

UNTOUCHABLE ENTERTAINMENT LLC

# You Gon' Learn Today

---

## A Dystopian Short Story

*By Alexandria M Lawson*

12/1/2011

One girl relates the story of her mother's death as only a frightened, scarred child can.

I can still remember the last time I saw my mother. To call it the saddest day of my life, would be an understatement. It was worse than sad; for that day was heart wrenching. The day my mother died cut so deeply into my soul that it has left a permanent impression. Even if I got amnesia and couldn't remember my name, I think the horrific events of that day would be forever engraved in my memory. Before my Mama died, we had close to a perfect life in a less than perfect world.

"Now, what will you tell your teacher?" she asked as she fixed my clothing. They were just Daddy's old scraps but they were sitting properly on my body and she had to make them look ragged... or else.

"That you... threw me ...down the stairs...." I said, unsure. I tried to recall as many details as I could, for surely, I would be quizzed as soon as I got to school that day.

"What else, Becky? What else did I do to you last night?" she questioned suspiciously.

"You... bent my arm back because I didn't answer you right..." I said smiling, hoping I could remember everything.

"Rebecca," She only ever called me by my first name when she really wanted me to pay attention. "You have to say it right, or else they will take you from me... is that what you want?" My mother was my favorite person in the whole world. She was my best friend, the only true protector I had left, and my greatest ally in the face of the cruelest times in history. Without my mother, I would never survive in this world. Without my mother, I would surely die.

I had heard about what became of the children who lived in the other homes. When the government takes you from your parent, they put in you a home with a new "protector". At the protector's home, anything goes. What happened in those homes was abuse, abuse of power, abuse of authority, just plain abuse. Government sanctioned abuse, at that. The adults even gave money to each other to abuse us children. The more abuse you cause, the more money you get. For us kids, the abuse was near unbearable. I went to school with some of them and the things their "protectors" did to them was unthinkable. One girl came to school with a broken arm and leg; another with a black circle around both her eyes; one girl stopped coming to school at all. I overheard Ms. Janie saying that her protector went a *little too far* and fractured the girl's skull. What may have started with a

noble purpose had now turned into something dirty, something evil. I never wanted to live away from Mama and certainly never with a new protector.

“No Mama, please...no! I wanna stay with you. Please don’t let them take me.” I begged almost with tears in my little brown eyes. I gripped the collar of her yellow dress with my small hands so tight that when she finally freed herself, little wrinkles were left in the place of my fingers.

“Then, if you wanna stay with me, you have to make your teacher believe that I hurt you. You really have to sell it Becky, or they will make you live with someone who really *will* hurt you.” There it was... the information that my mother hated telling me, but knew she had no other choice. At just 9 years old, it was time for my mother to give me the talk. Only it wasn’t the average talk, it was the talk about the times in which we lived. She straightened out the scraps of clothes that I was wearing as she recalled out country’s history.

We lived in San Lorenzo. San Lorenzo was a beautiful place filled with beautiful people when Mama was born. From what I can remember my mother telling me, when she was little, San Lorenzo was the place all the people wanted to visit. Her Mama used to brush her hair at night and read to her stories about what it was like in America, where she was from. “It’s beautiful there, but I would rather be here with you. You are more beautiful than anyone or any place in this whole world...” her Mama would say. Now, San Lorenzo is still a beautiful place, but it is no longer filled with beautiful people.

“Baby, the world has been like this a long time, since before you were born. Probably since Mama was a baby like you. Back then, children were allowed to laugh and play, and then one day it all stopped. One day, the famine came. Lots of people died because they didn’t have anything to eat. And then one day, a man named Dwayne Andrews came here to San Lorenzo and promised to make everything better. The only catch was he had to be put in charge of the whole country. Most people didn’t want him to be in charge, but we were desperate. So many of people had died and more were dying every day from starvation. So everyone in San Lorenzo agreed.

“But baby, if there is one thing Mama wants to teach you; it’s that everything has a price. When you’re in trouble, there may be some things that you will be ready to sacrifice. But baby, *those* are things that you need to hold onto with all your might. Because people were so quick to give up democracy for a monarchy, because we

were so desperate, we now have to sacrifice something more precious than we could ever imagine.”

The takeover was more than 40 years ago. The first generation who agreed to Andrews conditions had died off by the time I was born. Andrews had died off. By the time I came around, the country was ruled by his son. Mama said he was more evil than his father.

