

BLACK ASPHALT AND CEMENT (1975)

There was two weeks left to June and the Fourth of July was fast approaching. When you breathed, it felt like your lungs were going to explode. I decided to take a little break from carrying boxes to the moving van because I was just tired. My mother was placing more boxes in the back of the U-Haul and talking with our neighbors.

My baby sister, Gilda, whom we called her Goodness Gilda because when she was bad, our mother always hollered, “Goodness Gilda look at all the mud on your dress!” Or she yelled, “Goodness Gilda, if you don’t stop all that screaming for no damn reason, I’m going to spank you good!”

She stood before me with her little pink sun dress on with those little brown muscular arms hanging out of the dress, along with her Afro puffs that held two yellow bally barrettes on either puff, and she placed her Barbie doll on the step next to me and decided to take a load off too.

Gilda placed her hands on either sides of her cheeks and looked down at the ground. “I don’t wanna move, Clarence!” I pulled her a little closer to me, being her big brother and all. “I don’t either, but Mom says it’s for the best right now.”

While we sat on the steps, my eldest sister, Monica, came bursting through with a few boxes of her own. “Why are you two just sitting there? Ma told y’all to get your stuff together, because we’ll be leaving soon.” That was Monica always trying to play our mother, Stella. Monica wore a yellow sun dress, with white flip flops that had daisies over the top part of the shoe. She had a single Afro puff in her hair, which she pulled to the back. When she walked down the walkway with the boxes, she looked just like a miniature version of our mother.

Of course, once Monica reached the van, she told Mom that we were just sitting on the steps and not helping out. I know this because I saw Mom peep behind the door of the van. “Clarence, Gilda, get your asses up and help Monica get those boxes out of the living room!” Gilda refused to be apart from her Barbie doll, and she dragged that doll everywhere she went, so she certainly wasn’t much help to me because she could only use one hand.

“Goodness Gilda, you’re gonna have to put Barbie down for a minute because you can carry some of these littler boxes.” Gilda put her one free hand on her little side that she thought were hips, and shot me this mean look.

“I’m not putting Barbie down. She’s my bestest dolly and she goes with me everywhere. I’m sorry, but no!”

“Goodness Gilda, if you put Barbie down for a few minutes, I promise to buy you some candy when we get to our new home, how’s that sound?” Gilda poked her lip out and kept her hand firmly on her side. “No!”

There was no use. How do you reason with a five-year old? “Okay, suit yourself, but when Mom comes in here and find that you’re not helping out, don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

Gilda sat down on one of the boxes and began playing with Barbie's hair. I just shook my head and laughed to myself because she was asking for it, and I knew what was going to happen, but she would have to learn these things on her own. I walked over and picked up a couple of boxes and headed back to the door when Monica bumped right into me and I dropped one of the boxes.

"Hey, what's the big idea, Monica? Mom is gonna kill me if there was something in that box that is breakable."

Monica totally ignored me and walked straight over to Gilda, studied her playing with the Barbie doll, and she snatched that doll from Gilda's hands so fast, it didn't register with her what had happened. When Gilda realized the doll wasn't in her hands anymore, she began to start screaming and hollering. "Gimme back my dolly, Monnie!" Gilda fell down on the floor and began kicking her feet, all the while tears didn't appear to be coming from her eyes, but she sounded as if she was crying. "Gimmmme back my doll, Monnie!" She'd stop hollering for a few seconds, and then it sounded as though she wasn't breathing, and right when you thought the episode was over, she'd yell out again, "I want my dolly!"

Mom came running into the living room, and she looked at all three of us. She saw her youngest baby lying on the floor kicking and screaming. "What the hell is going on in here? I can't leave you three alone for one minute without you getting into something!"

"Ma, I came in here and Gilda was just playing with her Barbie and not helping. It's not fair that me and Clarence have to do all the work. She can help and do something."

Mom pushed past Monica and bent down to Gilda. "Aaaw, what did they do to my baby girl, huh?" Monica looked over to me and we both shrugged our shoulders. My mother was like that sometimes. Just when you thought she'd come in and start beating one of us, she would baby the baby.

