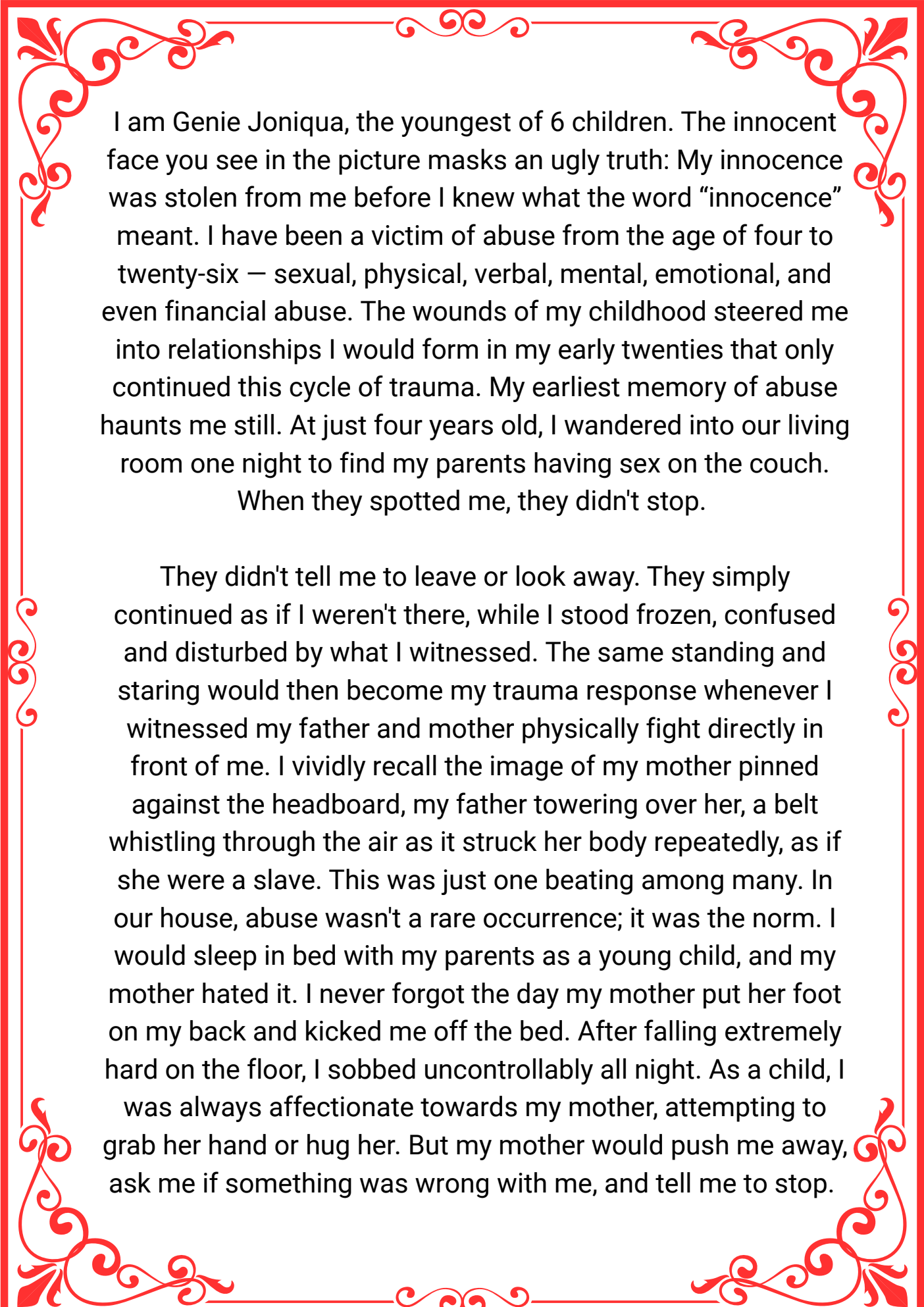




I am Genie Joniqua, the youngest of 6 children. The innocent face you see in the picture masks an ugly truth: My innocence was stolen from me before I knew what the word "innocence" meant. I have been a victim of abuse from the age of four to twenty-six — sexual, physical, verbal, mental, emotional, and even financial abuse. The wounds of my childhood steered me into relationships I would form in my early twenties that only continued this cycle of trauma. My earliest memory of abuse haunts me still. At just four years old, I wandered into our living room one night to find my parents having sex on the couch.

