

# Nappy Haired Gal

By Devondria “Danni” Darty

An lil' ol' nappy haired gal. That's what I thought was soon as the doctor gave me the news back then. Nothing too big, but I was hoping for a boy. It's hard raisin' a little girl. Ain't that the truth? Most people 'round here say that a boy is a lot easier to take care of. Keep his head clean, send him on his way. My momma was beamin' when I told her the news. A family just ain't complete 'til a baby is born. That's what people always said. She was dancing that day. Feet stomping and hands clapping as she chanted, "Thank you, Jesus!" I've never been a religious person, but I wasn't feeling too thankful then. There was nothing to be proud of at the time.

"The Lord done blessed you with a girl, child. So you better work hard and raise her right."

I was never one for religion, but Momma loved the Lord. She wasn't like the other pretty, skinny, stuck up yellow-bones in the neighborhood. Momma was a thick woman. Thick in the legs and waist. Blessed in the chest. Eyes like freshly mixed mud. Natural currs that fell down to her shoulda. Her smile? Would you believe me if I said my Momma had the sun on her teef? Seemed like nothin' could stop her from smiling. I've always had my dad's complexion. A rich, err'thy brown with a slim build. The baby was the only thing that was big on me. At that point, I was told by the neighbors that I was bound to pop soon.

"Just 'cuz you blessed don't mean you should stop ya schoolin.' Ya' hear me, child?"

My school was located juss off the side of a downtown east Texas neighbo'hood. Cross the train tracks for 'bout a minute, through the woods until you reached the nook at of the road, take the left dirt path down yonder and about a hop (or a mile) past the old warehouse. Momma once told me that my Daddy used to work there, 'til an accident in seventy-two closed it down. Some kind of manufacturer if I remember correctly. Momma was forty when he died that day. I was only three. It still ain't unusual for a seventeen year ol' to be pregnant, but it's not like I wanted to be. My largest sweatshirt wuh'znt be able to hide the baby. I could'nt sit forward in the dess seats, so I had to sit sideways. Legs and stomach facin' the walkway, back toward that annoyin' little rail that connected the seat to the dess. Thankfully the teacher didn't call me up as often as he would've. I guess being pregnant did have some benefits.

There was no point in eating lunch when it would only come right back up. Seemed like nothin' I ate would keep the baby satisfied. People did'n really talk to me afta they noticed my baby bump, but it wudd'n a big deal. They did'n talk to me before, so why now? The other girls

would stare at me, tradin' smack, gossipin' with each other and pointin' fingers as I passed by. The guys were no different. "Who the baby daddy is, gal?" or "When you gon' have my baby?" E'ryday in the hall. E'ryday afta school. Neva a glitch in the routine. And juss like e'ryday, I started to head straight home afta school.

"Hey, Shea!"

It took a hot minute to realize someone was callin' out to me. By then I was too busy walkin' and figured I had left e'ryone from school behind. I continued to walk, but der in the corna of my eyes was Mr. Sight-for-sore-eyes, Jessie. I tried to ignore 'em, but Jessie was one of few people who talked to me. To be honess, he was pretty much the only friend I had. We didn' go to the same school though, but we met during pre-scoo. Jessie was a year older than me, average buil', mocha colored eyes an' rich, rusty brown hair. Always drivin' that old 80s pickup truck that his dad handed dow' to em.' "You don't have to walk, Shea." He called out to me, slowin' the truck down just enough to keep up with my pace. "C'mon." I'll give you a ride. I would have been alright without the offer, but I got inside anyway.

Now Jessie always kep' his truck a lil' messy on the inside. Empty McDonald's chick'n nugget boxes on the floo and some junk scattered in the backseat. But there was one area he made sure to keep clean, and I remember starin' at the dash not long after I closed the do.' "I thought you got rid o' that thing?" I murmured while turnin' my attention to the view outside. He still had the first picture we took together taped on the dash. I remember hearin' Jessie chuckle as he started to pick up speed, never turning his attention from the road. He was good like that when it came to drivin'.

"Can't get rid of it, Shea. You know that."

"Boy, don't play with me." I replied.

