



## Around the Way Girl: A Memoir

By Taraji P. Henson

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From Academy Award nominee, Golden Globe winner, and star of the new motion picture *Hidden Figures*, Taraji P. Henson, comes an inspiring and funny book about family, friends, the hustle required to make it from DC to Hollywood, and the joy of living in your own truth.

With a sensibility that recalls her beloved screen characters, including NASA physicist mathematician Katherine G. Johnson, Yvette, Queenie, Shug, and the iconic Cookie from *Empire*, yet is *all* Taraji, the screen actress writes of her family, the one she was born into and the one she created. She shares stories of her father, a Vietnam vet who was bowed but never broken by life's challenges, and of her mother who survived violence both in the home and on DC's volatile streets. Here too she opens up about her experiences as a single mother, a journey some saw as a burden but which she saw as a gift.

*Around the Way Girl* is also a classic actor's memoir in which Taraji reflects on the world-class instruction she received at Howard University and the pitfalls that come with being a black actress. With laugh-out-loud humor and candor, she shares the challenges and disappointments of the actor's journey and shows us that behind the red carpet moments, she is ever authentic. She is at heart just a girl in pursuit of her dreams.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Taraji P. Henson rips the facade off stardom and reveals a woman committed to her family and craft." (*Essence Magazine, Best Books of 2016*)

"An engaging read. As much a manual on acting as it is a memoir. . . [with] plenty of inspiration for readers." (*Library Journal*)

"Henson's memoir is an inspiring account of overcoming adversity and a quest for self-discovery, written with vitality and enthusiasm" (*Shelf Awareness*)

#### About the Author

Born and raised in Washington, DC, Taraji P. Henson graduated from Howard University. She earned a Golden Globe for her role as Cookie in *Empire*, an Academy Award Nomination for Best Supporting Actress opposite Brad Pitt in David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and was a 2011 Emmy nominee for Best Actress in a Movie or Miniseries for Lifetime's *Taken From Me*. She also won the 2014 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Drama Series for her role as Detective Joss Carter in CBS's *Person of Interest*. Henson made her singing debut in *Hustle & Flow* and performed the Academy Award-winning song "It's Hard Out Here For a Pimp" on the Oscar telecast. She currently resides in Los Angeles with her son and has a strong dedication to helping disabled and less fortunate children. Follow her on Twitter @TheRealTaraji.

Denene Millner is a *New York Times* bestselling author and award-winning journalist who has written more than twenty-five books, including *Act Like a Lady, Think Like a Man*, cowritten with Steve Harvey, among others. She has written for a plethora of national publications, including *Essence*, *Women's Health*, *Ebony*, *Redbook*, and more. The founder and editor of MyBrownBaby.com, a website dedicated to Black parenting, lives in Atlanta with her husband and two daughters.

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Around the Way Girl

## 1

### Fearless

Let my mother tell it, all that I am and all that I know is because of my daddy, a declaration that some might find shocking considering the list of negative attributes that floated like a dark cloud over my father's short, hard-lived life. During his fifty-eight years on this good, green earth, Boris Henson, born and reared in northeast DC, had been homeless and broke, an alcoholic and physically and mentally abusive to my mother during their five years together—plus prone to hot tempers and cool-off periods in the slammer. With that many strikes against his character, I can imagine that it's hard for some to see the good in who he was, much less how any comparison to him might be construed as a compliment. But Daddy wasn't average. Yes, there are plenty of fathers who, grappling with their demons, make the babies and leave the mamas and disappear like the wind, without a care in the world about the consequences. The scars run deep. That, however, is not

my tale to tell. The truth is, no matter how loud the thunder created by his personal storms, my father always squared his shoulders, extended his arms, opened his heart, and did what was natural and right and beautiful—he loved me. My father’s love was all at once regular and extraordinary, average and heroic. For starters, he was there. No matter his circumstances, no matter what kind of fresh hell he was dealing with or dishing out, he was there, even if he had to insist upon being a part of my life. One of my earliest memories of my dad is of him kidnapping me. It happened when I was about four years old, shortly after my father dragged my mother by her hair into his car while threatening to kill her. I’m told that the only thing that kept her from being dragged down the street with her body hanging out of his ride was my aunt’s quick thinking: she pulled the keys out of the ignition before my father could speed away. He was angry because more than a week earlier, my mother, fearful that my father would follow through on a threat to kill her, packed up a few of our belongings in a brown paper bag and plotted a speedy getaway; she wanted to divorce him and bar him from seeing me until he got himself together and handled his bouts of addiction and anger. But my father wasn’t having it. “Nothing and nobody was gonna keep me away from my baby girl,” he used to tell me when he recounted the days when my mom and I disappeared. He said he even took to the top of buildings throughout our hardscrabble southeast DC neighborhood with binoculars to see if he could spot us. We were long gone, though, hiding out where he didn’t think to look: back and forth between his parents’ home in northeast DC and his sister’s place in Nanjemoy, a small town in southern Maryland.