“Baby, he’s mean just because there is no one to stop him. He is the one who has come up with the most recent laws that are in effect.” When Andrews was in power, he instituted rules to ensure children were strong enough to endure the harshness of the times. That meant giving your children as little food as possible needed for survival. But when he saw that people would rather starve themselves than their children, he made new laws that prevented people from socially interacting with their children. He wanted people to stop loving their children so they could be tougher. According to him, tougher children could survive longer in the world in which we live. Now, people don’t just toughen their children, they abuse them. Mama and Daddy decided when my brother was born that they would never do to their children what other people have done. They would never abuse me and my brother. We would always come first in their minds. Love would always come first in their home.

“For a while, everything was good. Then Andrews decreed that the legal age to begin working was going to drop from 18 to 12, so more families could afford food. Then, he decreed that children age 12 to 18 had to work in the mines on the outskirts of town. After he died 10 years ago, when his son took power, that’s when the harshest of the rules came into play. Children were not allowed to play, ever. Children could only leave the house to go to school or work. Parents must hit their children twice a day to ensure that they always remember their place in society. Finally, two years ago, he wrote a law declaring that all parents physically prepare their children for the work in the mines. And you know what that means, don’t you baby?”

“Yes Mama. It means we have to make everyone believe that you will push me down the stairs.” I said excitedly.

“No, baby... It means that if I don’t make everyone think I am making you tough, then they will give you to someone who will make you tough, someone who will hurt you to make you strong”, she said patiently. “So, if you wanna stay with me,

you have to do what I say; we have to make your teacher believe that I am making you strong enough to handle this world.”

I hugged and kissed my mother all over and promised that I would remember everything she told me. I promised to play my part and sell the story to my teacher. I promised to lie. If I didn't, the costs would be disastrous.

## 2

I was successful, or so I thought. When I walked in the classroom, my teacher pulled me aside and quizzed me. It felt like she quizzed me longer than normal, but there was nothing I could do about it. I answered every question without stumbling or anything. She looked at me funny and then she told me to take my seat. For the rest of the day, Ms. Janie just glanced at me and then kept on going with the lessons. But she did the same thing to everyone, so I didn't see anything wrong... right??

After school was over, I got on the school bus like normal and rode the whole way home. Everyone was quiet as the bus pulled through the streets. That was the norm in San Lorenzo because of the law. I was almost never sad on the bus ride home, except I had to pretend that I was sad to keep Mama from getting into trouble.

One time, a girl in my class had a good Mama just like mine. She lived on the same street as me just three doors down in the big yellow house. Her house was really pretty. It had big windows on the porch with white shutters. The porch was long and wrapped all the way around the house. There were flower pots all over the porch with sweet smelling flowers and twigs in all of them. The girl got so excited at seeing her Mama after school that she ran from the back of the bus and out of the door. As soon as she did, everyone knew that this was a big mistake. But, school was hard that day. Ms. Janie promised raps across the knuckles for anyone who didn't do their workbook perfectly, and the girl got two answers wrong. Her fingers were still red and swollen and looked like they were going to bleed when the bus pulled onto our street. The girl was so happy when she saw her Mama that when she ran from the bus, it was like she didn't even hear the bus driver yelled out the door at her. She ran up the three steps and jumped into her Mama's arms while she was standing right in the front door. Her Mama looked shocked as I walked onto our porch. I could hear the girl crying as the sweet smell of chocolate chip cookies hit my nostrils. Later, I heard horrible screaming coming from outside. I ran to the door and Mama trailed behind me calling my name. It was hard to grasp what I was witnessing, but that didn't make it any less real. The

police had come to take the girl from her Mama. The girl was reaching for her Mama as if to grab away from the police but she just couldn't reach far enough. They dragged the girl out of her house kicking and screaming with her Mama following right behind her in tears. Mama came out of the house and grabbed me to come in, but I snatched away as people came out of their houses to watch. The police held the girl's Mama down and started to kick her and hit her in the arms and legs. The police sat the girl down and made her watch as they beat her Mama with the big black sticks from their belts. The police officer let the girl scream and cry for two whole minutes before they told her that for every tear she cried, that would be another minute of beating her Mama would have to take. Later, when it was all over, I overheard Mama say to Ms. Patrice that they had beat the girl's Mama nonstop for more than 27 minutes, while everyone watched. The officer then took the girl over to her Mama and said, "Do you see what you did? You killed your Mama. She didn't make you strong, she didn't follow the rules. She loved you and now, because of you, she is dead."

