



Chapter

01



*We've
been duped;
everyone dies!*

{ Why you should shamelessly love hard }

When I was a kid, my parents welcomed and entertained me and my brother's every wish. And I mean, every wish! It's the main reason my brother and I don't really know each other (apart from our six year age difference). We were never forced to play together. I had my things, and he had his. Gosh, I miss those days. I still envy the closet I owned as a kid. My mother spoiled the shit outta us, and I was her precious little baby girl. I had an endless supply of Barbies and Cabbage Patch Kids. I had every electronic gadget you could think of: VCR. Boombox. Cassette player. Record player. TV. I had them all as soon as they were released. When I wasn't "jamming on the one" (remember that episode of *The Cosby Show*?) pretending to be Whitney Houston, I was teaching Barbie and her friends how to host the best darn party ever in her three-story dream house with the Corvette parked out front. My therapist later analyzed the early years of my life. We determined that the cause was probably my parents' guilt over my dad being absent reimagined as love (but that's another book).

By the time I was in high school, we were the definition of spoiled middle-class kids. Thankful, but spoiled.

I had masterfully managed to try tap dance, ballet, piano lessons, saxophone lessons...you name it, I tried it. Unfortunately, because I often quit, I was mediocre, at best, at all of them. But my mom let me try anything I wanted to do. Any and every dream I had was honored, mostly without question. So when I had this bright idea that we should get a family pet, we got a family pet. My parents got a parakeet, thinking it would be easier than getting a puppy. Ha! Wait. Actually, I can't remember if that was my idea or my mom's. But, in my mind, I had all of these plans to love my new pet and to teach my bird how to talk back to me. We'd be besties for life.

I'd watched *The Flintstones* reruns faithfully after school. So when my mom asked what I was going to name the bird, I knew I wanted her to be "Pebbles." Pebbles was a tiny little thing but she was gorgeous. She was this bright canary yellow and ocean blue color and had soft silky wings. I loved that damn bird. Pebbles was the first thing you saw when you came into our house. I'd come home from school each day and maybe spend an hour or two trying to teach her to talk back to me. You should also know that I gave up on my lessons with Pebbles after about a week. Playing with Barbie and her friends proved to be a much easier task. Plus, someone had to drive Barbie's new ride and help

her host her last minute soirees. I swear I tried my best to take care of Pebbles. And I thought I was doing a good job. You know, as good as any child takes care of any one thing. I hadn't had that bird for more than a month when I came home from dance class and noticed that Pebbles was gone. Her cage was gone. I instantly went into a full-on kiddie panic attack when I saw that her little area in our living room was replaced with a brand new wooden coffee table with a pretty piece of stained glass in the middle of it. The nasty stench Pebbles caused (that really bothered me and my mom) was also gone, swapped out for my mom's favorite household scent: Pine-Sol. When I finally stopped bubble-snot crying, I asked my mom what happened. She told me that Pebbles had flown away. My mom had this way of answering certain questions so abruptly and firmly that you didn't dare ask her to elaborate.

I was devastated and kiddie depressed (read: when children refuse to eat and sit in the corner voluntarily and pout). I was mad as hell. For weeks, I was really shook up over this damn bird. But more than any of those emotions I felt, I knew I had let Pebbles down. I told my mother I was quittin' school. I know that's a laughable demand, but I felt that school was the reason I didn't take better care of Pebbles; that she would have never left if I were home more. My mom knew how dramatic her child could be, so

my request to quit school was arrogantly dismissed like those nasty ass black jellybeans during Easter.

After that, we never ever got another pet. My mom was over it, and she become voluntarily oblivious to every single request I made for a puppy...or a fish!

I think I was in my twenties when my mom slipped up and told the real story behind Pebbles's disappearance. Get this: my bird didn't really run away. I bet you guessed that though?! My mom let her lighthearted confession casually slip out over Thanksgiving dinner while we all devoured her infamous homemade crab cakes. She said she woke up one morning and that "damn bird" was just dead. (Here's where you can insert a lot of hearty laughter and a few deep sighs of relief from my aunts and my older cousins. As if they all knew!) She said: "Pebbles was a bad idea anyways. I knew you weren't gonna take care of dat bird!" So when she found Pebbles' lifeless body, she cleaned all traces of her existence and then threw her out into our back yard for the stray dogs and the field mice to have their way (the dramatic kid in me still oozes out sometimes).

