

Locked

by Natassia Guyton

The first thing I remember about that office up North is the doors.

They required badges, codes, permissions. But the real locks were quieter:

A supervisor saying he didn't recall a conversation we both knew had happened.

An investigation labeled "for internal use only."

A floor only certain people could access.

My own mouth, closing at strategic times to survive the day.

I have always believed that if something is wrong, you say so. That is how I was raised.

In church, in classrooms, in the steady cadence of my mother's voice—truth mattered.

Even when it was inconvenient. Especially then.

So when I saw what was happening, I spoke.

The first time he yelled at me, it was through a speakerphone while I was in my bedroom.

His voice filled the room, sharp and unfiltered, stripped of the charm he wore in public. I

stood near the dresser, staring at the wall so I wouldn't absorb the force of his voice. I

remember the hum of the ceiling fan. The way my fingers trembled but my voice did not.

I kept my tone even. Professional. Careful.

What I didn't know was that my son was standing in the hallway.

Children are not meant to hear grown men try to dismantle their mothers. They are not

meant to hear authority weaponized. Later, his teacher would tell me he had repeated

parts of what he heard—adult words in a child's mouth. I felt the air leave my body when

she told me. Not embarrassment. Not shame.

Violation.

I had brought him up North for opportunity. Stability. A federal position. Health benefits. A future with less financial strain than the one I had known growing up in Memphis. I told him this move was temporary discomfort for long-term gain.

I did not know I was also bringing him into a war zone disguised as a workplace.

After that call, he grew quieter.

He still earned honors at school. Still ran track. Still told new classmates that we would “be moving back South soon.” But something in him watched me differently. As if recalibrating his understanding of what safety meant.

And something in me hardened.

I told myself I was strong enough to absorb it. That endurance was strength. That pushing through was proof of resilience. Black women do not fold easily—we bend, we brace, we pray, we endure. I had climbed too far, worked too hard, survived too much to let one man—one office—undo me.

But something had already begun to lock.

My sleep.

My appetite.

My reflection.

The mirror became difficult.

Not because I was aging—though I could see the subtle shifts—but because I no longer recognized the woman staring back at me. She looked thinner in some places, swollen in others. Her eyes scanned the room before settling. Her shoulders curved inward as if protecting something vital.

People at work still called me composed. Knowledgeable. A steady presence.

They did not see the way my chest tightened when I heard footsteps outside my door.

The way my stomach dropped when a message preview read, “Hello, do you have a moment?”

Trauma is a kind of locked room. You leave, but the air follows you.

When the Organizational Climate team asked for my story, I gave it. They said they were there to assess the culture. They said honesty was essential. I sat in a quiet virtual room and laid it out carefully—the hostility, the intimidation, the ethical concerns, the retaliation that followed my report.

I was not dramatic. I was precise.

I believed in process.

Weeks later, when I asked what had been found—what would change, what accountability would look like—the answer came in neutral language.

“For internal use only.”

Four words. Polite. Professional. Final.

The door closed again.

I had offered my truth in good faith. I had believed that naming harm would loosen its grip. Instead, I learned how institutions survive: they absorb impact and protect the structure.

Not the people. The structure.

Friends asked why I hadn't just stayed quiet. If others weren't speaking, why did I feel the need to? Was it pride? Was it ambition? Was it the need to prove something?

I have asked myself those questions in darker moments.

Maybe I believed God placed me there for a reason.

Maybe I believed integrity was non-negotiable.

Maybe I confused suffering with purpose.

Or maybe I was simply not built for locked rooms.

The day I decided to leave did not feel triumphant. It felt like exhaustion reaching its limit.

I sat in my car in the parking lot longer than usual, staring at the entrance. My son was at school. The bills were real. The risk was real.

But so was the cost of staying.

By then, my body was rebelling. I forgot to eat. I slept in fragments. I startled easily.

Sometimes I would hide in bathroom stalls just to breathe. I began scanning hallways instinctively, measuring tone shifts in voices, cataloging exits in every new building.

Even after relocating back South—even after stepping into a quieter office—my body remained vigilant.

When a supervisor greets me warmly, my chest still tightens before logic intervenes.

When I hear a certain timbre of voice, I am back in that room. My hands grow cold. My mind races.

My body remembers what my résumé does not.

There were nights my son saw me curled under blankets, quiet in ways I once criticized in him. There were mornings I handed him my debit card for food because cooking felt insurmountable. I hated that part. The visible unraveling.

But he also saw something else.

He saw me leave.

He saw me choose peace over title. Health over hierarchy. Safety over salary.

I used to think strength meant absorbing the blow. Outlasting the hostility. Being the last one standing in a broken system.

Now I think strength might look like interruption.

Like saying, this far and no further.

Like understanding that survival is not the same as living.

Like refusing to teach your child that endurance of harm is a virtue.

I do not romanticize what happened. There are still days I sit in my car before walking into work, steadying my breath. There are still moments when memory ambushes me.

Healing is not a dramatic unveiling. It is brushing your teeth in the morning. It is attending therapy even when it exhausts you. It is finishing the twelve weeks your doctor insisted you take. It is writing when the institution would prefer silence.

It is unlocking one small door at a time.

I once believed that being strong meant staying in rooms that diminished me and proving I could withstand them.

Now I believe strength might mean building rooms of my own.

Rooms where my son does not overhear cruelty.

Rooms where honesty is not buried.

Rooms where my body is not bracing for impact.

Some doors require badges.

Some require permission.

Some require courage.

The hardest ones require you to walk out without knowing what waits on the other side.

I am still learning how to live in unlocked spaces.

But I know this: I am not broken.

I was locked in.

And I chose to leave.

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