

Mr. R. [REDACTED] Hughes
The Art of the Short Story



This piece is written for all the children who suffer as a result of a parent's wrong choice. The author, R. [REDACTED] Hughes [REDACTED], who has been locked up for most of his two daughters' lives, in attempt to express what his own conscience echoes to him about what he feels his daughters are going through, decided to compose a letter in their honor, giving them and all children in similar shoes—a voice.

“Crazy Right?”

Dear Daddy,

How's everything? I know you're probably surprised to hear from me. Hopefully, you'll understand why I have been missing-in-action once you read these thoughts. This is going to be a lengthy letter, so I'm going to skip the small talk.

Daddy, what I want to express has been a long time coming—eighteen years to be exact. In fact, I want you to know that I've tried to write this on numerous occasions. You should see how many times. By the completion of this letter I know I will grapple with whether or not I should send it to you, as I have a million times before. If you do receive this letter, I want you to know it's not my intention to offend or hurt you, because as you know, “I love you with all that I am.”

Initially, I was going to write it and give it to you when you come home. But with the irrationality and the randomness of the parole board there's no guarantee that you'll be released even when your twenty years are up. I guess that makes this letter that more significant. Plus, today I received my acceptance letter to the University that I applied to in the mail. Yes, your Babygirl is off to college in January. I can see that big smile on your face. I'm so happy Daddy.

But as always, there's a part of me that's sad. Here I am embarking on another chapter of my life and the one person—you—who I yearn to share my happiness with, is not here. Have you ever been happy and sad at the same time? Daddy, it's the most confusing thing. It's kind of like when Grandma died and left us that money, on one hand we were surprised and happy, but extremely sad because God called her home much too early.

Anyway, I wish you could be here as I make my transition to college Daddy. I know you would know exactly what to do. I guess I'm going to have to rely on a do-it-myself approach again, and to be honest, that's exactly what this letter is about.

Daddy, over the years, I literally filled up two and half 500 page notebooks with thoughts about us. I can't wait to show you these journals, but that will definitely have to wait until you get home. Maybe we can get them published, what 'cha think? ☺ I tell you, there are so many feelings in them. Even now as I re-read what I wrote throughout the years, I have to deal with a flood of emotions. There is a sudden, tight grasp of sorrow and hurt that takes over me when I read these words. It's weird Daddy, I don't know why, but when I read them I begin to shudder. Not the kind of shuddering where anyone can see, it's an internal shuddering, something that has me feeling like I can come unraveled at any moment. Crazy right? Nevertheless, I need you to know that these words are written with love Daddy.

Okay here I go...the first time I sat down to write this letter was six years ago, when I was thirteen. At that age, not only did I feel unsure about myself when it came to putting exactly what I felt on paper, but I was scared because of what I thought your reaction would be.

Back then, all I can remember is hearing so many stories about you, how you were this good dude, someone who got busy when it came to reppin' your team or town. However, it wasn't long before I figured out that the term good, in your case, meant bad—a complex thing

for a child to wrap around her mind. But since these stories about you were told to me by people I trusted: mommy, my godfather, Sasha, Uncle Guy, Charles and Charlton, I felt like it was important for me to pay attention. These are people I love, so it was easy for me to get caught up in their narrative. On top of that, every time one of your friends came over to check on us they had a story about you. To be honest, when I was younger I used to love hearing people talk about you Daddy. The stories made my heart swell with pride. However, somewhere around thirteen things changed. I no longer wanted to hear them. I know these individuals didn't mean any harm, but I wished they understood that stories about your reputation did very little for the emptiness in my heart and the void in my life. I recall sitting around and acting like I enjoyed hearing about your notoriety. I don't know why I did that, probably because of my youth, plus I felt that it was my job to at least appear as if I was interested in your tragedy. After all, I am the daughter who looks and acts exactly like you. But, if truth be told, stories about you made me sick. Not that they were bad stories, because a lot of them were funny, while others made me extremely proud of you, however, I seemed like the only one who could not tell a story about you and that was so disappointing. I often wondered how people could make the determination that you were a good guy. Didn't they know you left two children out here? Instead everybody seemed to paint you as a stand up individual, that idea made me sick and took me to that place of sadness; a place you built by subtraction, by leaving me. Crazy right?

Do you know by not having you here to encourage me, to give me unconditional support, has drained me of the confidence I needed to approach life fearlessly? As a result Daddy, every step I take is shaky, but somehow I make it, and now I'm on my way to completing my dream of being a teacher. I guess I can say that I'm managing to defy the odds. Crazy right?

