

“Divorce isn’t just the person, it’s everything that goes with it – your kids, the adjustment, Everything.” (Peter Andre)

1980

It was around 5 am I awoke because I was sick with fever and heard what sounded like music coming from the kitchen.

I want to rock with you (all night)

Dance you into day (sunlight)

I want to rock with you (all night)

Rock the night away

Out on the floor

There ain't nobody there but us

Girl when you dance

There's a magic that must be love

Just take it slow

'Cause we got so far to go

You gotta feel that heat

And we can ride the boogie

Share that beat of love I wanna rock with you all night. Dance the night away.

(Michael Jackson)

My mother and father were dancing in the kitchen around the oakwood island. My father was still wearing his truck driving uniform as he dipped and twirled my mother around. She was beautifully happy standing on her tiptoes on top of my father's steel toe boots with her perfectly manicured feet. I didn't know what love was at three years old but I felt an overwhelming burst of sentiment with a delighted sense of belonging towards two people who even when they thought no one was watching loved each other without pretentiousness. And, as my parents danced before sunrise, their smiles illuminating the kitchen, it would all soon fade away into the perils of divorce. I fell asleep on the dining room floor flushed with a high fever watching my parents dance to the tunes of happiness, feeling unfamiliar sentiments of what I now know was pure love. Those treasured sentiments would never visit my life again.

Divorce can sometimes be worse than death because there is no end to the degree of grief that can potentially engulf you. After my parents' divorce we lost everything. My mother went from over feeding us to not feeding us at all, buying us the latest and coolest clothes to hardly ever buying us clothes at all. Visits every other weekend with my father turned into no visits coupled with diminishing child support payments and my father's decision to disappear because my mother's vindictive antics became too much for him to bear. Ugliness on both sides lost us our beautiful home in the suburbs but the biggest loss of all was losing my mother to depression. There were multiple men after my father left and her warmth and attentiveness slowly diminished over time, rarely making any cameos. Her once exuberant smile turned into a stoic gaze, crying spells and sleep marathons. The first year after the divorce was one of the worst years of my life. It was an inglorious pang that has never been easy to completely digest.

One-year post divorce

Drunk Ronald

The needle gently tickled the record as an old Isley Brothers tune, a funkadelic, dusty 70s melody penetrated my bedroom walls. The raspy sound of muffled instruments pressed against a rustic base with that-low crackling vinyl sound that emits from a record player's needle that is covered in weeks of accumulated dust. It was December in 1981 and Los Angeles had finally gotten some needed rain. Rainy nights can be a treacherous thing to get used to. So many sounds competed with the rain: Gunshots, grandfather clocks, drippy sinks, moans, cries, creaky floors, and the occasional gang members howling their gang calls out to the moon. It was an orchestra of unconventional instruments except this was the poor man's version of a symphony. This was South Central Los Angeles and what an unforgivable night it was.

The soulful sound of the Isley Brothers' hit "Who's That Lady?" was playing as a backdrop to the rain that'd finally let up a bit and I could hear those funny sounds coming from mother's room again. It

must've of really pissed off my big sister Rosy because every time the noises got louder she punched against the wall and tell mother to "shut the fuck up!" Rosy was allowed to curse because she was 12 but I wasn't. I was only 4 and wasn't allowed to do anything outside of playing with my dolls and watching cartoons.

One day Rosy was being bossy again and demanded that I fold up her laundry in the middle of me eating cereal and watching my Saturday morning cartoons.

"Fold my clothes, Pixie." said, Rosy.

Pixie was a nickname that my father had given me because he said that I looked like a pixie doll and then the name just stuck.

"I'm not folding up shit!" I told her flippantly and rolled my eyes.

Well I didn't get the last word out because Rosy slapped the living daylights out of me. She hit me so hard in the lips milk in my cereal flew into the air and I thought I saw tiny stars dancing around in the air above my head. Needless to say, I didn't curse in front of her any more after that happened. And although Mother threatened to wash my mouth with pine cleaner if I dared to utter another shit, or fuck, I still did it anyway when no one was around.

The rain messed up my park plans with my play friend Valerie, and Rosy had to cancel her track meet. Mother was still in her room screaming to the top of her lungs. Rosy rushed over to me and covered up my ears with pillows. I was worried about Mother. She was in the room with drunk Ronald all day and wouldn't come out to see about us. When Drunk Ronald visited he bought us McDonald's but I despised

him because he always smelled like a combination of liquor store beef jerky blended in with dime store cheap cologne.

Drunk Ronald was one of my mother's slew of boyfriends after the divorce just one year prior to us ending up here in "the hood" or "trap," as they call it, which is a place where black people ended up when opportunities for employment and decent real-estate were nonexistent. Drunk Ronald was a self-proclaimed Vietnam vet with post-traumatic stress disorder. He told us that he was a prisoner of war and was held captive in a dark cave with no human contact for months. We didn't know if his war accounts were accurate but sometimes he would wake up in the middle of the night screaming.

"Get the fuck down and cover! Come and get me Charlie!"

These outbursts were accompanied by cold sweats.

