

dark. That made him feel safer. But ever since his mother changed, all she wanted to do was lay across that disgusting couch.

Lil' Mike was with his mother when she purchased the couch from a furniture store on Pratt Street. He was about five at the time and remembered the outing well. He helped her pick it out. It was white when she purchased it. Not anymore. The dirt was so consuming the couch took on a permanent brown hue.

"A few more shades, and it'll be black," Lil' Mike thought to himself.

Not only was the couch all dirty, but the cushions were stained with pee. The cushion reeked of urine, and so did his mother. Nowadays, she always seemed to smell bad. That was not always the case, but so many things had changed when it came to Mama.

He recalled the good ole days when Mama took him places all the time. Every Friday, they went to Lexington Market.

"Friday is payday and fish fry day at our house," she always said.

Lil' Mike had fond memories of their outings to Lexington Market. The fish was on display at stalls throughout the busy indoor marketplace. He always felt the fish was staring at him as they laid on the glistening ice chips. Mama stopped at one of the stalls, looked at the fish, checked the prices, used paper towels to pick up the ones she wanted, and dropped the fish onto a large piece of white paper. She always went to the same man. She called him the 'Fish Man'. He grabbed the paper holding the fish, plunked it down onto a scale with big numbers that resembled a funny clock that didn't tell time, told her how much was owed, and she paid him.

Lil' Mike loved going to Lexington Market. The sights and sounds were so much fun. He enjoyed watching the non-stop bustling of activity. Men sat high-up in chairs like kings getting their shoes shined. Grown-ups pushed their children around in strollers and toted babies in sacks that hung from their backs. Sometimes, he saw his classmates from school with their parents and Mama ran into people she knew from their neighborhood and church.

A medley of smells, including cotton candy, fried chicken, hot peanuts, pastries, and other delicious aromas filled the air. All kinds of meats, cheeses, cakes, cookies, candies and other foods and sweets were also on full display in glass cases. He saw strange things like pig tails and pig ears in the cases. He even saw entire pig heads. Lil' Mike didn't like those. They looked too scary. Mama looked carefully in the

glass meat case until she saw just the right piece of fatback. "I'll take that piece of fatback right there," she said pointing to the red and white-colored meat. He thought fatback was a piece of a person's back. But he just couldn't imagine his mother cooking a part of someone's back. One day he asked her, "What is fatback?" With a chuckle, she said, "Son, fatback is the salt-cured backside of a hog. It's a secret ingredient in some of the best, finger-lickin' Southern cookin' you can put in that belly of yours. But don't tell nobody I told you about fatback being my secret ingredient. That's our little secret."

Mama also made a pit stop at one of the lunch meat places to buy a quarter-pound of hog head cheese and a quarter pound of American cheese. He liked the American cheese, but not the hog head cheese. He tried it once but didn't like the way it tasted. "Ewww," he told her after biting into a piece. "It's too sour." But his mama loved it.

His mother also stopped past the Utz potato chip booth to buy two bags of potato chips. One for him and one for her. She told him that was the best place in Baltimore to get fresh potato chips. His mama also liked to stop by Rheb's Candy to buy pieces of chocolate. She would purchase four for herself and let him pick out any two pieces he wanted.

As his mother made her rounds around the big market, she also grabbed a bag of hot peanuts from Konstant's Peanuts. Those were for his father, Michael "Big Mike" Adams. Daddy really liked those peanuts. But he made such a mess when he ate them. He dropped peanut shells all over the floor, and Mama had to clean them up.

After Mama bought peanuts for Daddy, the two walked over to a place in Lexington Market called Mary Mervis. She ordered and paid for a corned beef sandwich on rye bread with mustard for his Aunt Caroline. Aunt Caroline was his father's sister and really loved those sandwiches.