When they spotted me, they didn't stop.

They didn't tell me to leave or look away. They simply continued as if I weren't there, while I stood frozen, confused and disturbed by what I witnessed. The same standing and staring would then become my trauma response whenever I witnessed my father and mother physically fight directly in front of me. I vividly recall the image of my mother pinned against the headboard, my father towering over her, a belt whistling through the air as it struck her body repeatedly, as if she were a slave. This was just one beating among many. In our house, abuse wasn't a rare occurrence; it was the norm. I would sleep in bed with my parents as a young child, and my mother hated it. I never forgot the day my mother put her foot on my back and kicked me off the bed. After falling extremely hard on the floor, I sobbed uncontrollably all night. As a child, I was always affectionate towards my mother, attempting to grab her hand or hug her. But my mother would push me away, ask me if something was wrong with me, and tell me to stop.

Her rejection left me feeling unwanted, unloved, and hated for reasons I couldn't understand. That same year, I also remember my older brother telling me to get into bed and underneath the covers with him. I remember him not wearing any underwear or pants. I took my stuffed animal with me when I got into bed with him. After I got out of bed, I remember my stuffed animal having stains all over it, and my underwear being removed. These are the only details that I can remember from that incident. By five, I was exposed to pornography while sleeping in the bedroom with my parents. And from this, at the very young age of 5, I developed an addiction and obsession with pornography, and I began masturbating. My older siblings discovered this and snuck together to silently spy on me. Then, they teased me for watching porn and masturbating. I felt like a creep and a weirdo as I drowned in shame and self-disgust. By the age of six, I was exposed to porn again, but this time through my older siblings. They would gather at night and quietly watch porn together. This deepened my porn addiction. Meanwhile, my father's abuse would take on many forms.

I would receive beatings for little infractions like wearing unclean socks or for my younger brother's behaviour. His rage manifested in spit-filled tirades, his finger jabbing into my face and chest. His fist punching my arms and shoulders, and his elbow striking my shins. My father would leave me alone to care for my little brother for hours. Many days and nights, I was terrified that someone was going to break in and harm us. Though my father was abusive and neglectful, he protected me from my siblings until he and my mother separated. My mother had six children by five different men—a teenage mom whose life choices shaped our reality. My father, despite his violence toward my mother and his sexual abuse of my sisters, was the only one of these men she married, the only father consistently present in our lives. This dynamic, I believe, fueled my siblings' resentment toward me. When I was seven, my parents divorced. My mother moved us away from my father, and suddenly, I became his proxy. The fury they couldn't direct at him, they unleashed on me—a seven-year-old child bearing the weight of an adult's sins. Their message was clear: "Your father isn't here to protect you now. What are you going to do?"

Throughout my childhood, the refrain remained constant: "You're black and ugly just like your daddy." "Joniqua, your daddy is this..." "Joniqua, your daddy is that..." "Joniqua, you have man hands and feet, like your daddy." In movies, the villain was always compared to my father. If I dared express sadness or anger about anything, they would refer to my father's actions to invalidate my feelings. It became somewhat of an unspoken rule that I had no right to feel some type of way about anything because I was his daughter. They dictated what colors I could wear, claiming certain shades clashed with my "too black and ugly" skin. When my sister offered to paint my nails and I requested red, she repeatedly ignored me before finally saying, "Black and red don't go together"—my dark skin, in her eyes, incompatible with beauty. One night, after hours of listening to them vilify my father—calling him a rapist, a pedophile, wishing death upon him, insisting I was just like him—I ran downstairs in tears, begging my mother to make them stop. She looked me in the eyes, laughed, and told me to go back upstairs. The irony cut deep: this same woman who dismissed my pain would hide behind doors during arguments with my brother, waiting for me to respond to his provocations so she could ambush me with punches to my chest and back as if I were an adult. By eight, the horror deepened as my older brother began molesting me. I would wake to find him in my bed, fondling and groping me.