One night I woke up because my bed sheets were soiled in urine. I witnessed him talking to the wall in the hallway mumbling. Whether we believed his stories or not there was no doubt in any of our minds that he was bat shit crazy regardless of how he got that way.

Drunk Ronald was a white man. Mother told us that white men had a lot of money and didn't mind spending it unlike black men whom she said had permanent holes in their pants pockets. Drunk Ronald was in his 40s and a full-blown alcoholic. Sometimes he walked from Long Beach to our house in Los Angeles, which was about a 25-mile plus journey in a car. He had very pale skin and always looked a hot sweaty mess. Sweat always found its way through all of his clothes no matter the weather. Rosy and I took pleasure in laughing about the sweat stains on the back of his shirts, quietly teasing that they were shaped like the continent of Africa. He stood about 6'3 and had the strangest looking eyes. One of his eyes was crystal blue and the other was lazy with a glossed over grayish color. His hair was always damp.

Mother was an old school gold digger. Her strategy was to only squeeze money from men who had severe issues such as alcoholics, drug addicts, mental health issues and young naïve men who were easily manipulated. Drunk Ronald definitely fit into her scheme of things.

As Mother's noises intensified Rosy would not release the pillows from my ears. She yelled at Mother through our bedroom wall.

"Shut the fuck up—there's kids in here!"

And then, there was an eerie silence. No more screams. The record restarted.

"Is Mother naked Rosy?"

Rosy gave me the black girl death stare and didn't answer me. She just frowned up her bottom lip, rolled her eyes at the wall and then tucked me tight into my bed.

"Pixie, stay your little ass in this bed and don't get up. I'll be right back. Do you understand?"

I shook my head "yes" and hid underneath my blankets like a lost puppy with his tail between his legs.

She left the room and closed the door. I hated doing what Rosy told me to do but I wasn't big enough to kick her ass. I was a preemie baby and everyone said that I was small for my age. I didn't feel small though. I wanted to get up and tell her that I wanted to check on Mother but she told me not to get up so I held back.

The storm started up again in full force. Where was Rosy? And then, my bedroom doorknob jiggled. I felt a sense of relief to know that Rosy returned so I opened my eyes and took the blankets off of my face. But, my room intruder was not Rosy. It was Drunk Ronald. Where the hell was Rosy? He stood in

my doorway and smiled at me with his dingy gapped front tooth wearing dingy underpants, a sweaty tank top and church socks pulled up mid-calf.

"Who's that lady? Who's that lady? Pretty lady. Such a fine lady. Who's that lady?" Sang, Drunk Ronald along with the Isley Brothers sweating profusely in the dead of winter. He glided a few steps passed the doorway while moving his body with a pelvic thrust dance move honing in on me, salivating at the mouth like a dog in heat; his beastly shadow reflecting onto the wall making him appear 10 ft. tall.

"What the hell did you do to my mother?"

He wouldn't leave.

"Well, well, well, look what he have here. Little Pixie always stirring up some trouble. Do you want a beer?"

"No. Rosy is coming back right now."

My teeth chattered and bony knees shook uncontrollably. It was frightening.

"What the fuck did you do to my mother?"

Violently, drunk Ronald yanked my blankets off. I held on to those blankets with a death grip holding on so tightly that my brown fingers turned a pinkish blue and a few knuckles popped in unison.

"Who's that lady? Who's that lady? Pretty fine lady. Who's that lady?" Drunk Ronald kept singing.

"Please! Rosy didn't mean to make you mad hitting mother's wall she's an asshole sometimes."

Drunk Ronald did not respond and kept singing. I scooted to an inescapable corner of my bed and became a hermit. My bed, which only had two ways to get in and out, felt like a maze that I could not escape. He pulled me out of the corner and threw me across the bed. The impact was so strong that my body bounced off of my twin size mattress and hit the floor headfirst. My one tooth in the front that'd just started to grow back in sliced right down into the pink part of my bottom lip going straight through. He picked me back up, laid me back onto my bed and covered my mouth so I would not scream.

I couldn't breathe; I was shivering as my heartbeat danced in circles around my throat. I screamed like Mother but unlike her screams of pleasure that seeped through the wall my screams were laced in fear. They were the sounds of terror. He pressed his giant body against mine and his breath wreaked of shit. I almost vomit.

“STRUM! STRUM! PLOW! PLOW! BANG! BANG. WHO'S THAT LADY?”

These were the sounds of the Isley brothers cutting up with electric guitar solos, that pierced through one of my ears and then out through the other.

I attempted to scream again but with his hand over my mouth there was no hope. He was too powerful. Saliva made its way to the back of my throat, which provoked a gargling cough into a dry heave. At one point I thought I died until there was a loud thumping sound. Rosy had come to save me and clonked Drunk Ronald over the head with our Minnie Mouse nightstand lamp. She moved around like a wild animal just released from captivity. The shadow of her perfectly picked-out Afro reflected onto the bedroom wall. Her nightgown fell off of one shoulder as she went wild on him. Rosy could not be tamed. It was a grizzly sight. The light bulb inside the lamp SHATTERED over his head with some of the shavings cutting deep into my face. Everything was fading into a foggy haze and my head was spinning topsy-turvy. My eyes stayed fixated on Minnie Mouse in her pretty blue dress, pink bow and her cemented smile that in some strange way gave me a level of invited escapism.

