

Poverty Phoenix

An excerpt from a memoir in three parts

By Shanequa Levin

Summer has come and gone, which means I've moved up to the fourth grade, and shockingly my father's still out of jail! He's even paid me, like, five visits. I haven't seen my brother Bryan much, though, and I miss him. It's not like we hung out all the time, but when we did, I had so much fun with him. We were either riding our bikes around the dirt trails near our bus stop or playing with kids in my building, or sometimes he'd hang with Rohaan and me while we were boyfriend and girlfriend and sometimes did ... you know ... "stuff." We used to listen to reggae, and Bryan would sound just like the guys on the cassette tapes. Sometimes he'd sleep over, and Mom would make me leave my door open all night long; Bryan would have to sleep on my floor with blankets and a pillow. My mom never makes me do this when girls sleep over, my doors are closed and sometimes we sleep in the same bed. But Bryan didn't seem to care. We spent those nights together hating our father, or me experimenting in the kitchen, and him eating my tasty creations. Aww, those were the good times. I really miss him.

"Mom, I don't really see Bryan anymore," I mention one morning before school as I'm on my way out of the door. She's wearing a nightgown that's almost see-through, I can't help but to stare at her nipples and wonder if my breasts will become as big as hers.

"His mom is on that crack real bad." My eyes leave her breasts and head for her lips as my ears start listening. "She has to give up custody of her kids."

With my eyes as big as can be and my heart pounding hard enough to cause an earthquake, I ask, "What's gonna happen to him? Where will he live? Will our father get custody of him?" With my eyebrows scrunched up, I say, "Ain't he outta jail? If not, will Bryan have to go to foster care now? Will *I* ever see him again?" I throw my hands on my head as I continue to ask any and everything that comes to my mind before finishing with, "Is he okay?"

All of a sudden, my eyes widen even bigger this time, just like they do on cartoons, "Oh my God ... maybe he can live with us!" As if a light bulb went off inside of my head giving me an answer, I say, "Mom, I've never lived with him before! That would be so cool!" With the saddest face I can find and arms folded over my chest I shout, "I don't want him in foster care, *Mom!*" Next thing I know, I'm shaking my head quickly from side to side. From what I've seen in movies, foster care is horrible, the worst thing ever. My brother just can't go there!

My mother places her soft hands on my shoulders, looks me in my eyes and says, "Relax. Take a deep breath." I try, but I can't relax. I want answers, but I take the stupid deep breath anyway. "Bryan is living with your father's mother." All of a sudden, my heart slows down and all the muscles in my body finally loosen up as I let out that huge breath.

"Thank God!" But out of nowhere, I can't stop being mad about the fact that Bryan will get more time with our father and grandma than me.

Thankfully, Mom's voice interrupts those thoughts. "Yeah, all of Berry's kids had to be split up. The little boy is with her mother, and her daughter's godmother took her."

"I thought our cousin was her father, why wouldn't he take her?"

"He's married. And I think Berry is still saying that the little girl is this other man's child."

Surprised that someone would lie about who their child's father is, I ask, "Whose is she?"

"Shorty's."

Mom and I both laugh at his funny name, then I say, "Welllll, maybe she is Shorty's daughter." I can't help but to giggle again at his name. "She *is* light-skinned like everyone in his whole family."

"Yeah, but black people come in all shades, Shanequa; you never know what you're gonna get till the baby comes out."

My face scrunches up because now I think everything I know about black people is wrong. "Mommy, that doesn't make sense. I thought you were a mix of what your parents are.

Because you're lighter-brown-skinned, and my father is dark-skinned, and I'm darker than you but lighter than him. And white people only come out white."

Mom's hand goes onto her hip, "Well, that's not always the case with black people. The white man was up in all of our houses!"

"What white man? And we live in apartments."

With a slap to her forehead, Mom says, "Oh, forget it, Shanequa! Just remember, us black people come in all different shades! Now put your jacket on and go catch the school bus before you miss it; I can't afford to call a cab for both of us today."

I do as I'm told, grab my jacket, and head out the door and join all the kids from my building, the red building, the brown houses, and all those that live near the dirt trails, where my brother and I used to ride our bikes. Like every day lately, once I get to where our buses pick us up, I look all around to see if I can spot my brother. This time when I don't, I realize since he's living in Kennedy Heights with our grandma, he has to go to the bus stops in the projects now. That's why he hasn't been at my stop for a while. The projects kids have their own buses and stops that Kennedy Heights kids go to also; I think the kids who live in the nice town houses behind the projects where my great aunt lives get on the buses in the projects too. I don't know when I'll see Bryan again. He's not even in the same school that I'm in.

