

STAGE TWO



## Story of a Black Woman

“MY MOTHER SPOKE TO ME CONSTANTLY ABOUT BEING FREE AND, IN THE SAME BREATH, REMINDED ME THAT I WAS A BLACK WOMAN.”

*Tashi's story was never recorded. Most slaves were forbidden to read and write, so the spoken-word and songs carry their truth from one generation to the next. Historically, motherhood has been an important role for black women. From pre-colonial Africa, where children were highly prized, the role of child bearing and child rearing was taken seriously and valued.*

*My mother, Reta, was a descendent of Tash's daughter, Medora. Medora was born into slavery, but spent most of her life as a black woman in the free world of the white men. Like her mother, Medora took pride in the legacy of culture, strength, and survival. She dreamed of a different life for her children as she taught them to cope with the hardship of discrimination.*

*My mother spoke to me constantly about being free and, in the same breath, reminded me that I was a Black woman. I thought if I kept my life close to the black community I would be safe and unchallenged. In day care, all of my playmates were black children like me. But, when I entered kindergarten in an integrated school, I was faced by a different world. I was aware of 'differences.' But, were we supposed to stay in separate worlds because of our skin color?*

*My mother always worked hard. She cleaned the homes of two families and cared for their children whenever she was needed. She worked long hours outside of our home, and my sister and I missed her. As far back as I can remember "kin" took care of us in my mother's absence. "Kin" are women who are not biological mothers, but who play a mothering role in raising black children. In our culture, children are seen as part of and belonging to a communal network that extends beyond their natural parents. That community is always made up of women who are sensitive to the needs of their sisters.*

*My parents did not spend many years together. When I was four years old, my father left my mother unexpectedly. One day, my mother came home after work and found a fifty dollar bill on the table with a note saying "Good-bye ... hope this helps." The family problems were holding him back from becoming successful. He blamed my mother for being too demanding. I can still remember how sad my mother was. She was scared*

*and confused by my father's unexpected abandonment. I didn't understand that he wasn't coming back. I thought he just needed a vacation from us.*

*My grandmother came to live with us right away. Her presence seemed to comfort my mother. My grandmother did not have to be asked to help ... she simply knew my mother's needs. She gave up her job and rented her home to live with us. I knew my grandmother had to give up a lot of her life to save our lives and help my mother. Was the sacrifice making her as angry as my 'daddy?' I worried about her becoming 'fed up' with us and leaving like my daddy. Every day, when I got home from school, I looked to see if there was a note on the kitchen table from my grandmother. The only way I could help was to be 'good.' I worked hard to anticipate the needs of both my mother and grandmother. I listened to their instructions. I tried to be as grown up as I knew how to be. At first, they were excited that I could do adult things. Soon, excitement yielded to expectations ... it was as though I was on a treadmill that kept going faster and faster without my permission. I was proud that I could keep the pace, but the pace was consuming me. Reconciling child with adult became as confusing as reconciling black and white. I must have done a good job, because my mother and grandmother bragged to everyone about how "good I was." That is how I learned that 'being good' meant 'doing good' ... even when I didn't want to.*