

CHOICES

Katrina L. Burchett



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*I thank God for the story inside of me,
the desire to put it down on paper,
and the courage to make it available to others.*

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VISITING LAKEETA

The recipe called for four cups of miniature marshmallows, but LaKeeta Wilson added seven cups to the pot of melted butter. She liked her rice krispies treats to pull apart like saltwater taffy. As she blended her ingredients, behind her squeaked a kitchen chair against the linoleum floor. She knew her friend had sat down when the crack of wood reminded her that her mother desperately needed a new kitchen set. This one had seen better days.

“Didn’t you make those the last time I came over here?”

“I make these things all the time, girl.” LaKeeta’s hand rhythmically moved the wooden spoon in a circular motion, stirring the marshmallows down to a sweet, sticky blob.

Angel Nichols propped her elbow on the white painted tabletop and rested her chin in her hand. She had known LaKeeta since they were kids, though some would argue they were still kids, even at age seventeen. Since LaKeeta had gotten pregnant she spent many evenings in the small kitchen talking over rice krispies and milk. “And you’re not sick of ‘em yet?” she asked, crinkling her nose. “I know I would be.”

“Girl, I’ve been craving these things like crazy, and you know I can’t be denying my cravings.”

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“No kiddin’,” Angel chuckled.

LaKeeta lightheartedly rolled her coffee-colored eyes and sucked her teeth at her, instinctively adding, “I’m talking about food.”

“Yeah, right.”

Ignoring Angel’s giggles, LaKeeta spooned the marshmallow mixture into a square pan coated with non-stick cooking spray. She pressed it down with a piece of wax paper until the top was flat, and then she crossed her unembellished kitchen with the pot in hand. Moonlight peeked through sheer curtains that hung above a small window overlooking the backyard. A warm glow from the overhead light illuminated the room, highlighting gold flecks in LaKeeta’s eyes. She pushed the curtain aside and glanced out the window. White rays of moonlight danced against her reddish-brown skin. It was a calm night.

LaKeeta strode across the room, pulling the chair beside Angel far enough away from the table to make room for her protruding belly when she sat down. She placed her hand on her stomach as she positioned herself. It was more and more difficult to get comfortable nowadays.

“Whew, girl—this baby has got me *too* big,” LaKeeta huffed after she plopped into the cushioned seat. “I can’t even get comfortable at the table no more.” She placed the pot at the edge of the table and scrounged around the corners, picking at what was left sticking to the bottom and sides. The sugary remains saturated her tongue as she licked each finger. “So, are you gonna tell Shauntice what you found out tonight?” she asked out of the blue.

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“No!” Angry that she was triggered to remember what she longed to forget, Angel aimed her index finger at LaKeeta’s chubby face. “And don’t you tell anybody.”

“Don’t be pointing at me, girl,” LaKeeta pushed Angel’s hand away. “Keep your little secret.”

“Thank you.”

“Why can’t Shaun know, though?” LaKeeta curiously questioned.

“Could you just let it go?”

“I just mean...I thought you and Shaun were close.”

“Yeah, and we usually tell each other everything, but—” Angel paused for a moment to think of a good excuse, then went on, “Shaun’s dad’s been gone about a month so far, and it seems like she’s starting to feel better about life.” Angel stretched her arm out on the table and placed her head on it. “I’m not gonna give the girl something else to stress about. You know how she acts like she has to look out for me.”

“Yeah, you are blessed. It’s a rare thing to find a real friend in this world,” LaKeeta replied, and then muttered, “I *thought* I had one.”

“You and Bridgette still ain’t speaking?”

“Nope, and I don’t wanna talk about her.”

“Fine.” Angel lifted her head. “She’s not my favorite subject anyway.”

“So, you think Shaun’s dad is gone for good this time?”

Angel tipped back in the chair, extending her lean legs beneath the table, and sighed. “I hope so. And please don’t let Shaun know I told you about him. I wasn’t supposed to say anything.”

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“Then why did you?”

“I don’t know,” Angel shrugged. “Shaun was so upset last time and I was mad ‘cause she was upset and I had to talk to somebody, I guess.”

“Nobody should have to live like that.” LaKeeta’s empathetic tone suggested she understood Shauntice’s situation more than she let on. She had seen a lot in her seventeen years, though she knew better than to hold on to the memories. “I just hope it’s over, because I never felt right about not saying anything.”

Adjusting herself in the chair, she leaned forward and reached her hand around to rub her lower back. Ever since the pregnancy her body was out of whack and everything ached all the time. “I’ve been praying for Shauntice, though. God’s protecting her.”