Daddy, can I ask you something? How could you put the streets before me and Lexi? Weren't we more important to you than what others thought about your reputation? What were you thinking? Were you thinking? Do you know that a daughter without her father is like life without a pulse?

I never cared about you being a stand up guy. What I needed was to see you stand up and applaud louder than any other person in the auditorium when I got through my first dance recital. What I needed from you Daddy was for you to stand up and greet the first boy who dared to ask me out in spite of your reputation. What I needed from you was for you to stand up and shout words of encouragement when I forgot my lines during my first school play in third grade. I would have done anything to hear you say "It's okay Babygirl, take your time," that would've made everything alright.

But no, you chose to stand up to some guys that, like you, had no idea what was or is truly important in life. I know, I know, I sound like a "mad black daughter," but I don't mean to come off like that; it just hurts when I think about how much time has elapsed and how empty my life has been without you.

Daddy do you feel sad when you think about your childhood? I think everybody feels a little sad when they think about their childhood. I believe it's because the world, as we knew it then, seems so far away. That's not the case for me. That world, for me, still exists and will continue to exist until you're released. I think that's why I don't visit you as much. Daddy I'm tired of sitting in that visiting room eating those nasty chicken wings that have been sitting in those vending machines for God knows how long. Unlike my dreams of our warm, freshly scented, loving home, that smell of that microwave popcorn and the over-usage of Muslim oil has become one of the many living symbols of my sorrow. Daddy, that visiting room has an

oppressive aura to it. The dirty, cream-colored walls reek with damp and overpowering indifference, as if the paint has absorbed the sadness of the place. When I'm up there my only escape is when we get lost in our discussions about us, or what it's going to be like when you come home, and of course those long discussions about our boyfriends. Everything else about that place makes me sick.

Do you know how it feels having to leave you after each visit? Do you ever think about what that does to me? Every time I leave that place, I leave a piece of my heart. After eighteen years of visiting you, my heart has shrunk to the point where it's even hard for me to feel its beat. Yet, my small heart still absorbs its love from you, but that love remains a hidden jewel, locked up inside of me because of your abandonment. Crazy right?

Daddy, you know what I want? I want to know what it feels like to love you without constraints, without the watchful eyes of the prison guards; without them telling you to tuck in your shirt, or where to sit. Yes, I see how the guards eagerly await a chance to scold the inmates or their families for the slightest thing, like hugging your loved ones too long, or not having your legs under the table. I notice how those things pain you, and that's exactly why I hate that place. It's abnormal. I know hate is a strong word, but I really hate what it does to you, me, and Lexi.

I know we have been arguing about a lot of unnecessary things lately. I wish I could make you understand what I feel inside. There are a lot of pent up emotions that date back to the early nineties. For me, Daddy, looking back at my childhood is like looking through a window which is covered with dirt. I can make sense out of some things, but at the same time nothing is really clear. Do you know why? Do you know why nothing is really clear? Because the hurt of not having you in my life has obstructed my view. What do they call that—a paradox, right? It's crazy how the absence of something has the ability to get in the way. You know what I just

realized. I see through troubled eyes, that's crazy, wow, writing is truly a discovery. You always told me that.

Daddy, let me ask you something—can you imagine what it feels like having a father who missed your, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, your “sweet” sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth birthday? “Pheww,” even writing it out seems like such a long time. Maybe by reading it you can get an idea of how long it's been for me.

You've also missed all my graduations. Eighteen Christmases, or better yet, Kwanzaa's, the holiday you've always encouraged us to celebrate. Unfortunately, the principles did not resonate with us. However, I do want you to know that I still light seven candles in honor of you and the Seven Principles. It's ironic because the first principle is *Umoja*, which means unity. I often wonder where the spirit of *Umoja* was when you decided to leave us. By leaving us, Lexi and I had to find something to fill that gaping hole you left behind. You know what it is? Shopping. Yes, that's right, shopping fills that space, so I don't want to hear you complain about us always wanting something Daddy—alright? We have grown to like the finer things in life because we have been neglected in receiving the most important thing in life—love. That's why we rather celebrate Christmas, because we know we can get our Coach bags, our jewelry from Tiffany's and all the things we want, all we have to do is make the family feel a little guilty. I know, it's crazy, but since we're on the subject, make sure you know I want those new Coach boots, the Brown ones with the fur on top, for my Christmas present. I'll send you the catalogue soon, thank you. ☺

I know I'm a mess! Sometimes I just shake my head too. But that's my whole point, there was no you, so there was no consistency in teaching us what is really valuable and

important. You were not here to teach us the difference between a good looking woman and a good woman. There was no one here to teach us how to define ourselves in ways other than materialism. Everybody in our house defines themselves by the things they own, and you know Mommy, she likes her designer stuff, so she definitely wasn't going to instill the principles of Kwanzaa in our household.