Their outing continued as they walked towards the back of Lexington Market to get crab cakes from Faidley's Seafood. His mother told him they were for her and Daddy. As they walked towards Faidley's, Lil' Mike watched men and women stand at a counter and slurp down oysters and clams. Bottles of hot sauce sat in front of them on the counter. Some shook hot sauce on their oysters and clams before gulping them down. Others ate them with boiled eggs. Lil' Mike didn't want any clams or oysters. They looked too slimy. Yuck! He thought whenever he saw people eating

them. He silently wondered if they were unknowingly swallowing pearls as they gulped them down one after another.

People of all colors shopped and worked at Lexington Market. It was like an adventure. Something new always awaited, and no two trips were ever alike.

Before they left Lexington Market, Mama always bought him a big, pretty, red candy apple. He loved candy apples. However, she wouldn't let him eat his delicious confection until after he ate dinner. In one hand, he held his candy apple, whilst his mother toted a bag full of things she bought from Lexington Market. Lil' Mike could hardly wait to get home and eat the delicious dinner his mother prepared. Then he could gobble down his candy apple.

When they arrived home, Mama turned on the oven and seasoned and battered the fish before she dropped each piece into a hot skillet of Crisco cooking oil. As the fish fried in the sizzling grease, she headed to the cupboard and pulled out a box of Jiffy cornbread mix. She poured the cornbread mix into her favorite mixing bowl and added eggs, milk, a can of creamed corn, a pinch of nutmeg, and other ingredients. She let him stir the batter around and around until all the lumps were gone. Once it was nice and smooth, Mama set the mix on the side. She pulled her big, burnt-looking skillet from a cabinet, put it on the stove, and turned the pilot up high. She removed the fatback she bought from Lexington Market from its package and dropped it into the square cast iron skillet.

"I won't tell anybody about our secret ingredient," he told her.

"You better not," she replied with a smile.

After the fatback naturally made its own grease, Mama poured it off into the awaiting batter. She removed the piece of fatback from the skillet, chopped it into small pieces which she called cracklin, and drizzled them in with the bowl's other ingredients before pouring the mix into the piping hot skillet.

"This is gonna be some good eatin," said Mama as she popped the mix into the now-heated oven.

As the cornbread baked, she opened another can of creamed corn, poured it into a small pot, and added butter, sugar, pepper, and other seasonings. As the creamed corn bubbled on the stove, she made a large pitcher of Kool-Aid and spooned in cupful after cupful of sugar until it was thick like syrup. As she stirred the Kool-Aid, Lil Mike grabbed two Styrofoam cups and placed them on the counter. Once she finished

stirring the Kool-Aid, and it was sweet enough to her liking, Mama filled the two cups with the syrupy mix and put them in the freezer to make frozen cups which they ate later. The best part was licking the syrupy top of the frozen cup and then turning it upside down to slurp its juicy bottom.

If it wasn't Kool-Aid she fixed to drink with dinner, it was Sweet Tea. She put a pot of water on the stove, plunked in several Lipton teabags, and boiled them on the stove until they were immersed in hot bubbles. After turning off the pot, Mama spooned in heaping after heaping of sugar, slurping dribbles off the spoon tip as she went along until it tasted sweet enough. She set the tea aside to cool and sometimes added more sugar after it cooled down.

Soon, the delicious smells of fried fish, baked cornbread, and creamed corn filled the whole house. Lil' Mike couldn't wait to eat. And when he did, the taste was worth the wait.

"Mama, this food is soooooo good!" he said.

"Thanks, Lil' Mike," she replied. "And watch out for those fish bones. Mama don't want you to choke."

However, those days were long gone. Mama never went to Lexington Market. Not anymore — because she never cooked anymore. I sure miss Lexington Market, he often thought. Especially those candy apples.

Lil' Mike also missed the good meals she cooked. Since Mama turned into a different person, most of our meals come from the microwave or fast-food restaurants. Nowadays, his mama always cooked packs of Oodles of Noodles. His mother once told him they were cheap and easy to fix. But he was tired of eating Oodles of Noodles all the time. Their refrigerator and cupboards were once full. But now, the cupboards were bare, and the refrigerator was always empty.

