

SCENE ONE: SAGASHUS

SAGASHUS' oldest daughter, Diana, enters.  
She shuts off the music.

SAGASHUS

Diana! Why'd you do that? What you doing in here? Girl, you supposed to be ...

DIANA

Mom! Mom, you gotta hear this song that I ...

SAGASHUS

I asked what you doing in here? You supposed to be watching your brothers so I can work!

DIANA

Yes, but I want you to ...

SAGASHUS

You get back on in there. Those boys have to be watched every minute.

DIANA

But ...

SAGASHUS

Baby, you know I need you to watch your brothers so I can get my work done. Now, go on! Please!

DIANA

I will, Mom, but first, you have to hear this song! I heard it on the radio last night, so I went online and I ...

SAGASHUS

There'll be plenty of time to listen to songs later. Right now is my *working* time. Not my *listening-to-your-songs* time.

DIANA

But ...

SAGASHUS

No buts about it. Go on, now.

*(Softly ...)*

You go back to watching your brothers before they get into something.

DIANA exits reluctantly. SAGASHUS speaks intimately, directly to the audience.

SAGASHUS

Sorry about that.

*(SAGASHUS collects herself. Then ...)*

Well. Here we are.

*(gesturing at the stacks of paper)*

This all started because I couldn't find my story. Not anywhere.

I looked in all the usual places. TV. Cable. The movies. The Internet. Nothing. That may be why I decided to get my doctorate in English, part of the reason, anyway. My story had to be somewhere and I was going to find it. In the library, maybe. And yes, I still go to the library. I take my children there, too. There are thousands and thousands of books in libraries. Good books. But none of them were about me.

I don't mean about me, specifically. Sagashus. I wasn't expecting that. Lord no. But a book about someone like me. A book I could pick up and read and say 'Oh! That's my story! That book is about me!'

I couldn't find one.

It wasn't just for me I was looking. I'm not the only one left out.

I was born in Bronzeville - south Chicago. Girls like me - women, too - were all around. My sisters and cousins, aunts and nieces. My mother. Grandmother. Neighbors. School mates. Nobody had it easy. It's what we were born into. The life we entered. It's all we knew.

When we were grown up, or thought we were, we weren't. We were just teenagers. Didn't know nothing. Teenage girls. And then young pregnant girls. Before long we were single mothers, or if we were lucky, trapped with some man who beat us and then gave us more babies. And yes, I know there wasn't nothing *lucky* about it. But you have to understand, in those tender years we were raised to believe a man was the only thing that could make life better, even when he didn't.

We did a lot of things to get through the day, the week, the hour. To pay the bills. To quiet the pain. To feed our babies. We were minimum wage earners and food benefit recipients, prostitutes and drug addicts, sex workers, rape victims, felons, dropouts, survivors of child abuse. We were damaged goods.

I wasn't all those things. But I was enough of them.

I'm here to tell you, I *am* not any of them. Not anymore. But deep inside, where you are who you are, I will always be some of them. Once it's beat into you, it's beat into you.

Then there is recovery.

Hah! No. Not recovery. That's the wrong word. The wrong idea. Something else. Recovery sounds like you're just lying on a bed somewhere, all bandaged up, and someone's bringing you soup and warm blankets. Wasn't nobody bringing me soup, and I had to pay for my own warm blankets and put them on my own damn self.

'Recovery' is like 'closure', and they are both unicorns. Don't none of 'em exist. Once you've been swallowed up into the belly of hell, there is no recovery and there is no closure. Not ever. But there is something. There is something you can do.

I tell you what it is. You take your despair, and you put it in the ring in a knock-down, drag-out fight with hope. Sometimes despair wins the round. Usually despair wins. But every now and then hope gets a jab in. And then another. And another. Until one day you find you're someone else. You're living a different life. And despair doesn't show its ugly face quite so much any more.

We live in a culture that treats mothers one of two ways: like goddesses or devils. It hails mothers as being the strongest women on the planet, or it blames them for every mistake a child makes. And if we are not careful, both become just one more excuse to leave her to bear the full responsibility of raising children alone. If she is a goddess, she doesn't need our help. If she is a devil, we don't want to help.

Struggle. That's what it was. Still is, some days. Determination. Willpower. Transcendence. Transformation. Faith. Failure. Every now and then, victory. Little victories. One at a time. Piling up.

There is a light. Corny as it sounds, I'm telling you, there is a light. I've seen it. It may be dim. Sometimes it's so dim you can't tell it from darkness. But there *is* a light. If you look for it. And keep looking.

And don't take your eyes off it, even when that deep, deep darkness keeps pulling you back down. There's stairs to climb even if you have to build that stairway all by your self. Believe me. I know.

Wherever there's a sordid past, there's a possible future. You just have to want it bad enough. You have to believe it bad enough. You have to grab it. Hold it in your hand. Smell it. Taste it. Never let it go.

I believed when I had no call to believe. Ask any of these ladies, these infamous mothers, they'll tell you the same thing. No proof. No guide map. No guide. Without reason, in spite of everything, I believed I would find a way out. For me. For my babies. I would make my own way out. I would get out. Where I would get out to - I didn't know that either. That's something else I had to make up. I had to create my own destination.

I never did find that book about me. But along the way, I met more and more and more people like me. Women. Single mothers. Infamous Mothers. They are my family now. They all have stories. And they are all my story.

So I did what I had to do. I put those stories in a book. My book. Our book. The book of Infamous Mothers.