

It Takes A Village Some Say

Ngwah-Mbo Nana Nkweti | *The Baffler*, No. 36

Volume I: Our Girl

I

Don't believe everything you read in the tabloids. We're nothing like the others. We're not The Slick Salikis splashed page to page in the papers; a couple utterly obsessed with living the good life, so concerned with keeping up appearances that we pimped out our own daughter. Fabrications. Rag sheet revisionist history. All of it. We did our best by Our Girl.

She was eleven years old when we got her, Our Girl. She came to us with a shocking expedited-shipping efficiency after years of adoption delays: endless home studies, background checks, credit checks, health checks—then ding-dong, ding-dong, a child, handily home-delivered. Imported from the motherland. She was bundled up in this sad little polyester coat, the color of off-brand cola—fudgy brown, tasteless, fizzy—utterly useless in warding off the cold and bluster of that winter night. We pulled her shivering frame into the warmth of our home and she scuttled off to an entryway corner—so straight-backed and vigilant between our coatrack and umbrella stand.

Her guardian, Mrs. Dukong, a booming storm cloud of a woman, thundered in behind her. Teeth chattering. Chatter chattering: Hello, hello! It's so cold, so cold. They had just been to Houston she told us (so warm!) and then on to (so windy!) Chicago. She pronounced the latter “Qi-cargo,” which sounded vaguely like the name of some New Age travelware boutique, a nag champa-scented place specializing in vegan carry-ons for the ashram hermitage set. It was the kind of shop we might have frequented in our East Village heydays; before our vacation fund became the baby fund, before we moved out of the city to a home with a backyard and a swing set and a better school system for our someday children.

“The girl? Call her anything, anything you like,” she said. “Call me Aunty Gladys. ‘Mrs. Dukong.’ Hmph. So formal, so formal.”

We were seated in the formal living room. We could see that Aunty Gladys was impressed. She was meant to be. It was our showcase parlor: chandeliered, marbled, credenza-ed; a place where we received guests with a dazzling solicitousness typically the dominion of ambassadors feting visiting state dignitaries. Our Girl sat mutely by the flames of our hearth, while we beamed at her warmly from the comfy remove of a Chesterfield sofa.

“Mrs. Du . . . Aunty Gladys,” we began. “We're so grateful—”

“Nonsense. It is the girl's family that is grateful,” she answered. “Grateful that one of you is from Cameroon so she will know her culture. Not grow up like these young girls twerking their makande on television. Godless Americ—,” she stopped to gape silently at the salt and pepper set we made, “sorry, sorry. The cold has scattered my brains.”

We were suitably understanding. How could we be otherwise? What followed was all courtesy and business: Yes, Our Girl had all the appropriate papers. The girl's parents? Her father, may he rest, would

be so honored by this opportunity for his youngest daughter to live in white man country. Her mother? Back home, with Our Girl's six younger sisters, happy to know that at least one daughter would go to bed each night with more than cold gari in her belly.

This saddened us, this sibling separation, but we couldn't take them all on, could we? We—a chemist, a botanist turned floral stylist—were hardly millionaires. We lived an average middle-class New Jersey 'burb life: a two-story colonial with a three-car drive and ballooning mortgage payments, two car notes paid off, the other, not so much. Our new Auntie understood, took the balance of the \$30,000 in fees we had agreed upon, told us it would help them, told us that this was the way it was done “back home.” One child lifted up and up till they returned and lifted their whole family out of shantytown quarters, out of thatch huts, out of hollowed and hungry lives.

We nodded in understanding.

Our Girl's family would be our family, we told her.

How could it be otherwise?

II

We were finally a family. Finally! Well, not quite. An adjustment period was to be expected, after all. For weeks, Our Girl roamed our home merely touching things, eyes sauced, while we followed her hopefully with our own. She was fascinated by bling (usage courtesy of a How to Talk to Your Pre-Teen pamphlet, just a coin-toss pick from the multitude of parenting e-books, magazine articles, and podcasts we devoured). Bling: Our Le Creuset crystal vases, the gold-leaf lion head knobs of an armoire, even the gleaming touchscreen interface of our chrome Whirlpool washer. We took to wearing our shimmery baubles and finery indoors, pantomiming our movements—exaggerated yawns and back stretches that dingle-dangled bracelets and wristwatches, anything to draw her to us. We craved her approbation. Anxiously laid shiny objects at her feet like penitents. Did she like her new room? (kitted out in cotton-candied furls of pink). Were her patent leather Mary Janes too tight? (the sizes her Auntie Gladys emailed had been as off the mark as that miserable winter coat she had bought the girl).