Aunt Caroline would make a big fuss about the empty refrigerator when she stopped by the house. He recalled Aunt Caroline asking Mama why there was no food in the house when she received food stamps.

"Did you and Michael sell those food stamps again?!" Aunt Caroline yelled from the kitchen as she opened and closed the refrigerator and cabinets. "You and Michael need to be ashamed of yourselves!"

All his mother would do is nod off on the couch. "Get your coat, nephew!" said Aunt Caroline before taking him to McDonalds to buy him a Happy Meal. He liked

those. Especially the French fries and toys. She also bought groceries for the house. But she no longer visited, and he really missed Aunt Caroline.

School was out for summer vacation, but Lil' Mike could hardly wait for the school year to start. He attended Gwynn's Falls Elementary School, where he would start third grade in the fall. He felt the meals at school were much better than the ones he ate at home. At school, the menu changed each day. Some days, the ladies in the cafeteria served pizza. That was his favorite. Other days they served cheeseburgers and French fries. He liked that meal too. They also served Sloppy Joe on buns. That was his least favorite. He didn't like soggy bread. At home meals were always the same. Cold food Mama brought home from fast-food restaurants or Oodles of Noodles. Before she changed, his mama would get up early and cook a good breakfast. Scrambled eggs, bacon, grits, home fries, and homemade pancakes. Yummy! She would put butter on my pancakes and drizzle them with King Syrup.

"Those pancakes were so good. And she always poured me a glass of orange juice too. Mama used to be the best cook in the whole wide world."

After his mother stopped cooking, Lil' Mike started eating breakfast at school. That was the only way he could eat a nice, hot breakfast. But now to eat breakfast, he had to arrive at school early. Before she changed, his mother walked him to school when he was in pre-k, kindergarten, and first grade. During that time, he was never late to school. But halfway through second grade, things changed. A former early riser, she began to sleep late into the morning. After waking his mother up, he pleaded with her to take him to school. After fussing at him for waking her up, she snored back off to sleep. She finally got up, but by the time she walked him to school, he was late. Sometimes, he didn't make it to school at all. Lil' Mike was halfway through second grade and didn't want to fail because he was late or absent too many times.

Lil' Mike loved school and didn't like arriving late and getting a late pass. He especially did not like being marked absent. He also didn't want to miss breakfast. When he was hungry, he sat in class thinking about food. His stomach growled so loudly in class he knew his classmates could hear. This was embarrassing. So, to eat breakfast, be on time, and avoid awakening his mother, Lil' Mike began walking to school. The hot meals were worth the walk.

For a youngster his age, the nine-block walk to school was treacherous and dangerous. Once Lil' Mike left his home, he crossed several side streets until he

reached the busy intersection of Gwynns Falls Parkway and Dukeland Street where his school was located. Sometimes, Lil Mike would leave so early that he would arrive before the school's crossing guard. On those days, he would have to cross the busy intersection all alone. Back when she walked him to school, his mother taught him to look both ways when crossing the street. He knew how to cross the street, but crossing this busy street sometimes scared him. He would look both ways and quickly dart across when the cars stopped coming. He was always careful. But one time, he almost got hit by a car.

Despite the scary trek to school, he preferred it this way. Mama looked so bad, that he didn't want the other students to see her walking him to school. He knew they would tease him, and he didn't want to get in any fights. He was not about to allow anybody to joke or crack on Mama.



Lil' Mike stood in the living room entranceway still holding Angel's bottle. He watched as Mama incessantly rocked the crying infant. His mother looked like a madwoman.

"Mama never used to look like this," he thought. Now she looks like this all the time. Her hair was sticking up all over her head. It reminded Lil' Mike of how the characters on the cartoons looked when they got electrocuted or were scared out of their wits.

Once again, Lil' Mike got caught up in the moments of yesteryear. Back when his mama got her hair done at Miss Henrietta's Beauty Salon. He thought about the pink smock Miss Henrietta wore. It was all covered in splotches of hair dye. Her name "Miss Henrietta" was stitched on the front in cursive handwriting.

