

TRACEE PORTER

My name is Tracee. I am a second generation Angeleno. I have lived in LA all my life except for a couple of years. My family moved to West LA after the Fair Housing Act passed. We were the first Black family in our neighborhood. As soon as we moved in, I saw the beginning of white flight. I was six years old and the “For Sale” signs went up. When I was 12-13 [years old], my mother uprooted us from West LA to South LA, right at the beginning of the crack cocaine wars. In that time period, we lived at 54th and Denker, 51st between Main and Broadway, and then 120th and Central. We lived at three different places from the time I was 13 until I graduated from high school.

‘She did nothing to protect me.’

When we first moved to 54th and Denker, my stepfather started sexually assaulting me. Bottom line: raping me. I was a girl going through puberty, not sure of her sexuality, and I guess I felt that it was flattering. I knew it was wrong, but he groomed me into thinking it was okay. I was the oldest and the only girl. We moved from there to a place on 51st between Main and Broadway. The abuse continued because my mother worked at night.

There was this young man that I was dating. It was a triplex, so the big apartment was upstairs with two smaller apartments downstairs. He lived in an apartment downstairs. I was 15 at this point and, you know, we would get busy. My mother found out that he was 18, so she was threatening him. First, she beat my a-- about it. And I said, “You know what, you really need to talk to your husband. He's been sleeping with me for the last two years.” At that point she stopped [hitting me]. Finally, I felt free – even though it was told out of anger and violence. Next thing I know, she's throwing his s--t in trash bags. When I got up the next morning, I didn't expect for him to be there. But not only was he still there, he was in the bed with my mom. I told my mother, and she believed me. She knew that this is what was going on. Yet, she did nothing to protect me. He kept abusing me.

My mother got pregnant twice. She got pregnant with my sister when we lived over there on 51st. My sister was born in ‘82. My brother was born in ‘83. Then my aunt and my cousin moved in with us. Because I was the oldest, I had to babysit because my mother was at work. My stepfather was at work. I had no childhood. I had to come home, help people with homework, get kids ready, cook dinner, and stuff like that. I always had to be at home.

I don't even know sometimes how I'm still here.'

I forget about [living at the place at] 120th and Central, that's where I learned to put a lock on my door to keep him [my stepfather] out. My mother knew. She just didn't want to. I was the only girl, that was justification. There was this boy I really liked, and he invited me over to his friend's place. I knew we were going to have sex, but I didn't know that he had his friends hiding in the closet. So, I was gang raped on my 16th birthday. Even after the gang rape, I still had to deal with my stepfather. I don't even know sometimes how I'm still here.

I never told my biological dad, who I loved dearly, but he was really never in the picture. When he and my mom got divorced, he had a good job as a union carpenter but he said I'll quit my job before I pay child support." I would see him on occasion, but I couldn't tell him. I went away to school and, at one point, I got pregnant. There was no way I was going to have a baby. I told him when I got pregnant, and I was still on [my mom's] Kaiser plan. This is when they still did abortions at the hospitals. So, I had to take care of that. I came home after because I wasn't really prepared for college. I didn't know at the time that I was bipolar.

I had to have the baby.'

I got a job at Ralph's on Crenshaw and Century as a cashier. There was a manager, the cutest white boy ever. I look back on our relationship, and I was just something to do, I was exotic. During the time we were dating, we never went out. We always met at a motel, and he would order Chinese food. I thought it was the sweetest thing ever. It was the first time in all my life that I enjoyed sex. But then I got pregnant. I had no intentions of keeping the baby. My best friend drove me to the abortion clinic in Inglewood. We get there and there's something happening so they couldn't do the abortion. They had to reschedule. In that time, he told his mother. We all went to the same church. His mother told another friend of mine. Because these are all my mother's friends; they went to my pastor. Did I mention that I was grown? I was over 21.

