

The Geography of Grace: How *Shirley Ann* Found Her Own Altar



For decades, the people in my circle told me I needed to put my life down in ink. "Shirley, your chapters could fill a library," they'd say. But I would just smile, offer a gentle word, and quietly step back into the background. At 68 years old, I am a woman wrapped in a beautiful contradiction: the possessor of a fiercely compelling life story, yet inherently, beautifully bashful.

I never sought the spotlight. I was too busy being a single mother to two adult children who grew up under my protection, and a doting grandmother to two teenagers who embody the very rhythm of my heart.

But when the call went out for the TS52 project—a search for the transformation stories of 52 women—something stirred deep within my spirit. My bashfulness yielded to a higher calling. It was time to document the exact coordinate in time when I stopped operating under the borrowed faith of my youth and transformed from a Black girl into a fully realized Black woman.

For the first part of my life, my spiritual foundation was inherited. Like many young Black girls growing up in the church, I viewed my relationship with the Creator through the lens of my parents' prayers and my family's pews. But true womanhood, I discovered, cannot be inherited. It must be forged in the fire of one's own trials.

My defining moment came as a young adult, when life fractured. I found myself in a place—both geographically distant from the familiar comforts of home and spiritually isolated in a valley of deep uncertainty.

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In the past, my instinct as a young girl would have been to reach for the telephone, to call my mother and father, to run back to the safety of parental rescue. But in that distant place, looking at the wreckage of my trials and tribulations, I looked up instead of looking back.

In that quiet, desperate space, the Lord did something miraculous: He revealed Himself to me—not for my parents, not for the congregation, but for me, because of me.

That was the day the shift happened. That was the day the girl became a woman. I didn't just know about God anymore; I knew Him for myself. And more importantly, I felt the cosmic, staggering weight of knowing that He knew my name, too.

Now, at 68, I look at my reflection and see a woman totally submitted to God's will. The transformation didn't make my life immune to hardships, but it completely changed my posture in the face of them. Through every valley I navigated

as a single mother, through every financial or emotional hurdle, I stopped relying on human hands and anchored myself to a single, unshakeable truth: "The Joy of the Lord is my strength."

"I'm not perfect in myself," I say, my voice softening with that signature modesty as I pen my application. "But I'm forgiven. I'm loved. I'm cherished."

When I finished writing my testimony for TS52, I paused, looking at the words on the page, almost surprised by my own boldness. I thought to myself with a quiet chuckle, "I truly didn't intend to say all this. But if it blessed them, then to God be the Glory."

I am ready for my chapter to be read. Not for fame, and not to erase my bashful nature—but to stand as a living, breathing monument for the next generation of young Black girls. My story is a map showing that true womanhood isn't about achieving perfection; it's about the wonderful gift of salvation, the beauty of growing up, and the magnificent, enduring architecture of God's grace.

I am Shirley Ann Smith Burt, TS#25 of *The Soutltown Magazine*. I want to thank you all for having SOUL! 🙏

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