It took Dad more than a week to track us down at my aunt’s place, and when he finally made it over there, he waged war on her front door, banging and hollering like a madman, demanding to see me, his daughter.

“Let me see my baby!” he yelled. “Taraji! Come see your daddy!”

I was in the television room, which was in the back of the apartment, in a thin pair of pajamas, watching television and pulling a comb through my doll’s hair when I heard my father screaming my name. That doll didn’t have a chance; I left it, the comb, a brush, and a bowl of barrettes and baubles right there in the middle of the floor and started rooting around the recliner for my sneakers with the flowers on them when my mom, a naturally gorgeous cocoa beauty with a beautiful halo of hair, rushed into the room to check on me. “Come here,” she said, scooping me up into her arms. She sat on the edge of the couch, rocking side to side; her palm, warm and slightly sweaty, pressed my head against her chest. The thud of her heartbeat tickled my ear.

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I was much too young to understand the dynamics of my parents’ relationship—that my mother was running for her life after he’d lost his temper one too many times and hit her. Nor did I understand that my father was violating my mother’s wishes and scaring her half to death by dropping by unannounced and demanding time with me; all I knew was that my father was at the door and he wanted to play, that he would once again, as he always did, sprinkle magic on what would have been an average day. Try as she might and despite my aunt’s pleas not to open the door, my mother couldn’t ignore the scene Dad was making, the banging and screaming. He even left and came back with a police officer, someone my father, who was working as a cop at the time, knew on the force. To placate him and keep my aunt, I’m sure, from becoming the laughingstock of the neighborhood, my mother finally, slowly walked to the front door, with me in her arms. “Look,” she said, seething, “you have got to stop it with all this noise. Please! You can see her for a few minutes, but then you have to go.”

Dad, burly and strapping, standing at well over six feet tall, didn’t give my mother a chance to put me in his arms; he snatched me and took off running into the winter chill, me dressed in nothing but those pajamas. Nothing could stop him—not my mother’s screams, not the neighbors peering out their front doors and rushing down their driveways to get a glimpse of the Negro theater unfolding on the street, not threats from

his fellow officer, who'd pointed his gun and considered shooting my father. Definitely not common sense. Where, after all, was he going to go? His home situation was sketchy, his money was funny, and really, the chance of him taking proper care of a four-year-old was slim to nil. Yet none of that mattered. He wanted to be with his daughter.

I thought we were about to go on one of the many fun and funny adventures we always embarked on together, whether that was going for a ride on his motorcycle or taking a walk in the park; never once did it cross my four-year-old mind that something was wrong—that we were like Bonnie and Clyde on the run. When Dad took off down the street, I wasn't scared; I was happy to be in his arms, so strong and thick and grand.

My father's getaway was short lived, though. "I'm going to call the cops on your ass!" my mother yelled down the street after him as she and the police officer jumped in his cruiser. From the front seat of that cop car, my mother searched frantically for me and my father for hours, unaware that he'd stolen me away to a friend's house somewhere in the same neighborhood. It was my dad's friend who convinced him to let go of all that passion and make way for common sense: there was no way he'd be able to get away with stealing his daughter from his wife and he finally acknowledged that. Grudgingly, he brought me back to my pleading mother's waiting arms. "I'll come see you another time, baby girl," Dad said as my mother rushed away from him. "I love you. Daddy loves you. Don't you ever forget that."