Mom cradled Gilda in her arms and she looked up, and her eyes were giving us directives without her having to say one word. I immediately picked up the box I dropped and Monica assisted. We fussed all the way to the van. "Ma kills me doing that. How she gonna make us do all the work? It's not fair, Clarence."

"Yeah, it's not fair. I tried to bribe Goodness Gilda, but she wasn't having it. You know, it's times like these that I really miss Daddy." Suddenly, Monica placed the box on the van, and she put her head down. The sun was shining brightly and sweat began dripping down Monica's back.

"I miss Daddy too. I wonder if it's sweltering hot up in heaven?" I was fighting back a huge lump in my throat. "Yeah, if dad was still here, we wouldn't be moving to the projects."

Monica sighed rather loudly. "Well, Ma said if the settlement comes in with the construction company dad worked for, we'll be able to buy a house, and not have to be in the projects for long. Let's keep our fingers crossed that we don't live there too long."

Amazingly, I began to feel better. “Come on, sis, let’s get the rest of those boxes.” When we got back to the house and looked in the living room, Goodness Gilda was helping Mom put vases and dishes into boxes. And more importantly, she didn’t have Barbie in her hands. This came as a shock to me. I guess mothers really know their children best.

Monica, Gilda and I were snugly secured in the backseat of my dad’s deuce and a quarter. He had just purchased the four-door black Buick with a white hard top about a year ago. Aaw hell yeah, we had arrived. I remember the day he brought it home. I thought a limo had pulled up alongside our house. We were all giddy and screaming. Mom yanked open the door, and we all ran outside. I rubbed that car like making a wish on a genie bottle and watching how my reflection shined back at me. Dad took us everywhere in that car. It was sure going to seem strange having Mom doing the driving now. That car was the best ever made; it was like a modern-day, truck, jeep, SUV all rolled up into one, but better than all those cars put together because it was made out of real metal—heavy, not light, like these fiberglass cars made today. Hell, a good strong wind can dent these new cars, but back in the day, a deuce could do some major damage! Mom had gone back inside the house to do a once over to make sure we hadn’t forgotten anything. While we sat in the car, Mrs. Miller came over to the side of the window.

“Hi, babies.” She extended a box through the window. “This is a little food for you to snack on while you make the trip to Woodland Heights. I’m sure gonna miss you all.”

Mrs. Miller was a short, fat woman with a voice that sounded as though she smoked too many cigarettes and had visited too many bars. Her hair was very long and greasy looking, and she always wore it in a pony tail. “Thank you, Mrs. Miller. It is greatly appreciated.” She pinched the side of my cheek. “Where’s your mama?” As soon as those words left Mrs. Miller’s mouth, Mom was coming down the walk and closing up the gate.

“Hey Ida, what’s going on?”

“Oh nothing much, I handed Clarence a box of food for your trip. Oh, Stella, I’m gonna miss you all so much.” She reached over and hugged my mother.

Mom began to cry a bit. “Come on now, get yourself together, you’ve got these kids to think about. Everything is going to be alright. As soon as you get settled, you give me a call, and I’ll come by and visit. You have the number, right?”

Mom took a tissue from her front dress pocket and wiped her eyes. “Yes, Ida, I have the number.” Mrs. Miller patted my mother’s back, and she took in a huge amount of air, and let it out slowly.

“Okay, then it’s settled. You take these babies and take good care of yourself. And you know, if you need anything, you can contact me or Arthur. I’m gonna miss ya, baby. Take care.” She kissed Mom on the cheek.

Mom opened the car door, and got in, and Mrs. Miller leaned in the back window toward me. “Okay, babies, you be very good for your mother. She’s a good woman, and you look out for her, especially you, Clarence.” She grabbed the sides of my face. “You know you’re the man of the family now, and Monty would have it no other way.” She winked at me.

“Oh before you go, give me some sugar, babies.” She kissed me, and Gilda climbed up on my legs and put her face in Mrs. Miller’s hands, and she kissed her as well. She moved from my side of the window and walked around the back of the car and reached over and gave Monica a big wet kiss on her cheek. “I love you all.” She tapped the side of the deuce, and Mom waved and we were off to our new future.

Some of Dad’s friends that he worked with agreed to drive the moving van over to Woodland Heights and help us move in. Mom was so happy to have the guys help, because we had to pack up the entire townhouse, and we certainly didn’t want to have to move the stuff in and unpack too.