At the mention of God, Angel examined her nails as if she wasn’t satisfied with the way she had painted them before she left her house. She felt LaKeeta’s eyes on her, and when she raised her glance she could tell by the look on her friend’s face that LaKeeta was about to turn into one of those television evangelists. As much as she loved the girl, she couldn’t stand the preaching. Ever since LaKeeta got “saved,” a term she referred to quite often, the mere mention of God bugged Angel. Saved from what, she didn’t know. Life was bearable. She was doing okay. And she certainly wasn’t pregnant like the girl preaching at her from across the table. Maybe this “saved” business wasn’t the solution for everything.

Before LaKeeta could get another word in, Angel

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stopped her. "Don't start with me, LaKeeta. I don't need you preachin' to me tonight."

"I wasn't gonna preach," LaKeeta denied, mainly because she didn't want to run Angel off. "I was just gonna ask what's up with your man."

"Yeah, well..." Angel didn't believe LaKeeta for one minute, "don't be so nosy." She laughed when LaKeeta lifted the spoon out of the pot and pretended she was going to hit her with it. "We both know you ain't crazy enough to use that. If you don't wanna lose that hair you miraculously grew, you better put that thing down." Angel's playful demeanor was revealed in her wide, dimpled smile, but she meant what she said. Nobody would ever hit her and get away with it. Everybody knew it, too.

LaKeeta pulled the pot closer and dropped the spoon into it, rolling her eyes at Angel. "I didn't wanna hear about you and Randy, anyway," she claimed. "I was just hoping you were gonna tell me ya'll broke up."

LaKeeta stood up like it was a chore and Angel waved her off. "Whatever, turtle," Angel chuckled, watching her friend slowly make her way over to the kitchen sink. "And, anyway," she added, "what's up with Kevin? You two get back together?"

LaKeeta shot a cold frown back at Angel. "Oh, I can't ask you about Randy, but you can get all up in my business?"

"That's right," she said with a yawn. "I saw Kevin over this way the other day. So what's up? Did he come by to see you?"

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“Guess I don’t have to ask what you were doing over this way,” LaKeeta teased, knowing Randy lived close by.

“Kevin didn’t come over here getting smart with you, did he?” Angel asked, ignoring LaKeeta’s comment. “Cause I’ll straighten out his narrow behind. You know I got your back.”

“You just wanna project your anger.” LaKeeta ran warm water into the pot and set it in the sink. She squeezed a dribble of orange fragranced liquid soap directly into the stream of water and watched bubbles spring up. “Don’t even act like you’d be doing it because you care about me.”

“What are you talkin’ about? I am not angry, and I do care about you.”

LaKeeta turned to face Angel. Leaning against the oak cabinetry, she looked at Angel as if she wanted to say something, but couldn’t find the words. So much floated through her mind, but because of Angel’s resentment towards all things spiritual, she filtered her thoughts and came up with silence.

Growing frustrated, Angel couldn’t stand wondering what LaKeeta wasn’t expressing. “What? Just say it.”

After a moment, LaKeeta spoke. “God’s Word says that out of the abundance of your heart your mouth speaks.”

“Maaan, why’d I even ask?” Angel moaned. “I’m not a Christian, okay? I don’t care what God’s Word says.”

“Christian or not, what’s in a person’s heart will show in what they say or what they do. God can help you with that anger if you let Him.”

Angel blew out her breath as she lifted her head, her

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eyes searing into LaKeeta's. "Change the subject or I'm leavin'," she threatened.

"Fine, I won't press," LaKeeta surrendered, throwing her hands in the air. "But you are angry, and I think Randy's the reason why. You need to leave him alone."

"Now you sound like Shaun." Angel crossed her arms across her small breasts. "I don't need ya'll tellin' me who I should like, okay?"

"I don't even believe you really like Randy."

"How you gonna tell me how I feel?"

"I know you, Angel. You think you *got* to have a man."

"You don't know what you're talkin' about."

"Fine, deny it. But you deserve better than Randy."

No, I don't is how Angel wanted to reply, but LaKeeta would have asked her why she felt that way and she didn't want to get into all of that. She didn't need a pity party or a counseling session, and that's what LaKeeta would give her if she wasn't careful.

"You wanna go to church with me tomorrow?" LaKeeta offered when Angel didn't respond.

"Why? You think Jesus can talk me into breaking up with Randy?"

"You don't have to get smart, Angel. Going to church helps, that's all. God could have a Word just for you."

Angel eyed LaKeeta's huge belly filled with child. "Don't look like He had anything to say to you all those Sundays you been goin', or maybe you just didn't listen."

