



CHAPTER 3

LOSS, SILENCE, AND BECOMING A MAN TOO EARLY

I was in seventh grade when my name came over the classroom intercom. “Send Lorenzo to the principal’s office.”

The room went quiet for a second, then the usual shuffle started back up--papers, whispers, chair legs on tile. I got up, trying to act like it was nothing, but my stomach already knew something was wrong.

When I walked into the office, I saw my sisters sitting there.

They weren’t talking. They weren’t joking. They had a look on their faces I had never seen before--eyes wide, hands tight in their laps, like they were trying to hold themselves together.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Gramp is coming to pick us up,” one of them said. “Momma was in a car accident. We need to get home.”

The word accident floated in the air between us. I swallowed hard.

“What happened?” I pressed.

She looked at me and said quietly, “Momma was in a car accident and she’s in a coma.”

My heart dropped straight through me.

“Nobody wakes up from a coma,” I said.

I didn’t know where that came from. I was just a seventh grader in a principal’s office in South Carolina, but those words came out of my mouth like something I already understood about the world.

I hoped I was wrong.

I wasn’t.

Two weeks later, the day after Thanksgiving, instead of eating leftovers and laughing with family, we were standing at my mother’s funeral.

The picture that stayed with me the most wasn’t the hospital or the service. It was a simple morning before all of that.

In my mind I can still see her walking past the kitchen door, heading out to work. I’m sitting at the table with a bowl of cereal. The light is soft. She pauses just long enough to lean in and say, “Bye, love you.”

“Love you,” I mumble back, spoon halfway to my mouth.

Then I hear the screen door, the jingle of her keys, and the sound of the car engine as she pulls away down that Ridgeville road. At twelve, you think there will be a million more mornings like that. You don’t know how to mark a moment as your last.

That picture--the kitchen doorway, her voice, that engine fading--would not leave me alone. A year after she died, it finally poured itself out of me as a poem.

We were in chemistry class when I shared it.

The room smelled like chalk and old lab experiments. My friend and I were supposed to be focused on formulas, but I slid the typed page across our shared desk.

“Read this,” I whispered.

He started from the top: “In memory of my mother, Mrs. Ella Mae Pringle...” As he read, his face started to twist in that way where you’re trying not to cry and not to laugh at the same time.

“Man,” he said under his breath, voice catching, “this is beautiful. I didn’t know you could write like that.”

We chuckled quietly, partly because we were thirteen-year-old boys trying to hide real feelings, partly because neither of us expected words on a page to hit that hard.

Our teacher caught the movement.

“Hand it here,” she said, stretching out her hand like she was about to bust us for passing jokes.

My friend gave her the poem. I watched her eyes skim the first line as she turned toward her desk.

She didn’t make it there.

Halfway across the room, she stopped walking. Her eyes stayed on the paper. The class noise faded down as she kept reading, line by line. I could see her shoulders rise and fall with a deeper breath. When she finally looked up, her eyes were wet.

“Did you write this?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, sitting up a little straighter.

She studied me for a moment, then folded the poem carefully, like something fragile, and slipped it into a book on her desk. She didn’t scold us. She didn’t say another word about it. She just went back to teaching, but the air in the room had changed.

Later I found out she had shared it with my English teacher. Between the two of them, they decided to send it to the local newspaper. Before I knew it, my private grief was in print for the whole community to read.

For me, the poem was a way to survive--my own way of sitting with my mother’s voice in that kitchen doorway, of trying to make sense of being twelve and suddenly “the man of the house.” But for the people who read it in the paper, it was something else.

For them, it was a reminder of who my mother had been--her love for community, the way she showed up for people, her hope for her children. They leaned in as if they had a stake in my future, too. Church folks called to encourage me. Community leaders invited me to youth panels. Pastors asked me to write poetry for programs.

It was loving. It was affirming. And it came with an unspoken expectation:

You can’t let them down. You can’t let your mother down.

At thirteen, I didn’t know how to name that pressure, but I felt it. I had lost my mother, and at the same time, I had inherited this responsibility--to carry her memory, to carry other people’s hopes, to carry their perception of who I was

supposed to become.

That was one of the first times I realized that in our community, becoming a man wasn't just about age. It was about weight--about the stories, expectations, and silent assignments other people placed on your shoulders long before you were ready.

This was the poem my classmates read in the paper. This was the way a twelve-year-old boy tried to say goodbye and keep his mother alive at the same time.

DEAR MOTHER

This poem is written by Lorenzo Pringle In memory of his
mother,

Mrs. Ella Mae Pringle who died on November 26, 1986.

That Tuesday morning you left for work,
I noticed a difference and I didn't know why. You didn't say
I'll see you later,

Only I love you and good-bye.

When I heard you were in an accident I was really terrified.

And then the shocking news came That you had just died.

I was shocked and lonely, Very scared at first.

Your love never crossed my mind,

All I thought about was how bad it hurt.

When you were sick, lying with your eyes closed I believed you
still could see.

You saw the things I couldn't,
And heard the many voices within me.

I was just a little lad,
When God stretched forth his hand.

I often wonder why you didn't let us know. Maybe you
figured we wouldn't understand.

I've been here a number of years.

The body's yet young, but the mind's mature. Although I
think of you often,

There's still a lot in the world to explore.

I remember you like the present time, Yet when you died I was
only a child. I couldn't die with you,

So I kept a special part of you inside.

I remember your smile, I remember your laughs,

I remember your sweet, warm embrace. I've made it a special
part of my soul, Only God himself can erase.

Our love is like a special bond, Between a mother and child.

And I know we'll be together again, Not long, but just a little
while.

I'm dedicating this to you

Because you gave me that special tingle. I love you,

And I want to thank you for being my mother. Mrs. Ella Mae
Pringle

L. Ron Pringle

I carried that silence into adulthood, all the way into the Air
Force--where the uniform gave me purpose, and the desert
gave me scars I couldn't name yet.