

BRENDA L. THOMAS

laying down my burdens
a memoir

prologue

July, 1981

He was spending the weekend with me at my parents' while they were down the shore. I'd gone to the store with our three-year-old daughter, Kelisha, to get milk and all I can do is imagine how he made his discovery.

He'd probably decided to make the bed and while he was tucking the sheets in between the mattress and box spring, his hand hit what felt like a book—my journal, filled with scraps of paper. I would hope that once he pulled it out from its hiding place he hesitated in opening it. I would like to believe that he initially thought to himself, *"This must be her personal journal; I can't read this."*

He knew writing was important to me, whether it was poems that I wrote to him confessing my love, or journal entries of my hopes of one day becoming an author. I'm guessing, though, that his curiosity to learn more about my inner thoughts proved too strong, leaving him no choice but to

open the pages to my life and begin reading thoughts that I'd dare not tell anybody but myself.

I can see him sitting there where I found him, reading about how much I loved him and how badly I wanted our relationship to work out. I'd written about how hurt I was that he had another girlfriend with whom he was spending most of his time. But something tells me he ignored that, and probably passed over my accounts of how I had tried to understand his abusive nature—from the first time he pushed me over the bed to the punches and chokeholds I'd learned to endure.

No, something tells me he focused on how I'd written about the man who'd become my confidant, who I would talk to when I came to work battered from his anger, the man who refused to believe those bruises were from a slammed door or playing on the floor with my daughter. He was the man who encouraged me to leave and the man who'd taken me in his arms one afternoon in a dirty vacant office at our workplace.

I had written: *"I wanted to see you and kiss you," he said smiling. So we stood there, me in a white dress and him pressed against me in his dirty work clothes.*

With his arms firmly wrapped around me, he slowly moved his hands around my waist and under my dress. His tongue was deep in my mouth, while his fingers made their way under my panties. Had it not been for where we were, I might've let him have his way.

Reaching the top of the stairs, I first hear the rustle of papers. My heart stops and starts again. My mouth is dry and I force my legs to move toward the back bedroom. Bracing myself, I step through the bedroom doorway.

"Russell, please don't read those. They're personal."

He doesn't answer.

I hold out my hand, "Please, can't you just give them to me?"

"Fuck no!" he says, his voice a low rumble.

"But Russell they're—his sharp glare cuts off my words.

Knowing I can't simply snatch away from him what belongs to me, I feel the need to quickly busy myself in order to come to terms with what's happening. I snap into autopilot

and figure that by focusing on breakfast I can pretend that what I know is about to happen might be delayed if only for the seven minutes it takes to fry bacon and scramble eggs.

I back out the doorway and go downstairs to the kitchen. Our daughter is the only one who will eat. Meanwhile, Russell skulks down the steps and sits on the couch, refusing to acknowledge my presence. Needing to talk to someone besides me, he phones his mother, Eve, revealing to her the details of my writing.

I sit his plate of food on the coffee table in front of him, his grits stiffen and the bacon continues to shrivel while he talks to his mother. Absentmindedly he pushes the plate away.

To distract my daughter I turn on the cartoons but also keep an ear to his conversation as he reads parts of my journal entries to Eve. I know from the creases across his forehead and the redness that fills his cheeks that it's paining him. I'm also aware that Russell's talking to his mother in no way assures me that she will have my best interest at heart, but still I pray that she can somehow console him. Finally, he tells her he's going to see her in a few minutes and hangs up the phone. He takes my journals with him. I want to ask him to leave them behind. Why does he need them? Is it because he's going to destroy them? That wouldn't bother me as much as the thought of him consumed by the idea of another man's hands on my body.

Not much later Russell calls me from a phone booth. This is the call I should ignore, the one that will bury part of my life for 10 years.

"Brenda, can you come over to my house? I wanna talk," he says, his voice full of sadness instead of anger.

"Okay," I say, feeling guilty and hoping I can make him understand why I'd reached out to another man.

There is nobody for me to leave Kelisha with, so I take her along with me to meet him at the bus stop. We ride the 66 trolley, the El train and the 52 bus mostly in silence, until we arrive at his house on 52nd and Viola Streets.

He beckons for me and Kelisha to follow him upstairs. The narrow middle bedroom is small and hot, the air conditioner

BRENDA L. THOMAS

not providing much relief from the sweltering July heat. The room is only big enough for his queen-sized bed, a dresser and chest, on top of which sits his 19" television.

He tells Kelisha to sit on the bed and play with her dolls. Russell then props himself against the headboard and proceeds to read my journal aloud. I can tell he is doing it to intimidate me. He wants to hurt me with my own words.

With his voice in the background, I take in the close quarters of the room. His dust-filled dresser is littered with products: Right Guard deodorant, Ultra Sheen hair grease, Pierre Cardin cologne and the wire pick for his hair. Sticking out from under the bed is an old turntable and a Stacy Adams shoebox filled with cassette tapes.

He has yet to acknowledge me, so I keep my distance by situating myself next to the window where I fold my arms across my chest so he won't see me trembling.

At his next pause, I interrupt. "Russell, I'm sorry you found those. It's not what you think."

He snaps his head in my direction and I can see beads of perspiration forming on his top lip—this tells me it would be best if I keep quiet. I glance over at Kelisha who is twisting her dolls' hair in knots.

He finally addresses me.

"Brenda, why would you write this shit? I mean, how could you let a man stick his dirty finger in you?"

"Russell, you don't understand."

"I understand alright, you ain't shit, *everybody* told me that. Why aren't you any fuckin' good?"

I shrug my shoulders as if to say, "I don't know why at the age of 23 I am considered no good."

"When did you start fucking this nigga, Brenda?"

"I didn't. It wasn't like that."

