

The Weight of Grace: How I Stepped into Womanhood

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Growth rarely announces itself with an invitation or a grand celebration. Most of the time, the transition from girlhood to womanhood arrives quietly, unannounced, wrapped in the heavy, unexpected moments where life demands that you stand up and carry a room.

For me, that defining moment didn’t happen under the bright lights of a college campus or during a celebratory rite of passage. It happened in the quiet, sterile hallways of a hospital in Iowa City, and in the living room of the home where I grew up.

As an only child, I was used to navigating my own world. During my junior year of college, I was building a future I had meticulously planned—juggling classes, pledging Delta Sigma Theta, and partying. Life was moving forward on schedule.

Then, the phone rang.

My stepdad, Joe—a tall, commanding man who had always been adamant about me pursuing a college education—suffered a sudden brain aneurysm. What began as an emergency trip to the hospital quickly descended into a harrowing series of complications: major brain surgery followed by four strokes over forty-eight hours, leaving him in intensive care for weeks and requiring months of intensive rehabilitation.

When the medical team delivered the ultimate ultimatum—either place Joe in a nursing home or bring him home with round-the-clock care—my mom faced a choice she couldn’t make alone. She turned to me with a silent, heart-wrenching reality: I can only bring him home if you help me.

In that moment, duty took precedence over youth. I didn’t hesitate. I voluntarily relinquished my apartment—forfeiting my hard-earned deposit—withdrew from my university classes, and walked away from the traditional college experience. While my peers went out, pledged sororities, and planned weekends, I put on what I call my “big-girl drawers.”

Overnight, I became the operational backbone of our household. I navigated the complex mechanics of caregiving for a 6’2” man, learning everything from medical administration to navigating mobility challenges. I traded in a hand-me-down vehicle for a handicap-accessible van, negotiated internships so I could work full-time to support the family, and balanced twelve-hour shifts between factory schedules, nursing visits, and doctors’ appointments.

When Joe’s family members from Memphis called with unsolicited opinions and added tension, it was me who drew the line in the sand, protecting my mother’s peace of mind: “If you can’t call here with positive vibes and support, don’t call. This is my mom, and this is what we are going to do.”

I stepped into a mantle of strength I didn’t know I possessed, becoming the anchor not just for my mother, but for my entire extended family. From that point forward, whenever crisis struck, I became the first call—the woman everyone turned to for guidance, resources, and grounded leadership.

For four years, I held the line for Joe until his health deteriorated to a point where specialized care was required. And when tragedy struck again—first with my mom’s terminal cancer diagnosis, and later passing away just 16 months after Joe passed—I carried that same quiet, unshakeable grace. Through the grief, I returned to school, finished my degree, completed graduate studies, and dedicated my final research presentation to the memory of Joe and my mother, Mattie Bell.

When I look back on those years, I acknowledge the sacrifices: the lost weekend trips, the missed campus parties, the delayed college milestones. But there are zero regrets.

“I learned a lot about myself. My mom was happy that we could keep him at home, and that we did it together. That was the moment I had to step up, my defining moment. It was the moment I became that person for my family.”

From a college student forced to surrender my plans to the pillar who holds my family together, my story isn’t just one of caregiving—it is the blueprint of transformation. It is my story of how a Black girl put aside her youth to answer the call of duty, stepping fully, gracefully, and powerfully into Black womanhood.

I am Youlanda Robinson. TS#42 of 52 of The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL!



TS#42

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