We didn't really say much during that drive home. We would have gone into town for a few soft drinks and chips, but a pregnant black girl and a wite boy would 'ave gotten some strange looks from people. Things were getting better, but that didn't stop people from staring and swapping words with each other. You cain't stop people from bein' racist, especially in an old town that was known fo' it. Jessie was my friend. Nothing more than that, but the townfolk could'nt. He was raised in an average household, but they still did'nt like the idea of their o'dest son havin' a "negro" for a friend. Can't remember what all I was thinking about at the time, but Jessie's voice broke the lingerin' silence.

"Have you thought about a name?"

Baby names for a girl never crossed my mind, but I guess it could be something simple.

Momma was Sheryl. Gramma was Helen. I was Shea. Gracie? I knew a Gracie once, but she was the type to get aroun.' People called her 'Monkey Pot' because her monkey was always being picked up by any guy willin' to chase her. Rochell? Yolanda? The twins I knew ended up joinin' a gang when they turned fo'teen. Rochell was sent to juvenile detention. Yolanda didn't live long after a few of 'em tried to rob the local corner store. Shot from behin' and died in her momma's arms. Comin' up with a name for a girl then wasn't easy. The name always tied back with someone I once knew.

"You okay, Shea?" he asked me. "You got quiet there..."

I know Jessie. I knew him well enough. He would have reached out to hol' my hand when I was upset, but only when we knew nobody was aroun.' If he was'nt drivin' then, I knew he woulda held my hand. He neva complained and always listen'd to me. "Just thinkin' of a name." I replied with a sigh while shiftin' in the seat. Never realized until then how uncomfortable I was with the seatbelt against my stomach. Felt like it was suffocatin' me. Suffocatin' her too. "Not much to go off of these days. Y'know?"

Anotha chuckle. That's always been his way of agreein' during moments like these. Where we both undastood without saying too much to one another. I appreciated his company, but I also liked the silence. When he dropped me off he promised to caah me sometime tomorrow before he left. He wouldn't be in town for a few days, but he tol' me to stay safe, and don' forget to eat. I swear that boy would say the silliest things, but I listened to him for the next few weeks. It was nice knowin' that he was still there for, even after all that happened. . .

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Funny to think that I was washin' the dishes when I started to go into labor that December evening. Lil' Stacie went to kickin' on our way there. I named her Stacie since Momma wanted that to be my original name. Shea suited me betta, so she said. Stacie was born a lil light-skinned-ed with dark, curly hair. Her fists were so clenched so tight I saw her becomin' a little scrapper. She had a set o'pipes on her the day she popped out. Loud and squabbling. Ol' folks tol' me, "Thass how you know a baby is healthy." Momma prayed the entire she held onto my hand. She was worried for the both of us. I cain't remember everythin', but I remember her askin' Jesus that Stacie came into the world safely. She told me she was proud of me when I first held, but I never wanted to go through that again. A baby is a blessin', but those nine months were a pain. Raisin' a baby with no daddy ain't easy neither, but I didn't learn that for a while.

The first few years with lil' Stacie were difficult. Being a young momma n'all. I wasn't able to finish scoo on time, but I never had enough time for fun. I started hearing from Jessie a lil' less and less because of Rae Anne. I knew she was crazy, but now she was *crazy*. Rae Anne was a wite gal, bouncy blonde hair, typica' blue eyes an' a chest I swear was fake. Like most

wite gals, she did'nt want me bein' around Jessie, but his family approved of Rae Anne ova me and it was obvious why. She was the type of gal who would start rumors if she did'nt get her way. There's a story about how she managed to get nominated for Prom Queen, but I ain't gonna go there. So, to make his family happy, Jessie had to start hangin' with her more than me. He was spendin' his time with her, I was at home with Momma and Stacie.