"That's bullshit. Don't no man feel sorry for your ass, he just wanted some pussy. You fucked him in that dirty room, didn't you?"

Between quivering lips I say, "No Russell, I swear I didn't."

I try to answer his questions, but rather than listen he continues

to berate me about how I'm no good.

"Why you standing all way over there?"

Again, I shrug my shoulders and play dumb, knowing I'm there to stay out of striking distance.

"You love that nigga don't you?" he asks.

I move to the corner, trying to position myself behind the TV.

"I love *you* Russell. I don't love nobody else."

He moves from the bed so quickly that I don't have a chance to defend myself.

WHAM! He slaps me on the side of my head.

"Tell me the fuckin' truth, Brenda!"

Protecting my face with my hands I whine, "I am, I am, I swear I am."

I look over his shoulder at our daughter, who is busy in her own world. She is scared, I'm sure, to even glance at the monster her father has become.

With all 6'3" of him hovering over me, I take every slap, punch and kick he deals me. I take them because I am guilty of being all the names he shouts: slut, whore, dirty bitch. None of it, however, hurts as much as knowing that my daughter is a witness to his violent attack.

I cover my mouth to keep from shrieking, but I hear my daughter's frightened voice, "Mommy?"

When she starts to cry because she can't ignore us anymore he yells, "Lay down and go to sleep!"

I want to yell, "How can she? It's six o'clock in the evening!"

Hysterically, I cry to him. "Please don't hit me anymore, Russell. I'm begging you."

"You don't think you deserve it?" he asks.

I relent. "Yes."

He backs me up against the window. The air conditioner knobs dig into my skin.

"Well then, shut the fuck up and take it!"

"Russell, you don't have to beat me in front of Kelisha."

"Why not? She needs to know what a dirty bitch you are," he says.

BRENDA L. THOMAS

He steps back across the room and bends over to get his sneakers. I pray he is going to take a walk to cool off. Instead, he flings a hi-top red and white Adidas in my direction, hitting me between the breasts.

I don't know who cries the loudest, my daughter or I.

"Stop it Daddy! You're hurting my Mommy!"

He turns to Kelisha and shouts, "Git your ass in the room with Tank!"

She scurries off the bed and out the door to where his younger brother is lying, recovering from five gunshot wounds he received two weeks ago as a result of his criminal lifestyle.

Having retrieved the sneaker, Russell whips around. "Take your clothes off!"

For the first time in our five-year relationship I am terrified. I have never been the one to hurt him; his beatings in the past were always in response to my accusing him of being with other women, or my talking back to him. This time, though, it is clearly my fault. I am guilty of having been intimate with another man.

I do as I'm told and undress down to my bra and panties. This is usually when he forces me to have sex and is the only way he calms down. So I am submissive because in the past it has meant the punishment will soon come to an end.

"Sit your ass down!"

My eyes follow his hand gripping the sneaker as my mind scrambles to think of something more I can do—something that will keep him from hitting me. The words won't come fast enough. "Can't you just listen to me?" I beg.

He pounds the sneaker across my thighs.

"You better tell me the fucking truth! You fucked that nigga, didn't you?"

"No, no," I holler out, my hands flailing in front of me. I'm not quick enough, because the sole of the Adidas smacks across my face. I can see blood splashed on his shirt and feel its wetness on my cheek.

Through my dulled senses I hear footsteps dragging down the hall. I pray it is Tank coming to save me. There is a knock at the door. It opens and it is him.

He looks at us, shakes his head and says to Russell, “Com’on, smoke a joint man and cool out.”

Russell answers, “I’ll be in,” before giving me one last look of disgust and exiting the room.

With Russell gone from the room I consider running, but there is no escaping—especially without my daughter. My God what could she be thinking?

Whispering, I pray to God that the sharp pangs I feel in my back and stomach aren’t from a broken rib. The shock of his beating reels in my head. In the past I’d just go numb, but now I was wide awake, thinking that this might just be the one to put him over the edge. Maybe this time he would really kill me. Yes he’s beaten me before, but this time *he’s* hurting from something I’ve written.

I glance down at the journal pages strewn across the floor. Now that he has discovered my journal and my infidelity my writing will no longer be a comfort for me. It is the only thing that gives me optimism about having a better life, even when the world around me is spinning out of control. It’s as if once I write it down it has happened to someone else.

I rise from the bed. Seeing my reflection in the mirror I realize I’m looking at a woman I don’t recognize. I have no idea how I got to the point where I would allow a man to beat me. I stare at myself in disbelief, trying to get a grip on what might lay ahead.

Ten minutes later Russell returns to find me sitting on the bed, my knees to my chest. I am clenching my ankles, rocking back and forth.

“Stand your dirty ass up!”

Once again I do as I’m told. He picks up his sneaker from the top of the television to finish what he had started. Moments later I’m slumped beside the dresser.

“Tell me something,” he says, crouching down in front me. His voice is a whisper.

I stare up at him, hoping he’ll have mercy on me.

“Why you always writing some dirty shit?” he asks, his face so close to mine I can smell the joint on his breath.

“I don’t know.”

BRENDA L. THOMAS

“I’m gonna promise you something Brenda; if you ever write some shit like this again, it’s gonna be the last time.”

His hands grip my wrists tightly. His knuckles are red.

“No, you don’t understand. I swear, Brenda. Your shit is so fucked up that you better not *ever* write, keep a journal, none of that shit or I’m gonna kill you. You hear me?” The tone of his voice is so low, so deliberate, it sends shivers through me.

“I won’t,” I promise, as the imprint of the sneaker brands my soul, severing my desire to write, replacing it with a paralyzing fear.

“I swear, I *promise* you Brenda—I’ll kill your dumb ass. You understand?”

I lower my head like a dog that’s been disciplined.

“Now suck my dick.”