

A woman with dreadlocks is shown in profile, looking out of a window in a prison cell. She is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved shirt. The cell walls are made of grey concrete blocks. The lighting is dramatic, with a strong light source from the window creating a bright area and deep shadows elsewhere.

BRITTANY K. BARNETT

A STORY OF
HOPE, JUSTICE,
AND FREEDOM

A KNOCK AT
MIDNIGHT

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A Story of
Hope, Justice,
and Freedom

BRITTANY K. BARNETT

 CROWN
NEW YORK

A Knock at Midnight is a work of nonfiction. Some names and identifying details have been changed.

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About the Author

On the last day of her trial, Sharanda found a parking spot with a two-hour limit across from the courthouse. Early, she sat for a few minutes, admiring the blackbirds lining the branches of a small elm on the corner, both birds and tree silhouetted against the crisp Dallas sky. People complained about the birds, said they were too noisy, but Sharanda admired their tenacity. And they looked pretty, fanned out on the tree branches like that. It was late summer but the air was still cool from the air-conditioning in her car, and she shivered a little in her light blazer. As on every weekday morning, she'd been up since four to prep-cook at her soul food restaurant, Cooking on Lamar, and she relished a few quiet minutes in the car. She had no way of knowing that these private moments of peace would be her last for a long, long time.

Cooking on Lamar was her pride and joy, and though the hours were long, Sharanda enjoyed every minute of it. While her eight-year-old daughter, Clenesha, snored lightly in a blue vinyl booth, Sharanda would chop vegetables for the salad bar, set tomorrow's brisket in marinade, smother ribs in dry-rub. At eight thirty this morning, she'd taken her break, dropped Clenesha off at McKenzie Elementary, and headed back downtown to the courthouse.

Now that her trial was finally ending, Sharanda felt relieved. It had been an ordeal, but at least it was over. Based on the obvious lies from the witnesses and the sympathetic glances the jurors shot her throughout the long week, she was sure she would be acquitted. Her attorney agreed. "The only challenge is the conspiracy charge," he said. "Kind of hard to counter hearsay. And that's basically all they need." He shrugged. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. Based on this evidence? You're looking at probation.

Worst case, five years.” Five years? Sharanda’s eyes had filled with tears. In five years, her baby would be a teenager—no way she could do five years in federal prison.

The lawyer patted her on the shoulder reassuringly. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Pretty sure you’re looking at a full acquittal.”

She’d prayed, stayed positive. All the signs in her life were good. The restaurant was finally taking off, her house ready to flip. And Clenesha was an angel. Being a mom was the greatest joy of her life. Sharanda smiled a little, thinking of her daughter’s thrilled face the night before when she’d tried on the bright red leotard she’d wear to her gymnastics practice and the imitation beam routine she’d done on the way up the school steps this morning.

Reminding herself to check Clenesha’s practice time, Sharanda slipped on her heels and fed the meter. At the last minute, she tossed her purse into the backseat of the car. No reason to drag it around the courthouse. She figured she’d be right back.

During closing arguments that morning, Sharanda tried to follow what was going on but gave up after a while. The prosecutor kept saying the same things he’d said throughout the trial. Her attorney didn’t say much. Just as she started to worry about the parking meter, the judge came back to the bench to announce the verdict.

Sharanda’s attorney gripped her arm. “The marshals just came in through the back,” he whispered urgently. “No matter what happens, stay calm.”

“What?” Sharanda looked at him, not understanding. Then her stomach dropped.

She never saw her purse, her car, or her restaurant again. By the time Sharanda was able to set eyes on her daughter as a free woman again, Clenesha was twenty-four years old and a mother herself.

—

I FIRST SAW Sharanda Jones in a YouTube video. Hair half up, neatly pressed. Dimples like dimes. Her boxy tan top could pass for a Dickies

work shirt, in that early-nineties style, and at first glance she looked like any beautiful young woman on her way to class, to work, to see a movie with her girls. But the beige brick wall behind her had no windows, and there was a number printed on a white sticker above her left chest pocket. Sharanda wasn't on her way anywhere. She was a woman in federal prison, serving the harshest sentence possible in America short of execution: life without the possibility of parole.