Drunk Ronald roared. Rosy hit him until his bearish sweaty body tapped out. I didn't know if he was alive or if Satan had come to our bedroom himself to collect his soul VIP style. I thought that I was screaming, but no sound dared to escape my vocal chords in such a state of distress. Rosy left the room with her hands waving the air like black woman who get the Holy Ghost in church. She was hysterical screaming every obscenity imaginable to Mother who was in the hallway calmly smoking a Newport. I smelled its remnant polluting my nose. Surprisingly Drunk Ronald sprung from the floor a few seconds

later and as my body drifted into unconsciousness the last image that I saw was the back of his dingy underwear that were decorated in shit stains. I passed out.

When I woke up Rosy was hitting my back the same way that a mother burps a newborn baby. I was having a panic attack.

"Try to cough Pix and breathe slowly. Breathe into this bag."

She had one of our school lunch brown paper bags gripped between her badly nail-bitten nails leaving a small slot for me to breathe through.

"You're going to be okay Pix. Do you want your bottle?"

Since I was a preemie baby my mother allowed me to nurse from a bottle longer than I was supposed to. Bottles mostly helped me sleep at night.

"I don't know."

"Cough Pix, breathe."

I didn't know which one she wanted me to do first breathe or cough so I did both.

Rosy silently wept as she slapped me over the back repeatedly. Rosy cried before when Mother whipped her for peeing on our mean neighbor's garden but never like this. I wanted to cry too but for some strange reason I felt the need to be strong for both of us. I wanted Rosy to be proud of me and know that I wasn't a coward, that I wasn't afraid, and I wasn't a baby anymore so I fought back my tears with everything inside of my soul. Slowly, I raised Rosy's head that sunk deep into her chest and smiled at her. She smiled back with her puffy eyelids pretending that she was okay but I knew she wasn't. After stabilizing me she retrieved the blanket from her bed, my favorite doll with the missing arm and picked

me up like a baby. She traveled to the hallway bathroom and burrito wrapped me inside of the blanket and laid me down.

“I’m going to get you a bottle. Don’t leave from this bathroom no matter what okay. I love you. Everything’s okay.”

She closed the door. I heard Mother and Rosy cursing at each other outside in the hallway. Rosy was telling her that she ain’t shit and that she was tired of her treating us like shit and wished Father was still home with us. There was a lot of arguing and then it all got foggy. I passed out again.

When I woke up the rain was wild and still falling down pretty hard. I was soiled in my urine and it was so cold. I was shivering. The milk from my bottle had dried to my cheek. I tried to stand up straight but my knees shook causing me to fall back down. The blood from my nosebleed stained my doll’s yellow dress because I’d held her so tight and now my doll was also part of this living nightmare too, a co-conspirator. I knew Rosy had come back because of my bottle of milk but why hadn’t anyone come to collect me yet?

I needed someone to tell me that I was still alive, still breathing, and that I was still part of this natural world. I don’t know how long I was in the bathroom but it felt like eternity and I was afraid, cold and embarrassed for not making it to the toilet in time. I know Rosy told me not to come out but I was tired of listening to her and I needed to see if she and Mother were okay. If there were any time that I would take my chances and kick Rosy’s ass now would be the perfect time to overthrow her throne. So, without hesitation, I peeled off my soiled training panties and got out of the urine-infested blanket and slowly opened the bathroom door. I peaked my little head out of the door one Afro-puff at a time. I

didn't see anyone. I slowly tiptoed past Mother's bedroom; the very room that unleashed hell on us all and then ran to the next corner of the house. If Rosy found me now I'd be in so much trouble for leaving the bathroom but I didn't care. I needed a signal from God that I was still alive and staying closed up in a bathroom was far from any hopeful confirmation of such.

Smear on the carpet was dried up mud. I didn't see anyone so I darted quickly towards my bedroom but was too afraid so I streamlined a detour to the kitchen instead. I managed to make my way to the glass sliding doors, which was the only entrance to our backyard area.

Where I was standing some rain gently mist my face through a small crevice in the glass, God's way of telling me yes, "Pixie you are still alive." I gladly surrendered to it. It was a pitiful sight as I laid down on that cold dank floor directly in front of a gigantic sliding door window watching the rain make beautiful patterns onto the glass. And then I noticed something strange. Mother, Rosy and Drunk Ronald were all outside in the backyard. Rosy was digging a hole with her bare hands and Mother was shaking drunk Ronald's body, and punching him in the chest.

Teetering between delirium and reality, life was blurry. Just as the rain hit the window masking a clear view of what was happening in the backyard, life itself was vivid. I knew that Mother would never fully come back to us. I wasn't safe anymore. We weren't safe anymore. This time I didn't feel the overwhelming sentiments of love & happiness that I once felt while flushed with fever at 5 am watching my parents dancing in the kitchen to Michael Jackson prior to Drunk Ronald's attack. These were crashing realities, a tragic ending of broken families plagued by divorce and unwillingly we all surrendered to its capture.