The pastor talks to my mother, and I had no idea. I wasn't living with my mother at the time. At this point, [my mother] had gotten a place over by USC (University of Southern California). I had a key to the house, I walk in, and she says, "So I guess I'm going to be a grandmother." By that time, everybody at my church knew that I was pregnant. The secret was out, so I had to have the baby. I didn't want to know the sex of the baby. I didn't want a daughter because of my own issues with colorism and being dark skinned. I prayed to God that I had a son, and my prayers were answered. I had a son. I don't know if I would have been a good mother for a daughter. Fortunately, we'll never know.

I don't fit in a box.'

Years pass, I got hurt at the job and I was on the verge of losing my apartment. I was 25, maybe 26, and the baby was three. A friend of my mother's told me about a program to help me get my Section 8 [Housing], a subsidy program where the County pays a portion of rent and you pay the balance. In order to get the Section 8, we went to a shelter. While I was waiting for my Section 8, I got kicked out of the shelter because I wouldn't go to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings. I am not here because I had a substance abuse problem. I'm here because I need help with my rent. I've never had an issue with drugs or alcohol. This is a problem with a lot of these programs. I don't fit in a box. Fortunately, I was still able to get my Section 8 and I moved out to the Valley.

We had a cute two-bedroom and one-and-a-half-bath townhouse in Canoga Park. And I lived there for a while then I met another white boy. I had a type – blonde hair, blue eyes. We dated for a while, and [he was] really good, cool, a sweet guy. I had a good friend who was a low-key drug dealer, and he was moving some weight. My boyfriend found out about it. And he's like, "You know, maybe, can you talk to your homie because I guess he got a kilo to sell." So, my homie said, "Okay, cool, because you my girl's boyfriend."

I came to find out that he had a drug problem. Once he got that crack, he went on a bender. I didn't know that he had a drug problem until that happened. I dealt with so many of my relatives – my grandmother got hooked on crack; at one point, my mother had all these people living in our house; my aunt would steal from me – I know how drug addicts work. They're very manipulative and he had been clean. Had I known he had a drug problem, there's no f---ing way I would have hooked him up with my homie. The only reason why he didn't get killed is because he was my boyfriend. He took the drugs on spec. In other words, *I'm going to sell it, and I'll pay you from the profits*. Instead of selling, he used. At that point, we had been together for over a year, and I loved him.

I went to a fugue state.'

When he finally came back [from his bender], he was all apologetic like, "Baby, I'm sorry, I will never do this again." I believed him. It was a lie. The second time, he lived up in Agoura Hills with his dad. We would go up there, [he had] this gorgeous deck with a jacuzzi and a lake below. One night, I took my son, my sister and my brother, and we were going to go spend the weekend up there. I had my mother's car, and he was supposed to go to the store, and he left [with the car] and never came back. This was before cell phones, so we were stranded up there in Agoura Hills with no food or anything like that. I forget who came and got us and took us back to Canoga Park. He finally resurfaced, and at that point, [I'm like] *you endangered*

not just me, but you f---d with my mother's car and stuff like that. I was done. One night he comes over asking for money. He was trying to get me to smoke crack with him, because he knew that I was on [Section 8] and that I was getting money. He's like, *well, if I get this b---b booked...* And I'm like, "No, we're not doing this." I told him to leave. He didn't. He tried to take my purse and he slapped me.

I don't know what happened. But the next thing I know, I went to a fugue state, because I clocked his a-- and gave him a bloody nose. He left, and I called the cops. The cops showed up, did a police report and everything. A couple of days later, he keeps calling and I said, "We're done." One of the reasons why my mother left [my father] was because my father beat her on a regular basis, and I witnessed that. I was two or three years old, and it was after a particularly bad beating. I asked my mother, "Is Daddy going to beat me too?" That was it. There will never be a man that will beat me. But this is long before I got my voice.