How could such a beautiful, vibrant woman be spending the rest of her natural life in prison? In the video, the narrator decried a wrongful sentence for a drug offense, but surely there had to be something more to the story—some history of violence, a lengthy criminal record. I adjusted my headphones and leaned closer to my laptop screen. It was late in the evening at the Southern Methodist University Underwood Law Library, and only one other student sat with me at the mahogany table, a preppy-looking white guy who'd been staring blankly at the same torts textbook for over an hour. I was twenty-five and had just transferred here after my first year at the University of Houston Law Center.

Off camera, the interviewer asked Sharanda a question about her daughter, Clenesha. Pain flickered over Sharanda's otherwise calm features before she answered with a small smile.

“My sister brings her to visit. Every time she comes it's hard. She's grown up from an itty-bitty girl to almost a grown-up woman. I only get to see her once a month.”

She paused to compose herself and continued, her voice full of pride and conviction.

“My dream is just to show up at her school. I know they gave me life, but—I just can't imagine not being at her graduation. Her high school graduation. I just can't imagine me not being there.”

Onscreen, the camera zoomed for a close-up of the number on Sharanda's tan prison uniform before panning back up to her face. My breath caught in my chest.

I flipped my laptop shut and sat frozen in my seat. The torts student looked at me curiously as I fought back tears. I understood all too well the emotions I saw flickering across Sharanda's face as she spoke longingly of

her daughter. I stared straight ahead, breathing deeply, and tried to shake the seven-digit number burning in my brain: 1374671. It wasn't Sharanda's number that haunted me.

Prisoner number 1374671 was my mother.

TRAVELING

Black love is black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy.

—NIKKI GIOVANNI

DEAR MAMA

Mama was always heavy-handed, and I was tender-headed. I'd sit between her legs on the worn rust-brown shag carpet separating my bare legs from the cool cement floor of our old wooden house in Fulbright, Texas, trying to hold in my protest as she dipped the brush in water to pull through my thick hair. Mama's hands, cool on the side of my head and ear, smelled of Blue Magic hair grease, and I relished the touch of her palm even as I squirmed from the comb. "Hand me that barrette, Britt," Mama would say, and I'd reach into our pink hair box for the red one I knew she meant. Jazmine—or Jazz, as we called my little sister—would be dancing her carefree self around the TV, pantomiming the Tom and Jerry carnage playing out on the screen, her hair already combed in perfect pink barrettes that matched her short set, red with pink flowers, lace on the straps. It might have been the last time in her life she'd look so girly without a fight, but at four, she wore it well. As soon as Mama finished torturing my head we'd be free to go sit outside on the faded porch swing and eat sweet plums from Aunt Opal's tree across the road, the best spot in the whole town of Fulbright to catch a breeze in that sweltering Texas midsummer heat.

My mom was a tall, long-waisted, young Black woman with the deep-set paisley eyes and the high, full cheekbones of her Filipina and half-

Cherokee grandmothers. Her skin shone like a burnished penny, and her glossy black hair framed her face in a perfect curly halo. Physically, she was striking—an exotic beauty of Hunt County. Even when she was a small girl, her biting wit and sharp-tongued fury could not be contained. Before adolescence, other kids mocked her “Chinese” eyes and bony frame; when she grew into herself, the attention from men of all ages was both blessing and curse. She cultivated a tough exterior. In photos, she’s always giving the camera side-eye, jaw set, lips a flat line. Even then she’s gorgeous. Too much for her small town, for her small world, a world made smaller by my arrival when she was only eighteen, and Jazz’s a year later.

