter from a previous marriage, the two daughters, Daddy had with Tina and I slept in one bedroom while Daddy and Tina slept on a sleeper sofa in the front room. The dingy green walls of the bedroom were decorated with a mixture of children's drawings and The Lord's Prayer. I found that depressing.

Times were tough for Daddy. He worked hard to keep at least the rent paid, some food on the table and squeeze out child support to Mama. When I wasn't at Daddy's house, to my delight. he'd even meet me on the corner of the block where Mama lived and give me all of

his pocket change. He always wanted me to have my own change in case there were little things I needed for school. These visits were our secret. He knew his child support was spent on more whiskey for Ray. His children staying in school were very important to Daddy. He was only able to finish the fifth grade and he'd longed to finish his education most of his life.

One day before classes started, right in front of the school, a familiar car U-turned and parked at the curb near me. I was thrilled when I turned to look and Daddy stepped out. He dropped to his knees spreading his arms wide as I ran and jumped into the most secure place I'd ever known. I was thrilled that the other children on the playground who called me ugly names could see that someone loved me! But it hurt me when we were at the home he shared with Tina. To prevent arguments, Daddy didn't see me at all. Tina's hurtful attitude towards me stung even more when Daddy chose to not see, to look the other way. I knew he loved me, but he said he needed a mother for his other kids.

Daddy worked two and sometime three low-paying jobs and still was unable to afford much heat in the winter. I remember sleeping in a wool cap, scarves, a winter coat, mittens, socks and even boots to keep warm. Shivers rattled my bones. The tiny space heater barely warmed a small spot in the house. Because of the living conditions Daddy feared I would not want to come visit. During one of our rare private moments, he asked,

"Do you hate it here?" His eyes were full.

"No, Daddy, never!"

We stood on the porch, shivering, as the snow blew up against the house. I said everything I could to try to reassure him, but, he seemed far away. I loved him so much. He seemed somewhere else, in uninterrupted, deep thought. I just stood by holding his hand. Visiting

Daddy was the most important thing in my life. It was much more peaceful than life at home with Mama.

Soon, Daddy stopped worrying so much. He was moving his family to an Apartment complex. A Housing Complex some would say was in the ghetto. Low income apartments in the city. He said it was cheaper, much bigger with plenty of bedrooms. He said the city had done a cleanup and there were no unsavory people or dangerous places.

To Whom It May Concern:

It wasn't long before Ray took all of his rage and frustration out on Mama. Awakened by the sounds of a fight, of the destruction of our future, I was in the throes of a family being torn apart. There was crashing and banging and the sound of his fist hitting her flesh. He pulled Mama around like a rag doll, by her hair, slamming her head into the wall. There was so much screaming, I wasn't sure which scream was mine. Mama crumpled to the floor like a rag doll as Ray climbed on top of her – hands around her throat.

"I know you've been with that bastard down the street!" He screamed.

He had released her throat.

"So what!" Mama spat in his face.

"At least he pays attention to me and spends time with me!"

“Whore!” Ray screeched as he grabbed Mama’s throat again.

Ray jumped up and began dragging Mama around by her hair.

“Bitch, you were seeing ME while married to William, I know you’re doing that shit to me, now!”

I gasped.

“Good Bitch!” Mama yelled back, as she somehow struggled free from his grip.

Backing up, screaming, Mama yelled,

“My new man got money, you old drunk!”

Ray lunged at Mama and fell. Scrambling to his feet, he snatched at her skirt yanking her to the ground and began choking her again. Ray was nearly choking Mama to death. My little brothers and sisters were wailing and jumping on his back and in his rage he was tossing them off like rag dolls. I stood cradling Mama’s newest baby.

More policemen burst in saving Mama’s life. The couple who lived downstairs had called them. Officers were wrestling Ray; they forced him to the floor. Mama was cursing, her voice was squeaking and strained, and sometimes nothing came out. She was trying to call my stepfather all kinds of bad names,

"You black ass, son of a bitch, I'm gonna kill..."

She was crawling, pointing at him, blood was flying out of her mouth with every word she was able to scream. Another officer went over to help her up. I could hear the whine of an approaching ambulance. The officer lifted her up off the floor and escorted her from our second floor flat to the ambulance waiting outside.