In retrospect, it is all a tad embarrassing, that bottomless need for validation. We needed a win; we habitual gold star-earners, merit scholars, six-figure careerists. For years, amongst the Forjindams, the Atekwanas, the Bangwanas of our Cameroonian clique, we had been failures, reproductive underachievers. In another time, another wife might discreetly have been proffered by some well-meaning village Auntie, oh so solicitous about maintaining the family line. Ours was a tribe in which marriage and procreation went hand in hand, peopled by descendants of rural gran-grans accustomed to measuring their worth by number of offspring like so many sacks of cacao. Although Western diplomas brought Western mindsets, remnants of old ways persist.

“Habi white women no sabi born pickin? Habi nah the man who no get bedroom power?” our so-called friends conjectured in whispers as they dandled chubby infants or chomped on oily sese plantain at every born-house but our own. Amongst our New York social set, it was somehow worse; we were the definition of mediocre, an average Joe and Jane. There were our co-op neighbors, the Talbots—childless by choice, a couple who took open-jaw journeys around the globe toting that vegan luggage from Bali to Madagascar, while we watered their fire escape philodendrons. Then the chef-owners at our favorite

bistro, Tomas and Didier, devastated yet resilient after a childhood friend reneged on her promise to be their birth mother, to Easy-Bake-oven their offspring.

But poor, barren Mr. and Mrs. Saliki were finally a family. Gone from duo to trio. And after nine bumpy, oops-riddled months, we were getting the hang of things with the evidence to prove it: snapshots on IG, thousands of page views for “Bringing Up Baby/Bébé/Mtoto/Bimbo,” our interracial, multicultural childrearing blog. We had become chronic chroniclers. If alien life forms explored our planet eons from now, there would be irrefutable proof, found footage of our happy family: at the pumpkin patch, canoodling with mall Santas, attending any number of calendared events at the Children’s Museum enrichment series. We were building our own exhibit of sorts: a collection of report cards and other artifacts, often lacquered and laminated, shining, as if under glass.

The corridors of Highland Terrace Middle School were bemusedly circuitous and maple-wooded, we held hands as we Hansel and Greteled our way through this educational IKEA in search of the Principal’s Office. We had been called in for a special conference to discuss our precocious child’s “special needs.”

“There you are, Mr. and Mrs. Saliki.” A secretary sidled up on slipper-heeled feet, ushering us into the cool hush of another wood-paneled chamber where Principal Artemis sat in state behind a huge coffin of a desk. Her brow was pinched behind dark cat’s eye glasses. We sat where we were instructed to.

“It’s customary to begin these meetings with some pleasantries, with chit-chat,” she said, “yet the circumstances that led me to call you here are of such a serious nature . . . well, I can see no other way but to get right to the heart of the matter.”

Here she paused. But we were trained observers, habituated to gathering facts before formulating shaky conclusions. We merely leaned forward to indicate our interest. She seemed taken aback, hesitated a moment, then said:

“Well, your daughter, well . . . she has done very well here at Highland, in spite of some initial concerns about her ability to adjust to the culture here, our expectations. We make every effort to be inclusive here.”

“Inclusive?” we echoed. Yes, no doubt they thought they were. There were two Indian students from Uttar Pradesh, a half-Czech Latina, as well as ongoing relations with a sister school in Qingdao, China. And yes, there was Our Girl.

“Yes, inclusive,” said Artemis, forging on. “Progressive, in fact. But even we have our limits. There are some practices that we simply cannot tolerate. Your daughter has been . . . appropriating . . . the belongings of others.”

“Appropriating?” one of us queried in confusion.

“You mean stealing?” said the other, attempting to clarify.

“No, no. We have no evidence of that. Well, we’ve had complaints from other parents. About items. Items gone missing from their homes. Items later noted in her possession.”

“This is ridiculous,” we cried out. “She’s not stealing, so how did she—”

“Gifts. She says they were gifts. From male students who were interested in her . . .”

“So all you really know is that a few moon-eyed teenage boys gave her ‘gifts.’ And you called us in here for that?!”

We rose in ire.