Miss Henrietta had black hair and brown skin. When she talked, she always put her hands on her hips. Lil' Mike thought she looked and acted a lot like 'Florence' – a maid on a television show called "The Jeffersons". His mother used to watch that show all the time. Lil' Mike hated going to Miss Henrietta's salon with his mama. He would frown his face every time she told him she was going there. He would have to sit and behave for hours and hours. He could judge the wait time based on the number of ladies who were there when they arrived. One, two, three, four, five, six he

counted to himself. Sometimes, there would be less. Sometimes, there would be more.

Miss Henrietta and some of the other ladies would always pinch his cheeks and tell him he was cute. Whenever he and his mother walked into her shop, Miss Henrietta would stop whatever she was doing to rush over to him. She would stoop down and tell him how fast he was growing and give him a wet, sloppy kiss. Just like the ladies at church. But at church, their breath smelled like peppermints. But Miss Henrietta's breath smelled like stinky onion pickles and pickled pig feet. Lil' Mike would see them in big jars at the neighborhood corner stores his mama sometimes frequented. Between doing hair, Miss Henrietta would stop and nibble on onion pickles and pickled pig feet and talk about how good they were. They might taste good, Lil' Mike thought to himself, but they make her breath smell bad. Sometimes, with a shop full of customers, she would leave to pick up lunch and sit and eat it while the ladies all waited.

He recalled the sign taped to a glass pane on the shop's front door. It read, "Walk-ins Welcome." His teachers always told him he was an excellent reader. Lil' Mike always hoped that no one paid attention to the sign. More ladies coming in meant they would be there even longer. Every now and then, a "walk-in" lady came through the door. Lil' Mike never saw Miss Henrietta turn away a customer. Miss Henrietta would stop working, walk over to the walk-in lady, and carry on a long conversation. Lil' Mike would exhale. It was going to be another long day at Miss Henrietta's salon.

During the long wait, Lil' Mike took naps. When he awoke, he kept himself busy. He colored and doodled in the activity books his mama told him to bring along. The activity of the salon was also a source of entertainment. It was always buzzing with chatter. The ladies talked non-stop. They discussed all kinds of grown-up things. They talked about their husbands' good jobs. They talked about the new cars their husbands bought for them. They talked about how their husbands and boyfriends were "acting up". They talked about their children and grandchildren. They talked about the sales being offered at the stores. They talked about what was going on in their churches. They talked about their jobs. As Ms. Henrietta washed, permed, curled, styled, dyed, or made their hair straight with a hot comb, she shared her views on the topics of discussion. When Lil' Mike's mother was a good mama, she always told him

that cursing and using the “N-Word” was bad. But Miss Henrietta and some of the other grown-ups did both.

Lil’ Mike recalled a lady in the salon telling the others about her plight at home. Her husband wanted her to iron all his clothes – including his underwear.

“Now I can understand you ironing your husband’s trousers and shirts,” Miss Henrietta told the lady while curling her hair. “But I ain’t ironing no nigger’s drawers!”

All the ladies laughed, while another commented, “Well Henrietta, I guess that’s why you ain’t got a husband!”

“And it’s gonna stay that way if a man expects Henrietta to iron his damn drawers!” said the hairstylist as she stopped curling and put her hands on her hips. “I’ll be damned! I use my hands for a lot of things. But one of them won’t be ironing no nigger’s drawers!”

Once again, the ladies all laughed.

Amidst the chatter and occasional bursts of laughter, the steady hum of hairdryers and the smell of perm filled the air. Lil’ Mike hated the smell of perm.

“Phew,” he thought. “That perm stuff smells like rotten eggs.”

He watched as Miss Henrietta mixed up colors and put them in the ladies’ hair. Most of the ladies got black color. Others got brown. Some ladies even got blue. “Why would someone want blue hair?” He wondered.