Since I'm on the topic of holidays, let me apologize for not sending you a Father's day card. I know that's something that upsets you and you probably think I'm selfish for not acknowledging you, but let me try to explain. As far as me and Lexi are concerned, Fathers day is never a big deal. We hardly know it when it falls, and rarely celebrate it when it occurs. That's something you should be grateful of, because though we accept and love Brian, we do not see him as our father.

But anyway, to us, Father's day is kind of like Saint Patrick's Day, it seems like a celebration for other people, a day that belongs to another culture. You may not understand this, but I become extremely depressed every third Sunday in June. So it's easier to just forget it. But since it means that much to you, I will make sure to acknowledge you on that day.

It's crazy because even as I write these words I realize my hurt is still prevalent. I thought I was healing but that's not the case. Give me a minute Daddy, that's Lexi calling.

Okay, I'm back, Lexi says hi, and that she loves you. She and mommy just got back from a parent-teacher's conference. I remember when I had to go through that. My heart still cries when I think about the humiliation I felt when Mommy took me to those parent-teachers' conferences. I can still see my girlfriends coming through with their fathers. I can recall how most of my girlfriends preferred their fathers to attend those meeting rather than their mothers. They all believed that fathers somehow took those conferences less seriously. Me, well, I

wanted you there for other reasons. I remember how I stood there admiring them, imagining what it would've been like to have you holding my hand, escorting me to see each of my teachers. I know I would have been proud of how you represented me. I envied seeing fathers hug and kiss their daughters. I wondered what that felt like, I wanted that Daddy. Was it too much to want to be locked in your protection; to take long drives to nowhere with you; or to go get some ice cream before dinner just because. Was it? Still, I made sure all my friends knew about you. I needed so much to show you off. Did I ever tell you how I put a collage of photos of you together during parent-child day and told your story to my class, just like the stories that were told to me? Parent-child day is a day when one of the parents spends the entire day with their child in school. Since Mommy always had to work, I decided to bring you there. Crazy right? I was so young then.

Daddy I needed you so much back then, and even more today. From first grade to high school I use to imagine you defending me like you were a superhero or something. That's funny. I think that came about as a result of all those damn stories. You would've been my superhero like Hancock. Did you see that Will Smith movie? If not, make sure you check it out when you get the chance. It's about a man who has his own struggles, but is equipped with extraordinary powers. You have to see it.

I remember in high school how I wanted you to defend me against Mr. Kirschenbaum and his unfair charge that I always disturb his class. He was my history teacher and only said I disrupted his class because I questioned him as to why he only taught about African-Americans in the context of slavery. His response was that I should not undermine the importance of that institution. An institution, what kind of mess is that? I told him, for them it was an institution, but for us it was a nightmare. You should have seen his face. He sent me right to the principal's

office. It was never my intention to undermine slavery, or our ability to overcome such horrendous treatment. It's just that I know there's so much more to us than that and I simply thought we needed to hear more about our accomplishments as opposed to our suffering, our contributions to this country. Ooh, I did not like him.

It's funny how the mind works, huh? I don't even know what triggered that particular memory, it was so long ago. Maybe it was the way Mommy looked at me that day; eyes squinted, giving me that "you and your mouth" look. I still remember when she said "You're just like your father." Those words erupted like a vicious windstorm that leaves nothing standing, nothing as is. She had said that to me many times before, but that time, it was like a tornado came by and swept both you and me up in its ferocious whirlwind. Her words pierced me that day like never before. I couldn't believe she said that in front of the principal and Mr. Kirschenbaum. I remember looking at her and whispering from somewhere far inside of me a question that I know threw her for a loop, "If being like him is some kind of sickness to you, then why did you have children with him?" She was hot Daddy. I thought she was going to punch me right in my face. ☺

