

The Break Up

Seeing each other for the first time since the incident, Omara and Derek give half-smiles to each other before sitting down.

“So...” Derek says as he stares deeply in Omara’s dead eyes.

“So, are we drag this out like a season of Scandal, or are we going to cut to the chase,” Omara asks as she folded arms.

Derek opens his mouth like a river as the truth flows out of him, “I admit that what happened between Valarie and myself was wrong. And I’m sorry that it made you feel this way.”

“That’s a start,” Omara states losing up her hardened stance.

“But...” Derek stutters knowing this will start an unholy war.

Omara snarls, “But what?”

Derek hesitated before answering “But we’ve been having problems for a minute. Like, even before Valarie entered the picture.”

“Problems? What problems? Enlighten me, Mr. Stratford,” Omara says in a sarcastic tone.

“The manipulation. The control. Your quick-temper. Your nasty attitude. The power trips. You’re a little much for someone like me,” Derek answers with a lump in his throat.

Omara's eyes tear up. "Am I really that bad? I can be better. Plus, our future is so bright. We can be Edison's answer to Barack and Michelle. Don't you want that?"

"There you go. The obsession with image. Status. Perfection. You. Your girls. The pageantry. You don't want a relationship. You want be a Jay and Bey, and baby, that's draining. That's why we need to let this all go. You understand?" Derek sounds exhausted.

"Fine," screams Omara, startling other patrons in the restaurant. "If you can better than moi, go ahead. Just remember you and that hillbilly will never have a moment's rest while I'm around."

She pushes away from the table, stands up, and storms off. As she walks out the door, she gives Derek a cutting look.

Sowing the Seeds for a Creative Future

Laughter and chatter fill the room as a group of young Black men and women go back and forth over The Simpsons' Principal Skinner "steam ham" memes. The fluorescent lights in the meeting room bounce off their black and brown skin as the conversation switched to the future. They speak on their passions. Professions like playwright, fashion designer, filmmaker, ballet dancer, and journalist flow around the room. These affirmations come from being in the National Black Arts Festival's wide range of youth programs.

Since being founded in 1987, the National Black Arts Festival has been the preeminent space for many Black creatives pursuing their dreams within the entertainment industry. Despite their presence within entertainment, the organization has an underrepresented gem within its wall: the NBAF Youth Program. Young Black and brown creatives partake in a variety of activities while building towards careers in the creative arts – film, television, music, visual arts, etc. Supporting the arts within Metro Atlanta school systems is part of the organization's mission to highlight emerging Black creatives.

One participant stands out from the others as she shakes hands with one of the festival's chairs. She mentions having gone through portions of the Youth Program. Her name is Angelique Tolbert, an effervescent 20-year-old dark-skinned Black girl, whose curly hair and freckles match her go-getter mentality. Her journey with the Youth Program begins as an eighth grader in the inaugural year of the Move/Dance program where the creative arts and physical education collide to battle childhood health issues.

“I barely had any rhythm, but I put my best foot forward,” Tolbert giggles when speaking on her experience in the Move/Dance program. “Having two left feet made it worst as I kept tripping over myself. I was a hot mess.”

Despite her rocky beginnings in the Youth Program, Tolbert survives the Adopt-a-School Program long enough to find her footing as a designer.

“I grew up drawing and observing people, especially clothing. I would sometimes draw my friends and design clothes for them like they were Barbie dolls. I paid attention to every seam and stitch,” she recalls.

As a little girl’s dreams morph into her passion, Tolbert becomes more determined to be a designer as she moves farther into the program.

“Attending those panels, lectures, and events allowed me to see my future as a fashion designer,” Tolbert states when mentioning her time in the program. “I found a great support system with amazing mentors who nurtured me. These circumstances led to me obtaining a scholarship and an apprenticeship. For that, I’m grateful to this program and what it has done for me and my future.”

Like Tolbert, many young creatives can build a stable foundation in the arts within the NBAF Youth Program. Besides the Move/Dance Program, there are two other pillars: NexGen Artist, a program that nurtures high school participants’ dreams and talents for their creative future, and Fashion Forward, a program highlighting outstanding fashion students in the Atlanta area.

The bond between the program and its participants is a significant one as evident by Tolbert’s recent achievement. She has been named as one of this year’s Fashion Forward

recipients. She admits to balling like a baby when she first heard the news from a former mentor.