What he did was wrong—I can see that now as an adult. Still I hold tight to my belief that at that time, my father was a good guy who simply wasn't very diplomatic about his wants and needs versus his rights, and a tad immature when it came to understanding how to get what he wanted from others. My mother was the one who would try to reason with him; she'd tell him time and again, "If you want full custody of your daughter, go to court and say, 'I'm her dad and I deserve rights, too.' But you don't come knock on the door and run off in the wind with our daughter, because that's not going to work. Get it together and we can talk."

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As an adult, when I think of my parents' polar opposite personalities, I say to myself, how in the hell did they ever meet? She's quiet, thoughtful, methodical. He was loud and full of drama, quick to say and do the first thing to come to mind. He wasn't trying to hurt anybody; it's not as if he were robbing banks or knocking people upside the head and taking what was theirs. Quite the contrary: he was a Vietnam vet and an artist at heart, and when his finances were flush, he made good money as a metal fabricator, installing metal bars on the windows of houses throughout the metro DC area. But my father also was a victim of the lack of support provided for Vietnam vets who served their country, only to come home to a nation still reeling from political and racial turmoil, to say nothing of that shady Reaganomics math; the only thing that trickled down to him during the Reagan administration was a decrease in the lucrative contracts that sustained him financially. No one could afford window bars and fancy iron fences and front doors anymore, and when the middle class didn't have money, Dad didn't have money. Soon enough, the checks stopped coming and he couldn't pay the rent, at which point the entirety of his apartment was dumped out onto the street. Getting another job to keep a roof over his head was near impossible, as he had a record—a knot of misdemeanors he'd gotten for a couple of street fights made it difficult for him to secure a gig that would give him enough cash to live on. With no job, no money, and nowhere to go, he ended up living in the green van he was driving at the time.

Boris Henson was a lot of things, and he did a lot of things wrong, but he was a stand-up guy—a good guy who was dealing with the cards life dealt him, plenty of which would have ruined a lesser man. But what he chose to do with those hands is where the best life lessons for me lay. Rather than fold into a ball and

disappear from my world, he turned all that ugly upside down and let me examine its underbelly. It was important to him that I see it all—the good and the tragic, the long, slow climb he made toward finding peace for himself—which he ultimately did when he got sober and found Jesus—and the pitfalls that threatened to swallow him whole along the way.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said of all the furniture and personal items he had to leave behind when he was evicted and living in his car. He cupped my face and looked me in my eyes. “That’s material stuff I can get back. I’m alive. I’m free.”

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I’m free. That’s what mattered to him. And that’s what mattered to me. There was so much emotional intelligence there, so many lessons for me to mine for my own life journey. Through example, he showed me that we’re human—that nobody is perfect and there most certainly isn’t a rulebook for living a perfect life. I was to train my eyes not on the misfortune, setbacks, or possibility of failure, but on living—really living—without fear. Time and again, my father would show me that no matter how often he fell from grace, he simply would not let the dread and anxiety of another failure shackle him. And how could he? He needed both of his hands free so that he could place them squarely on my back and push me forward past the fear.

The pushing started early, and my father showed no mercy, like the time he forced me to sink or swim, literally. His family, who generously arranged for me to attend all kinds of extracurricular activities my mother couldn’t afford now that she was a single mom, paid for my swim lessons at an exclusive club in Capitol Hill, which might as well have been another world from the part of DC I called home. Every weekend, my mother would style my hair so pretty in little cornrows and dress me up in a cute bikini with an outfit and barrettes to match. Prancing, I’d kiss my mother good-bye, and while she walked over to the cordoned area behind the glass where the parents sat, I’d walk just as nice through the gym and out to the pool, as if I were eager to jump in the water. Then, as soon as I got to the pool, I’d take off running and screaming around the deck like somebody was trying to kill me. Terrified that I’d end up at the bottom of that sea of blue and chlorine, stuck like a brick to the pool floor, gasping and thrashing for air, I did not want to get in that water. Rather than toss myself into that liquid grave, I ran. Fast. So no one could catch me and force me into the pool. I was manipulative and slick—dramatic for no reason and drunk off the attention I got when I refused to listen to the swim teacher and instead employed my devil-may-care, run-like-the-white-girl-in-a-horror-movie antics. “Come on, sweetheart, just put your feet in the water,” the instructor would insist every week as the rest of the class piled into the pool excitedly and I stood on the side, my arms folded, my brow furled, and my lip poked out. “You don’t have to get all the way in just yet, but I want you to get used to the water. I won’t let you go under, I promise. We’ll take it slow.” I’d take a step or two toward the pool, close enough for the teacher and her charges to think that maybe this week, I’d at least let the cool water hit my big toe. But I wasn’t about to let that happen. Off I’d go, running. Dramatic, just like my father.

