

The following samples are drawn from the first two chapters of my current (2020) book, *Behind God's Back: Overcoming Poverty, Abuse, and Addiction to Living A Life of Service*. The work focuses primarily on my challenges in childhood, creating a foundation for my eventual ascent into a life of service.

1. Mrs. Wellington's Party

In 1961, Mama found a coveted plot of subsidized housing on Salisbury Street in Pittsburgh's Arlington Heights. Without any discussion, she announced to us kids that it was time "to move on and move up." The distance from our then-home in the projects of Arlington Heights and Salisbury Street—barely a mile—struck me as an unbridgeable gulf: an expanse not only between the known and unknown, but between the black world and the white world.

When we moved to Salisbury Street, I resumed simple routines to comfort myself: collecting pop bottles for refunds, humming soul music I learned from Miss Bessie, walking back from school with my childhood friends from the projects. But in this new world, even as a seven-year old girl, I was met with epithets from my white classmates, who coined me "white chocolate" and "n____-lover" for fraternizing after school with the blacks from the projects, the place I considered my real home.

Even Mama lamented my unwillingness to assimilate. She asked me, in polite and measured terms, to abandon those who had cared for me when she didn't or couldn't do so herself. But I had found pockets of compassion in the projects—in Miss Bessie's grits and homemade hot sauce, in participating in stoop-sitting as mamas braided their daughters' hair and discussed all sorts of things that I didn't understand, in humming along with Mr. Chester's Southern Baptist hymns, in my best friend Patty Reevers's laughter; together, they were antidotes to my suffering. Needless to say, the move was more than a little disorienting to me, a little white girl who got along so well with her black neighbors.

Just before we moved, our upstairs neighbor, Betty Wellington, threw a party. Mama, who suffered frequent dark spells, was in a rare, animated mood and announced to me and Eddie, my older brother, that we were "going to a party!" I squealed with delight when Mama told Eddie to start the bath for me, stage one of preparations for what felt like a distinguished masquerade ball. I couldn't think of the night as bittersweet, a flash of light on the eve of some disorienting change; I was just grateful for Mama's mobilization, for the prospect of us—as a family—experiencing some small measure of contentment.

I was in and out of the tub in a flash as Eddie moped and dragged himself into the bathroom, distressed over his mandated participation. In retrospect, I know he was attuned to our Mama's highs and lows, intuiting that Mama's cheer would be followed by one of her then-trademark plummets.

"Put your pajamas on, and come here and let me brush your hair," Mama said.

I was excited because I had a fresh outfit for the party. I had just been given some new-to-me pajamas from Miss Bessie, who lived the next building over. The bottoms were pink with a small white ruffle at the ankle, with a pink-and-white checked top, and a bow at the top button. They looked almost new, except for a small blood stain on the right sleeve from when Sharmane, the original owner, had almost sliced off her finger trying to open a tuna can.

"That child bled like a stuck pig," Miss Bessie had told Mama. "Cut that finger straight through to the bone, I thought she was going to lose it. Anyway, Sharmie's grown out of these and if you'd like them for Terry, you're welcome to them."

Mama didn't like taking charity from anyone, but everyone in the projects shared things, so that made it all right. Besides, Miss Bessie and I were close. She had fed me black-eyed peas and collard greens on days I had gone without anything to eat, and when I would show up at her house—inconsolable and crying—she would sing to me and hold me in her family's old rocking chair. Wearing the pajamas made me feel connected with Miss Bessie and my surrogate family next door.

"Hey, Mama. Look. Sharmie's pajamas fit. I like them."

I didn't mind the blood stain on the sleeve. This was my first set of pajamas that came—originally, at least—from a retail store. Mama had made most of my wardrobe from discarded fabric she got on sale from the local five-and-dime. She would walk in and ask for "bolt ends," almost always plaid, sometimes getting them for free. Mama took whatever she could and used butcher's paper to trace and embellish designs for different outfits I needed. Some of these outfits—almost exclusively plaid—were elegant and impressive, revealing just one of her many natural but uncultivated talents. Up until Sharmie's pj's arrived, I had been wearing a well-designed but *woolen* nightgown in the summertime. I had a perpetual rash around my neck and scratch marks on my arms because the fabric was so irritating and uncomfortable. Mama tried to soften the prickly fibers by soaking the pajamas in vinegar, but this only added a sour smell to the irredeemable cloak, which felt to me like some mixture of a straitjacket and a monastic hair shirt.

I smiled broadly at her.

“Yes, you look splendid, honey. Now stand still,” Mama said.

I stood before the small vanity mirror at Mama’s dresser and tried not to make too much of a fuss as she pulled the stiff-toothed brush through my tangled blonde hair. It felt good to be regarded by her.

“Okay, little miss, you’re done. Now it’s my turn,” she said, laughing. “Now we need some music. Find Billie Holliday and put her on the phonograph.”

I did as she said. Mama was on her second highball already, and she was letting *me* put the record on the record player—a rare privilege.

I sorted through the stack of records, wildly swinging the Billie Holliday album in the air.

“This one, Mama?”

“Yes, that’s it. Now be careful,” she commanded.

