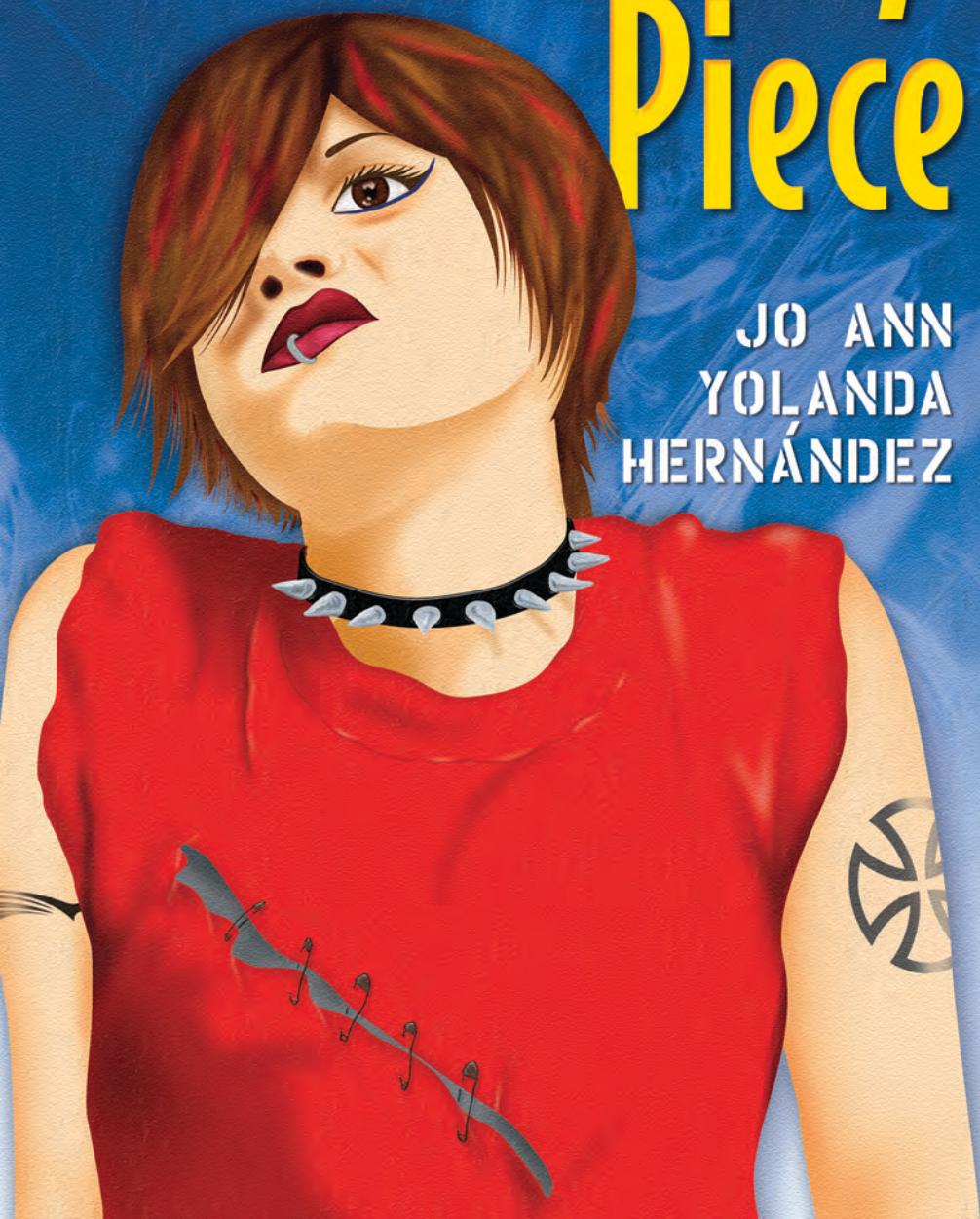


# The Throwaway Piece

JO ANN  
YOLANDA  
HERNÁNDEZ



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**Also by Jo Ann Yolanda Hernández**

*White Bread Competition*

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Summary: Even after entering the foster care system, Jewel is the one who takes care of her mother and, shutting herself off from the vulnerability of closeness to others, is unaware of the positive influence she has on those around her.

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# Rule #1

## What's important is never you

I didn't start out as a State Kid. Name's Jewel. When I was four, my mom and I lived in an apartment complex with an inner courtyard, where the smells of everyone's supper mingled: boiled cabbage, roasted *jalapeños*, and spaghetti sauce.

My mom and I squeezed into three rooms and a kitchenette with smoke-stained paint, smudged fingerprints around the door-knobs, and bars on the windows. Neighbors became privy to each other's lives through apartment walls. People turned up their televisions to drown out kids who screamed for mercy or maybe love. Families made do with what they had and dreamed their hope-driven dreams of what could be.

