

Tanasha Y. Gordon

The Day I Call "Why?"



Tanasha—or “Tee,” as she likes to be called—knew right away that she wanted to write a book that would help others to walk in her shoes. She began the first chapter even before our workshop had properly begun, each week adding a new episode or reflection as she alternated between odes to survival and heartbreaking passages about despair. She has read her work extensively in public as part of Herstory’s justice program.

As she enters motherhood, she is proud of her same-sex relationship and intent upon raising her daughter in a very different way.

Do you know what it’s like to not have a father not be able to play basketball with you? Parents to take you shopping? Do you know what it’s like to have parents in jail and they cannot provide for you financially? I used to play basketball around the corner as a kid with my closest friend, Kay-tee. Her dad would give her money. Her mom would see what she wanted to eat. Her dad would even come play basketball with her sometimes. But, what about me? I never had a father to play basketball or football with. Never had a mommy to ask what a period was, or sex.

What do you know about your mother and father? I cannot tell you what my mother’s favorite drink is. I can maybe tell you her full name and favorite color. I don’t even know how old my parents are. Now, think about everything you know about your parents. I wish I had my real mother and father to tell me what to do, give me rules.

This not only should give you an outlook on how one can be affected by parents that have been in trouble with the law, it should also make you realize and appreciate your parents, whether it is just your mother or your father, because seventeen-year-olds like me would LOVE to take your place.

* * *

Jail . . . it will get you . . . it will mold you . . . it will shape you . . . But it will never take the pain away that I have felt most of my seventeen years of life. It affected me much! I felt alone. I felt like all the other boys and girls had mommies and daddies, but I didn't. I had people who played the role, but that cannot replace the feeling that I had. Sometimes, I just walked around with a frown, just wanted to punish things and throw things.

Some people wonder how I became such a good person, how I didn't end up in trouble or a juvenile delinquent. It was only God that has kept me mentally sane. But when you see someone or try to judge someone, look at their background, find out their history. Being a child to a parent that is in jail is not easy. Before you criticize anyone, find out about their book and the story inside it.

Daddy, is that you?

* * *

Still not living with any of my biological sisters. My mom, in jail, finally started writing me letters. Me, in shock because I didn't know what to write, how to feel, always had unconditional love for my mother. Me, in the church choir, loving to sing, happy, healthy . . . always wished my mother was there.

Do you know how it feels to wonder if your mother is in jail? Dead? In the street? Coked up? There were times where I just wished my mommy never went to jail! Why my mommy?! She is such a good person! Don't be mean to my mom! She doesn't deserve this! Imagine your mother in jail and she can't come see you because she has no freedom!

Daddy, is that you?

* * *

Mommy, coming to visit me at times. I don't remember how often over the weekends, but whenever she did, I never wanted her to leave. Now, eight years old, spoke up for myself and said, "I want to live with my mommy." Did I get to go? Yes, of course. But, did it last long? Hell, no! I used to go to my Aunt Mary's house with bruises and cuts on my arms and legs from getting beaten. Did I think anything of it? No, because I loved my mommy. She is a good person. I didn't want anything to happen to her.

Three months . . . three months is as long as it lasted. Everything had gotten so bad that we had to go back to court for custody battle. Me, in the courtroom, not knowing what was happening, just sat there, hour after hour after hour, waiting for my mom. Soon, Mom storming out of the room, turning the corner and sitting on the floor. Me, looking at her with a sweet benevolent smile as she says, "DON'T LOOK AT ME." With tears in my eyes, Why can't I look at my mommy? I love her. Why is she being so mean to me? She is a good person. I know she doesn't mean it.

Later on, around eight o'clock, "Come on, Tanasha, it is time to go." My mother, angry and tears in her eyes, me, walking with my "mom," who has raised since the age of two. This day—I always remember it as "the day before Thanksgiving." My first holiday with my mother was soon to be destroyed, and I know why . . . but that's a different story.