Mama had grown up with her mother in Greenville, notorious even in the South for the sign that stretched across its main street for decades: WELCOME TO GREENVILLE: THE BLACKEST LAND AND THE WHITEST PEOPLE. Though some would claim that “the whitest people” referred to the moral purity of Greenville’s citizens, Black folks from inside and outside the town knew the truth. Mama’s mama, who I called Granny, was named after Ida B. Wells, and she was as fierce and loving as her namesake. A prayer warrior, she was a straight shooter who would tell you exactly what was on her mind, regardless of whether you were ready to hear it. My mother took after her in temperament. Always willful, Mama took pride in controlling her own destiny—nobody could tell Evelyn Fulbright what to do. Greenville schools didn’t reward precocious intelligence in young Black girls, and Mama played the rebel more than the achiever. Still, at seventeen she scored extra high on the entrance exam for a basic training and airborne program at Fort Jackson in South Carolina, which would have led to a year in Germany and the nursing training she desired. Then I came along.

I was born in 1984 when both my parents were still living with their own parents. Mama was seventeen when she got pregnant with me, and Daddy just sixteen, a sophomore in high school. Mama says that Daddy was “mesmerized” when they met in the Greenville park where she held court with her friends, seniors to my daddy’s crew of gangly sophomore boys. She had a barely healed divot under her eye from her latest fight and shorts that showed every inch of her long brown legs. Daddy was indeed struck dumb, by the force of her character as much as her uncommon beauty. “All

I wanted was to see her smile,” he would say. “Prettiest woman you ever saw, but boy did she act mean!”

Mama joked that when she saw that handsome young Barnett boy drive through the park in Greenville she’d have been a fool not to fall for him. Leland Barnett drove a brand-new Z28 with the T-top, flashing his gap-toothed smile from beneath his Michael Jackson curl, a perfect single twist on his forehead just like on the *Thriller* cover. Everyone knew my daddy’s family, the only Black family in all of Campbell, a small town about fifteen minutes’ drive from Greenville, with six handsome brothers and a real pretty piece of land. My daddy’s daddy had picked cotton and had only a third-grade education, but he managed to build one of the most successful cement contracting businesses in the area. He also owned Sudie’s, a thriving after-supper club in nearby Commerce. And here came my daddy, fine as could be, earnest and smart and with the exact opposite personality as Mama. He met her hot temper and sharp tongue with a sweet smile and calm demeanor, her extroverted sass with shy introversion, her decisive action with his languid dreams. They fell for each other hard, in that first flush, can’t-tell-nobody-nothing kind of love.

That’s the kind of love that burns out fast, especially under the pressure of two newborns. Mama entered the deferred enrollment program for Fort Jackson, but she was reluctant to be away from me, her first baby. Granny told her, “That little black-eyed pea don’t want to go to no Germany!” So Mama relented.

Jazz was born a year after me, and by the time she was a year old my mom and dad’s relationship was all but over. For the next year we bounced around within a ten-mile radius in Hunt County, Texas, between Granny’s house in Greenville and my dad’s family home in Campbell, under the loving care of our dad’s mom, Mama Lena. Mama appreciated the help, but she wanted out from under all of it—away from her mama’s house, away from Hunt County, and especially away from my dad’s new girlfriend. So when Mama’s daddy, Pa-Pa, offered to fix up the old house he’d grown up in for us, it was a big deal for her—a chance, finally, for my headstrong, independent mother to be on her own with her girls.

Pa-Pa’s own daddy had built that house with his two hands, and by the time we moved in, it had seen better days. Still, it was ours. Pine trees grew

out back, and the sky was sharp with electricity during tornado season. Fireflies delighted us on summer nights, and torrential downpours turned the red earth redder, releasing everywhere the sweet smell of new growth so potent it permeated our clothes drying on the line. Despite the cement floors and bare bulbs, the thick plastic nailed over windows for insulation in the winters and the pipes that froze all winter long, we had joy in that house, and so much love.