After putting the color in their hair, Miss Henrietta would slap a plastic bag on their heads and set them under a hairdryer. The plastic bags reminded Lil’ Mike of the ones worn by the lunch ladies in the school cafeteria.

Lil’ Mike could still recall the smell and sound of Miss Henrietta straightening some of the ladies’ hair with a hot comb. The hair grease she put on their hair sizzled and crackled as she ran the hot comb through it. The smell of hot hair and grease filtered through the shop. He once asked Miss Henrietta what that way of making hair straight was called.

“Pressing, Sugar,” she responded.

Pressing. That’s how Miss Henrietta did his mama’s coal, black hair. Then she would curl it nice and pretty.

Miss Henrietta also put in Gheri Curls. Lots of them. It was a popular style and many people had them. But Lil’ Mike hated when Miss Henrietta put one of those in.



They took such a long time. "I wish Miss Henrietta would hurry up and finish their greasy heads," he thought as he impatiently watched her put them in the heads of both men and women.

During the course of the morning, Miss Henrietta would walk over to the television. No matter what everyone was already watching, she would turn the channel knob to "The Price Is Right". She said that was her favorite show. Then the ladies would guess what they thought was the correct pricing on the show's various games, including the Showcase Showdown. They would comment on how dumb some of the contestants' answers were. As the day wore on, they would watch soap operas and talk about them.

Ladies and sometimes men sat under hairdryers, back at the shampoo bowl, or simply waiting for Miss Henrietta to get started on their hair. The luckiest person would be the one sitting in Miss Henrietta's black swivel chair getting their hair hot combed, curled, or activator sprayed in his or her Gheri Curl because that person's hair was almost done. The unlucky ones still had a long wait, and Lil' Mike's mama was one of them. All he could do was try to keep himself busy until it was time for his mama to sit in the swivel chair. We're gonna be here forever, Lil' Mike thought as he sighed.

"Mama, why do you and these other ladies have to wait so long just to get your hair fixed?" he once asked his mother during an appointment.

"Because we all want our hair to look good," she replied.

"That's right," Miss Henrietta chimed in as she curled. "And as long as your mama and all these other gals in here got money, they can come all they want."

His mother and the other grown-up ladies all laughed, Lil' Mike shrugging his shoulders. He couldn't understand why they all thought what Miss Henrietta said was so funny. "I wasn't even talking to Miss Henrietta".

Now, Lil' Mike only thought this to himself. He knew better than to ever dare say such a thing out of his mouth. His mama would have smacked his lips clear across the floor. She had taught him good manners. He knew better than to disrespect, question, or talk back to grown-ups. Smart talk would have been grounds for a beating.

Then there was this lady named Miss Brenda who always came into the salon. She was always selling something. All the ladies – including Miss Henrietta - would

flock over to her to see what she had inside of the big tote bag she always carried. Miss Brenda sold all kinds of things. Clothes, shoes, jewelry, bottles of aspirin, soap, detergent, jewelry, hair care products...you name it. They called her "Brenda Da Booster." His mother told him they called her that because she was always stealing things from the store and then selling them.

Lil' Mike couldn't understand why anyone would take things from a store without paying for them, so he asked his mother. "Drugs make people do all kinds of things," was his mama's response. "Steal, lie, whatever. Just make sure you never get tangled up in no drugs."

As he looked at his mother sprawled across the sofa he had come to hate, Lil' Mike only wished she had taken her own advice.



His mama stopped going to Miss Henrietta's salon when he was six. That was two years ago. Although he didn't like the long waits, Miss Henrietta made his mama's hair look pretty. Now, it always looked ugly. Lil' Mike used to hate it when his mother went to Miss Henrietta's. Now, he wished she would go back. He felt Miss Henrietta could make his mama look pretty again.

Not only was his mama's hair a mess, but the hair had sprouted beneath her chin and underarms like flowers from seeds. Her underarms used to be nice and smooth. Every morning, she would bathe and put on deodorant, good-smelling perfume, and oils. Now, her underarms were unshaven and smelled all funky.