"Mommy, where you going?"

"Out."

"Why?"

"Because."

"'Cause why?"

"Because you're such a little question box."

I stand next to the dresser, my hands locked on the edge, barely able to see over the top. In my jean overalls and a yellow shirt, I watch my mother in the mirror lining her green eyes with makeup. "So you be pretty."

"Jewel, I've told you to stop speaking like that. We want our new daddy to be proud of us. You have to speak proper English." Mom smiles into the mirror and blows me a kiss.

I catch the kiss and pat my cheek, enjoying the game she plays with me. If I can keep Mom playing, maybe she won't leave me alone.

"You're the most beautiful daughter a mother could have." Mom's waist-length black hair shimmers as she bends forward to color her lips. She smacks at her pale reflection and sucks in her cheeks.

I don't smile. The worry feeling leeches into my body as the stomps of the Dragon get loud. I saw him in a book, and now he haunts the nights when Mommy is gone.

When my mom is stronger, I'll be able to tell her about the Dragon. She'll chase it away. For now, I have to be brave.

"I wanna go."

Mom tilts her head and winks at me. "No. This is grown-up playtime. Maybe tomorrow we can do something. Would you like to go to the park?"

I nod, then crawl on top of Mom's double bed. The one place the Dragon can't come. Mom crosses the room and picks a dress from the closet.

"What about this one, honey bunch?" She holds the outfit up by the hanger. A scarlet-sequined dress, short-sleeved, split up the side, sparkles in the light.

I smile. I like the color red. "You gonna bring me home a daddy?" This is Mom's favorite game.

Mom pulls the dress over her head, still talking. She pops her head out of the top. "Tonight's the night, kid. The love potion is going to work. I've this strong feeling tonight is going to be magic."

I kneel and bounce on the bed, clapping my hands. "I like magic shows."

Mom struggles with the clasps on the back of her dress. "Yeah, your kind of magic's fun, but it doesn't pay the bills."

I hate the word "bills." It makes the sound of my mother's voice sad and sometimes mean. What would we be like with a daddy? Would he pay the bills? I flop forward and lie on my stomach, my feet in the air. I spy the face of the Dragon in the mirror, but the image is gone before my mother looks up.

She checks her watch, which has her name, Angela, spelled in diamond chips across the band. From the closet, she pulls out silver strap heels, sits down next to me, and strokes my cheek.

"One day we're going to meet a magic prince. He's going to take us away, out of this tenement, to live in a fabulous house."

I ask more to keep the dream going and my mother from leaving. "Will I have toys? And dolls?" I roll over, hang my head off the bed and, upside down, watch my mother strap the heels to her ankles.

"Yes, you'll have your own room, filled with toys, dolls, everything your heart desires. I'll have a room to do my artwork. I won't have to work at the drugstore because he will be very successful. People will respect him. Every time they meet me, they'll treat me well because I'm his wife. Other fine ladies will invite me to their homes to play bridge."

"What's bridge, Mommy?" I knot my forehead.

"It's a game your new daddy will teach me. He'll like to teach me a lot of things so he can be really proud of me. I'll learn fast." My mother stands to check herself in the mirror and runs her hands over her flat stomach and her trim hips.

I feel the Dragon's hot breath on my legs. "Are you leaving me?" I search for magic words to keep my mother near.

"It's time, sweetheart." My mother swings me onto her hip. She steps out into the hallway and walks on a once blue, now gray, strip of carpet. It runs the length of the hallway with worn-out spots in front of each doorway.

The hallway lightbulb has been out since last week and, like my mother says, the paycheck isn't due for several more days.



Light from my mother's bedroom fades into the gray by the time we reach my room. My ears fill with the snorts from the Dragon. I bury my face in my mother's neck.

She gives me an extra tight squeeze when she feels me tremble. "Silly girl. Mommy won't let the boogeyman get you. I promise. I'll never let anything hurt you."

My mother squeezes me too tight, and I feel my breath caught in my body. This hug is more for her than for me, so I wrap my chubby arms around my mother's neck. "I love you, Mommy."

She flips on the light of my bedroom. A small white bed comes into view. She sets me on the bed, helps me undress, and slips my pajamas over my head. "When you get older, you'll be able to help me more by doing this yourself."

I grab and pull my pajama top down hard to get rid of the wrinkles. I check to see if my mother notices.

She reaches over the bed, and I fill my nose with her perfume. She snatches a three-foot-long purple feather from the nightstand. I stand on the bed, and she waves the plume over me. "Evil spirits away with you. Only angels and good fairies visit my daughter tonight," she chants.