Every lesson, week in and week out, my mother would be completely embarrassed by my antics, and no amount of threatening or bribing could convince me to act any other way. Until, at her wits’ end, my mother, unbeknownst to me, hipped my father to my game.

I’m at my next lesson, running and screaming around the pool, and who comes through the double glass pool doors but none other than Boris Lawrence Henson. I had just about finished my first lap around the perimeter of the pool when he walked in, practically in slow motion, looking like Shaft 2.0 in a leather trench coat and hat, fly as hell, mean mugging like he was about to get that work. He snatched me up by my arm, bent down, looked me dead in the eye, and let me have it. “You gonna sink or swim, do or die, but what you not gonna

do is run around here acting crazy like somebody killing you.” And then he did the unthinkable: he picked me up and tossed me into the water.

The water stopped splashing, every tongue fell silent, everybody froze in horror. This was not the place where you show up looking like a black superhero and then throw your daughter in the pool like “The Mack.” But my father didn’t give a damn. He zeroed right in on my drama. “Uh-huh, stay your ass in that water, too!” he yelled, jabbing his finger in my direction. “Your mother ain’t driving you down here just for you to act like a little monkey!”

And when I hit that ice-cold water and it came splashing up all around my neck and eyes and nose and cornrows, what did Taraji Penda Henson learn to do that day?

Swim.

My dad saw all through my foolishness, latched on to my fear, and pulled it out of me. He was the muscle—the parent who, with one look, one curl of the lip, one phone call from my mother, could get me together and ensure I was on my best behavior and being brave. All my mother had to do was halfway say, “I’m going to call your father,” and I’d see the light.

Thing is, my father never put his hands on me; he didn’t have to. He simply knew how to bring out the best in me in a way that inspired me to expect the best out of myself. He managed this not so much by being strict but more so by trusting me, by encouraging me to trust myself. This was a recurring lesson that started as early as age seven, when my father started teaching me how to drive. I’d sit on his lap and steer his blue pickup truck through the back roads of Washington, DC, listening to the gravel grind and pop against the tires, giggling all the way. Sometimes, when it seemed like I was on the verge of getting too close to a parked car, Dad would put his hands on top of my own to gently help guide the steering wheel; I loved how they felt—rough and calloused and strong. Later, when I was just about to become a teenager, my father would let me drive all by myself; he would go get some beer, take me to the stadium where the Washington Redskins play football, and sit up under a shady tree while I drove around the parking lot, practicing for the day I’d get my own ride. I’d have to sit on the edge of the leather seat, sticky and hot against my little legs, just to reach the gas pedal and brakes; the truck would jerk violently, making my neck whip as I pushed too suddenly on the gas or got scared and pumped the brakes too hard. Still, I’d giggle every time I passed by my father, who’d be sitting there laughing. “Drive, baby!” he’d yell, and take another swig of his beer. I took my driver’s license test in a big-ass lime-green Bonneville without an ounce of fear, because, over the course of years with my father’s direction, I’d already mastered driving that pickup truck. I’d already mastered how to control fear rather than let it control me.

That’s the thing about fear: Dad had a knack for figuratively knocking it out of you. No one around him was exempt from it—not even adults. Sometime later, long after my parents’ own marriage had dissolved, he matured and committed to his second wife. But there was one problem. She didn’t have a license and didn’t know how to drive. She was too scared. My father wasn’t having it. “Let me tell you something. If you gonna be with me, you gonna learn how to drive,” he told her. “Fuck that being-scared shit. Come on!” And guess who drives now? He forced everyone he loved to look that devil in the eye and “go tell him he’s a liar.” Boris Henson lived on that. He wanted me to fear less. To be fearless.

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My mother was right: I am, in a lot of ways, like my dad. My candor, my humor, my relationship to fear, come directly from him—I carry it deep down in my gut. But while my dad schooled me on the game, it was

Mom who taught me how to live it.