"Mama never used to look like this," Lil' Mike thought. "And her underarm hair is all nappy. And they stink."

Her underarm hair reminded him of Bobby Jennings, one of his former classmates. He and Bobby had been in the same second-grade class last school year. Bobby's head had small, individual knots of hair, and all the kids teased him. The boys and girls all called Bobby, "Beady Beads". Lil' Mike wondered if Bobby would be in his third-grade class when school started again in September.

His mama also used to go to a nail place down the street from Miss Henrietta's salon. It was called Jackie's Nail Place. Ms. Jackie always made his mama's fingers and toes nice and pretty. Sometimes Miss Jackie painted his mama's nails red,

sometimes pink, sometimes purple. The colors reminded him of the Crayola crayons he used in his coloring books. But now, his mama's nails and toes never looked pretty. They were always raggedy and full of dirt. To Lil' Mike, everything seemed to look dirty now. The clothes his mother wore, and their house. Their Gwynns Falls Parkway home used to be sparkly clean. There was a time when it would have been hard to find a piece of lint on the floor. Now, trash, debris, and empty beer bottles were all over the place.

His mama guzzled down tall bottles of Colt 45 malt liquor beer bottles like water. She called them her "forties". Lil' Mike often watched as she tossed the empty bottles down to the floor. Sometimes, she made him pick them up and throw them in the kitchen trash can. One time, he started to taste some before tossing the bottle in the trash. There was still a little beer at the bottom. Lil' Mike thought he would drink it to see why his mother liked it so much. But first, Lil' Mike put the bottle up to his nose. Phew, that beer stuff stinks, he thought before throwing the bottle in the trash can.

There was a time when their living room was full of nice furniture. But now, all that remained was the dirty couch, a wooden coffee table with burn stains and water spots all over it, a few rickety end tables, a small black and white television, and a few lamps whose shades had light bulb burns. White paint was peeling from the walls, and the ceiling had cracks. On days when rain poured from the skies, water dripped in through the soiled ceiling. His mama would make him get pans and set them on the living room floor to catch the drops of falling water.

Angel's white bassinet was also in the living room. His mama had placed it next to the nasty couch. The bassinet was a baby shower gift from his Aunt Caroline. He thought about his aunt all the time. He really missed Aunt Caroline. Before his mother and Aunt Caroline stopped speaking, they were best friends. His mother told him they had been friends for a long time.

"Your Aunt Caroline and I met when she moved to the neighborhood," his mother told him. "We were students at Walbrook High School. That's the big school I pointed out to you one day as we rode through Walbrook Junction. Your Aunt Caroline's family had just moved to Baltimore from Mississippi, and she was a new student at the school. We were both about 16, and sophomores at the time.

"We hit it off right away. Caroline and I had so much in common. That included

cooking. She and I both loved to cook. We became best friends. Now your Aunt Caroline mentioned she had an older brother or bruuuuuther. That's how she pronounces brother," his mama said with a laugh.

"I know," Lil Mike responded. "It's so funny."

"Well Lil' Mike, it was a while before I finally got to meet your Aunt Caroline's bruuuuuther," she said imitating his aunt. "But boy when I finally got to meet him, I thought he was the cutest guy in the world. I thought he had the prettiest eyes. And the rest is history."

Then his mother looked at him and said, "Funny thing...your Aunt Caroline didn't want me to date your daddy." Turning away, his mama let out a deep sigh, and uttered under her breath, "Maybe I should have listened." Lil' Mike didn't think his mother realized he had heard what she said. But he did.

Like his father, Aunt Caroline talked much differently than the way people in Baltimore talked. She and his daddy had their own special way of saying words. His mother told him the two talked "country".

