

My mother's three children were headed in directions: My oldest sister Tina was moving out to live with her fiancé. My youngest sister Michelle was well into her sing along video stage and held the only television in the apartment hostage, captivated by a purple tyrannosaurus who promised he loved her. I was petitioning release from a residential group home where I'd spent two years following demands of a structured environment.

New Beginnings, it was called and guaranteed my mother it would straighten me out or give her money back, less shipping and handling. During the week, I did chores and pretend to follow the rules. I accumulated points, enough to purchase small privileges including home passes on the weekends to reunite with my friends who reminded me of all the fun I was missing.

One Saturday night, I stumbled into the apartment, sixteen and belching drunk. Strange sounds were coming from behind my mother's bedroom door. I sank to the floor in the hallway, took a healthy swig from my bottle and waited.

This was how I encountered Brad, my mother's boyfriend. He was a shift manager at Burger King. He had already bought Michelle's loyalty. She was cheap: Kid's Meal toys and promised trips to Carowinds. We had never met but hearing my mother's headboard knocking against the anorexic wall, I hated him and contemplated stemming doors and breaking dishes like the angry ghost of my father who was still

in prison. Instead, I shuffled to the living room and collapsed on the sofa.

I woke the next morning, hungover, but in time to catch Brad kissing my mother goodbye on the front porch. From the kitchen window, I followed his steps to the parking lot. He unlocked his car door, then he saw them and stepped back in disbelief. All four tires had been slashed.

A few weeks later, I sat across from my father in a cold visitation room packed with murderers and thieves; my first visit to prison. After a difficult hour of small talk, our conversation caught a groove. Real words emerged.

"Hear your mother got a boyfriend," he asked. I said nothing but he didn't need confirmation. My eyes confessed.

"You know you're the man of the house now" he added.

I held my smile the best I could, then reassured him:

"Yeah. I know."