Pa-Pa's family constituted more than a quarter of Fulbright's one hundred fifty residents, and most of us lived on that same two-mile stretch of Fulbright Road—not quite dirt but not quite paved either, the old blacktop crumbling back into the rich soil. We were the first house you'd come to if you turned up that road, a little ways after the old church where we'd go some Sundays, gospel hymns shaking the wooden floorboards. My cousin Charla lived across from us with my great-aunt Mary Ann, and a few paces down the road my great-aunt Opal made my favorite plum jelly from the massive trees in her front yard. Just around the bend my great-grandmother, Mama Toni, tended her flowers and cooked up sweet rice with carnation milk and sugar from her family's recipe in the Philippines. Across the road from her was Pa-Pa's house, my grandfather Edward, who worked in the coal mine. Pa-Pa's cattle and horses grazed in the fields around the house, and in the summer he and Uncle Willie would be in the field all day with their rumbling tractor, pitching hay that fell loose from the fresh rolled bales. There we all were—descendants of Fulbrights, living on Fulbright land in a town that bore our mama's name. There was rich history in that small East Texas town. We knew we could knock on any of those family doors on Fulbright Road if we needed to. And we knew we had a proud, hardworking mother, who dressed every weekend in the white nurse's uniform she'd bought secondhand at a store in neighboring Lamar County and starched and ironed until it looked almost new.

The year was 1988 and my mother was only twenty-three, with two toddlers underfoot. Though she'd given up her dreams of the military, she was determined to make something of herself. She attended nursing school all day in Paris, Texas, through the week and worked the evening shift Thursday through Sunday as an aide in a nursing home. Mama would carry us to the car, asleep, and when she knelt by the backseat to wake us and

usher us into daycare, it would still be pitch black, no other children there but us.

When Mama's financial aid package got cut as part of President Reagan's austerity program that closed several hospitals in the area and cut drug treatment programs, childcare initiatives, and education, daycare was no longer an option. Without daycare, Mama's future was in jeopardy. Mama Lena offered to take us, but Evelyn wasn't having it. "They're my girls, Lena," she said. "I'll figure out a way." And with grit and determination, she did.

The whole family pitched in. Pa-Pa left his truck at the end of our driveway when he came home from the coal mine at night and walked the rest of the way home so Mama would have a vehicle to drive to the nursing home to work second shift. And every weekend, without fail, Mama Lena came to collect us and spoil us rotten at her home in Campbell while Mama was at work. Everyone pitched in to make sure we didn't want for anything. At least, if we did, we didn't know it. In our family, as in much of the South, Black love was Black wealth.

—

JAZZ AND I were sitting on the edge of the front porch, our skinny arms circling the peeling slats, when a huge blue and silver Silverado truck, set way up high, rolled up the driveway of our little house in Fulbright. We looked on with interest as a brown-eyed, handsome man with a box haircut slid out from behind the wheel of the truck. He was shorter than our daddy but sturdily built, with a round face and wad of snuff tucked in his lower lip. He wore a thick TXU work jacket and a wide, kind smile that put us immediately at ease, and at the bottom of the porch steps he stopped to pay his respects to us as if we were grown-ups. "What you know good?" Billy said, and we appraised him for only a moment before Jazz clambered off the porch, walked straight up to him, and said, "Do that truck fly?"

That's how Mama's new boyfriend, Billy, always seemed to us—a superhero. And we, his apprentices, to whom he worked to impart all of his steadfast values from the day we met him, just as though we were his own blood. That day, he laughed his quiet laugh and took Jazz to sit in the shiny

cab, showed her how the controls worked, didn't even complain when she got Teddy Graham crumbs on his seats. Just like that, Billy became a part of our family. We loved to see him coming and ran outside whenever we heard his truck rumbling down the road. We joke now that he rescued us from that old drafty Fulbright house, and he did.

When I started kindergarten, Jazz was left by herself, gathering the last of the sweet plums, feeding stray pups, sneaking out to ride bikes with our cousin Chauncy while Mama slept off the night shift. Each day she waited loyally for the mailman at the big tin mailbox in front of our house so she could proudly carry in the letters.

One afternoon Jazz was standing outside waiting for me to get off the bus after school—I could see her standing there on one leg like a stork, using the other to worry a scab on her calf, her hair a wild mess because Mama hadn't had time to put the comb through it.