I ain't gonna lie, I was mad as fuck when my mom told me that. I quickly changed the subject so that I wouldn't embarrass myself by yelling at mom for lying to me. Looking back, the adult in me knows that she was just trying to protect me and my little thug tears (read: those

uncontrollable tears followed by snot and hiccups). She didn't want me to experience death, even if the loss was just "dat bird." So she unapologetically lied straight to my face to keep me safe from my feelings.

As a mother, I get it. You wanna hold your children's tiny little fragile feelings close because you know that they are breakable. And it sucks when shit breaks. But I do wish my mom had been upfront with me. The reality of it was that I was going to have a mini panic attack and be kiddie depressed anyways because Pebbles was gone. You can't fix that. It happened. And in the grand scheme of reality checks, —I hate to break this to you— everyone dies. That's right, we've all been duped, people! It's one of the few guarantees in this thing we call life. Everyone and every thing dies. Everyone and every thing has a beginning and an end, a start and a finish. Abruptly or semi-planned, it's gonna happen, my beloveds.

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Everyone and every thing has a
beginning and an end...
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I know, all of this is *mad* depressing. It's that unchanging truth we all ignore to our own demise. Then we spend hours, days, months, years, decades and even lifetimes grieving instead of actually living and loving.

If we all shamelessly loved each other, then death would be an easier pill to swallow. If we loved without regret, without guilt, without judgment—you know: shamelessly—, then death would just be the price we paid for a love so grand.

Can you imagine a love so relentless, so shameless, that you'd never want that person to be anything but happy and overjoyed? Even if it meant that death had to happen. It's the kinda love that allows your mom to drop all of her dreams, allowing you to experience your own. It's a love so monumental that it lasts beyond your last breath in this world. That's shameless love! It wasn't until I didn't have my mom's love present every day that I realized it was so shameless. She always protected me, and my little thug tears, at any cost.

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She always protected me...
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I was 20-years-old when I left home. I had just had a baby. I wanted to come and go as I pleased. My mom and I had gotten into a huge argument about the usual nothings that life brings any young adult. Freshly graduated from the world of teenagedom, I was fittin' to flex my new adulthood because...it was mine and it was new! With my one-year old son on my hip, I told my mom where she could go

and how she could get there. Gasp! I knew she wouldn't physically try to kill me as long as I had my son in my arms. I planned on never coming back to that house again. Because she was right. If I didn't wanna play by my parents' rules, then I should just leave. Just before I stormed out of the kitchen and attempted to slam *her* front door, she grabbed the doorknob with one hand and caught my wrist with the other and said, "You can leave my house if you want to, but remember you can *always* come back home!"

There were a lot of times when I was in the dark, without electricity, holding my son and wishing to be back home. I was fired from jobs more times than I care to remember (or admit), but my pride never let me go back home. Instead, I'd visit often to grab up my share of parental guidance, soap opera talk, and *duh...* those infamous, homemade crab cakes that she loved making for me.

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*...her love was so shameless that
she didn't care...*
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When I was thinking of how to explain shameless love to you, I thought back to that day I left. Because something happened to me that day. Because her love was so shameless that she didn't care who judged her for my actions. Her love never changed, no matter what I did or

what I said. My mom's love liberated me! It liberated me to be something more than I ever could have imagined. And, of course, despite that liberation she bestowed upon me, I managed to turn my 20's into one long ass theatrical episode of *Punk'd* and then spent my 30's cleaning up that masterpiece of foolery. But her shameless love gave me permission to think beyond the moments that made me weak. It's what has made me strong. That shameless love gave me permission to believe that I could be great. That shameless love gave me permission to stand strong in what she taught me to be right or wrong. That shameless love gave me permission to make absurd mistakes that led to phenomenal lessons. Like this book!

{ The grenade life threw at me: Goodbye, Mom }

And then, life fucking happened! There was this global sized grenade thrown down at my feet. I didn't run. I couldn't run. I think the worst part of death is that you can't run from it. And now, there was no one to cover up my wounds before they began. I was forced to face death once again. But this time by myself.

My mom's obituary reads, "Yolanda "Denny" D. Brown passed away peacefully at home surrounded by her family on Sunday, April 28, 2013." I always have to check the obituary for the exact date because I've managed

to purposely discard that day's existence. It's not like a memory to me; it's my reality. And even though I don't remember the day, it's a reality that I replay repeatedly like a sappy ass movie, over and over and over again. It's kinda like each time I watch *The Notebook*. I get all sucked into the storyline of how they fell in love. Then I swoon over their love and hope for its continuation, as if I don't know the ending. Like I don't know that they peacefully die, holding hands together, but dead nonetheless. It's like I don't know that I've been duped and everyone dies. Including moms. Including my mom.