Then, not too long after, my "mom" tells me, "Your mother is in jail." Wow! The sharp pain I felt in my heart. I wanted to go visit her but was too scared to ask.

All this I am telling you is brand new to everyone. No one EVER knew I felt this way. No one EVER knew I had this pain . . . no one but my Aunt Mary.

* * *

The most precious angel I can imagine, the glow of my day—the perfect reflection of a saint. I loved her with all my heart and might. She was my backbone, my anchor. When I would get in trouble I would hear her say, "Leave that girl alone, Purr," her lovely way of saying her sister's name. She knew my secrets in and out. She knew what I was going to do before or even while I was doing it. She had my heart. If it wasn't Aunt Mary, it wasn't anybody.

I stayed with her for about three weeks before I went back with my "mom." Her house was the one everyone ran to in their time of need, in their time of trouble, maybe even just to say some kind words or expression like "Thank you," "I love you." Every time my mom would say, "Get on your shoes, we goin' to Sista's house!" ("Sista" was what she called her) I jumped up, grabbed my shoes and hurried up out the door, forgetting my hair was not done or I was still in my pajamas that I changed into every day I came home from school. I loved coming from church and my mom stopping at the stop sign, me, in excitement, waiting for that left-turn blink to come on. And when it did, I couldn't help but smile, trying to hide my excitement, trying to rush my mom out the car. At times when I didn't hear that blinker, I would make an excuse, "Maybe she cooked dinner . . . maybe she needs help with something."

At times, I loved to hear that car pull up in front of my house, I could always tell when she pulled up, her nice pretty shiny white van had a certain sound it made, a distinctive sound, a sound that no one else could make. Until one day, that left-turn blinker turned into no blinker at all and that sound could no longer be heard . . . the day I call "Why?"

* * *

Waking up that morning, taking extra long to get ready for school. Wanting to see my Aunt Mary, something telling me, go, go, go! So I decided I was going to take my cousin's bus since his bus came a little later than mine.

Phone rings. Caller ID: *Mary*. I quickly jump to answer the phone, but my older brother, Jared, got to it first. I listened for a moment, realizing it was just my cousins goofing around, laughing, soon realizing that laugh I was hearing was a sorrowful cry from her daughter.

Jared running upstairs, saying repeatedly, "I have to go to Aunt Mary's house," me asking, "Can I go? Can I go?" He says, "No" as I fix my lips to ask, "Why?" He says, "She stopped breathing." Me, gasping for air, "Oh, no!" Then, not too soon after, putting a smile on my face: *That's Aunt Mary, she will be okay.*

Jared running up and down the steps, trying to get himself together. I ask, "Should I call Mommy?" He pauses and says, "Yeah." By

the look on his face, I could see this was more serious than I thought. He left. I called my mom's job, speaking to her boss, whose name was also Mary. "Oh, my God! I will tell her when she comes back." My other brother, Devon, running out the room. I tell him what's going on. Him, getting ready to get Mom from work—she still has two hours before she gets back to the yard. Soon hearing the phone ring. From the way he was talking, I could tell it was Jared. Me, saying in my head, "Ah, she is okay!"

Devon breaks down his voice sounding raspy, "No, man, don't tell me that! Don't tell me that! No!" Only one thing that could mean . . . she was gone. Devon, finally getting off the phone, goes to get Mom as I call all my uncles. Devon pulls up, I run outside, get in the car and there we go, on our way to the hospital. Everyone crying. I sit in the waiting room.

My other aunt comes out and asks, "Do you want to see her?" I walk in the room of Huntington Hospital and see her lying there peacefully, tears in my eyes, my mom and two brothers surrounding her. MY AUNT MARY IS GONE! Everyone blaming themselves, blaming each other for things they could not do. Me, blaming myself because if I would have left when I first walked out that door, I would have been able to save her. Realizing the day before, I missed the bus and was mad at her for not being able to take me. There are so many parts missing, but cannot be described in detail. Aunt Mary was gone, the matron of the family gone. And that is where everyone's life changed.