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied.

Be careful, be careful, be careful, I whispered to myself. Slowly I pulled the record out of the album cover, then out of the sleeve, holding only the very ends of the record with my fingers as I tiptoed toward the record player.

“Be mindful not to scratch it,” Mama said.

I adjusted the arm, lowered Billie onto the stem, returned the arm until it clicked, and turned on the machine. The turntable began to spin, the record released, and finally it fell down the stack. My hand trembled as I put the needle to the record and the speaker on the little RCA phonograph crackled, a sign of reassurance. Like magic, Billie’s voice came through the speaker as she sang “Crazy He Calls Me,” and Mama matched Billie every slow, sultry, rhythmic beat of the way, both of their voices hanging in the air—as thick, rich, and velvety as Miss Bessie’s homemade chocolate pudding. I knew this was going to be a wonderful night.

With a Winston cigarette burning at her side, Mama sidled up to the vanity mirror with special lights and prepared to apply oils, lotions, powders, and polish to her face, all alluring to me.

Perched on the dresser, I listened closely as Mama explained the art of applying makeup.

“The foundation evens out your skin tone,” she explained, “and blush adds color to your cheeks. It’s very important to apply with sweeping upward strokes—always upwards—across your cheekbones so as not to show any makeup lines. Nothing’s more unsightly than a woman walking around looking like she has a mask on.”

Nothing’s worse than a woman with a mask on, I memorized.

“Makeup should enhance a woman’s beauty. You understand?”

“Yes, Mama,” I said.

“Ready for your next lesson?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Okay, this is the most critical part. We’re now going to dress the eyes—applying the eyeliner mascara and eye shadow. Special care must always be given to dressing the eyes. *Cosmopolitan* magazine says the eyes are the most attractive feature on women, so it’s extremely important to get the dressing just right—too little and you won’t get noticed, too much and you look like a clown. We don’t want to look like clowns, do we? The idea is to have a subtly dramatic, alluring look.”

I repeated the part of her instruction I had actually understood: *Too much and you look like a clown.*

“Now, the most important thing about applying eyeliner and mascara is having a steady but loose hand,” she said. “And you know,” she added, raising her glass in the air, “there’s nothing better to relax your hand than a good stiff whiskey.”

With a wink and a laugh to no one in particular, she knocked back the last of her drink.

“Run and make me another one, then come back and you can help me apply my eye shadow.”

“Lickety split, Mama?”

“Lickety split,” she replied.

I dashed off into the kitchen to make her highball.

Grabbing the bottle from under the dank kitchen sink, I shouted “Three or four fingers, Mama?”

“Those little fingers of yours? Better make it four, honey. And top her off with the ginger ale.”

Unscrewing the cap of the Seagram’s 7 bottle, I lowered my nose to get a whiff. The fumes were so strong that they made my eyes water. I carefully poured the dark elixir to the top line in the little shot glass, added ice from the black and gold ice bucket on the sink, and dashed it off with a touch of ginger ale. With the same care I had shown the Billie Holliday record, I walked back into the bedroom, holding the glass with two hands so as not to spill a drop.

“Good job, baby. Now come and help me finish my makeup.”

“Can I pick the color?”

“You can,” Mama said, as she swigged down some of her drink, wincing.

Eyeing her glass, she said, “Mmm, really good job, baby.”

I smiled.

“I’m thinking about wearing my white shirt this evening, so what color eye shadow do you think I should wear?”

I surveyed the little pallet of eye colors—brown, blue, green, white, silver, and pink—and deliberated with grave seriousness, hoping my answer would be the right one, the one that pleased her.

“I think silver and brown, mixed together—brown for your eyes and silver for the sparkle.”

“Good choices,” Mama said. “That will create the alluring effect we talked about. Start here on the lower lid with the brown. Brush strokes from the inner part of the lid outwards and highlight with the silver on the upper brow using the same method—even strokes, inner to outer brow.”

She took a long inhale of her Winston and puffed it out.

Leaning into my mother’s face, I lightly brushed the sienna dust onto her lower eyelids. But I couldn’t contain myself. The soft scent of Oil of Olay on her skin, Maybelline powder on her face, a shot of Estee Lauder behind her ear, whiskey ale on her breath—all contained in a fresh cloud of cigarette smoke—made me giggle with such complete abandon that Mama had to finish the job herself.

“You silly little thing,” she said, tickling me as I collapsed in laughter. “Let’s get me dressed.”

Mama fetched a large white men’s shirt from the closet, one she’d picked up at the Goodwill thrift store. She had thrown padding in the shoulders, added front and back darts to cinch in the waist, and raw-stitched black arrows on the collar tips. It was utterly transformed.

I watched as she slid her long legs into her black slacks and shimmied into the crisp white shirt she’d rendered beautiful. She rolled the sleeves to three-quarter length and added a bright red chiffon scarf around her neck.

“What do you think, honey?” she said.

I was mesmerized.

“You’re beautiful, Mama.”

She continued to stare into the mirror, unfazed, examining and adjusting herself.

“Earrings or no earrings?” she asked.

“Hmmm, you decide,” I said.