My legs were trembling violently, I felt paralyzed as I was trying to calm the children. A neighborhood crowd had gathered around our lawn, news had spread quickly. Ray went to prison, that day, with us looking on, in full view of everyone in the neighborhood. We were the talk of the neighbors for months. They took my stepfather away in a squad car. I felt sad for him because of the painful way he looked when he glanced back at us. When the officer placed a hand on top of his head and guided him into the back seat, I felt I knew his hurt, his pain. As far as I knew, we were the only family he had. He was going to have no one who loved him. I never heard of him again. He was another living being who seemed to have disappeared from the face of the earth.

Mama's best friend took the baby. I took care of the other kids the best I knew how. I needed all the help I could get as the baby kept eating his own feces, the littlest girl had asthma and oldest boy had what we know today as ADHD.

The downstairs neighbors checked in on us, every day and so did the officer with the ugly red hair. I grew to understand he was a man who liked everything about being a police officer. The excitement, the danger, and the chance to be a hero, particularly to children caught up in situations like ours.

He brought us candy, coloring books, and crayons. His face lit up as the children squealed with delight. I surprised myself when I hugged him. In those days, people were ashamed if anything about themselves or their family ended up in the newspapers. Mama's violent

experience ended up in the newspapers! For years I didn't know that Daddy kept the black -bordered newspaper clipping from the Detroit Free Press, locked away in a strong box. He unlocked the strong box and let me read it when I was fifteen.

The Detroit Free Press:

April eighteenth, nineteen sixty

Newspaper item: Domestic Violence Case Dooms Man:

It has come to the attention of this reporter that on April seventeenth, nineteen sixty, our community experienced another tragic incident of Domestic Violence. Iris Duane suffered a hairline fracture, bruised larynx, and fractured pelvis when brutally beaten and strangled by her husband Ray Duane.

She, hospitalized for an unknown period of time, is the mother of five young children. Her husband charged with domestic violence, attempted murder, torture and aggravated battery by the State of Michigan is in jail awaiting his sentencing. According to the Detroit Police Department, battles at this residence, on Marsh St, are a recurring event. In this reporter's opinion, this brutal attack and prior history will put Ray Duane away for a very long time.

To Whom It May Concern:

I was twelve years old and Mama said I was fat. I wasn't like my classmates, thin and pretty, either, but fat? I felt awful knowing I was an embarrassment to her. She said she could not dress a fat girl the way she wanted to. I knew that to her, appearance was of substantial importance. She bought me dresses, skirts, blouses, and shoes, but I wasn't looking good enough for her. Mama screamed at me when I ate, telling me to put food back. I felt she had a helpless hatred for me. I did not fit the image of the daughter she had envisioned. When I tried to express the pain I felt, she said,

"That should be your motivation to lose weight."

When one of the other children stole a piece of pie or cake, I received a slap in the face. She accused me! I had to have been the one who took it, in her eyes. I was the deceitful one, sneaky! One day, after expressing her frustration to a room full of her girlfriends, she forced me to stand on a scale, in front of them. I didn't know why they were there, perhaps a Club meeting or card party. Mama stood on the scale after me to demonstrate the fact that, at my age, I weighed more than she did.

She was a small woman. I was a towering, sizable child, growing rapidly. I felt hurt. I left the room, in tears, frightened tears, that filled my eyes, clouding my vision. I didn't understand why I deserved that display, that humiliation! I heard them talking in hushed tones, as if they were discussing something scandalous. They spoke in vague terms, hunched slightly together. It hurt more than the fruitfulness of the growing pains that rocked my body.

"She has unruly hair, even though it is long. It's a mix between good and nappy."

"Appearance is so important."

"Especially for girls, maybe her Mama should try a "wet set" for her hair, at the salon."

"That does not help the weight! The poor thing."

"They need to use a hot comb on that hair."

"She's so fat she won't ever get a boyfriend."

"Boyfriend? No decent man wants to marry a fat woman."

"Put her on a diet, is all she can do."

"The girl will just sneak food!"

I cried myself to sleep.