The drive over was pretty uneventful at first. We all sat rather quiet as Mom got on the freeway. There were several cars passing by, and the sun was blazing down on us and even with the windows down, it was extremely hot. Monica was looking out her window, as she appeared to be buried in deep thought, while Gilda was sleeping with her head on me and Barbie snugly up under her arm. Mom reached over to the radio and was going up and down the dial to find something to listen to. She finally rested on an urban station that most of us listened to back at Crescent Hills. As I sat and listened, Mom seemed focused on driving, while she rested her head on her left hand and steered with her right hand. The wind was blowing furiously as we drove down the freeway, and I enjoyed it. I liked the way it tickled my neck and my nose.

You’re listening to the sweet sounds of YPLZ, as you ask why pa-leeese DJ Craaaaaazy Larry play somethin’ funky. Well folks, how you doin’ out there this glorious afternoon? Is it hot enough for ya, cause it’s blazing hot at YPLZ. Here’s one of my favorite tunes to put movement in your hips, and music across your lips, it’s KC and the Sunshine Band’s That’s the Way (I Like It). Aaaw yeah, baby, that’s the way I like it, blaaaazin’ hot, so funky hipsters and hipettes, put your best platform shoe forward and let’s boogie on doooooown!!!!

My dad always listened to Crazy Larry. He loved him because of his cute little rhymes. That brought a smile to my face, and I began tapping my foot to the music as KC was singing. When I looked at Mom, she was tapping her finger on the steering wheel, and she caught a glimpse of me in the rearview mirror.

“You like that song, huh baby?” Mom reached over and turned the volume up.

“I sure do, Mom. That’s the way, ah, huh, ah, huh, I liiike it, ah, huh, ah, huh – that’s the way ah, huh, ah, huh, I liiiike it.” Mom began singing too, and Monica seemed to snap out of her mood and she joined in. We sang with all our might, and we laughed and enjoyed the way the song was bringing us together. Amazingly, Gilda slept through the whole song and our singing, plus the entire ride over to Woodland Heights. Nothing could wake that child up.

I noticed the car was beginning to slow down, and Mom’s Afro was a mess, due to the wind on the freeway. I saw a sign that read, *Welcome to Woodland Heights!* Mom made a right and I noticed the moving van was a few feet ahead. We had finally caught up to it. There were several stores collected together, with people on both sides of the street. Grady’s Fish-N-Chips, Chippy’s Chicken Shack, Baker’s Shoes, and Leah’s Boutique, as I counted several bars, The Jive Turkey, Charles’ Bar, Roses-R-Red, The Riz-N-Fiz, etc.

My eyes nearly bulged out of my head. I had never seen so many black people in one area. Crescent Hills was a mixed neighborhood, but I didn't see one white person on the street. The only thing white I could see was the U-Haul truck Mom had rented. As we passed the business district, you could smell old frying grease in the air, and it made my stomach turn. The only thing I smelled back home was Mom's apple pie and peach cobbles, and it smelled fresh and made you want to eat, but the smells here weren't inviting for my tastes.

The Woodland Heights community was in the shape of a U. We were driving through the base of the U and working our way to where we were going to be living. As we began to go up the hill, there was a huge store called Dunn's Superette. It looked like someone had converted an old house into a supermarket. It had a huge screen door, with two white columns holding up the roof above. The windows were outlined in a bright white, while the building itself was a fire engine red. There were several men and women sitting outside on the porch of the store, playing cards and dominos, with children running all around in various sizes, shapes and ages. I literally thought my eyeballs were going to pop out of my head. I had never seen anything like this, and I was terrified.

As we continued to climb up the U, you could see huge trees hovering over the entire community, which I later found out was how Woodland got its name. The community was built out in the woods, and there were miles and miles of trees behind Woodland. Mom was beginning to make a sharp turn up at the heart of the U, and I noticed the moving van had stopped just a few paces in front of us. I thought to myself, *Well this must be it.* When Monica looked over to me, her face had the same look that mine did, so I knew she must have been feeling uneasy about our new neighborhood as I was.

Mom didn't seem bothered at all, for if she was, she hid it well from us. She parked the car, and got out and walked over to the van, and me, Gilda and Monica didn't move. Gilda was still sleeping, and I shook on her arm a bit to get her up off of me, because my whole right side had become numb.