“Brittany,” Jazz announced as soon as I was in earshot, her eyes wide with wonder at the day and the pleasure of the telling. “Yo mama gone crazy today!”

“What happened?” I said.

“Yo mama's so happy she's gone crazy!” Jazz said. “Jumping around, hugging me—she spun me around and around! Yo mama got her driver's license!”

“Mama already has a driver's license,” I said, in the bossy old wise woman tone I used whenever I explained anything to Jazz in those days. “What are you talking about? How you think we drive everywhere?” But sure enough, Mama—never one to show much affection—met me on the porch, her smile wide as I'd ever seen it, and swung me around, too.

“We did it, Britt! We did it! Your mama is a *nurse!*!”

That night Billy took us all to the Tip-Top in Bogata to celebrate. We toasted Mama's success over the Tip-Top's should've-been-world-famous burgers and thick homemade milkshakes. We were so proud of her, and she was so happy. “I am a *nurse!*” she kept saying. “All those long nights, all those days of dragging you poor girls to the daycare at the crack of dawn! *I am a nurse!*”

She was our hero.

MAMA WORKED HARD to enrich our lives. When she was home, despite what must have been her extreme exhaustion, she read storybooks, made French toast, and played Candyland and Uno. When she could she took us to the movies, to the circus, to county fairs. And she did whatever teachers asked of her. One time she stayed up after working a full shift to help me make a poster for class, a public service announcement to keep folks from messing with the power lines. That poster took us hours: MC Hammer's face realistically rendered, his trademark glasses mirrored with carefully applied glitter, 3-D speakers in the corners blasting "Don't Touch This!" with power lines in the background.

In 1991, Mama married a smitten Billy in Mama Toni's front yard, wearing Granny's old wedding dress. Jazz, six by then, was the flower girl—happily tossing the flowers to guests on only one side of the aisle—and I carried Mama's train. A year later, they decided it was time to get out of the rickety old house in Fulbright for good. With Mama a full-fledged nurse and Billy's coveted benefits job at the coal mine, they bought a house in the town of Bogata—pronounced entirely Texan, with an "uh" sound for the *o* and a long *o* for the first *a*—about seven minutes up the road from Fulbright.

Bogata was another small Red River County town, but with a population of twelve hundred, a thousand more people than Fulbright, it dwarfed our old neighborhood, let alone that road with our family in every house. While our road in Fulbright had been peopled with our grandparents, cousins, great-aunts and -uncles, Bogata was almost all white. My cousin Charla and I were the only Black students in my class, and there were only a handful of other Black families living in the town. Even today, if you pull into the road leading to our old house, you'll see the bright blue letters announcing DIXIE KITCHEN against a Confederate flag backdrop. But sheltered by my family's love, I was shielded from racism growing up. The Bogata of my childhood was an idyllic country town, and my memories of those first few years there bring me nothing but pleasure.

Mama worked in the nursing home, and Billy worked in the coal mines in week-long shifts, seven days on, seven days off. We spent those off

weeks as the tightest-knit family you can imagine. Biking down Main Street to the snow-cone stand, making signs to root for our football team while Billy drenched ribs in his secret-recipe barbecue sauce. Jazz playing out back with the horses while I sat inside on the couch, inhaling another book from the *Babysitter's Club* series. My mom perched on a lawn chair, shaving her long legs in the water hose as Billy fixed the fence and teased her about her feet, Jazz hollering at me to get my nose out of the book and come play catch. Me and Billy shooting hoops in the front yard around our Little Dribblers trophy while my mom and Jazz put extra glitter on their Dallas Cowboys poster. Always the sound of laughter. I had a happy country childhood in our small rural town. But those times didn't last.

I didn't know then about the system of law and order closing like a vise around my community, my family. I wouldn't really know until years later. I was a kid, enjoying my kid life in my doors-unlocked-and-windows-wide-open piece of rural East Texas. But when the drug war came for us, it came with a vengeance. When the drug war came for us, it came straight for my mom.