Sometimes I'd open my eyes to see him standing over me before he'd run away, laughing. Once, he invited my stepbrother to join him, and they took turns violating me. When I told my mother—repeatedly—she aggressively shut down the conversation: "It was handled." Her tone made it clear: pursue this further and face punishment. And I was punished for continuing to seek protection. Meanwhile, my abusers went unpunished, and I internalized the blame, telling myself that if only I hadn't slept in certain positions, it wouldn't have happened. At nine, this same brother was permitted to physically abuse me with impunity. He searched for any excuse to punch, hit, push, or fight me. At home, I was invisible to him unless he was hurling insults or fists. In our shared bedroom, he would speak only to my sisters, as if I didn't exist. At school, he refused to acknowledge our relationship, leaving classmates shocked when they discovered we were siblings.

I remember watching "The Longshots" starring Keke Palmer, inspired by her character's strength and beauty. As I smiled at the screen, my brother asked, "See how pretty she is, Joniqua?" When I nodded enthusiastically, he delivered the blow: "You will never be that beautiful in your life." His words gutted me, stealing all joy and hope. None of my siblings objected—this cruelty was our normal. One afternoon, my sister, brother, and I were locked out of our house for hours after school. My brother, for reasons I still don't understand, began his typical ritual of provoking me by insulting my father. As I argued back, he unleashed a barrage of punches to my face and jaw with his full strength.

Each blow felt like it might shatter bone. I remember waiting for my sister to intervene, but instead, she encouraged him: "If she keeps talking, yes," she said when he asked if he should hit me again. When I called my mother to report what happened, she threatened us both: "Wait until I get home because neither one of y'all can handle me." There were times when I had to fight all my older siblings in one day. They like to boss me around, provoke me, then use my reactions to justify their abuse. Once, after I fought off three of my older siblings, my brother found me cleaning the bathroom while eating a sucker. When he ordered me to continue cleaning and I responded with frustration—"What do you think I'm doing?"—he charged at me, gripping my throat with both hands, causing me to choke on the candy.

I remember coughing up blood and gasping for air, certain I was about to die. These memories from ages four to nine are just glimpses of the abuse that shaped me. Every day was a battle for survival—physical, mental, and emotional. No one called me beautiful or pretty. No one said "I love you." Only the exact opposite. Constantly. Mindlessly. Alone in the bathroom, I would stare at my reflection, struggling to see the beautiful, valuable princess I once believed myself to be. Instead, I saw what they told me I was: "black," "ugly," "manly," worthless. I heard it so often I began to believe it. I felt foolish for ever thinking I was beautiful. I echoed their insults whenever I caught sight of myself, agreeing with schoolmates who mocked my very appearance. Self-hatred consumed me. I wished to be white, to have a white mother, to belong to a different family. My self-esteem vanished, and I wanted to vanish with it. Suicidal thoughts haunted me; I slept with knives under my pillow,



constantly contemplating ending my life. Summers were the worst—no escape from the toxic environment, no respite at school. But one summer, something shifted. Exhausted by the weight of self-loathing, I confronted my reflection. "What does the mirror show me?" I asked myself. "Am I really this ugly, worthless little girl they want me to believe I am? Am I really too black and ugly to be valued and loved in my own home?" In that mirror, I began to challenge the negative thoughts.

I spoke to myself with the love and affirmation I craved from others. I formed a relationship with myself. I began to save myself. This practice—this daily ritual of self-affirmation—saved my life. Now you understand that *What Does the Mirror Show Me: Brown Girl World* is more than just a children's book in a series.

It's a letter from the heart of a little girl who nearly died long ago. It's my message to my niece and every brown girl across the world: "Do not wait for the world to tell you who you are. Look in the mirror and tell yourself who you are." Driven by my childhood trauma and the generational curses within my family, I've dedicated myself to being a voice and protector for children facing abuse and neglect.

Remember, this is not all. This is not everything. This is only the beginning.