To Whom It May Concern:

My peers at school hated me, too. Several girls chased me almost all the way home whenever they saw me, after school, carrying scissors to cut my hair, jealous that my hair was longer than theirs. I was afraid to go to school, I was afraid, after school, to go home. Word would spread that I was going to get "beat up," and crowds waited outside, in the schoolyard, to witness. I went to Mama for help, and there was none. Mama said, "If you let them cut your hair I'll shave you bald, and see how you like that!" I knew she would. Mama said, "If you're stupid enough to let them beat you up, it's nothing like the beating you're going to get when you get home!"

I knew she meant that, too! I was alone, trying to dance a children's circle dance with tortuous people. Classmates nagged at me constantly to admit that I was white. They would surround me in groups, when I walked down the halls.

"You white ain't you?"

"No, I am not white," I would answer, pronouncing every word distinctly, in spite of the fact

I was terrified.

"You better stop lying."

By then my hair having been yanked several times by those standing behind me. My head was throbbing. My face turning scarlet, I refused to cry. I refused to say I was white. So, they'd threatened to beat me up after school. A fist shoved in my face, their faces becoming a blur, would seal the threat. I looked for back doors to escape out of, windows to crawl through, and back streets to travel, even if it was far out of the way of my usual route home. I was lonely and miserable.

I had no friends. I had no one to spend time with, so I spent a lot of time in the library. I loved words. I loved reading. I loved reading about African culture. One day I found a word I thought explained who I was. I liked the word, "Mulatto." I preferred to think of myself as one. I found it in an old tattered and worn Noah Webster dictionary. Its sound was exotic, dreamy, even if not used in America today: 'Mulatto, An offspring of a black and a white parent, or a person whose heritage contained African ancestors mixed with white ancestry.'

At school, classmates used terms drearily like "Hi-Yella, Red-Bone, and White Girl," with contempt. The boys used the terms more seductively; "Red-Bone!" Followed by a lusty groan or a whistle, licking their lips, reaching out trying to fondle my blossoming breasts or behind. I hated it. Always striving to avoid conflict, I ducked, dodged, and hid as much as I could. I was more than lonely.

To Whom It May Concern:

The family as we all know was a sorrow for me, too. My relationship with Mama had a very angry, perhaps violent component. The infinite amount of chores she left for me must have no mistakes. Any offense ended in a beating.

A fiery hot lashing would awaken me, from a deep and peaceful sleep. My eyes jolting open I'd find Mama standing over me, beating me with a strap. The beatings were for little things I forgot to do. A few crumbs found on the kitchen table, failure to wipe standing water off the sink or omitting to sweep the kitchen floor! My poor startled heart would pound like the slap note rhythms of a barrel shaped drum, resonating loud in my ears. My arms, flailing about, trying to fight off the swing of her arm, would be hit in the barrage. I tried to run, or duck deeper under the covers.

"What did I do?" I'd screamed repeatedly.

Often, I would get a strike across the face, on the inside of a thigh, making it hard to walk and even on the bottom of a foot, making a shoe uncomfortable. My pajamas would rip, sometimes, from her reaching out to grab me and pull me back into the beating. I wanted to die. When it was over I'd become sick from the pain and would throw up. I'd lie clutching my

bed covers weeping, nursing the ugly, raised red welts left on my body, crimson because of my pale white skin.

Always on the following morning I would dig, desperately, for clothing with long sleeves, regardless of the weather, to hide my wounds. I would be weak, my limbs heavy, and every move sluggish. When finally dressed, my clothing rubbing against the, sometimes bloody, welts were agonizing. As I sat in the classroom I'd shudder from the pain. Nevertheless, I had to bear it. The hateful girls hovering around me got in the way of my hiding the embarrassment. Once they spotted an ugly welt, usually on my hands, wrist, or legs, they'd laugh at me.

One day the loud whine of a safety signal disturbed the classroom; Air Raid Sirens went off, a common practice during those years. Was it a drill or an actual warning? Teacher, as always, yelled,

"Get under your desks, children, DUCK AND COVER!"