Her voice rose as well. “Mr. and Mrs. Saliki! Please understand. These items were family heirlooms: Dr. Donovan’s ruby tie-clip; a diamond clasp passed down in the Connellys’ family for generations. Worth thousands of dollars. Priceless.”

“Where are these items? Certainly not in our home.”

“I don’t imagine she would just leave these things hanging around in plain sight. Would she? Your daughter is a very clever girl.”

“Not by this account,” we replied.

“But there’s more. Some of the young men. Well they say she does things, sexual things, for these items.”

“They say, they say,” we parroted, cawing with bitter mirth, well versed in the cutting power of whispers made truth.

We were done then. Up and out of the room. Of course only after we had tossed off the obligatory threats to call our attorneys, cried foul regarding Our Girl’s token race status, but really all we wanted was to take her home and make sure she was safe. You see, she was damaged when we got her, Our Girl. Something Aunt Gladys had neglected to mention, lest we contract some “buyer’s remorse.” Imagine! It had come out in family therapy. There was an Uncle, we learned. She was only four years old.

We transferred her out of Highland Terrace and she continued to excel marvelously. Of course, we talked to her that evening about the allegations. She cried. We cried. There were hugs. And for the first time in the four years she had lived with us, instead of Mama Saliki and Papa Saliki, she called us Mom and Dad. Our family was made flesh. Knit together in adversity.

How could it be otherwise?

III

We did our best by Our Girl. There are those, perhaps some of the very neighbors who open-arm welcomed us with casseroles and plates heaped high with homemade brownies, who now tut-tut and give quotes to reporters skulking behind our rosebushes and . . . but let us take you to the beginning of the end.

It started when they took the Whirlpool. Burly men in overalls daintily rang our doorbell, asked permission to come in please like they were popping over for afternoon tea—something innocuous and neighborly like Earl Grey. The ones who took the car were far less courteous; they disappeared it in the nighttime while we lay fitfully in our beds, dreaming of bills come due and canceled credit cards.

We were having a few financial woes.

Doing our best in the face of career setbacks. Who knew an R&D chemist for General Mills could be downsized after twenty-two years? People were still eating their Wheaties. Someone was always after those Lucky Charms. And the demand for artfully arranged flowers had never been particularly high in our corner of this nominally Garden State. So things were tight, yet we were hopeful. We weren't keeping up with the Joneses. But we were keeping our obligations. People think Bono and Bill Gates are supporting the continent; they don't know it's us. Families like ours sending millions in remittances so cousin Manfred can have that corrective eye operation or paying the school fees for little Arabella in the village. That was us.

You have to understand how preoccupied we were back then. How desperate. Our Girl was seventeen years old, about to go off to a college whose tuition we could no longer afford. So we were slightly relieved when she said she wanted to put off school and live life for a bit. We were proud of this young woman. (When had she become such a woman, all hips and height?) She was better even than we had raised her to be, helping out around the house on weekends after we had to let the maid go. When had she learned about rinse cycles and pre-soaks or how to use all those special vacuum attachments? We had never even made her make her own bed.

She got a job. And two weeks later gave us an envelope thick with cash, just a little something to help out around the house. We didn't know where the money came from. We didn't want to know where the money came from. She was smart, she was enterprising, she was Our Girl.

This went on for months. Two weeks ago, Aunty Gladys was arrested. There are allegations of human trafficking and slavery and forced labor. A special prosecutor. Horrific testimonies from children she had placed with Cameroonian families all over the United States. One girl in Houston was forced to sleep on a pallet in the family's garage from the age of eight, tasked with cooking all the meals and caring for their three kids and cleaning the house. Another boy in Chicago was being sexually abused by the man of the house. Allegedly, Aunty Gladys would go to illiterate villagers and have them sign ad-hoc employment contracts, filling their heads with promises of educational advancement and money to support them. The courts contend that none of the children were sent to school. That they were little more than indentured servants, at their employers' beck and call day in and day out. The nominal pay they received (a pittance really at \$30/week) was funneled back to their parents only after Aunty Gladys received her 50 percent processing fee. It was all coming to light.

Another light flashes beyond the gilded confines of our home.

We have been closeted here since the scandal broke. Blackout curtains drawn tight against the flash of camera bulbs.

The article on our family was in the Post today.

We are Page 6 fodder, an exposé chockfull of doggerel and grainy, long-lens shots.