“I couldn’t believe I was selected to be one of the recipients out of all those candidates in Atlanta. I mean the competition was fierce,” Tolbert mentions as she looks forward to her moment at the Fine Art + Fashion event.

Despite her initial excitement, Tolbert believes it won’t be real until she sees her piece in the windows of Neiman Marcus.

Her smile illuminates the room as she states “I know the event and the display with Neiman Marcus are just the beginning of my future. I want to be the next Tracy Reese or Kimora Lee and inspire the next generation of young Black girls in fashion.”

Tolbert, like many Black and brown children, has the odds stacked against her from the beginning. But with perseverance and the NBAF Youth Program, she is beginning to see her future and purpose within today’s ever-changing world.

Fast Food Addicts Anonymous

Hi, my name is Adreon Patterson, and I'm a fast food addict. The greasiest. The saltiest. The teeth-rotting sugariest food I can find is always around the corner. Like many men, my health hasn't always been a priority as a combination of naivete and stubbornness wouldn't let me give up on my old friends: greasy, salty and sugary. The hold on me was so strong that I put my cravings before my health. Men, health and emotional connection to food were overlooked by society for a long time. So, I wanted to be the first to come clean about my addiction.

I've been battling this since childhood as I maintained a diet of pizza, fried chicken, French fries and gummy bears. As a chubby black boy growing up in South Carolina, finishing my plate and going back for seconds was encouraged due to the starving children in a third-world country who would give anything for a daily meal (Thanks, Sally Struthers). But eventually, this mentality and lifestyle caught up with me. As I entered my thirties, I felt now more than ever was the time to get back on track and slay the fast food dragon once and for all. So, I decided to become more disciplined with my food choices and lay off fast food and sugary snacks for two weeks.

Day 1

I began my day with a decent breakfast before starting my early morning shift at Kohls. I prepared a beautiful bowl of multigrain apple oatmeal and two pieces of jelly toast. The creamy, warm oatmeal tasted splendid in conjunction with the crunchy, strawberry goodness of the toast. I knew that beginning my wellness journey would be fun. As I walked through the parking lot at the end of my shift, the temptation of the

quick fix hit me harder than I expected. Usually, I would get a second breakfast from somewhere like Chick-Fil-A or Bojangles'. Not this time. Even though I hated McDonald's, it took everything in me to avoid running across the parking lot and yelling through the drive-thru speaker that I wanted to eat the greasy food known as a McChicken Biscuit. But I had to be disciplined. Seeing the electronic billboards and huge restaurant signs on my drive back home didn't help either. All I wanted to do was quiet the rumbling of my stomach.

Eventually, I made it home. But as commercial after commercial on television taunted me, I felt drawn to all the unhealthy options around me. *Come on, Adreon. You know you want some.* I was so tempted to throw the remote at the tv. Around lunch time, I warmed up my homemade chicken parmesan in the oven. It was delicious as the tomato sauce, whole wheat noodles and grilled chicken created a harmonious symphony in my mouth.

I spent most of the day working on assignments, but my mind wandered to visions of food I wanted to devour on Saturday. Usually, the fast food dragon was my friend. But, this time, not so much. I was frustrated frustrated that my goal for better health was impeding on my usual pig-out Saturday. After the initial frustration, I found solace in snacking on my fiber snacks, fruit bars, and raisins. As it filled the sugar void in my brain, I enjoyed the fruit bar's strawberry and granola combination. Oh, man! This "no fast food" exercise was going to be a little harder than I thought. Whenever I thought about my Saturday, the idea of avoiding fast food made me sad.

As afternoon turned into evening, I popped a grilled burger and homemade fries in the oven for dinner. The one-two combination of juicy ground beef and crunchy potato

made their way to my volcano-like stomach. This resulted in me crying out in pure ecstasy. Afterwards, I decided to buy some chopped cantaloupe and apples so that I could avoid chewing on the sofa. The juices of the melon hit my tongue and satisfied my sugar cravings. For now, the fight was over. I'd made it through my first official day without fast food and tooth-rotting snacks.

When I began this journey, I noticed a recent Norwegian study to linked childhood emotional feeding to adult emotional eating. The study followed a group of students from age four to ten and monitored their diet to see the effects over time. In the end, the study concluded that parents' use of food as a reward or comfort for children could lead to the adverse consequences in the form in emotional eating. The study rung particularly true in the case of how many in the Black community viewed food. In our culture, when it came to dealing with emotions, food was a gateway to healing, coddling, or rejoicing (depending on the occasion). My family was not an exception to this rule.