The teacher ran around the room, pulling down the shades, if a bomb dropped, we could go blind looking into the light. All of us scrambled around, crawling under our school desks. Under my desk, my hands clutched behind my head and neck, crouched down, I glanced around at the paralyzing fear on the faces of my classmates. I wished they understood that, that was how

I lived my life, every day. Running and hiding, ducking and covering in paralyzing fear. I cried, often, when I was alone in my room, because no one loved me and I had Daddy on a limited basis! It seemed that just being me on this earth seemed to upset everyone. Perhaps, I could run away, but I didn't know where to go. I didn't know where to hide. I didn't know what to do.

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About me: <https://about.me/lorenehill63>

REVIEWS

By K.W.C on June 18, 2014

Great read! I enjoyed this story. The author Ms. Hill, has an excellent way of "drawing you in" to the story. Very well done! I felt emotion as I read it and the To whom it may concern piece, really had me connecting with the primary character!

By Marie Buck on July 20, 2014

Thought Provoking Read! To Dance with Ugly People really drew me in with the author's concept of basing each 'chapter' of life on an African dance. I found this to be a thought provoking, emotional and a very clever read.

By Rukia the Reader on October 21, 2014

An emotive and memorable read! This is an emotional and captivating novel, which is cleverly written. It is formatted using a unique style that enables the author to portray stories relating to some of the struggles of daily life for the main character Dani and the heartache endured. As it covers emotive subjects like drug abuse, and abusive relationships, it is obvious that the author has invested emotionally in this book and this gives it a sense of honesty and integrity. It is an intense read in parts and is an enjoyable book to read.

By Melissa72 on April 18, 2015

This is a story told in a series of letters written by Dani, beginning in the year 1955 when she was just a small child of only 4 years old, and continues on through until the fall of 1983. Dani's story is raw and emotional in its honesty and truth. Dani is forced to grow up early, with a mother who left her in charge, basically abandoning her to raise her siblings and care for the household as a parent should. Dani suffers from abuse and neglect, not only as a child, but throughout this entire tale. I felt for this girl, I kept hoping that things would take a turn for her, kept looking for her silver lining.

Dani eventually grows up to be a strong woman, with the courage to keep going, to keep striving, and believing that her true "someone" was out there, waiting to appreciate all that she has been through, and the person that she has become. It is hard to read through Dani's trials and tribulations, hard to look into the face of the hand that this poor girl was dealt. This author did an excellent job in crafting Dani and her story, and all of the characters that come in and out of her life and affect it. She makes you understand the pain and suffering that Dani goes through, and helps the reader to see how she comes to the point that she finally is at.

By Tassy

Trip The Light Fantastic! To Dance with Ugly People by Lorene Stunson Hill is an inspirational and emotional drama of the life and times of Dani growing up fast from 5 years old. Told in diary format this remarkable story squeezes every drop of emotion from the reader without being preachy or overbearing. Well done to the author for tackling such a subject in a way that is totally unique. Very Highly Recommended!

By Sabrina Hundal

A good read!

By Sheree

Started reading it. I like it. The author is my cousin!

By D. Cotoon August 22, 2014

Who is to know human nature? There are so many different personalities; it becomes difficult to understand how one will react to their environment. And then there's fate. How much of one's life is altered by fate? This is a story of Dani Dobson from the age of four in 1955 to September 1983. Dani had a very difficult life. Her very favorite person in the world was 'Big Mama' a name she called her grandmother. When she was five, she lost Big Mama. Her mother had little time for her, leaving her to take care of the house and siblings. Because of the abuse she endured, she became very introverted. She found solace in reading and when she was a teen, she loved skating. During her teen years, she met Dane Ransom. He pursued her romantically and she fell deeply in love with him. Her marriage to Dane would not ease her abuse.

By Robin Squire October 2, 2015

This is the most wonderfully entertaining and powerful book, written with great sensitivity, guts and feeling. I urge you to read it, it will enhance your life.

By Amazon Customer on March 12, 2016

Format: Paperback

I loved the book, you could really feel the pain, joy, and longing for someone to just love Dani, and the inner strength she had to overcome all of her trials and fears, this book is truly worth getting and reading, I feel you will enjoy it, as much as I did.

Anonymous

A great read, captivating throughout, would definitely recommend