I jump from the bed and open the closet door. My mother shakes the feather at every corner. I shut the door and rush to lift the skirt of my bed. With the purple feather, my mother sweeps the floor beneath the bed and chants. I giggle as I stand at the door to the hallway. She wiggles the feather around the doorway, then tickles me all over my body.

I run around her, and she chases me onto the bed. I bounce on my bed, and she replaces the feather in the jar next to the lamp.

My mother fluffs the pillow and slips the covers over my doll and me. I grip the ribboned edges of the blanket.

"Dream good dreams tonight, baby." She kisses me on the cheek.

I touch my cheek and feel the sticky lipstick. "I don't wanna be alone."

She stops at the door; her shoulders stiffen into corners. "If you need anything, you just go next door. Mrs. Flores will let you in, but she'll charge me if you go over."

I stretch my arms out to my mommy. "I'm sad when you're gone."

She stands at the doorway, sparkling in the light. "I know, honey. I'm sorry." She turns around. "Mommy has to go. You want Mommy to find a new daddy, don't you?" The whine in her voice is as loud as mine.

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand.

My mom sighs, goes to the bathroom, and comes back clutching toilet paper. "Wipe your nose. I count on my big girl to help me out. I can count on you, can't I? You understand why I have to go. I'm doing this for you as much as myself."

I bury my face in the tissue and blow. She takes the knotted wad from me and drops it into the basket next to my bed.

"I'm so very proud of you." My mom tucks the sheet around my shoulders. "The best daughter in the whole wide world. I love you, sweetie." She kisses my forehead. "You have to be the best daughter in the whole wide world to help your mommy. Okay?"

I watch my mother walk to the door, then flick off the bedroom light.

"Look, I've left the light on in my bedroom. You'll be able to see if you want." She disappears down the hallway, the sound of her footsteps disappearing with her.

I reach over to the lamp but stop. I sniff and smell the scorch of Dragon flames. Quick, I hug my knees and smile at the light coming from my mother's bedroom.

Light is where Mommy is.

I listen to the sounds of leaving. The rustle of her coat. The tap of her shoes. The door shuts behind my mother. The lock clicks

loud. The best daughter in the whole wide world lies with her eyes wide open and listens to the noises, picking apart the house-talking sounds from the Dragon sounds. The kiss on my forehead grows cold as the room fills with shadows that stalk and haunt.

# Wasted Brains

## by Jewel

Mom's quite smart about  
doing dumb really well.

Once, she's talking to one of  
her many possible husbands when  
he asks how does she know so much?

Mom tucked her smarts so far  
back inside her head, I think, she  
forgot how smart she really is.

Mom believes most men act like they're  
some chest-pounding,  
vine-swinging hero,  
but they're really fragile inside.  
It's up to women to take care of  
them, letting them  
think they're doing all the decision-making.

Seems to me this  
waste of a good brain  
shows no respect for  
either one.

## Rule #2

### Be careful what you care about

My mom's a soft-boiled egg in a hard-boiled world.

The day before my tenth birthday, my mom is being beaten. Again.

I'm afraid the possible daddy will not stop in time. I stand in the hall off the new foyer, hiding in the shadows, scared, unable to move my legs. My heart is as loud as the thuds in the other room.

From beside the stairway of the new-to-us house, I can see into the living room. My mother kneels on the floor, bent small to expose less of herself, and covers her head with her arms. The boyfriend's arms jackhammer on her like he's drilling her into the floor.

My mom screeches and says, "Just a birthday party. That's all."

"Who do you think you are, spending my money?" Spit flies with each word.

The boyfriend's shoulders curve inward and his head falls forward as he lets out a gush of disgust. He rolls his head on his neck to look up at the ceiling, like he's wondering why his life has to be so hard. He moves to one side as if he's done with her, then with a backhand sweeps across the table knocking over all the pictures and knickknacks. Picture frames crack, glass breaks, objects roll away.

My mom ducks, then sneaks a glimpse from under her hair. "She's ten. I wanted to do something nice."

The latest boyfriend feigns a step in her direction and laughs when my mom cringes and scrambles.

“Shit. Nice is you being able to do anything right. I needed that money. Had something to buy.” He jabs his chest with his thumb. “What’s nice going to buy me now, huh? How are you going to fix that, huh?”

He hits her, again. With his fist. Both fists. On her arms. On her back. On her head.

My body jerks with the thumps from his fist on her body. Will my mom die this time?

A cut over my mother’s eye bleeds down her face. She’s dying. So much blood.

I grab the phone, punch the three numbers, and relief comes with the voice. With my hand over the phone and my mouth, I whisper, “My mom needs help. Bad.”

I take root with the phone in my hand. A tiny voice comes from the receiver, but I’m hypnotized and paralyzed. My brain refuses to take in any more.