I can still to this day remember the girl. I can still remember how she cried when she ran over and said, "Mama... I'm sorry. Please wake up Mama... Mama..." and that was it. With that, they dragged her off to a new protector. With that, she was gone. I cried so hard when Mama carried me into the house. "Why, Mama? Why" I asked over and over again. I never understood, until my Mama died. The day that happened was the day I fully understood all about the world in which we live.

I always felt sorry for the people in my class. They really did go home to horrible people. The people of San Lorenzo had been programmed over decades to not love their children. It was almost it was a contest between them to see who could hurt their children the worst. And to the winner, bragging rights. They won bragging rights about hospitalizing children. They hurt the most innocent people in the world and for doing it, often they received a prize. But, my Mama was special. My Mama was wonderful.

Mama told me that she and Daddy had promised to always love their children, just like their Mamas did. My brother and I always knew that no matter what happened in the outside world. Mama would be there at home with us to take care of us. Then one day, when the bus pulled up in front of our house, my brother got excited when he saw Daddy. That day, Daddy had been working in the yard planting trees. It was hard work and Daddy had sweat all over his blue jean shirt. When Bryan saw him, he ran from the back of the bus to meet him. As he went to step from the bus to the ground, the bus driver kicked him hard in the back and made him crack his head on the ground. When Daddy came running to check on him, Bryan was

laying on the ground bleeding. His dark red blood was soaking into the pavement while the bus driver stood over him, laughing. Like an instinct, Daddy grabbed the bus driver by his neck and threw him against the bus. With three jerks, the bus driver was gone, and so was Daddy. When the police came, they said Daddy killed him for nothing, because it was legal for the bus driver to use any means necessary to control an *out of control* child. The government allowed me and Mama to come to the courthouse just once to say goodbye to him, before they sent him to Sympathizers Hill: a maximum security prison for people who don't follow the laws regarding children.

Mama promised him that she would "keep me in line"-- their code word for how they treated their children when others were around-- and that she would never end up in a place like Sympathizers Hill. She meant every part of her statement, and if it wasn't for me, she would have kept every word of it true.

I walked calmly from the bus. I remembered the story of Bryan and the girl on my street. I walked like I hated coming home, like everyone else. But secretly, I knew that Mama would have chocolate cookies waiting for me, as a way of saying that the school day was over... that I was in safety. I didn't even notice the police car sitting at the end of the street. I didn't even notice Ms. Janie and the police sitting in my living room with Mama until I had already said it. I had already confessed.

The smell of chocolate cookies met me when I opened the door. It was like everything was normal. I dropped my book bag at the door and took my shoes off like always and began to proclaim my presence. "Mama, I'm home..." I yelled to the kitchen as I always did. It was at the back of the house and Mama always wanted to know where I was. "I can't wait to eat the cookies and tell you everything that happened today with evil Ms. Janie. She's so mean Mama, not like you... I'm so glad to be safe and..."

"Well...well, a confession..." said the police officer in his thick Irish accent. I could barely understand the words coming out of his mouth, but I knew this was a bad situation. As Mama sat in a kitchen chair, the mean police officer stood behind her with a big black stick around her neck. Ms. Janie sat on the little couch quietly, drinking a cup of chamomile tea. To this day, I can't drink a cup of chamomile tea without thinking of that day. I stood frozen in time. It was safe to say I was paralyzed with fear, for I knew what was about to happen. I knew Mama was in trouble. I knew I was about to lose her.

“I knew you were lying this morning, Rebecca.” Ms. Janie said as she sat on Mama’s couch.

I looked over at my Mama because I didn’t know what to say. The mean officer stood there with the big stick around her neck. I wanted to ask him to stop. I needed him to stop and let her breathe... let her tell me what to do...

“Mama, I...”

“It’s ok, baby...” Mama said as the officer tightened the stick around her neck and it looked like she couldn’t breathe. I could easily see the pretty brown skin on her neck turning red from the mean officers stick. I wished he would just let her go.

“Please don’t... you’re hurting her...” I begged, and then I looked into his face. He was the same officer from down the street. He was the officer that had killed my friend’s Mama.

“You lied to me Becky...” Ms. Janie said in a spooky voice. “You told me that your Mama bent your arm back so much that it hurt you to move it. But when I asked you to raise your arm, you lifted it right up.” Busted! That was stupid of me. How could I be in so much pain but I could lift my arm with no problem? I couldn’t believe I forgot Mama’s #1 rule. “Pay attention to what you say at all times.” One slip of the tongue and everything Mama had worked for was about to fall apart. It was my fault.

