REFUSING to SURRENDER

YoVonne's Journey of Independence, Grit, & Sibling Love



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Every Black woman remembers the precise moment her childhood quieted, and her true strength rose to answer the call. For me, that defining moment—the sacred threshold where I crossed from a Black girl into a proud, fully realized Black woman—arrived when I was twenty-two years old on the South Side of Chicago.

Determined to forge my path and stand on my own two feet, I took a leap of faith.

I moved away from the safety and comfort of my parents' home into a tiny studio apartment in Calumet City, Illinois. It was a modest beginning, to say the least. The space was small, the budget was tight, and even a roach had found its way in.

I remember one particular afternoon, lying on my pull-out couch—my bed and sofa rolled into one—staring up at the ceiling. As I watched a roach scatter across the plaster above me, a quiet, immovable resolve washed over my soul. I could have packed my bags. I could have surrendered and moved back home. But surrender was not in my blood. I refused to let my family think for a single second that I couldn't make it on my own. I was determined to stay, to fight, and to build a life of independence and responsibility with my own hands.

Through every trial, I kept my eyes on the prize. While holding down my household, I put myself through Olive-Harvey College, earning her Associate of Arts Degree in Liberal Arts—a testament to my discipline, intelligence, and unwavering drive.

And slowly but surely, the seeds of my sacrifice began to bloom. Things got better. The small studio gave way to a better apartment. My career expanded as I stepped into the fast-paced energy of downtown Chicago, Illinois, moving with the poise and grace of a woman who had earned her place at every table I sat at.

Yet, no queen walks her path entirely alone. Standing firmly by my side through it all was my beloved brother, Kenny.

Kenny was more than just family; he was my vault, my protector, and my sanctuary. He was the one who held my private thoughts and deepest secrets—the things I could never bring myself to tell my mom and dad. In times of need, Kenny stepped up, helping me in every way he possibly could, granting almost every request I brought to him.

Our dynamic was filled with deep love, unwavering trust, and a good dose of sibling humor. Nothing demonstrated Kenny's faith in me quite like the day I decided to buy a car with a stick shift. Kenny thought I was completely out of my mind—mostly because I had no idea how to drive a manual transmission! Even though he thought I was crazy, his belief in me was unconditional: he helped me get that car anyway.

Now, believing in my ambition was one thing, but sitting in the passenger seat while I tried to shift the gears was another—Kenny simply didn't have the patience to teach me how to drive it! So, that stick-shift car sat parked for months. But true to my resilient spirit, I didn't give up. I found a friend who came by faithfully every Friday to teach me until I mastered it. Looking back, I cherished that memory, loving my brother all the more for simply believing in me, backing my dreams, and always being the brother I could count on. Kenny has since passed away, yet Kenny is still protecting and watching over me.

Looking back on the road I traveled, I carry no regrets. The roach on that ceiling was not a sign of defeat; this experience was the backdrop to my transformation. From those humble beginnings in Calumet City, Illinois, to a life built on self-reliance, dignity, and deep family love, I have been independent ever since—a proud Black woman who claimed my power, honored my roots, and never looked back.

I am YoVonne Hayes; TS#40 of 52 of The Soultown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL!

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