LaKeeta's brow crinkled with offense at Angel's harsh judgment.

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“I’m sorry. I didn’t have to go there,” Angel quickly apologized. She genuinely cared about LaKeeta, despite their differing opinions on spiritual matters, and never meant to hurt her feelings.

“Maybe I didn’t listen—not that it’s any of your business,” LaKeeta spoke firmly in her defense, “but I *asked* God to forgive me, I *received* God’s forgiveness, and I *repented* of my sin.”

“I said I was sorry. I wasn’t judgin’.”

“What were you doin’, then?”

“Just being mean, I guess.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re angry, just like I said.”

Angel shrugged one shoulder. “Yeah,” she admitted, “maybe I am.”

“So, pray about it. Let God help you.”

“I don’t need God to help me,” Angel argued, exasperated at LaKeeta’s persistence.

“You always act like you have a problem with God. What’s up with that?”

“God has never done nothin’ for me.”

LaKeeta put a hand on her hip. “He wakes you up every morning, doesn’t He?” she spoke in God’s defense.

“No. That stupid alarm clock wakes me up.”

“God gives breath and life to everybody. That’s Isaiah 42:5. *He* breathes life into your skinny little body so you *can* wake up when the alarm goes off.”

“Don’t hate just ‘cause you gained all that weight.”

“Oh, you’re just gonna ignore the important part and act like what I said had to do with weight. All right, fine. Don’t

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listen to me.” LaKeeta turned away from Angel and took a tall glass out of the cupboard over the sink. LaKeeta didn’t know how else to reach her friend with the truth. No matter how LaKeeta put it, Angel always had a snide retort or simply changed the subject. What was she missing that would finally hit home with her stubborn friend? “But that won’t stop me from praying for you.”

Before Angel could comment on her remark, LaKeeta stepped over to the refrigerator and pulled the door open. Changing the subject, she asked, “Want something to drink?”

“No,” Angel replied, and then subtly added, “and if it’ll make you feel any better, I’m goin’ to church with Shaun tomorrow.”

LaKeeta’s smile lit up her face at the mention of Angel’s news.

As if by habit, Angel immediately changed the subject. “Oh, yeah. What’s up with Bridgette and JaMal? I heard they broke up.”

LaKeeta’s grin faded just as quickly as it came. “I said I don’t wanna talk about Bridgette.” Her tone turned bitter as she reflected on her former best friend. The fracture between her and Bridgette’s friendship left a sour taste in her mouth. But how was she supposed to feel after what happened? Angel’s words broke into her thoughts.

“Now who sounds angry? Goodness, girl, what’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong with me.” LaKeeta used her foot to keep the refrigerator door from closing as she took out a

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carton of milk. “Sure you don’t want some?” she asked as she filled the glass.

“No thanks, and something is wrong.”

Ignoring Angel’s remark, LaKeeta drank until the milk was gone, then filled the glass again. She placed the carton on the top shelf of the refrigerator, then shut it and set the glass down on the counter. She grabbed a napkin out of the holder on the counter and wiped away the milk mustache that moistened her top lip. Taking a butter knife from a drawer, she cut the large rice krispies square into nine smaller squares. “You want one of these?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Angel grabbed a handful of miniature marshmallows out of the bag left on the table. As LaKeeta walked towards her, the pan of rice krispies treats in one hand and a half-eaten treat in the other, Angel looked past her friend and up at the ivory plate clock on the wall. It was 9:30 p.m. “What time are your mom and dad supposed to get back?”

“I don’t know. Around ten, ten-thirty.”

“Think they’ll make me leave?”

Caught mid-bite, LaKeeta held up a finger—she was taught to never speak with food in her mouth. Once she swallowed, she answered, “I don’t think my mom will have a problem with you being here as long as she knows that Miss Vernie knows you’re here, but...” she rolled her eyes, “my dad might complain.” She glanced over at the glass of milk she had left on the counter. “Aw, maaan.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

“Thanks,” LaKeeta replied with relief because she did

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not feel like getting up.

“Why wouldn’t your dad want me to stay?” Angel asked when she returned with the glass of milk. She sat down and handed the glass to LaKeeta.

LaKeeta received the glass with a smile, then raised it to her lips and gulped like she was dying of thirst. “It wouldn’t have anything to do with you,” she assured her friend. “He’d put you out to be smart towards me.”

“He’s still giving you a hard time?”

“Yeah, well, he can stay mad at me till Jesus comes back. And Bridgette, too. I really don’t care. This is my body.” LaKeeta patted her belly. “This was my choice.”