

Reading Between the Lines

By Sheila Johnson

Growing up in a one-level, small single-family home made of brick and stucco, I learned to appreciate small spaces that provided peace and quiet: underneath the kitchen table and chairs; the inside of closets; the ends of narrow hallways; and my favorite haven: the corner adjacent to my one bedroom window.

My parents, my brother, and I lived with my grandparents until I began first grade at the age of six. My Grandfather, whom I called Papa, was a quiet, ebony toned, soft-spoken man whose physical stature measured five foot six inches, but in stature he was at least seven feet tall. My Grandmother, whom we all called Mama, was short like me, had a bossy personality (like me), and never seemed to be satisfied with how clean the house was. My father was a bit taller than Papa, was milk chocolate in skin tone, and was mostly a quiet, soft spoken man whose only thorn was my Mother. Mommy, as I called her, was much like my Grandmother in demeanor, and she had a knack for using her voice to scream in sickness and in health and joy and in sadness until death did them part.

My brother, Willie, was the first live birth that Mommy delivered into this world and although he was her pride and joy, I believe his spirit carried all of the sorrows and woes of three souls who flew before him and never met their village. He tragically took his own life the year I was married. As is typical of most siblings, Willie and I argued and brought each other to tears with fierce and hurtful words. Mommy and Mama usually became involved, invoking punishment upon one of us. Daddy and Papa were smart to remain quiet and dodge the piercing bullets, which oftentimes turned into hand grenades.

At any given moment before, during, or after the household storms, I could be found in my corner haven hugging a book – not a blankie, not a stuffed animal, not even my much loved dolls – but a book. I loved and love to read books about anything that exists in or outside of this world. Books, then and now, take me to another place in time where I am safe and where I am free to do what my soul demands. I can jump from the highest mountain and land like a cat; I can ride the sharp fins of sharks and then rest in the belly of a whale. I am able to take on the personality of penned-characters from the gentlest to the most bizarre; and I can even have deep conversations with Moses and Deborah and Jesus. Books are a catalyst toward my sanity and my salvation.

Reading between the lines of verse and chapter, I came to understand the volumes of love in my dysfunctional upbringing. Jane Eyre plainly told me that I was not alone in my struggle with morality; my moral duty and personal happiness are fighting their own battle – one that only time can win. Charles Dickens introduced me to social criticism and Maya Angelou graciously walked me through it.

I am so grateful for the privilege to read, not only because it is a window to the world and gives

me extreme joy, but it is the breath between the lines of the chapters of my life. Books.