The crashes, the bangs, and the grunts grow louder, then stop. The cries become fainter.

The latest boyfriend slouches on the sofa. “You think your shit register job makes enough for all of us. I have needs too. Not that you care.” With one foot he kicks my mom each time she tries to get up off the floor.

Sirens reach the front of the house.

Near me, knocks sound loud on the door. From inside the living room, the boyfriend takes a break from beating my mom to yell, “What d’ya want?”

“It’s the police. Open up.”

He flips the foyer light on and opens the door. Two cops stand in the doorway.

“Sir, we’d like to make sure everyone is all right. May we come in?”

The latest catches me standing a few feet away under the shadows of the stairs next to the table with the phone. He takes a step at me and points. "You're the reason for all this trouble."

I try to swallow but my mouth is dry.

One of the cops moves between us, and they usher the boyfriend back into the living room.

From the living room, my mother's voice filled with sobs becomes a wail. "He didn't do anything."

The boyfriend's words come out loud like gunshots. "It's the kid's fault."

Cop voices, lower, quieter, bring calm. "Why don't you sit down?"

Help is here. Things will get better.

The cops walk the latest boyfriend out the door with his hands behind his back. My mom, crying and holding a blood-soaked cloth to her forehead, follows them out. Her purse is pinched between her arm and her body; the broken purse strap dangles behind her.

I want to grab the strap.

"What about her? She needs help," I tell the officers as they walk down the sidewalk, but no one answers me.

I shiver in the night air. It wasn't my fault. I told her to forget the birthday party. I told her she was birthday enough. The pain hatches in my stomach and grows into my body, follows each vein, causing the flames to lick at my skin so it hurts to be touched, and I want to be held so badly.

I follow the police officers down to the sidewalk, but they shut me out when they close the cruiser's door with my mother sitting inside. "A social worker will be here to get you in a few minutes. Wait inside the house for her. This officer will stay with you."

Taillights vanish around the corner. I go into the house with the smiling man, who spits out words meant to assure and calm.

I pick up a cushion and set it on my lap. With my finger, I circle a spot of my mother's blood. If she dies, I will, too.

“Why don’t you tell me what happened tonight?” The police officer moves closer to study the picture of my mother hanging on the wall.

My mom’s hurt, and I’m not with her. How will she remember that I love her? My breath stops, my heart aches, my brain hurts.

The police officer picks up a broken picture frame and puts it on the table.

I want to scream at him. Those are my mother’s. Don’t touch them. You have no right.

“You want to help your mother, don’t you? If you tell me what happened, we’ll be able to stop that guy from hurting your mom again.” The police officer sits where my mother’s boyfriend sat. He pulls out a notebook and gets ready to write.

“He didn’t hurt you in any way, did he?”

I point to the kitchen. “I need a glass of water.”

He nods approval and continues to talk. “Things appear bad for you right now, but don’t you worry. By tomorrow, everything will be better. Kids nowadays are much tougher than when I was a boy.”

I walk through the kitchen entrance, pass the glass rack, out the back door, and hitchhike to the hospital.

Mom needs me.

At the hospital, there’s no Mom. Nobody’s heard of her.

“Sorry, honey. We don’t have anyone by that name. Have you tried the other hospitals?”

Without money for the phone, I thumb a lift to the police station. They have to tell me what they did with her. Don’t they? She’s my mother.

“You’ll have to wait for all the paperwork to be filled out. Sit over there, and she’ll be out in no time.” The mustached man behind the desk points to a grimy white plastic chair that’s supposed to be curved for a person’s butt. Not mine.



I whisper, "Evil spirits away with you. Only angels and good fairies visit my mother tonight." I hope my mom, wherever she's at, receives my message.

Hours climb, one on top of the other, each hour getting longer than the one just done. Just when I think I'm going to take shape with the chair, my mom comes out. I'm an hour old into my birthday, and she's my present.

She has a white bandage on her forehead with a round red circle in the middle of the gauze, like it's her passport out of hell.

She walks weary. Her eyes are dark all around. Her shoulders curve with shame. With the broken strap dangling, she holds her purse tight to her stomach, like it's a hot water bottle. I want to help her carry the load. I gently put my arm around her waist and walk beside her as she shuffles like a person just out of the hospital after the roof has fallen on them. But she bucks away when she feels my arms.

The frazzle is gone now.

Her back goes soldier-sharp.

With a snap, she adjusts her rose-colored sweater draped over her shoulder. The dainty, hand-stitched roses at the collar stand out bright.

She squints at me with one swollen eye. "You called the police?"

I nod. She loves me so much. Now she knows I love her the same, too. "Wasn't nothing, I just . . ."

"I guess I'll never be able to trust you again."