When my mom died, my family treated me like that 10-year-old little girl whose parakeet had just died. Everyone was semi-lying to me for the sake of saving me from my thug tears and kiddie depression spells. My entire family tiptoed around my feelings. My Aunt Katy called me on the Wednesday before my mom died. I was wrapping up at work when I picked up my phone to say hello. There was this long, uncomfortable pause. It was the kind of pause that was too long for anything good to happen next. You know what kinda pause I'm talkin' bout. It's the kinda pause that gives up the tape for what's about to come next. It's the bad news kinda pause. That agonizing, heart shattering, unthinkable bad news! She told me that the hospice nurse had been by my parents' house to examine my mom, and "it's not looking good."

I. Almost. Snapped.

Like, legit straight-jacket, mental-facility-worthy type of snapping. I mean let's be real here, people. It ain't been looking good since that day Mommy went to the hospital and the doctor said, "Can you excuse us, I need to talk to your mother in private?" There was a similar uncomfortable pause that day, too.

I pulled a Kanye and let Aunt Katy finish because she's my favorite, and I know she means well all the time! She said, "You should come home now, they're giving her just a few days." I calmly, almost without any feeling in my voice, said, "Ok."

O.K? What. The. Fuck!

My entire body slowly crept down into my desk chair, and I was basically sprawled out on the floor. I could feel my bottom lip trembling, but the thug tears that I had been prepping myself for since the moment my mom went home with hospice just wouldn't come out. Instead, my skin got hot. Then it got cold. I thought I was going to faint. I dropped my cell phone, and on my hands and knees I turned to my co-worker and whispered, "My mother. Is dying."

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My mom was supposed to live forever...

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It was the first time I said it out loud. It was the first time that I believed that death could actually happen to my mom. It was the first time that I believed that I had been duped. She was supposed to beat cancer and live to see my *every thing* happen gloriously. She was supposed to be there for my wedding, my grandchildren (although I don't ever want any), my first house, my first book. My mom was supposed to live forever, even though I had just spent the past eight months joking with her about what the Upper Room would look like when she got there. We had so many questions. Like: do you have to wait in line to see Jesus? Because I feel like Jesus is really popular in Heaven, so it might take her a minute to get settled. Is there a meeting that happens between Jesus and all the new angels? Then I wondered: do you see Jesus first and then God? Or does anyone really see God? Listen! I had (and still have) so many questions. But this is what we talked about. We knew that death was happening. But when it happened...

That hour-long train ride from my Midtown job to my little box that I called home in Brooklyn was absolutely

miserable. I was on a crowded subway train watching people watch me watch them while I violently bubble-snot cried. I didn't even have the energy to wipe the tears off, so I was just wet as fuck from my eyeballs to my chest. Literally! The front of my sheer white work blouse was soaked and showed my fellow passengers more than any woman wanted to show a crowded New York train.

{ How I dealt with my mother's death }

Then something happened. I heard a song that triggered what I believe was my revelation. I realized that my mom would always be with me no matter what. Here's why this is really a sign from Baby Jesus: The song that I credit as my revelation is a song I don't even remember adding to any of my playlists on Spotify. Ever. It's a song that I probably would have skipped on any other train ride, but that day I let "Lovely Day" —the Jill Scott version— be great inside my headphones. I immediately stopped crying. I turned my volume up as loud as it could go and then stuffed my earbuds a little further in my ears. Jill started to hum. The beat drops. The bass got louder. The supply of water for my tears paused as if a barricade had just appeared before them. My mind was now an eerie kind of calm.

Now, the song pops up in my playlist whenever I need it. Whenever I need to feel my mom and be reminded of the

love we share. And I still get chills when I hear it. My little baby-thug tears appear. I always think back to that moment when my mother became my personal angel. I've always believed it's the moment she got her wings.

Last year, me and my best friend went to Oprah's *The Life You Want Weekend*. Our one and only goal was to be in the building with Mama O. And maybe we wanted to be inspired. We got there super early. The kinda early that allows for hundreds of selfies in an empty stadium. We had decent seats, and we made sure we came with an open heart and nonjudgmental ears. At the time I was desperately seeking some inspiration, some stimulation, some something. I needed to be awakened. I was writing for an online publication that indisputably made the inside of my soul crawl to nothingness and burn a slow death, repeatedly, daily. I felt like my relationship with my boyfriend was crumbling (truth is, it was). And since my mom died, I hadn't spoken to or had a real conversation with my dad outside of a few birthday and happy father's day texts. Life for me had become an extreme chore, and I was just going through the motions. I was hoping and praying that Oprah could offer up some free therapy because I was also broke.