Lil' Mike thought Aunt Caroline was the best aunt in the whole, wide world. She would buy him things, take him places, and made him laugh all the time. Aunt Esther - one of the characters on a show his mama would watch called "Sanford and Son" - reminded him of his Aunt Caroline. Not only did the two look alike, but they also acted alike. Aunt Esther always talked about church. So did Aunt Caroline. Aunt Esther wore dresses all the time. So did Aunt Caroline. 'Aunt Esther' squinted her eye. So did Aunt Caroline. 'Aunt Esther' was always shouting and throwing her hands up when she got "happy". Aunt Caroline did that too. "Happy" - that's what they called it in church when people shouted and jumped up and down.

His mother would always tell his Aunt Caroline she "had an old soul to be so young." Aunt Caroline called his mother 'M,' the first initial in her name, Melvina. Aunt Caroline said 'M' was a lot easier to say than Melvina. She was the only person who called his mother by her first initial.

"M, you ain't never too young or too old to serve the good Lawd," she always said. Then his Aunt Caroline would get happ, yell "Glory!" and start hollering and shouting like people did in church.

His Aunt Caroline was a missionary and a church usher. Lil' Mike could still recall the white uniform she wore with the gold pin that said "Usher". Her usher

uniform was white as snow. So were her shoes, stockings, and the round napkin on her head she called a “doily”. She told him she had gone to ushering school.

Aunt Caroline and Uncle Carl would pick him and his mama up from the house and take them to church. They would pull their car in front of the house and blow the horn for them to come outside. Uncle Carl was Aunt Caroline’s husband. Uncle Carl would drive, Aunt Caroline sat in the front seat, and he and his mama sat in the back. Angel hadn’t been born yet.

During one Sunday morning ride to church, Lil’ Mike asked his Aunt Caroline, “What’s an Usher?”

Pronouncing usher as “ursher” and tabernacle as “tabanaca” which she always did, Aunt Caroline proudly said, “Nephew, an ursher, is the doorkeeper of God’s Tabanaca. Urshers keep folks in line so that the church service moves along with decency and order. No paper on the floor, no talking, no playing, and definitely no chewing gum. In other words, no foolishness. And nephew, all your Aunt Caroline got to do is look at somebody like this,” she said turning to look at him and squinting one of her eyes. “They know they better stop whatever foolishness they’re doing.”

Lil’ Mike missed his Aunt Caroline so much. She and Mama used to go shopping together, eat lunch together, and go to the movies together. They would do lots of things together. But all that came to a stop a few weeks ago. Lil Mike remembered the exact date. It was his birthday – July 10, 1998.

Aunt Caroline stopped by the house and picked him up to take him to Chuck E. Cheese for his eighth birthday. Lil’ Mike was glad to get out of the house and away from Angel’s constant crying. His mother had given her a bottle and changed her stinky, poop-filled Pamper. However, Angel still would not stop crying.

Once he and Aunt Caroline arrived at Chuck E. Cheese, she bought him lots of game tokens, a big pepperoni pizza, and soda. He even danced with Chuck E. Cheese. Lil’ Mike had so much fun. He played skee ball, threw mini-basketballs through hoops, and played video games. Before they left, Lil’ Mike took the tickets he won to a counter and picked out a prize. He wouldn’t have had any fun on his birthday if it had not been for his Aunt Caroline. However, when his aunt took him home later that day, she and his mama got into a big argument. When they got there, Angel was lying in her bassinet – still crying. His mother was pacing the floor. Lil’ Mike assumed she was waiting for his father to bring her some crack stuff.

“My Lawd!” Aunt Caroline told his mother, “I ain’t never seen a baby holler so much in my life! She was crying when we left, and she’s still crying. Look at her over there just a screamin’ and a kickin’! I know that’s my sweet, little baby niece, but that cat-eyed little baby is a mean, little thang! Mean and on’ry...just like my bruuuuurther!”

“Angel’s driving me up the wall,” his mother frustratingly replied. “I fed her, I burped her, I picked her up, and I changed her. And she still won’t stop crying! I don’t know what else to do!”