I did'nt feel that Stacie was my daughter. When we was together, she looked more like the younga sister I neva had. A lil yella gal that loved to wear yella dresses. Her hair was always full of colorful clip-in bows that danced when she stumbled over to me. Just like Momma, that girl always had a smile on her face. Stacie would grin and babble as she learn'd how to walk. Nobody ever tol' me that kids grow up fass. When I was with Stacie, my mind would go back to Jessie. What was he doin' now? Mos' likely with Rae Anne and her folks. Would he call me tonight? Not if Rae Anne had his phone. Will I bump into em' tomorrow? Not if Rae Anne is with him. I started to feel alone again, even though I had lil' Stacie sleepin' in her crib next to me.

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Stacie's sixth birthday came quickly. I was turnin' twenty-three and I finally had a decent job at a local grocery store. Durin' the mid-day I ran into a familiar face while restockin' the marshmallows. One I hadn't seen durin' the past few years. Mr. Sight-for-sore-eyes, Jessie. He had gotten taller, his hair was a lil' longer and Rae Anne was wrapped around his arm. I felt my heart sinkin' when I saw them. Rae Anne looked a lil' better since I last saw her too. She looked like a new woman standin' next to Jessie, propped up on his arm like dem trophy wives on TV. He can't see me here, not like this. I wasn't sure if he noticed me, so I duck'd and tried to hide in the next aisle. But he foun' me there. Does he still know me that well. . .?

Jessie told me that he didn't have his phone on much. When he hugged me, I felt years worth of pain leavin' my body. He still felt the same. Smell'd the same too. Juss like the countryside. I barely wrapped my arms around him. "I missed you." I remember sayin', hearin' him tellin' me how he missed me too, and sayin' sorry for not gettin' back to me. It was nice to hear that he kept me in his mind all this time. He even smiled at me when he let go. That damn boy, always lookin' goofy. We talked for what felt like an hour before Rae Anne started calling him.

"You should get back to ya girl. You know she gets."

He smiled at me as he wrote his number down on a scrap of paper that he had in the pocket of his jeans. "Don't worry about Rae Anne. Just keep looking out for yourself, Shae." he paused as he handed it to me "How is little Stacie doing?" He had ask'd me.

Stacie was fine. I remember telling him that much as he gave me a quick hug before leaving. My only friend was leavin' me again. . . It was nice seein' a familiar face, but the feelin' did'nt lass long when I got back. Momma was babysitting Stacie for me that evenin' and I was dead tired when I came home. Stacie ran over to me, so I pick'd her up and start'd to bounce her on my hip. Momma was sittin' down on her ol' rockin' chair in the livin' room corner when she starte' askin' me things about the child and why I had'nt been spendin' as much time with her as I should. Stacie was my child, but I still did'nt feel like she was *my* child. My responsibility? I must have snapped - no, I *did* snap -because Momma's eyes went wide. "What did you say to me?" her voice raised.

"I said you *ain't* my Momma! I've been workin' on tryin' to help you pay deese bills, I ain't got time to babysit Stacie!"

I had neva seen my Momma move that fast in my enti'a life. She charged her way over, hands on my shoul'da and shakin' me back and fo' a like a angry pit bull. I remembered having bruises for a few days afterward. We were both yelling over the sound of six year ol' Stacie's cryin', but my voice stopped as soon as I felt a sharp sting on my rite cheek. Momma slapped me good that day. Sounded like thunder crackin' from the force she put into it. Stacie continued to squall. I couldn't look my Momma in the face. I know now that I had hurt her mo' than anythin.' Neva tell yo Momma that she ain't yo Momma, because that is the mo's painful thing you can e'va say.

"God don't like ugly and I ain't raise no demon in this house, you hear me, Shea!?" She yelled loud an' clear that evenin.' There was so much disappointment in Momma's voice. She was pleadin' fo' me to do betta, but I wouldn't listen back then. Momma raised me betta than this. She was the type of momma who make you go outside an' pick yo own bush switch for a spankin.' She was warm like a teddy bear, but she was as fierce as a tige. "Now you do right by that gal and raise her like you ought to. She too pretty and you too smart to be actin' like an' ungrateful hussy!" Her words still sting me, but I felt so ashamed for a while after that night. I start'd thinkin' about Jessie less and less af'ta that. I tried bein' a better momma for Stacie, but things don't always go as planned.