“But Ms. Janie, I...” Crack! She smacked me right across the face with the back of her hand. I had never been hit like that before. The pain was so intense that I felt like it lifted me off the floor. I shut my eyes tight to minimize the pain radiating from my face and when I finally opened them, I saw stars for almost a minute before I could see straight again.

“You gon’ talk back to me too... You insolent, little girl...” She turned to face Mama. “Not only have you NOT been training her to live in society; but, you also have been teaching her to disrespect adults...”

“No, just *bitches* like you...” That was all Mama could get out before the officer punched her in the face. He hit her so hard, that her head violently jerked from one side to the other. “Mama... Mama...” I yelled through the tears that had already welled up in my throat. But I don’t think anything I could have said would have stopped the mean officer from hurting my Mama.



“You are a criminal... Criminals must be punished...” Ms. Janie said. She grabbed me by the collar with such force that if I wasn’t already paralyzed with fear, it would have been like adding quicksand to my ankles. She turned to my Mama and while my feet dangled like a rag doll she said, “you gon’ learn today... and I think precious little Becky should learn as well...”

“No, anything but that...” My brain said over and over again. I had heard of the way police taught people a lesson, although I had never seen it with my own eyes. And I feared that tomorrow, I would not be able to make that statement.

“Yeah, I think a good lesson in manners is in order.” The officer said as he laughingly looked at Mama. But Mama made no noise, like the lesson would not break her the way they wanted it to. However, I knew Mama was scared. I could smell it in her like her perfume. Then a look of terror flashed across her face. It was the same look she got when Daddy killed the bus driver. It came when Ms. Janie said, “Oh, that doesn’t bother you, huh... well, how about we let the officer teach little Becky a lesson.” Physical abuse was the lesson. Mama wouldn’t stand for it, and neither would I.

It took all my might, but as I felt Ms. Janie readjusting her hands on my shoulders, I leaped from her grip and darted towards the front door. She ran behind me and as we got outside, I began to scream. She caught my leg and flipped me off the ground. In midair, without even thinking, I kicked my legs as hard as I could and one caught Ms. Janie right in the face on her cheek. The officer grabbed Mama by the back of her head and forced her through the house and outside into the yard. He threw Mama on the ground so hard that her head almost bounced off the ground. Ms. Janie pulled me up by my arm as another officer who had been sitting in his car came over and held me down.

Ms. Janie looked at the both of us and said “You two deserve everything you get. I don’t just hope they send you to Sympathizers Hill, I hope they kill you both. You have raised the worst child in the world.” She turned to the officer who had Mama and in between heaves of breath she said “... do whatever you want to them... I am done trying to protect them!!!”

“This was protecting us... how unthinkable!” I thought as she turned and left. All of me screamed for joy as she walked away. I was so glad that that would be the last time I saw Ms. Janie.

The officer picked up Mama and punched her in the face and stomach and then threw her back on the ground. “Mama...No...” I screamed as she fell. The officer

looked as though he took some special pleasure in torturing my Mama. It's like he really wanted to make her suffer. She looked up at me with eyes full of tears and I knew. I knew this was gonna be the last time I saw my Mama alive.

"You gon' learn today..." he said to Mama. He kicked her in the stomach again and hit her over and over with his stick. I didn't struggle against the other officer. I didn't fight for my Mama. I knew that if I did, she would be gone for sure as slowly and as painfully as possible. I knew they would hurt her more if I did. So I just stood there and did nothing. I did nothing and watched as he killed my Mama.

4

One blow after another, he hit my Mama with all his might. Each strike more vicious than the one before. As people began to flood the streets from their homes, I could see the look of fear and terror on their faces. My eyes begged them to help us... to help her but they all just stood and watched as Mama slipped away from me slowly. I was determined that he would not break me. I was determined that not a single tear would slide from my eyes. It's no surprise that this angered the mean officer even more than he was before I came home. As the officer looked back at me, he saw the fear in my face and the tears I was holding back. Suddenly, he stopped. Mama was still alive but he stopped.

"So... you won't cry, huh?" He asked me. I said nothing. "Think you can save your Mama by being brave... well, well... A child who thinks they can out smart me." I kept quiet as Mama's body slowly began to convulse behind him.

"Maybe you should let her go..." The other officer said. By this time he had fully let me go and was covering his face with his hands. When Mama began to spit up blood, it was mixed with vomit and the smell made him almost physically sick. I stood there wanting to cry, needing to cry, but held it back just so he wouldn't hurt my Mama any more than he already had.