Yes, I can laugh at it now, but I blame you for things like that. I don't know why, but it seems as if I was always the target of Mommy's venom. Who knows, maybe if I would've done that collage of her, instead of you, maybe she wouldn't have been so angry at me. Or maybe if I looked more like her than you then maybe I wouldn't remind her so much of you. But then again, maybe it wouldn't have made a difference at all; maybe I am really like you. ☺

Daddy, when I really think about it, it was Mommy who did the heavy lifting of parenting. She fed us, clothed us, and hugged us. I must give her credit. Even though nobody could argue the fact that you were the one who ignited my interest in our culture. I still have all

the books you sent me, Assatta, Maya Angelou's *Why do Caged Birds Sing*, and Sister Souljah's *Coldest Winter Ever*, among so many others. The books you sent me over the years do have a special place in my heart. When I feel blue, I pull one out and lose myself in its pages. What's crazy is that I always know what it is that's in the book that I'm reading that you want me to interrogate. I know that's your way of parenting since you're in that position. I still remember you and Mommy arguing about you letting me read about *Winter*, that was crazy. By the way, when I have a child, I still plan on naming my daughter Assatta, (she who struggles). That's such a beautiful name. Unfortunately, when it came to making sense of all the ideas, the struggles, and all the interesting concepts that were in the pages of those books, I was on my own. There was no one to turn to. Lexi was too young to exchange thoughts with, Mommy was uninterested, and Brian never felt comfortable around me because I was that constant reminder that I had a father and it wasn't him. But that's one area of our relationship that I'm extremely grateful of. I just wished we could've taken trips to a library or a bookstore together instead of me having to receive a book in the mail.

Daddy, I know it sounds like I am rambling, but I need you to know there is so much stacked up inside of me. Daddy do you know how much it hurts to look for a father in everything but cannot find him. Can you imagine what that feels like? You probably do, because you never knew your father either—right? Do you think that has something to do with you leaving me? Is abandoning children hereditary? Daddy I looked for you in my school-work, in play, in my boyfriend, in my questions and answers. Crazy right?

The bottom line is that my life has been chaotic Daddy. I find myself often wondering what I could compare my feelings to, this way you could get an idea of the hurt I feel. Yes, I want you to feel my hurt. You deserve to feel my pain. The only thing that comes close to

describing what I'm feeling is probably an abortion. No, I didn't have an abortion, but I have many girlfriends who have, and hearing them speak about the process always made me compare myself to the fetus. Crazy right? None of them seemed concerned about what the fetus might've felt. It was always about them, or the guy, and that kind of made me mad.

Yes, Daddy in the privacy of my soul I feel you have aborted us. Think about it, you've ripped our lives apart. It feels like you stuck a hanger into the womb of our family and literally twisted, turned and yanked until you caused irreparable damage. If a fetus could express what he or she feels about not being given a chance to live a full life, it would probably echo me. I feel like you never considered my potential. You simply left after the first year of my life. Wasn't my smile bright enough to light up your world? Wasn't I enough for you to want to get to know me better? Didn't you want to see me evolve? Didn't you want to see me take my first step; grow my first tooth; say my first word; take and pick me up from school? Didn't you want to take me on my first date so I could've known what to expect when I did go out with a guy. Didn't you want to teach me to drive, to stop me from getting my first tattoo? I needed you to want that. Daddy I constantly wonder how I could've become more to you, to myself. I miss you Daddy. I miss the father I never had and I just want you to know that I think life sucks because you're not here. There are times when I'm so pissed at you that it actually scares me.

Daddy I have so many questions for you, questions that are stagnating me. Do you know where a young lady who has never questioned others begins to look for answers? I have been working so hard to figure this out. Does this make sense to you? I never told anybody this because it sounds so weird, but at the center of which I am, I feel the burden of your neglect and it's growing like a tumor, malignant and swelling. That's why I'm crying out to you. As I write, my face is covered in tears. But they feel good for a change. I don't want you to feel

sorry for me; I just needed to share these thoughts with you so I don't come undone. Daddy, there is so much hurt inside of me. It's so heavy and taking up space where my heart should be, free and beating. Please tell me, how could a father leave his daughter?

I guess this is a good question to end and begin with. It's one of many questions that are wrapped around my heart like razor wire. Help me stop the bleeding Daddy. I want so much to believe in you. I love you, but that's something you always knew and it didn't stop you from leaving me before. Please help me figure out where do we go from here. I need you to make sense of this space, I don't belong here. I'm ready to put my life back together; to be a collector of me. In spite of all that you have not been, you still are my glue Daddy—Crazy right?

I am we,
Naysia