



“Man, that’s the last time you’ll put your hands on me. . .”

Chapter 1

Damaged Goods

How about I open my journey at this point? Recalling the roller-coaster relationships, I could picture . . .

As a suburban family, we lived outside of the city of Chicago—some thirty miles south. The area wasn’t big enough to be called a city, so it was known as a village. And the population was approximately 2,500. The family home measured some 980 square feet. It was a little framed house, red and white with four small bedrooms, one bathroom, a full-sized kitchen, and a living room, with a big backyard. When our parents first bought that house (sometime around 1955), it wasn’t equipped with a gas or electric furnace. It had one of those huge outdoor, stand alone, gallon tanks for heating. Mom never let that tank get bone dry, though. If my memory doesn’t fail me, the fuel delivery person would come every four weeks to fill it up.

“Oooh weee, it’s gonna be a cold winter. Time to winterize!” Mom would tell us, dragging her words out. “Take this tape out there and wrap those pipes. Ya’ll wrap ‘em good and tight, ya hear. Wouldn’t want ‘em to freeze up on us.”

Wrapping the pipes wasn’t a job any one of us was fond of; anyhow, it had to be done. It was eighteen years later when mom converted that heating

unit from oil to gas. And what a big difference that made. It meant no more wrapping those pipes!

Even now, it's hard to imagine how all eight of us lived in that tiny, framed house. But we did! I had five siblings: two sisters and three brothers. Dana was the eldest, and the one we looked up to for guidance and support. Lyndia, the baby sister, was a spoiled brat and a pistol at times. Johnny Jr. was the eldest son and referred to as Junior. Junior was the spitting image of dad but grew to be a lost soul. (Matter of fact, Junior and I were the only kids that resembled dad). Bobby, the second eldest son, had a great creative mind. It took very little effort for him to take a gadget apart and put it back together. So when Bobby got a degree from the DeVry Institute of Technology, it was not unexpected. And Tommy, the baby brother, was the youngest of the clan.

Although we were raised with strong Christian values, our family worshipped under three different religious perspectives. Mother's missionary work was under the Pentecostal faith. Nearly every church she attended had "The Church of Jesus Christ", tagged to its name. Many times, mom received the Holy Spirit and spoke in tongues. Dad became a member of the Methodist religion and attended the United Methodist Church down on Martin Luther King Drive in Chicago. The Second Baptist Church on 150th Street in Harvey was where one of my cousins played the organ and piano. So for my brothers and sisters, along with other relatives, this neighborhood church was the one for us.

My mother, Esther Lee, was a retired coach cleaner for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Chicago. She was a Southern woman who spoke in a soft, passive tone. Mom was somewhat submissive in her marital relationship. Esther Lee in her stockinged feet stood 5' 7"; her lower legs were curvy and hairy. The hair on her head was charcoal black, real wavy, thick, and hung down her back. It was always parted down the middle, combed to the back, and twisted into a bun roll. Sometimes, she'd use just a little water to keep the edges slick. It was against mom's religion to wear pants so she wore long Christian style dresses that hid those gorgeous legs. Even as teenagers, those church-going traits were instilled in us. It didn't matter how old we were—in mom's house, everyone went to church.

"Sunday is the Lord's Day and we must worship him. Everyone get up and get ready, now." Mom would tell us.

Every Sunday, off to church we went. At the Baptist Church, Sunday mornings were spent embracing Bible studies and Morning Worship Services. After studying the Bible, the Deacons would start with Devotion as the first part of the service. The congregation would lead in singing old gospel hymns, praying, testifying, reading the scriptures, and taking up an offering. Once church services began around 11 a.m., there were more hymns, responsive readings, the passing of collection plates, sermons, and an alter call—but not without plenty of shouting going on. The closing of services concluded with the pastor giving his Benediction (the blessings). Staying in the church really made a difference when we were growing up. Some things we just wouldn't do because they were unrighteous. In our relationships as siblings, yea, we fought among ourselves; but we were always mindful and respectful of others. Who on the block didn't know us Johnny and Esther Lee kids? Although mom had old-fashioned ways in raising us, everyone knew she served the Lord. My mom was a nurturing person and gave her best to provide a safe and healthy environment. She would pray day and night.

Their marriage lacked emotional support and balance. Dad's addictive relationship towards mom became more obsessive and abusive. His crazed behavior made our family dysfunctional. Dad might have been a decent provider for us, but he was not a good husband. A lot of times, he was full of evil; some say he was evil as the devil.

Many times, the thoughts in my mind echoed, "How can a person keep doing the things he does and still go to church on Sundays?"

It meant nothing to dad when he hit mom with his belt. "You have real issues and ya need to address them," Mom would say, in her soft, passive voice.

But dad kept a solemn look on his face and never acknowledged her words. There was a very slick, sick, deep, dark side to him. Keeping those demons suppressed inside had to be torture. In dad's family tree, there was a pack of hidden skeletons stored away in his closet.

My dad, Johnny, Sr., worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad in Chicago as a pipe fitter. And that's where he met mom. Dad, a southern guy, wasn't

only handsome—he was a rolling stone. Tall and clean-shaven, he had a small trimmed mustache and his hair was a mass of silky black curls. He used Murray's grease to keep the curls intact. It had one of those strong holds and gave a great shine—that pomade did the job. Dad was always dressed as sharp as a tack; he stayed in his three-piece suit — even when he was hanging around the house. Now, you've heard the phrase, "Papa was a rolling stone?" Yes indeed, dad made his rounds with the women. Don't think mom didn't know about his flings. But despite all that messing around, my dad took care of his responsibilities; maybe that's what mattered. Well, not only that, mom was a praying woman. But it wasn't enough 'cause dad wanted a separation.

