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REFLECTIONS

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REFLECTIONS

A Capstone Project

Presented to

The Academic Faculty Advisors

By

Kiera Baity

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing
in the Department of English in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of
Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw State University

Summer 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

I.	Capstone Completion Form	3
II.	Developing Craft.....	4

Capstone Project: Creative Nonfiction

I.	MATEO.....	8
II.	BENNY.....	16
III.	MATEO.....	25
IV.	ANGEL.....	32
V.	SEAN.....	42
VI.	POPPY.....	45
VII.	ANGEL.....	48
VIII.	SEAN.....	51
IX.	JABARI.....	76

Conclusion

Work Cited.....	83
Resume.....	84

DEVELOPING CRAFT

Inspired by the memoirs *Slow Motion* by Dani Shapiro, *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon, and *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal* by Jeanette Winterson, I knew I wanted to tell a story of my life that was “close to home” (no pun intended.) The way the authors of those books moved through their lives in order to possess meaning towards the trauma still lingering like a shadow, made me want to peel back the layers in my life the same way, understanding who I am. The development of my Capstone began in the middle of January 2020, in Garden City, New York. I was attending a creative writing graduate program at Adelphi University and started the spring semester wanting to approach the creative non-fiction course with a story that went against the pieces in the fall. Then, I was constantly telling the story of a toxic relationship I was still healing from. I wanted to challenge myself and my craft ability to structure a story that would not only resonate with readers but allow me to unfold and reflect on the experiences in my life that shaped me into who I am today.

The earlier drafting stages specifically consisted of me focusing on my dad and I’s relationship overtime, and how that influenced my choices in men. Over this summer is when began to understand the broader view of the story I wanted to tell. For example, one of changes made during revisions was the title going from “Reflections of a Repeated Cycle” to simply “Reflections.” What I was writing allowed me to unfold moments in my past for both myself and the reader, and although I haven’t reached a charged sense of solace, getting it all out was like dumping a puzzle on the floor and analyzing the pieces in order to see the picture. Framing “Reflections” helped ground and expand the story to where I can continue to the end with clarity on how to keep the purpose linking the connections.

Origins of my Writing Life

Writing was on and off for me, a reflection of the relationship with my father. I began when I was nine -years -old writing over 200 pages of a novel I titled “Stacy.” It was a fictional representation of my middle school experiences. From there, I continued to write fictional shorts, and scary novellas up until my high school years, but that’s when I’d stop. There wasn’t a particular reason for the pause I just chose to be a teenager. I remember thinking *welp, I guess that’s it*, I was done with writing and sharing the stories of my imagination. I hadn’t opened a notebook or sat in front of blank page from Word, drafting outlines that would be the start to my manuscript.

My junior year at Clark Atlanta University was when I fell in love writing all over again. I took a poetry workshop where I learned about genre in writing, and the greats before me. This was when I started writing short stories again, a lot of them centered around a young female, like myself, coming to terms with her pain in some kind of spiritual but spooky way. Now, that spookiness is seen more in my poetry, when playing around with prompts, or grabbing motivation from scary movies seen in the moment. Once that workshop ended, I tried to continue the stories I started, even tried getting one published. But the more I was rejected, the less I was encouraged to keep going, so I stopped again in the middle of my junior year.

After being a “super senior” (what students and teachers called undergraduate seniors having to take an extra semester after their presumed graduation date at Clark Atlanta University), I’d graduate and find myself writing poetry as a way to escape my spiraling reality. Funny how I found writing again when I was losing myself. I knew then that it wasn’t just a hobby, or something I was good at. It was a part of me, in me forever.

The Purpose of the Capstone

As I said, the idea to write “Reflections” stemmed from my time in the graduate program in Garden City, New York. I was brainstorming content for the non-fiction class I was taking in the Creative Writing graduate program at Adelphi University. I wanted to push myself when it came to how I write, what I write, and how that would impact culture. I asked myself, “what’s something in my life I want to understand,” want to face on a deeper level that’ll feel uneasy at first, but with growing benefits.

The one thing I never shared, never allowed myself to think about for too long or talk about with anyone, was how my dad not being in my life made me feel. But where would I even start? How would I carry it on the page to where I’m not just talking about myself, but instead trying to make a difference with my words? There are a lot of women out there like me who’ve blocked out the one thing that could set their generational line free. I wanted to be a voice, or at least a part of one, that connects with these coming of aged women, and inspires them to face their own trauma. Ultimately proving how an unhealthy repetitiveness can be broken.