On the bus, Autura makes me laugh, which cheers me up right away. During school, my class is excited because Police Officer Cheryl is visiting us, and that means we don't have to do any school work. Police Officer Cheryl talks to us about all kinds of things that sound scary. Once she showed us videos of kids acting like one kid was bullying other kids, forcing some to give up their lunch or money. I don't have to worry about that because I never have money to bring to school; I always eat the free school lunch, and trust me, nobody, *nobody* wants to steal that. But after watching that video, I started observing everyone in school, trying to see if they were acting like a bully so I could stay far away from them. Officer Cheryl has also talked about gangs and how they kill you just so their gang members will think that they're cool. She told us that it's random, you can't predict who they're gonna attack and beat up and kill, or when they're gonna do it. Gangs can attack you at a mall, train station, bus stop, parking lot, and other places I forgot about. I know it feels like no place is safe, and if I ever see a group of guys standing together, I'd better run. Well, a group of black or Spanish guys, anyway. Those were the ones she had in the pictures. So I guess that means white people don't have gangs and do stuff like that to people. I remember that day very well. It's one of the times I wished I was ... white.

What's she gonna scare me with today? "Good afternoon, class!" Officer Cheryl greets us all.

"Good afternoon, Officer Cheryl," we all say at the same time, which makes our teacher, Mr. Larry, smile. Mr. Larry is a short black man with a long Jheri curl. Mom says she's pretty sure he has a crush on her. During one parent-teacher conference, she thinks he hinted at going out to dinner together. Besides the Jheri curl and the burn on Mr. Larry's right hand, he's not bad

looking. He has a job, and a he has a car, which we don't, and he doesn't do drugs like my father does. How cool would it have been if my teacher became my stepfather?!

"We have a lot to talk about today, so let's get started." Officer Cheryl turns toward the chalkboard, and as she spells out a word, her gun bounces up and down in the holster on her hip. Her blue uniform looks cool and all, but guns—guns scare me. What if it accidentally goes off and shoots one of us? There would be blood everywhere, someone would die, there would be tears, and we'd all be messed up for the rest of our lives! "Drugs! Let's talks about drugs," she draws a line under the word *drugs* as she says it, then she places the chalk down and claps her hands together. "Tell me what you know about drugs."

Kristen, a blonde girl who sits near the windows, yells out, "They're bad for you!"

Michael, a boy with black hair who sits three seats behind me, yells out, "They make you do stupid stuff."

I yell out, "They make your kids have to go to foster care!" It feels like everyone in the room is now staring at me. It didn't feel like this when the other kids said stuff. *Oh no. What do I do? Do I hide under my desk? What if they think that my mother does drugs and she lost custody of me? Why did I say that? Why, why? Maybe I should just run out the room.*

Officer Cheryl breaks the silence with, "Yes, that's true. Drugs can lead to all of that. Now someone else, what else have you heard about drugs?" More kids yell out silly answers,

like they turn your brain into green mush. Once we all stop laughing, Officer Cheryl tells us about all kinds of drugs and how they are bad for your body and others around you. All I can think about is my brother Bryan and his mother Berry. At the end of class, she hands us all pledges to never do drugs. I sign mine right away.

After school, I find my mother munching on Cracker Jacks while sitting on our sofa. She has incense burning over a dish and reruns of *What's Happening!!* playing on the TV. I sit down next to her, and we both sink low into the sofa. As she pulls me in closer and wraps her arm around my shoulder, I immediately feel loved. I love my mom, and I know she loves me. I squeeze her even tighter than she did me.

A commercial with a guy, an egg, and a frying pan comes on. The guy holds the egg up and says, "This is your brain." Next he cracks the egg into the hot pan. As it fries to a crispy golden brown he says, "This is your brain on drugs." When it's over, I can't help but think about what my brother must be going through. Is he crying? Does he miss his mom, his sister, and brother? Is he scared?

The broom catches my attention just when I'm gonna ask Mommy more about him, "Mom, why do you have a broom upside down by the door?"

"Because I don't want any visitors today. If you put a broom upside down by your door, you won't have any." For some reason I don't believe that will really work, but I don't say anything. My mom is like that; if we are walking down the street, and I walk on one side of the pole and she walks on the other, we both have to say "bread and butter" so I don't get bad luck, or she'll turn around and walk back on the same side as I did. We can't break mirrors because that will give us seven years of bad luck. Oh, and we can't walk under a ladder because something else bad will happen to us. Once in a while I think about trying one of them out. When the time comes, I stop myself because what if it's really true? I couldn't do that to my family.

Eating Cracker Jacks and watching Rerun be silly with my mommy makes me think of Bryan and his silliness. When another commercial comes on, I remember the egg commercial and ask, "Mom, why does Berry do drugs? Doesn't she know how bad it is? *And* you said she's losing her kids because of it!" I stare at her face waiting for her lips to move so I'll know she's gonna answer me. I hope this time, she'll tell me that everything has worked out, and Bryan won't have to go through any of this. As I wait for her lips to move, my heart seems to be slowly falling into my stomach.

Finally, her mouth opens and says, "Some people ... just lose control." With her voice as soft as can be, she says, "Once they get that first high, they start chasing it every day. And that becomes their *number-one* priority!" Mom gets this weird look in her eyes and almost yells, "But people aren't strong-minded like me! They don't know how to put their priorities first when they start getting high!"

I yell back, "Then they shouldn't do it in the first place!" That seems like a no-brainer to me.