“Well M, I would help you out to give you a break, but the last time I took that baby to the house, she cried like a banshee! Howled all night like a wolf hollering under a full moon! Carl had to work the next morning and she kept him up all night! He had a fit! Told me I better not bring no chil’ren back to the house to babysit! And oh Lawd, M. You got the baby’s soiled diapers in here on the floor! They stink and need to go outside! Lawd, I better use the bathroom before I soil myself.”

Lil’ Mike watched as his aunt covered her ears to drown out Angel’s crying as she headed to the downstairs bathroom. He headed upstairs to play with the things he got from Chuck E. Cheese.

“Lawd have mercy, M!” he heard Aunt Caroline cry from the downstairs bathroom. “When are you going to clean up this nasty house! You never used to keep your bathroom looking like this! It’s filthy! This bathroom ain’t fit for a dawg!”

Pat! Pat! Pat! Pat! Pat! Pat! It was the sound of his aunt stomping her feet on the bathroom floor.

“M!” shouted Aunt Caroline, using the nickname by which she referred to his mother. ‘I’m in here mashin’ these roaches with my new shoes from the Hecht Company! You got roaches everywhere! In the kitchen, in the living room, on the walls, and on the ceiling! I got ready to wipe myself, and they were crawling on the toilet paper! I’m jumping in here more than I jump in church!”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” screamed Aunt Caroline.

Her scream scared Lil’ Mike. He ran downstairs as fast as he could to see what was wrong.

“Lawd have mercy! Help me, Jesus! A mouse just ran over my foot!” Aunt Caroline yelled. “I plead The Blood!” A few seconds later, Aunt Caroline flung the bathroom door open and ran out. “I gotta get outta here! I can’t take this! I’m havin’

heart pala-patations!” she shouted. “I’ll have a heart attack if I stay in this God-forsaken house a minute longer!” she yelled dashing towards her keys and purse. “I pray none of these roaches in here crawled inside my pockabook!” she exclaimed. Aunt Caroline noticed her purse had been opened. “Why is the clasp on my pockabook open?” she asked turning to his mama and giving her the squinted-eye look. “All the roaches in the world ain’t strong enough to open a pockabook!” Looking through her purse and rummaging through it, Aunt Caroline bellowed, “Melvi-na-A-Tho-mas! You stole my money! Now give me my money back!”

“I didn’t steal your money, Caroline!” his mother fired back. “How dare you stand in my house and accuse me of stealing?! You probably ain’t have no money in that pocketbook anyway!”

“The Bible says, thou shalt not steal Melvina! I know how much money I had in my pockabook! Forty dollars to be exact!”

“I ain’t steal shit from you, Caroline!”

“How dare you cuss me, M?! You never used to use the Devil’s vocabulary! Those drugs you and Mike are usin’ have changed ya, M!”

“Get the hell outta my house, Caroline!”

“I’m leavin’ you, thief, before I do somethin’ I will regret! And you had better be glad that I’m saved, sanctified, pressed down, and filled with the Holy Ghost, or I’d cuss ya out right back! I nicknamed you ‘M’ because it’s short for Melvina, but I should have named you ‘M’ for Moolah because you sure stole mines! I may have not seen you take it, but Gawd sure did!” she shouted.

Lil’ Mike watched Aunt Caroline march to the front door. He had never seen her so mad. His Aunt Caroline abruptly stopped, turned around, and looked at him. “I’m so sorry you had to hear your Aunt Caroline and your mama carry on, Lil’ Mike!” she said, now turning and rolling her eyes at his mother. “Grown folks talkin’ and fussin’ should never take place in front of chil’ren! But your mama sittin’ over there on that ol’ nasty couch, done gone plum crazy!”

“Crazy?!’ his mama hissed, stooping down, picking up an empty beer bottle, and jumping up from the couch. “I’ll show you crazy! I’ll bust you upside your motherfuckin’ head!”

Trembling with fear, little Mike cowered in the corner, praying his mama didn’t hurt Aunt Caroline.