My Heart in Writing

When I think of creative writing, I think of an art form that gives my thoughts room to slow down. It’s honest through passion and intentional with relating to those that feel both alone and alive. I’ve always been the type of person to act through emotion, and writing has always found its way back to me in moments where my feelings would get the best. It’s easy for me to work through where it hurts with my words on the page, where what I have to say matters most. My heart in writing means having the guts to be vulnerable, making an impact articulating the uncomfortable, and I’ll always appreciate the gift.

With that being said, I thank my advisors and the MAPW program for the chance to speak my truth and provide insight for improvement. I hope this reflection recognizes my growth and represents my potential as an author.

REFLECTIONS

MATEO

JUNE 2018

My first night in the newsroom was quiet. The kind where any burst of noise would bring laser-focused attention. No more than ten people were seated at their desks, with heads down, and hands typing away. The sky-blue walls and gray cubicles made the room look like a huge checkerboard, nothing like the movie portrayals where phones ring off the hook, papers propel around like dandelion seeds blowing in the wind, and reporters, news anchors, and producers rush to gather and publish the local news. Before I applied to graduate school, I was working in one of the top ten news stations in the country, Metro46. The market housed in Atlanta, my hometown.

Every national holiday Metro46 had a segment allowing viewers at home to send in family photos that would be displayed during the broadcast. At the end of the show, Randy, the social media talent would ask the news crew to send their own personal photos as well. I was part of the crew now after my first couple of weeks, the main night anchor Peter being the span to Randy and everyone else. Peter had a thick upper body and thin legs like the uppercase letter “P,” and his off-camera voice wasn’t too far from his newscaster persona, always in character.

“Are you in school?”

Graduated.

“What did you get your degree in?”

Mass Media Arts with a concentration in TV and Film.

“What are your plans with your degree? Have you been putting yourself out there, making connections?”

“Um ... uh ... well actually

Questions like that made me cringe like I was in an interrogation room, and I could never answer them with confidence. I wasn't exactly applying myself after graduation, too focused on my relationship at the time. But Peter still offered to help me if I saw a career in news. *Did I see a career in news?* I'd smile and nod every time he brought it up at the end of our two-minute conversations. I didn't really know, nor gave myself space for the opportunity. But it would be dumb of me to have my foot in the door at a news station and not try to make something happen. When I told Peter I was a writer he hooked me up with the late-night producer, and soon enough I was doing more than my badge entailed: studio technician; assisting the night producer with writing the rundown: the script for the last newscast of the night.

The holiday that fell on the night I'd be working at the station was Father's Day, and I knew Randy would ask if I had any pictures of my dad and me to show at the end of the broadcast. I didn't, he wasn't around, so I took a picture of a picture earlier that day from the family photo album of my grandad and me. Poppy. I want to say I was around nine, ten in the photo, with a fuchsia-flowered church dress on, a messy ponytail, and braces. Poppy stood beside me with one arm around my back while his other arm kept my balance as I gripped the handlebars of my bike. I looked like a princess, he looked like a king.

Once the show was over, I took a photo of Poppy and me that was still up on the touch screen in the studio so I could share it on Instagram. I remember using phrases like, "father-figure," and "always there to catch me when I fall." There was seating area out back with dime-colored tables and benches made out of stone. Some of the producers would smoke their cigarettes out there during the breaks. I had a few left of my own in my newport's pack, so I went to puff some down. I had an hour before the eleven o' clock news.

The Atlantic Station skyline towered in the sky, and I could see pieces of the building heads in between the trees that hovered. Looking up at the semi-starry night, I took a moment with myself to appreciate my grandfather and how he's been there for me, until an alert lit up my phone. A direct message from Mateo, my dad. He responded back to the picture of Poppy and me that I posted: "that's the same man that pushed me out of your life." I deleted the thread shortly after the discussion was over but what I remember most was, *pushed me out of your life*.

I couldn't believe Mateo was placing blame on the one man that stepped in when he chose to step away. Taking rapid hits from my cigarette, fuming as my fingers sped across the keyboard, I told him to never speak on my grandfather's name again because at the end of the day, *he* was there. After high school I blocked out any feelings I had towards Mateo, my way of accepting his absentee role. But when he responded with an argument, pointing the finger at all the reasons why he couldn't be a man, something triggered inside of me, like a cramp that craves attention.

It felt like I was arguing not with my dad, but with my boyfriend.

“Because a secure attachment between parent and child is necessary for future healthy relationships, a lack of this attachment can lead to... consequences”

– Castetter 2020, 8

MAY 2008

The triggering connection I made at the station became the can opener to the trauma that tainted my life. But in order to understand the realization, I had to look back at the memories that lead me to reflect on the repeated cycles not just with Mateo, but with my family, and myself.