In the paper there are pictures of the "house that whoring built," our rather unflattering driver's license photos, and screen captures from Our Girl's website, Comely Cleaners, where she offers maid services—topless, they gleefully report. A service allegedly offered to half the neighborhood, at a discounted "friends and family" rate, no less.

She had the decency to call us last night. To warn us.

“Why would you say those things, honey?” we cried. Broken.

“Because I needed to,” she said simply, her voice dry and crisp as fresh bills.

“But we love y . . . haven’t we always been good to you? Given you everything you wanted?”

“Yes. You took me from my loving family so you could make my life better, right?” she said. “You bought the best and taught me to want the best. To need and breathe it like air. You should be thrilled; the money they gave me for the story will pay for college and then some. Maybe I can parlay this into a book. Maybe a movie. Wish me well.”

She hung up then and we clung to each other. Shivering in the waning hours of the evening. We withdrew to our bedroom. On the nightstand in the master suite we found a creamy linen envelope. Inside: a diamond clasp with an eagle insignia; a ruby-studded tie-clip, and a note in Our Girl’s meticulous handwriting that read simply:

To Mom and Dad,

For your troubles.

Your perfect daughter,

Winsome

Volume II: Their Girl

I

I give good read. Mais je suis rien commes des autres. Nothing like them. Those poor, poor telethon kids you scribble letters to and force-feed poto-poto rice “for just ten cents a day.” Fly-haloed. Swollen tum-tums begging for your pre-tax dollars. You give and give and give again. #SaveOurKids. #BecauseYouCare. No, I am nothing like them, but I made your heartstrings twang with tabloid tales of my liberation from the Salikis, who took me when I was just a small nyango and made me Their Girl.

I was thirteen years old when she came for me; Mrs. Fontep a.k.a. Ngando a.k.a. Dukong. First choice had been my follow-back, Arabella. Last cocoa in our family—age eight but could pass for the type of cuddly five year old you and your madame know from commercials where Happy Children™ eat Cheerios™ and Lucky Charms™ and everything is shine-shine. Bella was tres mignon—a doll-baby with long, Hausa hair and a sweet-as-bonbon manner so unlike me, my maman’s “wahala pickin.”

“Perfect, perfect,” said Mrs. Dukong.

At the center of our front parlor, Bella was twirling slowly for inspection in a dress maman had fashioned from the remnants of an old okrika dress, its tattered lace made fine again by her hand. Maman just sat there next to Mrs. Dukong, quiet as a mouet-mouet, head hanging low as overripe paw-paw. I was setting the table for our guest’s meal. My ever-watchful grande souer Frieda monitored from the kitchen doorway—neither in nor out.

“Does she speak proper English?” asked Mrs. Dukong.

Do we speak proper English? Swine-beef! I wanted to tell that fatty bobolo, “Nous sommes bilingues.” My family had lived in Douala for ten years now since maman had come to make market—so we spoke “proper” English and “proper” French and pidgin and Franglais. Not like Mrs. Dukong, with her pili-pili bush pronunciation grinding up “proper” into “pro-paah.”

I looked to Frieda, who looked at me and shook her head “no.” So I folded my arms and sucked my teeth.

Mrs. Dukong gave me some kind of eye.

“Do you have something to say, Zo . . . what is this one’s name again?” she turned and asked maman, who, without lifting her gaze from the ground, said, “Don’t mind her, Madame. That one is always talking.”

“I only wanted to say that the food is ready, Tantine.” I capped the lie with my best imitation Bella curtsy.

“No, no,” Mrs. Dukong replied. “I no get time for chop.”

At this, maman finally lifted her head. We all stared. For weeks she had been preparing. Chey! Frieda have you dry-cleaned this floor? See me this girl. You want Madame to think we have no manners? Wahala pickin carry that new serving dish and go tchuk am high for shelf where Arabella cannot reach. She had been bartering her skills for weeks to make this dinner perfect. To buy gari that was a fine gold dust. Miraculously weevil-free sef-sef! For goat meat to put in the egusi stew, the butcher’s wife received three new attires gratuit. Hmph. What made her too good for the bongo fish we usually ate it with? And why did we have to make show-show for people who were begging us for a child? People who were thieving my sister.

“You’ll not sit and eat, small-small?” Maman asked. “I made the food special, secret family ingredients.”

“No, no. I cannot,” Mrs. Dukong repeated.

Maman frowned.

We smiled.

Savoring the thought.

Our bellies biting.