Now when I say this to her—when I extend the credit she is due—she shrugs it off, but it is the truth. She stands back and looks in amazement at all that I do: balancing a demanding career with raising my son on my own, and all the while squeezing in some semblance of a personal life. But what I do is not magical, or, in my opinion, unique. All this drive, all this passion, all this get to it and get it done all up in my bones, I get it from my mama. She set up the goalposts and showed me in word and in deed that no matter what lies in the road ahead of me, fear is utterly useless. This she had to do because she was a single mother, heading our family of two in a neighborhood in southeast DC that, when we stepped outside the cocooned paradise she created, replete with my very own room and everything I needed and even some of what I wanted, wasn't the safest place for a woman and her young charge. When she wasn't battling my father, she was battling the streets—literally.

The parking lot was where she did her fighting, or, more appropriately, where she defended herself. It was a trap, really: the parking lot, set in a U-shaped valley between the two large apartment buildings that made up our complex, was always dark, and each entrance was flanked by steps on one side and a laundry room and trash room on the other, neither of which had doors or lights. It was the perfect setup for a thief to knock someone over the head and take all she had, and that's exactly what happened to my mother twice, both times in front of me.

The first time she was robbed, I was six years old. Until that very moment, I hadn't a care in the world. It was late October in 1976, on one of those warm Indian summer nights, and I was floating high, strutting between my mom and my friend from first grade, who, on this rare occasion, had been invited to sleep over at our place. My mother went all out for me, even taking us out for hamburgers and fries at McDonald's, an uncommon treat for us back in those days when money was tight and eating out, even at a fast-food restaurant, was a luxury. Though I was living in one of the most troubled areas of a city in which poverty and hopelessness made neighbor prey on neighbor, I hadn't experienced anything to cause me concern. With my mother, I felt protected, mainly because she always made a way out of no way for me. Because of her, our little family had stability: we never got put out of our place, neither the power nor the water was ever shut off because of an inability to pay the bill, we were never hungry, Christmas was always bomb. I lived for the oversells at Woodward & Lothrop department store—those exclusive sales when merchandise the store couldn't move was offered to employees for deep discounts. I was fly in high school: Guess jeans on my behind and Coach bags on my shoulders. I still have a beautiful silverware set Mom bought for me when I moved into my first apartment; the only time I pull it out is for special occasions, and when I do, I can't help but think about her and the sacrifices she made to make life beautiful. Knuckles raw, back sore, eyes burning, mind numb, she made it work. Made it so that even in the middle of the hood, where crime ran rampant and there were a lot of folks who had little and lived hard, her daughter found paradise in our little southeast DC apartment. Once I crossed the threshold into the home my mother made for the two of us, I felt like I was arriving at a grand mansion. In her typically selfless form, rather than buy herself a bureau for her clothes or a sofa on which she could relax after a long, hard day's work, she bought me a gorgeous Elizabethan bedroom set, which she outfitted with a Holly Hobbie comforter and a Strawberry Shortcake doll and posters. It was so lavish that for the longest time, I didn't know we lived in the hood or that we were struggling.

On that fateful night of the first robbery, it was to this paradise that my friend and I were going to eat our McDonald's, play dolls, color, and maybe watch a little television, before climbing under the covers to talk and giggle and fight sleep until sleep won out. We were skipping along ahead of my mother in the parking lot, making our way to the main entrance of the building, when all of a sudden, a man wearing a stocking cap over his face ran up behind us. My friend and I were too busy talking and laughing and doing what six-year-



olds do when they're excited about a sleepover to understand exactly what was going on. If anything, I was thrown off when my mother giggled, thinking it was a man who was sweet on her, playing a trick. "Oh, George, why don't you stop playing!" she said, laughing, when the man grabbed her.

"Give me your purse, bitch," he snarled, his breath hot on her cheek. The metal of the gun pressed against her temple.

To force her to comply and show her he meant business, he grabbed my mother's hair, jerking her head so hard that she gave a little scream and dropped the fast food and sodas. All three of us froze when the cups crashed to the pavement, splashing liquid at our feet. Terrified, my mother pushed her purse into the thug's hands. "You got any more money on you?" he yelled.

"No," my mother said, shaking.