As I thought about the study and my first day void of nutrient deficient meals, my first foray into fast food came to mind. The smell of Hardee's fries filled my nostril as I thought about my lifestyle change. With few eating options in my early years, my mom didn't have time to cook and my father was cooking-challenged, fast food was the best option for a picky child refused to eat meat, fruits, or vegetables. Our quaint two-bedroom apartment was situated behind a Hardee's, which made it easy for me to beg my dad for an order of fries. This was something that occurred almost every day in the afternoon. Like clockwork we would ride or, on a beautiful sunny day, walk there. I followed my father through the black and glass door. Then, I would toddle across the

terracotta-tiled floor to the register. Because of our frequent visits, and my chubby cheeks, I would get a free drink with my fries. As Dad placed the bag of fries into my little hands, joy filled my four-year-old body. Usually, I would wait to get home and eat my fries; but, sometimes, those fries were in my belly before my dad and I got back home. The fry cravings became so common that my dad would go back pick up a second order to satisfy my salty cravings.

Day 2

Today's battle was mixed. Still drowsy, I dragged myself out of bed and prepared a breakfast of grits, French toast, and egg whites. Making my breakfast had never felt so good as I gathered energy from the rich syrupiness of the French toast, fluffiness of the eggs and creaminess of grits swirled in my mouth. Traveling on MARTA to school was a little challenging as the aromas of McDonald's breakfast wafted in the air. Man, the temptation was real. By the time I arrived at school; my stomach was moaning and groaning; it was telling me that I needed to feed. My midday snack, a fruit bar, kept my sugar cravings at bay. The apple-meets-cinnamon taste danced in my mouth and allowed me to push my worries away.

By lunch time, I squelched my fast food anxiety by filling my stomach with homemade chicken parmesan and yogurt. The yogurt with its banana yumminess made my mind go crazy. I smiled as the creamy texture slid from my esophagus to my stomach. But, even after feeding the beast, I still wanted my Saturday treat. The feeling of eating it nagged at me. I could almost taste the gooey cheese, juicy processed meat, and delicious bun melting in my mouth. Luckily, the feeling was slightly curbed due to the tart lemon flavor of my Fiber Now bar.

Walking to and from the bus stop didn't help much. Whether breakfast, lunch, or dinner, I smelled the pungent odors from Arby's or the escaped aromas of the Mediterranean restaurant wafting from the plaza in front of my apartment. Part of me wanted to roll down the hill and run to the Arby's as though we were two long lost lovers being reunited for the first time in years. God, I just wanted some fried chicken tenders. However, that would defeat the purpose of the experiment, which was to better my health. I kept that in mind as I savored the wet juiciness of baked chicken, tender green beans and the cheesy goodness of homemade macaroni and cheese.

A study done in 2009 wanted to find out if there was a correlation between emotional status and eating and, if so, which emotions affected students most. The results showed that, out of 600 California middle-aged male and female students, males were more affected by confusion than stress, tension, or anger. This did not surprise me considering that there is a stigma attached to black southern families and emotional and/or mental health issues. In the black community, it is thought that religion and food are the only things needed to help your emotional state; going to a psychiatrist or psychologist is looked down upon. However, even as I write this, I remember growing up with a mother who championed seeking outside help when needed. She hated that the black community perpetuated the stereotype that seeking professional help for your issues makes you weak or broken in some way.

Like many of the students in that study, my emotional battle with food began in middle school. It was a cyclical nature. I would become depressed, then my food intake would decrease. This did wonders for my waistline, but not for my self-esteem. When I was no longer depressed, and my home life was safe, my appetite would come roaring

back. No food was safe from my carnivorous appetite. This was something that I struggled with at my alma mater, Brewer Middle School, and the local burger joint, Burger Inn. At Brewer, when I was depressed, I would spend my lunch hours in the white and maroon cafeteria pushing around food on my tray. I attempted to muster up energy to place the cold metal fork to my lips and take one or two bites. On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, when I felt good about life, Burger Inn was my salvation. I would sit in the brown leather and wood booth gorging on crispy fries and juicy, moist hamburgers while sipping sugary sweetness of the Southern tea. (If it's not sweet, you're doing it wrong.) Of course, my weight would balloon, and then I would become obsessed with every morsel that I put in my mouth.