Growing up, I was the only child in my household. A divergent if you ask me, considering what I was born into: a mother thought to be too young as my guardian by a grandmother who claimed me as her own. But I wasn't like Nana's children, my mother and uncle, so she took me to a clinical psychologist when I was six to "understand my ability"; the type of child I was and how to raise me. As if not sharing their last name didn't make me different enough. I had Mateo's last name, my mother having high hopes for their relationship and his competence, but he failed at sacrificing his teens for me.

"He wanted to be there for you," Pepper, my cousin from my dad's side once told me, "but as you got older, he didn't know how to handle paying for school and the things you needed." It's not like he had a proper example of his own either, his father being absent as well. But as a child, a daughter without a father, you're not thinking about the harsh truths of your predicament. All that matters is the time spent and the love shown, even if the moments are temporary events.

"Do you want me to invite your dad to your graduation?" I was at Pepper's house in the middle of her kitchen getting my hair pressed out for my eighth-grade commencement. Pepper was the only relative from my dad's side that my mom was cool with, let alone trusted when it came to me. My mom and Mateo were high school parents, and when Mateo started treating us like a revolving door, my mom couldn't trust him, let alone his family. Nana adding pressure making sure I wouldn't get influenced by his rugged lifestyle. Besides, Mateo's family rarely, if

at all, showed any care for a relationship with me. But Pepper always reached out to my mom wanting to help with me and be a bridge for Mateo to be a part of my life, thus becoming the exception from all the kin to Mateo's side. Hell, she even won the approval of Nana. She can be challenging to please.

“Um... yeah. You can.” The thought of him coming around always created this awkwardness inside of me. It was strange I could and would only see him on occasions such as birthdays, and graduation. It was also strange that he couldn't be around or didn't want to be. The clinical psychologist mentioned in his report that when referring to Mateo all I'd say was, he lives with someone else. “Mixed feelings about family are present,” is what the psychologist noted.

But being twelve at the time of my eighth-grade graduation, the thought of my dad not being a father never settled in my mind long enough for me to feel any sadness, anger, or resentment. I was blinded by the times we did have because for me, those moments made it up for when he wasn't around to be a father to me. At least he was trying, at least he was making an attempt, at least he was somewhat there. My mom would remind me that his inconsistency wasn't good enough, but I'd defend Mateo unaware of the apathy she must've felt from him and having me.

“You don't see now, but you will.” My mom would say, but as a little girl, I'd ignore the point she was trying to make. Moments like my eighth-grade graduation made Mateo seem like the father I wanted him to be, and that was enough for me.

Standing in a single file line along the school entrance wall with the rest of my class, my heart free falling inside my body, I could hear the principal starting our introduction. My mother,

Nana, Poppy, and a few others from my family were seated and waiting inside the chapel. Pepper and Mateo hadn't arrived.

"Alright guys, come stand by the door, it's almost your time!" Mrs. Doris, the social studies teacher called to us. *This is it*, I remember thinking, *but where's Mateo?* There was a knot of discouragement twisting in my stomach, but in my mind I'd remind myself how he told Pepper he would be there, that he would keep his word. With Mateo, hope was the only thing left to rely on.

Just before the procession the front doors clicked open, and in walked a tall, slim, gingerbread colored man, with braids stopping at the nape of his neck, and a formal button up flailing over baggy jeans.

"DADDY!" I darted out of line, embracing his presence. He smelled of Newport's, masked with the scent of a pine tree air freshener that hangs from the car rearview.

"Hey Ki!" He picked me up, squeezing me tight before placing me back down. "I told you I'd make it. I wouldn't miss this for the world." I could feel my classmates staring at me and see Mrs. Doris off to the side watching with a confused smile. She allowed me to gaze at him, listening to the words coming out of his toothy mouth for a few more seconds before telling me to get back in line with the rest of my class.

Walking into the chapel, the dim lights making the room a macaroon yellow, and two rows of pecan shaded pews split in four's on both sides of the aisle. The music teachers piano playing echoed off the walls as everyone stood looking back at us stride in. I remember feeling complete, as if the moments where Mateo wasn't around to get me ready for school in the sapphire blue of the morning, show up for parent-teacher conferences when I'd get in trouble,

record videos of talent shows, plays, swim meets, piano recitals, tuck me in at night, peck my forehead, tell me I was his little princess and that he loves me didn't matter.