Please believe me when I tell you that Oprah and her clan preached the good word of "get your life together" all

weekend long. That weekend really dug deep into my soul and deposited much-needed life affirmations and universal testimonies that I needed to hear to keep going. When it was all over, Oprah made her closing remarks. I could barely concentrate on her message. I was so in my feelings. And anyone who knows me knows that I really hate feeling feelings. But while Oprah was speaking, I was regretting the fact that my mom and I never really experienced things like this together. At best, we'd watch T.D. Jakes preach that good word on Sundays during our Bedside Baptist worshipping. My mom hated planes and tried her best to *not* travel too far outside of that little Maryland town we were from. I just kept thinking about how much my mom would have loved to be there to witness Oprah and friends. My mom and I never got a chance to do any of the really cool stuff I was being afforded since I was a now this popular blogger/writer.

We wanted to beat the crowd, so we started to make our way to the steps just as Oprah was wrapping up her speech. If you're into melodramatic, clichéd story endings then you might have already guessed what happened as Oprah went to exit stage left. OMG, yes "Lovely Day" by Jill Scott played in the background as Oprah ended the evening. You can absolutely cue your own personal thug tears right now because I almost laid completely out on the floor when Jill started to hum. When that beat

dropped. When the bass got louder. But instead of making a complete fool out of my best friend (because frankly I never cared that much if I made a fool out of myself), I chose to close my eyes and allow my mom's presence to settle comfortably in my heart and in my mind. Before that moment I was so distraught. I was searching for something in the world to kick me in the chest and beg me to start living again. And at that moment, I did. It became an unthinkable point in my life. Suddenly, my life had purpose again. My mom's death had purpose again. That singular moment changed how I felt about her death. It changed how I thought about death as a whole.

In the beginning of my grief, I completely I ignored it. I never used past tense when I spoke of my mom. I remember having a panic attack when my dad asked me to come to their house and clean out my mom's closet. I was livid. She hadn't even been dead a week and he wanted me to throw all of our memories away. Like they meant nothing to us, to him! I couldn't understand why he wanted her things gone so soon. If I had it my way (and, of course, I did) I'd keep everything the same. I wanted everything to still feel and smell like my mom. I wanted to be able to open her bathroom door and smell Elizabeth Arden's Red Door perfume. I wanted the smell to be so disrespectful it smacked you on the top of the nose when you entered her room. It really didn't matter if she was no longer physically

there with me, with us. Yes, in my mind, I knew she was gone. But I figured that if everything in my parents' house still left traces of my mom, then it would *maybe* feel like death never happened. Like she never left us for her rightful place in the Upper Room. It would feel like she never died.

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*I could feel that she wasn't
afraid of death...*
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But she did die. And I couldn't ignore that. After watching her fight cancer for almost a year, I learned that the last stages of her fight awakened this feeling of inevitability about death. And I think that must have been liberating to my mom. I could feel that she wasn't afraid of death anymore. She was really ready to die. That's how we ended up in a conversation about what people do in Heaven. She didn't have to manage her fear about death anymore. It was weird, but she had begun to include her death as a part of her experience. She started to believe that if she could prepare for her death, then she'd crush the power that death had over her. And after pouting and releasing a few thug tears (there's a theme here, guys) I realized that's how I had to deal with her death. Because we've all been duped right. Everyone dies!

So I started to live with intention. I promise you that this is something that I work on daily. It doesn't come naturally to me. I don't think it's natural for anyone. Sometimes I need Jill Scott *and* Oprah to remind me that I have a purpose, and I have to find an intent to live. Having intent in your life is something that, just when you think that you've mastered it, you completely forget about it. You go back to pouting and having kiddie panic attacks. The reality of losing the biggest love of my life is the hardest to accept. The rush of feelings I have at the sound of the word "mom," the anxieties, the sleepless nights, the heartache of never hearing her voice again has all brought me to my knees. But my intent is not to live a happy life without my mom. I understand now that processing my grief doesn't mean that there will ever be any less emotional distress for me. It just means that it is possible, through my struggle, to come out on top. I've learned that my intent to live a happy life involves constantly figuring out how to be forever surrounded by her undying love.

And I don't know if that's the right way or the wrong way, but that's how I deal with death!

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So I started to live with intention.

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Things To Repeat To Yourself

Toast to the loves of your life...

...the ones that inspire a special type of love that
completely liberates

your soul.

Let knowing that we've all been duped...

...steer your vision of life.

Change what death means and feels like to you.

Embrace your thug tears.

Let them out to play whenever they want.

They can keep you sane.