"It's not that simple, Shanequa!" She rolls her eyes and looks away, then takes a deep breath and lowers her voice, "Life is hard. It brings you up," her hands head toward the ceiling, "then pulls you down, over and over again." Her hand goes up and down, but never as high as it did each time before. "Sometimes people are looking for a quick escape, and they end up looking in all the wrong places. Then they get hooked! Drugs suck you in, they make you want more and more. Once you're hooked, now on top of the problem you were trying to cover up, you now have a fucking drug problem too!"

"I'm never gonna do drugs!" I turn my head toward our refrigerator because it always contains a 40 ounce of Old English, "I'm not even gonna drink beer or smoke reefer," I add.

"You say that now, and trust me I hope you stick to what you say! Nothing good comes out of doing drugs. Drugs ruin your life! People lose their kids and apartments because of drugs!" She sucks her teeth and shakes her head, "and they fucking make you lose your goddamn teeth!" Before I watch my mom's every movement, my tongue checks my mouth for my teeth. Although her head is down, I can see that she's trying to wipe her eyes with her fingers so I can't see.

I don't why she's crying. She has all her teeth, so that wouldn't make her cry. She's not losing custody of me. Why is she crying? "Have you," I stop in the middle of my sentence

because I'm so scared of her answer, "ever done drugs?" Please let her answer be no! Please, please. I mean I know she does reefer, but not drugs drugs?!

She places her hand slowly around her neck, then she moves it to her forehead where she leaves it. "Yes," she says as I gasp. "Look, Shanequa, I'm only 24! I'm still trying to live my life, and I ain't perfect! I smoke reefer, and occasionally I do some other drugs." The words *some other* make my body get stiff.

Taking her hands off her forehead and throwing them in the air as she talks, she says, "Listen, I rather you hear it from me then from people out there in them streets. So that way you won't be shocked and mad, you'll already know and be prepared for it!"

As she stares at me with a face I can't explain, my eyes widen at the thought of people already knowing that she does "some *other*" drugs. Thoughts of a kid coming over to me while we're waiting to get on the slide at school and telling me that she knows my mother does drugs makes my heart pound. I think about all the things Officer Cheryl told us that happen to drug addicts. Then I think about *my mom*.

After some silence, she stands up and heads toward the kitchen, where she says, "I may do some drugs every now and then, but I keep a roof over your head, we've never been evicted out of nowhere, and you ain't never been in no damn foster care! Hungry or without clothes. I'll give and do whatever it takes for you!"

As I take a deep breath, I can't help but to think about how true her words are. Then without even thinking, it feels like my mouth lets out the words, "Some drugs? What kind?"

She opens the refrigerator and sticks her head in it while she says, "I smoke reefer, do crack sometimes, and I try coke," she pulls chicken out from the freezer and places it on the counter, but not before saying, "I'm scared of needles, so I don't do that heroin shit!" Rolling her eyes as she looks me in mine, she says, "Your father does that shit!"

I look away because my brain keeps showing me a picture of her lips around a crack pipe and of my father with his arm stretched out, a rubber band wrapped around it, and a needle approaching it. The thought about my mom makes me almost cry way more than the one of my father. I hear her grab a bowl and place the chicken in it, then put it in the sink where she runs hot water over it. As she washes her hands in the bathroom, I sit on the couch wondering if she'll ever get arrested, and when she does, where will I go?

No one wants me; no one. I mean I do have family, but they're all trying to take care of their kids with no father around, or they can barely take care of themselves. So how will they be able to help me too?

When my mom comes out the bathroom she grabs the remote, and as she flicks from one station to another, I want to cry, scream, and beg for someone to help us. A little voice in my head says, "*The next time Officer Cheryl comes, maybe I should tell her about my mom?*" I can't believe it. All of the things she was talking about today were about *my* mom. I can't stop

wondering how many people know she does crack? Maybe the kids in the projects know, that's why they treat me differently. Oh *no!* What if all the white kids at school know? Maybe that's why they don't invite me to their parties. "You look worried. Don't be. I didn't tell you that to scare you. I am not like all of them; I will do whatever for you, Shanequa. I *know* how to put *my* priorities first!"

I put my head down while more horrible things come to mind. Finally, I say, "Thanks for telling me." Mom stares at me, which makes me put my head down even lower. I can't let her see my eyes because I'm trying to stop my tears from falling out. If I look at the person I love more anything, who is now a drug addict too, I'm sure I'll cry for days.

"I love you, Shanequa. I love you more than anything." She wraps her arms around me and gently rocks me. Which is good because now she can't see how scared I really am that she, too, will become like Berry, and I will be the next one taken away to foster care. "Why don't you go into your room and play with your dolls?" With a kiss to my forehead, she says, "Then clean up your room. The section 8 inspector is coming tomorrow to see if we will be approved for this program I'm trying to get us into." I do as I'm told and go into my room without saying another word. I pull out all of my dolls' fancy clothes and try to have them go shopping, but while holding my perfect white Barbie dolls in my hands, my eyes begin to sting from the tears that are begging to come out. As I cry, I hope my mom kidnapped me when I was little and my real parents are gonna find me soon.