One-by-one they called us into the den, with mom by his side looking grim. When it was my turn, dad spoke in a deep harsh tone.

"Ahem. Your mother and I have some bad news to tell you kids. You know, I love her but we can't stay together. So we need to know who you'd like to live with, me or your mother."

I had always been daddy's girl, but I sat in silence. After a minute or two, I replied, "I love you dad, I do, but mom needs me. She's the one I want to live with."

"Okay, I understand. But, should you need me, I'm only a phone call away. I'll be checking on ya'll regularly." Junior was the only one who went to live with dad. I was glad I didn't follow dad. They moved to Chicago—and stayed with a relative. But brother spent holidays and summer vacations with us.

Guess my parents' separation wasn't a complete shock. Those two were destined to split up, anyway.

There were times dad got violent and fought with mom. When it happened, us youngsters gathered together and wrapped around each other, each of us boohooing and balling. It wasn't until we became teenagers that we four eldest banded together to stop dad from his violent evil ways.

I don't recall which of my siblings said, "Next time daddy fights mommy with the belt, let's jump him."

But the rest of us replied, "Yea, let's take him down!"

For dad, this was a good thing it didn't happen because the odds were against him—four-to-one. It was during their last battle that mom took a

stand. That incident with the broom wasn't intentional. But As it was, dad had hemmed mom in the washroom. He lifted his hand and struck her.

Mom's voice crackled as she told him, "Man, that's the last time you'll put ya hands on me.

I've had it! All these years, I've been tippy-toeing and keeping the blinders on. Naw, they come off today! You bring those women into our home and have intimate relationships with 'em! Then when I walk in on ya, you shout out for me to get out of the room? Ya strike out and fight when the mood hits ya. The things you've done to this family. It's a wonder the kids ain't affected. Man, may God have mercy on your soul!" she shouted.

After lashing out, mom then turned and grabbed a broom that stood against the furnace door. But as she raised it over her head, the broom handle hit the ceiling light. The glass broke and shattered into tiny pieces all over dad. He jumped back and yelled in his deep, harsh tone, "Woman, what type of God do you serve?"

Of course, dad refused to go to the hospital. So, they spent the next hours plucking tiny glass particles from his dark, bruised skin. And it was the God who mother served that put some fear in him. Dad never again struck mom. My siblings may not recall the details of what was said, nor the incident. But this whole scene and their words stuck with me throughout the years. After overhearing the evil things done, "Dad's an example of damaged goods," my thoughts echoed.

Our punishment was nothing like what he put mom through. Whenever one of us were to be disciplined, he told us, "Go ahead and hold that hand out."

Then he slowly took off his thick, black leather belt and whacked it in the palm of our hand—about ten times. That was the extent of his discipline for us. Don't recall everything I'd done to get punished. But there was one incident when he woke me up for not doing the dishes before going to bed. You can bet I never did that again. Every time he'd whack me, I'd tighten up my body, scrunch up my face, and hold out a firm palm — with all five fingers spread apart. I took those licks and stood there rolling my eyes at him—up and down with each stroke. And wanting to ask, "Are you tired now, 'cause that doesn't even hurt?" I'd only thought it; I never said it. I wouldn't dare back

talk dad and push his buttons. Plus, I wasn't that tough as a kid or adolescent. It was rare to be disciplined by him, anyway. Dad never physically abused any of his kids; mom was the one he sought. He didn't show an ounce of kindness when it came to her. Dad had real issues; he was toxic and poisonous. Think about it: What kinda man whips his wife with a belt? Isn't that a sign of a deeply troubled man?

Another incident was shared well after it happened. The memory gets kind of fuzzy. I don't recall all the details, just the gist of the story. And this one added another blemish to darken dad's character.

It happened the time Bobby took the Halsted Street bus to Chicago, where he met dad for lunch. When Bobby arrived at the restaurant on 73rd Street, dad was already seated—and sipping black coffee. Dad loved coffee without any cream or sugar and would always order a delicious pecan roll. While they sat there talking, the waitress returned to refill dad's coffee cup and take Bobby's order.

In his deep harsh tone, dad introduced the waitress to Bobby. Turning to face the waitress, he told her, "This is my nephew –."

"It totally threw me for a loop after dad made that statement," Bobby told me. "Dad didn't have the decency to let the waitress know I was his son. Dad called me his nephew. Sis, I was so speechless and hurt that I just didn't say anything to him."

When my brother shared this experience, I too felt the pain. Although I was daddy's girl, some things just can't be excused. When dad split from the family, we four eldest had grown and were nearing adulthood. Lyndia and Tommy were still tiny tots. Now, there won't be any more time spent rehashing my siblings' adventures growing up. They're not the real focus of the story. So those childhood memories shall remain in the past.



A ton of thoughts swirled around my head. Had dad been abused as a kid to be such a toxic person? What pleasure had he gotten treating a good woman like that? Did his actions go back before any of us were born? Did he act like that while they dated? Had mom just chosen the wrong person to marry? Why did mom stay so long in

a toxic relationship? The things that went on in our house could've easily damaged any one sibling. Did it?