He ordered us to walk back to the car, and then he took off running. Once she thought it was safe, my mother hurried me and my friend up the stairs and called to a neighbor, who'd come down to empty his trash. He took us to his apartment and called the police, and let us stay with him and his son while the cops asked my mother questions and went looking for the thief. They came up with nothing, which only made my mother more scared. When she searched her pockets for her keys, she found a twenty she'd stuffed there after ordering our food and freaked out even more. "What if he searched me and found out I was lying about not having any more money on me?" she asked. The thought of what he could have done to her or us girls gave her chills. While desperately trying to keep her composure, she arranged to swap cars with her sister and change the locks on our apartment door, seeing as the thief had taken off with everything, including her wallet and the spare keys to our entire life—the apartment, our car, my mom's office. It would be close to an hour before we got back into our place, but the tension was still thick. Though I was only six and barely aware of the mental, emotional, and physical price my mother was paying for the attack, I knew something was wrong, and, even as I played with my friend on the living room floor, I had my eyes locked on my mother, watching her every move. I held my breath, terrified when I saw her reach into her hair, beautiful, long, thick, Farrah Fawcett—feathery and lush, and pull out a clump that the thief had tugged from her scalp. As she dropped her hair onto the table, the tears finally fell. Though on occasion I would see her rub her temples trying to figure out how to pay the bills and the rent so that we weren't put out or left in the dark, this would be the first time I ever saw my mother cry.

We never talked about that moment; my mother wasn't the type of parent who unpacked the gravity of a situation like that for a child's understanding. It happened. Life went on. She soldiered on, and, by extension, because I was her daughter and it was her sole duty to protect, raise, and move in lockstep with me, I did, too. I was scared of the dark for the longest time, but she made me feel safe, and so in my first-grade mind, I was safe. That was the energy she extended to me—the energy she had to employ because my father was not there to offer protection.

Years later, when I was in junior high, it happened again—same parking lot, same apartment building, same circumstances. This time, our city was on the brink of the crack epidemic, and junkies, desperate to score their next high, were out in full force like the zombie apocalypse, preying on anyone within their reach. It was midnight and we were on our way to the car, heading out to pick up a friend whose ride had broken down. Mom always put me in the car first, so I was tucked away in the front seat when a man ran up behind her as she made her way to the driver's side. As she opened her door, the man punched her in the eye—so hard that years later, when she accidentally got hit in the same eye playing softball with her coworkers, her retina tore. "Please," my mother begged the thief as he tugged at the door between them, reaching for her purse, "take my money. Take all of it. Just leave me my purse."

“Shut up, bitch!” he yelled as he wrestled my mother’s purse out of her hands and ran off.

I was in the passenger seat, screaming, “No, no, no! Not again!” But my howling was useless. My mother got in the car, closed the door, turned the key, and, without saying a word, started driving in dead silence. She was trying her best to be strong, but with every passing minute, her eye stretched and ballooned and turned various shades of black and blue. In the other unmolested eye, a single tear slowly traced a wet track down her cheek, across her chin, and down her neck.

This was the only home we had. Though she was working her way out of the hole my dad’s absence created—she was toiling from sunup to sundown—her salary would take her only so far. It would be perfectly reasonable to think that the two of us, in that moment, in that space in which we’d been violated twice, would be absolutely terrified. Broken. But that’s not how it works—at least not for Bernice Gordon. Rather than melt, she once again soldiered on, no doubt because she had no other choice, but I know she also did it because her daughter’s life depended on her ability to keep moving, despite the obstacles, despite the adversity, despite what anyone thought about her. She refused to disappear into a cave. She was more cautious, of course; while we lived in that apartment, she made sure from then on that whenever we were leaving or entering the building, someone was around to meet and walk with us. But she never, ever gave me cause to panic. What a profound lesson to learn as I began my own, long journey toward becoming a woman, a lover, a single mother, and a human moving through the world. My mother always said I got all my strength from my father, but I know so much better than that, even if she doesn’t realize or refuses to acknowledge it: she taught me, by leading her life, how to be. My father may have put the fire in my heart, but my mother taught it how to beat. They both showed me, by example, how to be fearless.