"Let her go!!! Let her go!!! I will never let her go... she's a criminal. Criminals must pay for the crimes they commit. And she will pay!!!" By the time he finished his statement he was screaming at his partner with such force that even he took a step back. He shook his head at the wild look the mean officer had in his eyes. There was no stopping him for he was out of control. The other officer just shook his head as he backed away from the mean officer. When the officer turned to look at Mama, she was shaking uncontrollably. When the shakes stopped, he pulled Mama up by her hair and stood her in front of me.

Life was so simple when it was just me, Mama and Daddy and Brian. Life was good and it had meaning. I can still remember the days when Daddy would surprise Mama with something special from the market, like a whole cooked chicken or a box of her favorite chocolates for one of their special nights; or, when Mama would surprise me and Brian with fresh apple pie still warm from the oven or when she would cook u one of the forbidden fishes like shrimp or lobster. With Mama and Daddy, life just made sense. They did everything they could for us and now, because of us, they are gone. Destroyed because we could not follow the simple rules we had been taught from birth. With them, it was like the outside world had it wrong and we were the ones who figured out what it meant to live and be free. Just like in the books I read about America. In America, parents love their children like Mama and Daddy without fear of persecution. In America, it's ok to feed your family good food and give your babies nice clothes to wear. But it was all too soon that I was forced to remember that we do not now, nor will we ever live in America. Soon, I would be forced to brave this horrible world all alone...

The officer's final words to me were simple. They were the haunting, hallowing words of a sadistic man; a man so full of hate, so full of anger that I will never forget them. As the blood and vomit mixed, it dripped down off my Mama's face and onto her shoes, the mean officer smiled at me and whispered...

"Say goodbye to your Mama..." Then he removed his gun from his holster and with one shot, my Mama was gone. The bullet from his gun was so loud and powerful; it tore through Mama's small frame and ripped the front of her face off her body. I froze with fear. The sight of my Mama as she fell to the ground was unbearable. It was like watching the ending of a slow motion nightmare happening right in front of my eyes. An ending so unbelievable, you find yourself actually praying to God that it really is just a nightmare. In my mind, my Mama did not just die. In my mind, he was standing in the kitchen pulling the cookie out of the oven awaiting my return from school to hear all about how that what that mean Ms. Janie did today... she did not just die, that's not what just happened... is it?

Seconds after Mama fell to the ground; a blood curdling screech rang out so awful, it snapped me out of my trance. Only it wasn't me. It was the other officer... the one who was holding me. The one who tried to help my Mama. He screamed so loud that I don't think there was anyone on our whole block who didn't hear it.

The bullet from Mama's head when through her and hit him square in the shoulder. It even hit his shoulder bone. The mean officer looked scared at what he had done. In his mind, he had finally gone too far. Shooting Mama could be justified, but shooting a fellow officer in the process was not tolerated. The mean officer knew that he would be sanctioned. He knew he was in trouble.

The mean officer was fired for excessive force in the shooting of his fellow officer. The police department said it was "retribution for trying to stop the officer in the commission of his sworn duties". Can you believe that? They said he was angry because the officer tried to stop him from killing my Mama. As it turns out, the mean officer knew Mama and Daddy. Mama chose Daddy over him before Bryan was born and this was just payback. I found out that the mean officers' real name was Matthew O'Sullivan. No additional charges were brought against O'Sullivan; however, Mama was still gone and I was still alone. They didn't even let me a funeral for her the only person left to come was me anyway, even though she had insurance. They gave her insurance money to O'Sullivan's partner as compensation for his injuries.

San Lorenzo used to be a beautiful place. I have seen the pictures. Life has been hard, but I am making it. I get beat pretty regularly and pretty severely now. After Mama died, I was sent to live with a new protector. I asked my social worker to please let me stay on my block so I can go to my same school, but she just looked at me and whacked me upside the head with her purse. God really has a sense of humor because when I opened the door at my new protectors' house, it was Ms. Janie. But honestly, life is not worth living most days without my Mama. I only stick it out because I know that she would want me to be the strong and survive, and who knows, one of these days maybe I will be able to leave San Lorenzo for a better place. Every night, I cry silently and think about Mama. Wish she was here with me to keep me safe. I just had a cast removed from my arm because Ms. Janie really did push me down a flight of stairs. When I told my social worker, she said that Ms. Janie was just doing what she thought was best for me. "Janie has to make you tough..." she says. She has to teach me discipline or I will never survive in this world. I always know when something is about to happen. She always whispers "*You gon' learn today...*" right before she does something.

*"You gon' learn today..."*