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God does work in mysterious ways. I know this now. Stacie was eight at the time an' I decided to take her to a park. It was Sunday an' Momma had just finish'd takin' us to church, so we walked across the street. Momma felt that e'ryone should go to chruch at some point in they life, so I decided to go that day. She had stopped to talk to the Pastor about his sermon, so me and Stacie kept goin.' Stacie was wearin' her new yellow and wite polka dot dress, polished buckl'd shoes and a solid wite headband. Just ano'tha nappy haired gal with a wide smile on her

face. I called to her, "Don't get dirty. Ya'hear me?" After a quick, "Yes ma'am!" I sat down on the bench and started to go through my phone. I neva had to worry about her before, and I didn't feel that I needed to worry at the time. There was a few kids from the church there that day, so I felt that Stacie would have been busy with them. Some of the kids were playing with bouncy balls and others was on the jungle gym. Nothin' unusual, but that didn't stop Him from his work.

"Look at me Mommy, look at me!" I heard her callin' out to me, but I was too busy staring down at my iPhone. I cain't remember dialin' it, but Jessie's number was on the screen at that time. Should I call? Should I wait? Those were my only two thoughts before the deafening screech of tires brought me back into reality. I was never one for religious, but that day I seriously prayed for the first time in my life.

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Jessie was my friend. Nothing more. That's what I wanted to believe back then anyway. Momma always told me that God worked in mysterious ways, but this was something I wanted to deny for years. Jessie and I had decided to watch the stars in the trunk of his ol' pickup truck. I remember there bein' a blanket and a few pillows since would be there for a while. I remember askin', "If dis place were different, would we be more 'dan friends?"

"You know we would be, Shea. . ." he answered as he turned to look me in the eye. "But you know my family wouldn't like it. Mainly my dad. He already don't like me talking to you. If this place were different, you would be the girl of my life."

We kissed. We held onto each'otha and our clothes started to come off as the night went. Since the night spent in the storage trunk o'his rundown pickup, we never got to be that close again. That night when we became more than friends, will always be a precious memory to me. Jessie was more than a friend that night, but only we knew about it.

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"How could you? How *could* you, Shea?!" Momma screamed as we waited in the hospital lobby. Stacie's blood was still fresh on my lavender blouse, and I felt like I couldn't hold myself together. My body was shakin', tremblin' as the people wheeled Stacie away into the ER. Momma's hands were back on my shoulder and I cou'd hear her yellin'. "You ungrateful, selfish child! How could you?!" Her voice was strained, dry and a lil' hoarse as she started coughin'. "I told you God *don't* like ugly, I told you! You was too focus'd on that boy that you forgot about what you *had!*"

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When it was time to plan for Stacie's Homegoin' Celebration, I couldn't find the strength to press that call button. The doctor finished tellin' me that Stacie had passed. The car hit her so hard that her lil' body broke down and collapsed as soon as they got her inside. Jesse's name appeared in the contact list. Would Rae Anne be the one to answer? The green call bar on the screen started to stare me down. The 'call' lettas grinned, tauntin' me to press it. I breathed a few times before I managed to press that button. How would I explain it to him?

"Hey, it's Jessie. I'm, uh, sorry I can't make it to the phone right now. If you could just leave a message with your name and number, I will get back to you as soon as possible."

Voice-mail. That boy still ha'dnt changed. I wasn't prepared to leave a voice-mail, so I hung up real quickly. Where shou'd I start? How long shou'd it be? I decide'd to call him back. I coul'dnt wait any longer to explain what had been going on. Three, long rings followed by a quick, "Hello?"

It was Jessie.

My voice started shakin' as I felt a tear goin' down my cheek. I wasn't cryin' befo' I called him, but hearin' his voice gave me a reason to cry. Jessie was Stacie's Daddy, somethin' I had known ev'ry since that night eight years ago. I was sure he knew, but havin' to tell him was beginnin' to break my heart. "Hey, it's Shea." I manage'd to say as more tears began to fall. "It's about Stacie. I'm...callin' to tell you about yo baby girl. She was hit by a car today. . . She's going to be going home soon, y'know...to Heaven. So...wear yella if you can. She really liked yella."