When Gilda joined the living, she rubbed her eyes with her balled up fists, and looked up and tried to see out the window. "Are we here?"

I was still in culture shock and I wanted to answer her, but couldn't seem to find a voice. Monica just stared straight ahead. Gilda began to whimper a little because neither of us answered her. She started pulling on my T-shirt. "Clarence, where is mommie?"

"Mom is standing up at the moving van talking with Mr. Cook and Mr. Phelps." I managed to finally say to her. I certainly didn't want her to start that crying with no tears again. That answer seemed to suit her fine because she didn't ask any more questions, but she began to start squirming around, and I knew she wanted to get out of the car.

Mom started walking toward the car and when she reached it, "Aah, why the hell are you all just sitting there? Get your butts out the car and let's get moving." We began rummaging around, and trying to get out and Monica managed to get out first, and instead of Gilda going out the door Monica just exited where the sidewalk was, she decided to crawl and walk over me. I pulled the handle and opened the door for her to get out.

“Clarence, are you crazy? This is a street. You shouldn’t let your sister out on the street side.” Mom then pointed at Gilda. “And you, young lady, should have gotten out on Monica’s side. You don’t ever get out on the side where the cars are, you hear me!”

Feeling a bit foolish because I knew what my mother had scolded was correct, “yes ma’am.” Mom then focused her attention over to Mr. Cook and giving him directions with where she wanted boxes to go.

Monica, as usual, went running up to the moving van, and I grabbed Gilda’s hand, while she clung to Barbie, and we walked over to the van too. While I stood there, I began surveying my surroundings. There were three four-level red colored brick buildings that held several individual apartments. One big red building to the left, one in the middle and one on the right. Each building had four main entrances, with eight apartments in each unit. As I calculated the math in my head, that meant 96 families to each court.

Where the heck has Mom moved us to? I was just baffled by this whole thing. Still holding Gilda’s hand, I led her and myself up eight cement-made steps, while I clung to the hot metal banister. As I got into the court itself, there were cyclone fences that separated each unit, with cement as the ground and a little bit of grass, but not much. Those huge trees loomed overhead and that gave me chills. There were a few kids playing near the middle of the court, watching Gilda and I, as we watched them.

Gilda yanked at my hand, “Clarence, what is this place? Where are the houses?” Those were very good questions Gilda asked, and I honestly had no answers for her, so I chose not to answer her at that moment. She yanked my hand harder. “Clarence, why are there so many windows to these big houses? Where’s the backyard?”

Still in shock myself, “These aren’t big houses, Goodness Gilda, these are a bunch of apartments, better known as the projects.” I looked down to her little confused face. “Prawjects, what is prawjects?”

Sadly I answered, “this is where we live, baby sis. It’s where we live now.” Gilda was full of questions, and I prayed that I could give her the answers she needed, but I was nine years old and trying to figure things out for myself. Gilda pointed to a bench. “Clarence, let’s go sit down.”

She pulled me like she was walking a dog, and I tagged along. The bench was made of stone, and when I helped Gilda up on it, she quickly jumped down. “That bench is hot, it burned my bottom.” The sun had been blazing all day, and it did make the stone bench rather hot, which immediately let me know that in the winter it was going to have the opposite effect.

I could feel the heat radiating over my bottom too, and my legs burned since I had shorts on. The sun continued to beam down on us, and we watched as dad’s friends went up the steps and down the steps to the van gathering boxes and coming back down without boxes. Mom was still up in the actual apartment we were going to be living in, and Monica stuck her head out the second story window and yelled over to us.

“Hey, no time to be relaxing y’all, go get some boxes and help Ma out!” I began mumbling things under my breath. “Come on Clarence, we gotta help.” No matter what, Gilda would not let that Barbie doll go.

One by one, all the boxes were delivered to Apartment 205. My dad’s friends hugged us and gave Mom a hug and wished us well, and they took the van back for her. We were finally left to our own device, our new living quarters. What else could we do?

All four of us sat on the living room floor and looked at one another. “Okay, kids, we’re going to have a family meeting.” Anytime Mom mentioned *family meetings*, I knew this couldn’t be good.

