

# UNMARKED

## SHONDRA BOWIE RILEY

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

“DO NOT open these!” Dr Norris's straight-pressed hair swayed as she sauntered along the line of anxious 6th graders standing in front of the fluorescent-lit classroom's door. Her A-line skirt, thin waist and rounded hips made her body look like a bell ringing as she handed the unmarked cream-yellow envelopes to each of us, “These are for your parents ONLY.”

“This ol' apple head. What she talkin' bout now!” LaTanya groaned just low enough so Keisha and I could hear. We sucked our teeth in agreement.

I ran my fingers across my teeth, searching for a sprouting fingernail to chew on. “Are we in trouble?” I whispered.

“Girl, chill. We gone after today, anyway,” Keisha replied much louder than I would have. She was so cool.

Since kindergarten, La Tanya, Keisha, and I had been best friends at Ingliston Christian School, a predominantly Black private school on the city's edge. In our last year, we were all twelve and had become very different. I wanted to fall in love, kiss New Wave boys, marry John Taylor of Duran Duran, and move to London. Keisha wanted to be a music journalist, marry Prince, and move to Minnesota. LaTanya's parents were super strict Christians. She never told us if she thought about boys or the future.

“Y'all stoopid!” She preached, “Don't nobody want yo' bald heads!”

The night before our last day at Ingliston, we decided on our outfits on a three-way call, where we made all our important decisions.

“Imma wear my yellow Izod Lacoste shirt and jeans,” LaTanya commanded, “Y'all wear yellow too!”

Keisha sucked her teeth and sighed, “Imma wear my purple and yellow paisley blouse, jean shorts and white Converse, Lisa Bonét-style,” She was so cool.

“Um, okay, ummm. I guess... I'll wear my ripped yellow skeleton T-shirt with my black skirt and Converse?” I questioned.

“You so stoopid! Always want t'wear somethin' crazy-” LaTanya said.

“Girl. Chill,” Keisha defended, “let her wear what she wanna wear.”

“I guess,” LaTanya replied, smacking her teeth. Even through the phone, I could feel her giving me baby-stank face.

The yellow school bus pulled into Pandora Park around 11 a.m. We could see Coach Reggie, Dr. Norris's husband, standing above a tin barrel with grey smoke billowing from fired charcoal briquettes. His close-cut afro had a constellation of sweat beads that slid down his face, like stars at play. Younger children were screaming, laughing, sweating, and tumbling over each other while they ran on the grass.

The swarm of kids splintered when the boys from my class, some wearing jerseys in their favorite team's colours, zigzagged for the basketball courts. LaTanya, Keisha and I carefully moved through the smell of Ultra Sheen hair grease and the sweet smell that radiates from small bodies before the musty stink of puberty takes over.

We huddled behind a manufactured boulder to shade ourselves from the merciless sun and the teacher's overseeing eyes. In the shadow, we tore into the unmarked envelopes. Paper floated onto the concrete like yellow confetti.

I mined my nailbeds with my teeth and heard LaTanya giggling with self-satisfaction. Keisha drew in a massive breath of hot air and BBQ smoke; I didn't hear an exhale.

*June 12, 1984*

*Dear Parents,*

*Our children are leaving iCS for secular Junior High Schools in September. I know that some of them listen to music that promotes un-Christian behavior, and I fear for their souls.*

*I've researched and summarized alarming facts for your consideration.*

### **Duran Duran**

*This group sends messages for The Occult via cryptic song lyrics. The album, "Seven and the Ragged Tiger", has satanic symbols that call forth Satan himself. **Beware.***

### **Prince**

*Prince claims he believes in God. What kind of Christian participates in lewd performances on stage and is a cross-dressing bisexual who flaunts this with no shame? His band members, Wendy and Lisa, are also deviant homosexuals. Prince and his cohorts will corrupt our children's souls.*

### **Marvin Gaye**

*You may be surprised to see his name in this letter. In the past, I have been a fan myself. I had to ask myself: What kind of Christian sings about sexual healing and uses cocaine? So possessed was he that he attacked his father, who had no choice but to take him out of this world.*

*Please consider the above when sending your children away from the safety of Christian education. One of the devil's favorite tools is secular music. I advise you to remove this music from your collections and be diligent about knowing what your children listen to.*

*Please feel free to contact me for further information as my research continues.*

*Yours in Christ,*

*Dr Dorothea Norris*

*6th Grade Teacher,*

*Ingliston C.S.*

Our shock was as palpable as the smell of smoked meat surrounding us. As flesh was burning, so was my heart. We did what we were told. We prayed every day, every night and ALL day at school. Now, she was trying to take away what we prayed for: to be women like Reema Ruspoli, body painted and dancing on the sand from mountains in the North down to the Rio Grande. We longed to be adored by men with probing eyes and glossy pouts.

And Marvin Gaye?! He is the patron saint of Soul. *Dr Norris, YOU are a blasphemer!*

“GIRLS!” Her voice stoked my blazing emotions. My heart raced with rage as I looked up and saw Dr Norris on the other side of the boulder.

“I told you not to open those letters!” she shouted, leaning over the rock. Sweat made her hair coil at the root, the straightened ends rising from her head. With the late morning sun behind her, she looked like a burning bush.

“These are lies!” I shouted, my voice trembling with anger, “Why?” My tears diluted the salty-sweat sting in my eyes.

“It don't matter. We gone after today!” Keisha said, emboldened.

“Y'all so stoopid!” LaTanya barked, trying to distance herself from our ‘transgression’.

“I am so disappointed in you, girls. Put them in your bags and give them to your parents!” Dr Norris shouted. She then turned and faced the sun, closed her eyes and said, “I rebuke you, Satan, in the name of Jesus Christ!” She rushed off and headed towards Coach Reggie. We stood up, laughed intimately at the crazy woman and pushed the crumpled papers into our backpacks, like dirty little secrets.

We squinted at the staggering brightness of the sunlight, then moved from behind the boulder towards the mayhem of careless play and the smoked enticement of BBQ'd meat; this was enough to abandon our heartbreak. We tossed our backpacks on the 6th-grade pile and played chase with squawking kindergartners.

*Shondra Bowie Riley is a Black American poet and writer from South Los Angeles, now based in Scotland. She has published essays on equality, climate change, gender-based violence and living with disability. Her Substack, Relevant Sense, reflects her intersectional worldview through accessible poetry and evocative essays.*