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Even today, when I taste fear on my tongue, it’s my parents’ example I draw on to help me swallow it whole. Nothing could have been truer than when my manager, Vincent Cirrincione, floated the script for *Empire* my way. I was scared to death of *Cookie*. After all, I’d been trying to escape the typecasting that had come from starring as the loud-mouthed, around-the-way baby mama Yvette, in John Singleton’s hit 2001 big-screen hood tale, *Baby Boy*. Yet no matter how hard I tried to climb out of it, I’d been stuck in the muck and mire of screenplays that tried to resurrect that character. The only roles casting directors could see for me were ones that were “edgy” (read: ghetto). Now, after stints on three television shows—one as a police officer in Lifetime’s *The Division*, one as a fierce litigator on ABC’s *Boston Legal*, one as a detective in CBS’s hugely popular *Person of Interest*—an Oscar nod for my role as the adoptive mother of a reverse-aging white child in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and box office gold in the *Think Like a Man* films, in which I played a businesswoman, I had finally managed to shake myself out of the exclusively stereotypical roles Hollywood producers envisioned for me. I wanted no part of a loud, wisecracking, gaudy ex-con fresh out of prison from a seventeen-year bid on a drug conviction—especially on a television show to which I’d have to commit all of my time. After being locked into fifty-five episodes of *Person of Interest*, going back to the grueling, stifling schedule of television production wasn’t even a consideration.

“Leave me alone with this one,” I told Vince over the phone during one of the many calls he made, begging me to read the *Empire* script. I’d been back in Los Angeles only for a short while, and I was preparing for a starring role in the play *Above the Fold* at the Pasadena Playhouse, biding my time until another film project came along. “Where’s my brilliant film script? I don’t care about this mess. I don’t want to do it.” Vince knew me well—he knew how no-nonsense and in-your-face I could be. He’d learned that the first time I met him, shortly after I moved to Los Angeles and went on a frenzied but exhaustive search for an agent. A friend arranged my meeting with Vince, but he made it clear he wasn’t looking for new clients; at the time, he already had a power roster, including Halle Berry, and taking a chance on a young, inexperienced black

actress at a time when roles for actresses who looked like me were few and far between wasn't a priority. But I got to him by standing in front of that man and being regular ol' Taraji from southeast DC, with my slightly country drawl and one fingernail painted bright red.

"What's with the fingernail?" he asked.

I looked down at my hand absentmindedly and shrugged. "I forgot to take the paint off," I said matter-of-factly.

After that, Vince launched questions at me in rapid-fire succession, and I answered each of them easily and truthfully, hiding nothing. I told him how I'd studied acting at Howard and got pregnant in my junior year—how I came to Los Angeles with my baby and only seven hundred dollars to my name, but a passion for my craft as wide as the Pacific.

"Where's your son?" he asked when, finally, I took a breath.

"He's with the babysitter."

"So you brought him out here with you?" he asked, surprised. "Usually actors leave the kids with family until they get on their feet in this business."

"No, he's right here with me," I said. "He's where he belongs."

Vince stared at me for a moment, no doubt trying to figure me out. Finally, he ordered me to stand. "Let me take a look at you."

I stood, uncomfortable for the first time in his presence. What the hell is this, a slave market? I asked myself as I turned awkwardly. Now I understand that he was simply trying to give me a taste of what it would be like to audition, but I wasn't feeling it in that moment. Annoyed, I snapped at Vince when he began talking again. "What did you say? You're talking too fast. My daddy told me not to trust a person who talks too fast."

Vince smirked. "You're a spunky one, aren't you?" he said. After another beat, he said what I wanted to hear. "Okay, you can do two monologues for me." But, he warned, "you better knock my socks off."

A week later, there I was, standing in his office, reciting for my life. I came prepared with a serious monologue and a funny one, and hit him hard with my presentation, a scene from *Down in the Delta*. When I finished, I'd barely taken a breath before Vince burst into a wide grin.

"I want you," he said. "You were great. You were great, kid. I want you."

I got up the nerve to ask slyly, "So, did I knock your socks off?"

"Yes, you did," Vince said. "That was amazing." Then he let out a hearty laugh as he reached down, unlaced his shoes, and gave me his socks. I still have his olive-green socks somewhere—eighteen years after he agreed to represent me. Ours is a relationship built on trust, mutual admiration, and profound respect, and by now we know each other as well as we know ourselves, meaning Vince knows all the ways to turn my fast no into a slow yes. Which explains why he kept shoving that *Empire* script in my face.

“I’m telling you, you gotta read this one. You’ll knock this out of the ballpark,” Vince insisted.

“I hate TV. No.”