As I watched my mother, I thought how strong she was. This couldn’t be easy for her, especially after losing my dad last year, due to a work accident. She was so pretty with her red Afro, red skin and a few freckles sprinkled about her pointy nose. In the light, Mom’s eyes sparkled a light brown.

“Okay, I know this last year has been rather hard on us all.” She smiled at each of us. “And I know you all aren’t thrilled about having to go to new schools and leaving old friends behind, but I want you to know”—she choked up a bit—“that this wasn’t the life I had envisioned for my family.” Mom fell silent and I could tell she was fighting back tears.

“I was left no choice but to move us from our townhouse because I couldn’t afford the rent on my salary alone. There are so many complicated things going on right now, and things you are too young to understand, but know that Mommie is doing the best she can, and I hope you all will hang in there with me, until I get can things sorted out.”

Monica began to cry, and of course, Gilda followed suit. Mom just sat and looked at her children. She reached out and grabbed Monica in her arms and she rocked her as they cried together. I wanted to cry, but for some reason, I felt compelled to sit and watch. Gilda clawed her way through the hold Mom had on Monica, and she cradled them both to her bosom. After the girls had their cry, Mom looked to me.

“Son, I want you to know that I don’t expect you to take over the role of your father. Montavious was a wonderful man, husband, father and friend, and I know everyone keeps telling you that you’re the man now, but I want you to remain a child for a long as you can.”

“Mom, I will do whatever I can to protect us.”

“No, son, it’s not your responsibility to look out for us, that’s my job and mine alone. You stay a child for as long as you can, and enjoy your youth, because one day”—and she bent down and kissed Gilda’s forehead—“you’ll be grown, and raising your own family. Being a child doesn’t last forever, trust me.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but I will always look out for you and my sisters.”

That comment made Mom smile. “I know baby, I know you will, but you do understand what I’m saying, right?”

“Yes ma’am, I do.”

“Okay, well, we have lots of unpacking to do, so there’s no time like the present.” Our apartment was so small. I was used to walking up steps inside a house, and now all the rooms were on one level, and there wasn’t much room to move around. We had a living room, kitchen, bathroom and three bedrooms. The apartment was one big square with no purpose, rhyme or reason. Every room was painted white. Fortunately, I got my own room and my Mom had her own room and Monica and Gilda shared a room. Back in Crescent Hills, we all had our own room, so this was going to be rather interesting.

“Ma, why I gotta share a room with Gilda? I’m the oldest, and I should get a room to myself and Clarence should share with Gilda.”

Mom was going through boxes and throwing crumpled old newspapers on the floor. “Child, don’t start that mess. You and Gilda are girls and you should share and Clarence needs a room to himself.”

“But Maaaa, that’s not fair!”

Mom stopped pulling newspaper out the box and looked directly at Monica. “Listen here, little girl, I’m the boss in here, and what I say goes. You don’t question what I decide. Is that clear?”

“But Maaa!”

Mom reached over and smacked the back of Monica’s head. “What did I say?!”

Monica poked her lip out and stomped off into the room she was going to be sharing with Gilda. Gilda ran after Monica. Mom resumed going through boxes.

“Baby, reach over there and hand me those curtain rods. I don’t want anyone looking in on us.”

I quickly grabbed those curtain rods because I didn’t want to suffer the same fate that my elder sister just had. “Mom, is Monica going to be alright?”

She blew some air out of her mouth and swished her hand at me. “Boy, I’m not really interested in what Monica wants. Hell, I don’t *want* to live here, I don’t *want* my husband dead, I don’t *want* to struggle raising three kids on my own, I don’t *want* to have to try to make ends meet, but here I am. So Monica’s wants are pointless. She’ll get over it!”

Mom made some very valid points. I guess Monica’s little tantrum paled in comparison to what Mom was going through. Although in Monica’s defense, I could understand how she must have felt. She was twelve and soon going to be a teenager, so I could feel her pain, but not so much so that I was willing to give up my own room.

After about a half hour or so, Mom called Monica back into the room to help us unpack boxes. I guess she left her alone for a while, so she could cool off, but Mom always handled us

that way. She gave a directive once, never twice or three times, and you can rest assured, if she had to tell you something for a second time, your behind and her leather belt would soon be having a date.