[One time] I spent the night, and I was leaving to go to church, and he didn't want me to go. And I'm like, I'm gone. I was leaving, and next thing I know, he's following me, chasing me down from where he lived onto the 101. And finally, I pulled over. Somebody saw it, called the police, and they showed up. He left and I said, "Look, I'm just trying to leave." He wasn't arrested.

He wouldn't leave me alone. I would see his dad's number [on caller ID] and I wouldn't answer the phone. Then he would go to somebody else's house or a phone booth and call me. One day, after I hung up on him, my dad called me, and I answered the phone. He could hear it on my phone. He asked, "What's wrong?" And I said, "He won't leave me alone." My dad's like, "What's his number?" To this day, I have no idea what my papa said to that white boy, but he never called me again. The next day, I filed a restraining order. I never saw him again, other than when we went to court.

'Take the deal or go to jail.'

Years pass, so in the interim, I was on [Section 8 Housing] but I worked, and I reported in my income because that's one of the things they want you to do. At the time I was also going to school. I moved from Canoga Park to Sherman Oaks. It was just me and [my son] for a while.

[My son] is probably 10 [years old] and I get a letter from the DA's (District Attorney's) office saying that I had to report to the criminal courts building. That's when I got arraigned for welfare fraud. I had gotten a letter saying the County overpaid me. I worked at Miller's Outpost, retail jobs. I was reporting my income and I was still on Section 8, but the County overpaid me. We fought back and forth for a year, and finally, my public defender said, "Take the deal or go to jail." I should have fought and I should have went to court. But I didn't know. And I had a little boy. The statute I was convicted under said that [I] applied for County aid with the intent of defrauding the County, which was not the case. I lost my job. I lost my car. At

that point, I hadn't been on [Section 8] for years. But this white judge gave me five years [of] probation, 250 hours of community service, and I had to make restitution.

How am I going to make restitution if I can't get a job? I was a full charge bookkeeper, and a tax preparer. I worked at a property defense company. Who's going to hire somebody who checks, "Have been convicted of a felony within the last seven years?" Even if I wanted to get a job at McDonald's I couldn't. Here's the worst part. I had to go back on [Section 8].

I had to go to a probation office right in Azusa and a friend took me out there. It was a room full of women who were Black and brown. They gave an outline of what we had to do on probation, and they said, "You're not going to be able to make restitution, but as long as you make an attempt." I finished my community service. I reported every single month. I was always in compliance. The only thing I hadn't done was make my full restitution. So, five years later, April 1999, I entered the millennium as a convicted felon. At 33, in April 2004, I [finished] my five years of probation. There was a white girl who was charged with the same thing and the judge let her off her probation. She hadn't done s--t; she hadn't even finished her community service. I'm like, *well, I'm golden*. So just as it was my turn to go before the judge, my public defender had to go to another department. When she came back, the judge was p---ed off so he gave me five more years [of] probation.

At that point, my mental health was tenuous at best, and I was supposed to go back to court. In that time period, my grandmother died, and I never went back to court. That's on me, but I disassociated. A year later, I'm driving down Sunset [Boulevard] and I get pulled over. I looked at my friend [in the car with me] and I said, "Girl, I'm about to go to jail."

I spent the weekend at the jail. I got strip-searched, my cheeks spread open. I spent 13 days [at the jail]. By this time, thank God, the judge who sentenced me had died. I got a new judge, and the DA was trying to send me to state prison. The judge said, "No." The DA wanted to send me to prison just because he could.

'It's important for me tell my story.'

I'm still suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). I would have these moments of clarity, and everything would be fine, then I would sink back into depression. But there were those glimpses of happiness. I met my wife, we fell in love, we got married. I got my AA (Associate of Arts) degree and then I finally got my bachelor's degree. Right now, I'm just trying to get some vestiges of happiness. I call it "Beauty from Ashes" – that's biblical. And I think about why it's important for me to tell my story. I want people to know that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. I want people to know that your future is so much greater than your past.

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