“Very well. Well, well, Madeline,” Mrs. Dukong finally said, sighing. “I can see you went to some trouble. Pack the food. I will taste it and give the rest to my night-watch.”

She smiled at her generosity.

I was vexed sootay. This woman with all her juro-juro chins wobbling. Had she ever missed a meal in her whole life? Making me a langa dog sniffing for scraps in my own home!

I took the plate to the kitchen as instructed but scraped half into a bowl for my sisters and me to eat behind the house. The rest I put in maman's best new dish. Mixed in some tap water to puff it up again. Placed it on the floor between my legs, squatting to add in some of my own secret family ingredient. Hehehe.

I was humming when I returned to the parlor to find Mrs. Dukong shouting. I thought of her "special" soup and squared my shoulders, ready to deny or to fight. But I saw Arabella hiding behind Mamas skirt, crying until catarrh was coming from her nose.

"You tried to give me an Eboah!" said Mrs. Dukong.

Oh. I forgot to mention that perfect Bella had a slight defect—a tiny limp, no worse than any other kids we knew in the quartier—with their bend-bend legs and rocking-pony gaits—all thanks to poorly dosed polio vaccinations at the free government clinic. Mrs. Dukong yelled some more but maman, who knew how to make market if she knew anything at all, began her best buyam-sellam spiel. She pulled me forward. Sold Mrs. Dukong on how strong and hardworking I was.

"I don't need a housegirl—"

"She's top of her class—"

Yeah. I had been. Before I was kicked out of school for lack of school fees.

"She looks a bit old—"

"She's only ten, Madame."

Mrs. Dukong lifted an eyebrow.

"Sorry, I meant eleven, her birthday just passed."

"Hmph. She will do."

A month later I was shivering by a fireplace that looked like it could roast me whole like a goat. I was tired. I was hungry. And a little angry. I was what the Salikis wanted. And maybe a bit more than they bargained for.

Wasn't I worth it?

II

"How now, petite soeur? How you d—"

My sister Frieda's face was stuck mid-question—all googly-eyed, hanging mop showing her gap-teeth. Hehehe. Our shaky Skype vid connection kept sputtering like a clando taxi at the motor-park. We had been talking for an hour and usually got cut off by now because Frieda always forgot to top off her phone minutes. In the hush, I heard the Mother coming. Or rather the swish of the high blonde ponytail which

forever swung behind her, agitating the air. She was in the open door to my bedroom, the one I wasn't allowed to lock until I officially turned sixteen. Two years from now by the Salikis' count. Two years ago by mine.

"Oh, nooo. The screen froze again?" she said. "Do they need another cell phone?"

"It's fine, Madame," said Frieda. Unfrozen. The Salikis had sent my family an iPhone with all types of social media apps pre-loaded so we could keep in touch.

"Please, call me Jessica," the Mother said.

"Thank you, Madame Jessica," my sister replied. Frieda would never call her by her given name. Back home, we respected our elders. No matter how silly they were. Besides, Frieda didn't believe half the things I told her about the Mother because real parents never teetered on your Bieber bedspread to practice putting on lip-gloss with you, or asked you about your period and your feelings, or sashayed around in your Rock and Republic jeans humming because they've still "got it." Never. Ever.

Just a day ago, the Mother was blasting Kamer hip-hop, telling me, "This new Jovi track na die!"

Seriously?

Frieda doesn't understand. The Salikis had plenty. In the beginning, they would always be hovering around me. Showing me their fine-fine clothing and their fine-fine jewelry like I had never seen such things. Like I was from the bush! The Mother always swishing her hair in my face like I couldn't buy my own horse-tail at the mall! But Frieda would look at screenshots of my perfect pink bedroom and curse me fine-fine for complaining. Tell me if I had stayed in Cameroon, I would have ended up like maman with three kids, three different fathers, none of them her husband.

Frieda doesn't understand. It's a grind. Na hard work being one of the Happy Children™. Constant extra-currics: ballet on Tuesdays, riding lessons on Thursdays, daily violin, and an English tutor to help me speak better "American." Then there's school palava. The run-hide-fight active shooter drills in halls full of strapping blond boys who'd sooner bang-bang shoot you down than date you it seemed. Their love on reserve for roving packs of perky girls: Amber (all twelve of her), Tiffani/y (the two with a "y" and six with "i" that she is), all looking right through you till you got the perfect Gucci knockoff and hair extensions like Kims K through Z. Everything fake. But at least, at least, some things come naturally. I was great at maths, excuse me, mathematics, or more accurately AP algebra came easy. Like my maman, I had a head for figures.

