

I bounced on my heels, waiting for the right moment to jump into the game of Double Dutch while my sisters, Irene and Simone, turned the ropes. Jumping rope was our favorite game every Saturday morning in the apartment complex before the neighborhood boys woke up and ruined our fun.

With the boom box blasting “Funkytown,” I rocked my hips and moved closer. Openings came and went in a blur. After several false attempts, Irene rolled her eyes, yelling for me to go already. Simone followed by saying her arms were getting tired. Their complaints propelled me forward, and I jumped in, hopping over the first rope and then the second.

Fast and hard, my feet pounded the pavement as I recited the jumping rope rhyme, hoping to finish the song because that meant I would have jumped longer than them. My braids bounced around, slapping me in the eye, but I continued dancing with the perfect rainbows as they shot over my head and under my feet. Then, as I finished the last word, Mama’s voice came out of nowhere.

“Girls, your daddy’s here.”

Irene and Simone let go of the ropes with a force that caused the neon chords to whip through the air like Mama’s popping fried chicken. If we didn’t move out of the way, we were sure to get popped. I ducked. They ducked. The ropes ended up on the other side of the courtyard, near the seesaw. I growled, knowing they threw them on purpose.

They both chuckled and shuffled toward the back porch.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“Daddy’s here.” Irene flicked her curls. “Gotta go.”

Their Daddy

“Uh uh...you need to help clean up.” I trailed behind my older sisters, refusing to let them get away with it.

“Why?” Irene asked.

“Because I beat you. You said if I beat you—”

“That was last week,” Simone said.

“That’s every week.” I rushed past them and made it to the porch before they did. They tried to go around me, but I blocked their way.

“Mama. Mama,” Irene called out. “Rose is having one of her hissy fits and won’t let us through.”

Mama came onto the porch, wearing a checkered apron and hair bonnet. She glared at me. “Rose, move out of the way.”

“No. Not until they help pick up the mess.”

“They can’t. Their daddy’s waiting. Come on, girls.” She stepped in between us and made sure they got in.

“That’s not fair,” I shouted.

“Just pick it up, Rose.” She disappeared inside, slamming the door behind her.

I gathered the ropes, turned off the boom box, and lugged them inside. When I entered the apartment, the aroma of bacon and sausage made my stomach growl. I followed the scent down the hall to the kitchen, where Irene and Simone stood at the counter, making their plate of food. Mama hovered over the stove, flipping over the fried eggs.

“Hey,” I said, stomping my feet.

They glanced in my direction.

“A little help?” The ropes dangled from my hand like day-old spaghetti.

## Their Daddy

Mama frowned. “Get those dirty things out of my kitchen.”

I nodded to my half-sisters. “They need to help. I brought them in. They need to put them away.”

“They have to go,” Mama said. “Their daddy’s here.”

“So what?”

Mama leaned across the counter and pointed her finger at me. “Rose, don’t fool with me. Put them away. Their daddy’s waiting.”

“I wish my daddy were here so I could be lazy.”

Irene chuckled. “You don’t have a daddy.”

I lifted my chin in defiance. “So.”

“Rose.” Mama motioned her hand. “Put them away.”

“Fine.” I walked further into the kitchen and dropped everything on the tiled floor.

My sisters’ mouths dropped.

Mama put her hands on her hips and glared at me. “Now you—”

The doorbell rang. She huffed and left to answer it.

Irene puffed out her chest. “You’re such a brat.”

“And so are you.” I got in her face and pointed my finger. “A lazy one, too.”

We shoved each other until Simone stepped in, separating us like a referee. “Stop it.

“She started it,” I said.

“You did,” Irene fired back.

“Girls!” Mama called out from the living room.

Irene shoved me as she grabbed her plate and backpack. “See ya, brat.”

Simone put her hand on my shoulder. “Try not to get on Mama’s nerves.”

## Their Daddy

I shrugged her off.

As soon as they left the kitchen, I grabbed a slice of bacon and nibbled. I went for another and stopped when I heard their daddy's voice. Deep. Authoritative. Foreign. Something I only caught once a week around this time.

"You girls ready for a fun weekend?"

I left the kitchen and went down the hall to get a peep. Irene and Simone stood in the living room with their daddy towering over them. His back was toward me so all I saw was his afro and denim outfit.

"Take care of my babies," Mama said.

She walked them to the door. Once they left, she spun around, calling out to me to wash clothes.

I ignored her and rushed over to the living room window. Through the ripped brown curtains, I could see my sisters and their daddy chatting out in front of his yellow Oldsmobile. I've never seen my sisters so animated like they did when they were with their daddy. Their relaxed demeanor and grins on their faces burned my mind like those miniature dioramas I created at school.

I cracked open the window to catch bits of their conversation. They had the whole weekend planned. Zoo. Sea World. IHOP pancakes for breakfast. Marie Callender's chicken potpies for dinner.

Mama always talked about their daddy having a good job and money and how he wanted to take them away to live with him and his new wife, but Mama wouldn't allow it. In a way, I was glad because then I'd have no one to play with and would be stuck with Mama all day.

## Their Daddy

After they were done talking, their daddy took them into his arms and hugged them close. I pictured myself as one of his, cradled in a bear hug, strong arms wrapped around me, whisking me away on wonderful adventures. The embrace lasted for several moments. When they let go, a hand went up as if motioning in my direction.

My eyes widened.

*Are you calling out to me?*

I leaped from the window and raced onto the front porch, slamming the door behind me. The three of them glanced in my direction, and I smiled, almost taking a step closer if it weren't for the look of horror on Irene's face. Her squinting eyes and pursed lips took me back to the day I asked if I could go with them and their daddy to the beach.

He didn't mind, but Mama said no. Later, when Irene returned home, she made it clear to me that he was not my daddy, and had no business with them. She shoved me into the corner of our shared bedroom and pulled my braids until I could no longer feel my scalp. "Get your own daddy and don't ever ask to go with us again." I could still feel her hot Funyuns breath on my nose.

My stomach turned in knots as if I was still that scared eight-year-old girl. Now eleven, I had more armor to protect my heart and pretended it didn't hurt. I reached down for the half-dead plant resting on the step. "Mama wants to water this." I took my time gathering the pot, half expecting someone to stop me or to say something, but they didn't. They continued talking then got into the car.

First Irene. Then Simone. As Simone got in, she turned back toward our home, toward the front porch, toward me. The ache of not belonging entered my heart. I knew I'd hear it later

## Their Daddy

from the both of them on how I interrupted their daddy's visit. They'd probably ignore me and not play with me for a week, like they did sometimes.

When they'd come home from a weekend with their daddy, they acted as if their new experiences made them better than me. No longer able to handle the second-rate feeling, I turned my head. Before I could complete my turn, something odd happened—something that made my insides flutter, something about Simone's expression.

Soft eyes and a smile, reminding me of the day I found her favorite t-shirt wedged into the back of the dryer. It happened by accident, but she didn't care, and loaded me with a bunch of *thank you's* and *hi fives*.

She waved goodbye and disappeared into the car.

I stayed on the porch until their daddy's Oldsmobile pattered down the street and around the corner, dreaming of what it would be like to have a daddy of my own.