Vince sent me the script anyway, and one night after a fully busy day working on the play, I sat in my living room and picked it up, hoping that reading it would beg off my manager so that he could focus on something else—anything else—instead of Cookie Lyon, the loud-talking matriarch of a record label dynasty. I read the synopsis and sucked my teeth. Hip-hop? Please. Stupid, corny as hell, I said to myself as I flipped through the script. Then I got to the page when Cookie first gets out of prison. I was licking my pointer finger to flip through the pages even faster when I got to the part where Cookie’s husband, Lucious Lyon, tosses his young, effeminate son in the metal trash can, and I really lost it when Cookie, fresh out of prison, visited her youngest son for the first time, only to end the scene using a broom to beat the hell out of him for calling her a bitch. “What?!” I screamed, alternately excited by the prospects but also wary of its implications: What kind of image is this for black people? How can anybody justify beaming a murdering, thieving, drug-dealing family into the living rooms of a nation grappling with and floundering over race? What would people think of me playing this violent, drug-dealing felon? Will the NAACP come for my neck over this? Though I saw Cookie’s heart beating all over the pages, I couldn’t see myself playing her.

I called Vince on his cell. “I don’t want to do this,” I said. “I just don’t see the value for me. I’ve done this before: she’s street, she’s hood. I don’t need to do this again.”

“Taraji, just think about it,” Vince said. “Can you do that for me? Read it again and think about it.”

I promised him I would, and a few days later, I did. As was the case the first time, I was hooked, but instead of my brain judging the characters and calculating how they’d be received by the audience, my gut kicked in: I felt the fear. It wasn’t about Cookie or how the television viewers would view her; it was about how they and all the casting directors who’d kept me tucked in that “she’s too edgy” box would see me. I simply did not want to go back to the bottom of that pool, where the weight of stereotype, judgment, and typecasting could drown my career. Drown me.

It is precisely then that the courage, experience, and trust in myself that my father had ingrained in me empowered me to make the decision to kick fear in the ass. The surest way to do that was to use all that I’d learned along my journey as an actress to figure out how to breathe nuance into Cookie. I understood her. But how would I get everyone else to get her, too?

I decided that, like my father, like my mother, Cookie would be courageous. I would build a backstory for her so airtight, so sympathetic, that viewers and critics alike would see past her troubles and straight to her heart. Think about it: in the real world, people will empathize with the coldest, most calculating evildoer imaginable if he’s got a story to tell. A man could be up for the death penalty for killing a dozen children, but if someone gets on the stand and testifies to his backstory—he was raped as a child and tossed in the streets by his no-good parents, in and out of group homes where he was bullied and tortured by kids much worse than him—the jury might be more inclined to give him life in prison instead of the needle. That’s how, I decided, I needed to handle Cookie. I created a backstory rooted in courage and her love for her family. It took both—courage and love—for her to deal drugs to make sure her children were fed and the lights stayed on while she supported her husband’s dream of becoming a rap star; it took both for her to go to prison for Lucious, rather than have both of them locked up and their babies left out in the street. It is love and courage, too, that makes her want to succeed in her epic battle to wrest control of the family empire from her devious husband: she doesn’t want the business for herself; she wants to leave it as a legacy for her sons.

Building that backstory for Cookie helped me really see her. It helped me see me, too. Soon enough, I was tossing a middle finger to the notion that playing Cookie would take me right back to that place in my career when casting directors were telling me no because I was too “edgy.” Bitch, please, check your résumé, I finally said to myself. Literally, you’ve done it all except put on a cape, get on a wire, and fly. You got this.

And I do. I’m not saying I’m invincible. I don’t walk around completely fearlessly. Skiing, for example, looks amazing, but I have no intention of climbing into a ski suit, pulling goggles over my eyes, and flinging my body off the side of a mountain. That’s a fear I’m not interested in overcoming. Same thing with skydiving: I will not be jumping out of anyone’s airplane and flying headfirst at 120 miles per hour toward the ground with nothing more than a piece of fabric to keep me from crashing into the hard concrete. I’m scared of rodents. And snakes. Don’t care for spiders too much, either.

But when it comes to something that stokes my passion, and to things that mean something to me, I tend not to lean on fear. Like my daddy said: fear is a liar. I make a point of calling its bluff.

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