Soon as they knew, the Salikis signed me up for Future Entrepreneurs Club. And Mathletics for good measure.

My sister and Madame Jessica chatted for a few more minutes. Mainly, Frieda's "thank you, thank you" for the new clothes sent to her and the rest of my "six" siblings. Mrs. Dukong was masterful at supplying official-looking documents from various boarding schools, at extracting ever-mounting school fees. Unlike me, Frieda had problems lying about make-believe kin. She made show-and-tell for the Mother, gathering Arabella and some small yam-heads from the quartier together for Skype sessions. Called me a lie-lie pickin. Though it didn't keep her from selling all that extra clothing to help fill maman's new stall in the market—a side business selling American goods. Maman got a mean mark-up. We got something just for us. But sometimes Frieda's boyfriend Boniface helped manage the store when maman was busy sewing. I didn't trust him with a register full of our hard-earned nkap. And I didn't bite my tongue about

saying so. Ey-ey! The yam-head was a cut-purse—okay, okay—that’s “pickpocket” in American. Former cut-purse, Frieda said. Then she said I was a hypocrite. My hands were way down deep in the Salikis’ pockets, no be so?

“Not hypocritical, grande souer,” I said. “Entrepreneurial. That’s me.”

Wasn’t I worth it?

III

I did what I had to. For myself. For my family’s future. Mrs. Dukong discovered maman’s kiosk and demanded her cut. Grubby hands in every pot. And the well was running dry. The Salikis were struggling. So I got entrepreneurial.

It began with heartbreak. One of those strapping blond boys finally took a liking. Imagine! An American boyfriend of my very own! But for months his gaze kited over me in school corridors. I went dateless at three dances. After a time, it dawned on me. I was too dark for daylight hours. I was low, felt invisible. But I yam what I yam, so I rallied. And soon another came along—big, brawny—his people hailing from somewhere along the country’s midriff. I looked at him and saw plenty: fattened calves, amber waves of grain. He looked at me and saw exotica: spears, breasts—everything jutting. He would fuck me for novelty, then marry his corn-fed sweetie. But this time round I would get something. Treasured. A keepsake. My own little piece of America.

My trinkets attracted corn-fed girls. They go gaga for show-show bling, for bedazzled cellies and pink-sequined UGGs. They want so much more than Daddy’s Little Girl deserves. So I taught them how to find new daddies, ones seeking sugar babies. It worked so well I set up a site. And soon another, for maid services au naturel. It was easy. This is a land where homemade XXX equals endorsements, a rapper hubby, and an iPhone app of your very own. Sex always, always sells.

Question was: how to keep Mrs. Dukong out of my profit margins?

So I gathered intel, touched base with some of the other children she had airdropped in barely vetted homes across the U.S.

A girl in Houston. Sleeping on pallet? No!

Another boy in Chicago. They touched you down there? You don’t say?

Horrific tales, all.

My mission? Accomplished. Had all the ammunition needed and then some.

Don’t judge. It was war. Kill or be killed.

So by the time they took the Whirlpool I was ready. A sugar daddy client knew a guy who knew a guy who worked at the Post. A week later, Aunty Gladys was arrested. There were allegations of human trafficking and slavery and forced labor. A special prosecutor appointed.

My interview is in the Post today. My side hustles too salacious to pass up in print. It was publicity for my businesses—Comely Cleaners set to double its customer base.

It really was never meant to be about the Salikis. My story is my own to tell.

Said as much when I called them last night.

Listening as they blubbered about all the things they'd done for me.

For me? Seriously? It was me who made them a family. I'm the one that made them real. "Wasn't I worth it?" I asked. "I was snatched up from my loving family so yours could be complete. All this talk of giving me the American dream. Then just like that, you're raiding my college fund."

"We had a mortgage to pay!" They cried. "You needed a roof over your head!"

"I needed a future," I said finally. "And now I've made sure I'll have one."

I hung up. Left them to their tears and seltzer water.

Tucked away in my hotel bed, I dreamed of better. Maybe I could parlay my story into a book. Or a Lifetime movie at the very least. I pictured the opening credits.

Based upon a true story. With my true name in bright lights . . .

Zora.