BENNY

DECEMBER 2009

My middle school was a feeder to Saint Mary's Catholic high school, and seven out of the eight in my middle school class were still with me my freshman year. Pepper was still around too, still doing my hair, and I can count on one hand how many times I saw Mateo after I graduated from middle school. I didn't think about it much though. It was easier for me to let go when Mateo did versus sulking in the thought of him not being around. I wanted to be happy, so I chose to be, the same way Mateo chose himself over me.

The day of Christmas Eve Pepper straightened my hair for Nana's sister Tinsley's party that night. My hair was staticky hours afterwards, rising up like cat hair in shock. It bothered me until we got to Nana's sister's house. I looked forward to her parties, they had a vibe. Her and Nana's side of my family are from Cuba, and Tinsley's husband's side is from Trinidad, so you can fathom the flavor that filled the room.

Walking in the crimson door you're likely to see a few folks gathered in the parlor on the right around the Christmas tree. I always liked the colorful lights they strung around it. My eyes were used to the traditional parchment lights wrapped around Nana's tree back then.

My great grandma always celebrated Christmas with us, but she stayed at Tinsley's. She used to stay with my grandparents, my mom, and me, but I remember her and Nana having disagreements whenever she came. Great grandma Nora critiquing how Nana carried herself and nagged at us. Nana scoffing and sucking her teeth, not wanting to disrespect her mother, but dismissed her comments at the same time. You could feel the tension between them.

“Mama and Tinsley are probably in the kitchen.”

I'd hear Nana tell Poppy under her gloved hand. My grandparents would lead the way. Tinsley's husband Theo had reggaeton sounds resonating throughout the house, an open bar in the kitchen area getting everybody boozy, and multicolored lights hovering over the dance floor.

I'd respectfully avoid family members that I saw once a year, acting "weird" as some would say under their lips. I wasn't always that way though. I remember being like five or six at the party shimmying around the dance floor. Everyone watched with smiles, clapping to the beat of the music, and my moves. But as I got older I noticed I'd react with more reticence when socializing. All I seemed to know how to do was smile, nod my head, and say "yes," "no," "oh really," and "hmmhuh" in rotation. I felt like it was because I didn't know how to fully be myself in front of people I didn't really know. Being raised by my grandparents for half my life, Nana made me feel weird for being me, reacting the same way her mother did. Because of her constant censure, we didn't have the best relationship.

Even though great-grandma Nora picked at Nana for who she was, she accepted everything about me, and I enjoyed having her around. By the time we got there great-grandma Nora was finishing up the food, while Tinsley was sweating from setting up the display table for dinner and making sure everyone was having a good time. Back then Tinsley used to get dolled up, now, she comes as she is.

"Ooooh, look at Miss Kiera!" great-grandma Nora gasped when she saw me, like I made her heart skip. She was petite, the color of coffee, with skin that was smoothly shriveled. Nana shared her same physique, and is a spitting image of Alfre Woodard in *Love & Basketball*, but with less rounded eyes, and a pointy nose that buttoned at the tip.

"How pretty." Favoring me like a flower, great-grandma Nora would always make me feel like I was enough. The rest of my family would greet her with love before she would tell us

to sit down or mingle because the food was almost done. Everyone from my immediate family knew about Mateo's absence in my life, but no one really talked about it with me except my mom. It was like he was the "unspoken of," like when family tries to hide a relative. Maybe that's why it was easy to let go for a while, since the people around me did.

A while had passed since we'd gotten settled in, my grandad on his fourth glass of wine standing amongst the other men in the dining room that faced the dance floor. My uncle and aunt were hanging with Tinsley's daughter and her friends at the dining room table. She was around their age. Nana and my mom sat on the bar stool kitchen chairs, observing everybody. Like Nana, my mom didn't go out of her way to socialize much at Tinsley's parties, unless someone approached her, she was reserved. But I'd be close behind her watching the party as well. If anything I was ready to eat, the food was delicious: squishy mac n' cheese, gold rice and Cuban black beans, juicy juniper greens, and baked chicken falling off the bone.

I don't remember the moment he saw me, but after he did, he wouldn't stop staring. Moving around the house, he followed. I could feel his eyes imprinting on me, and it made me a little uncomfortable. There was a vintage rosewood chair underneath the window at the back of the dance floor, I sat in it hiding behind the crowd. I thought I found a safe spot, until a few folks two-stepping on the caramel hardwood walked away, leaving holes for him to find me. I could tell when a guy was into me, glowering being the first sign, so I knew he was coming over to talk. In my mind I was trying to figure out who he was. I didn't remember seeing him the years before. Walking over with long thick black hair after a fresh blow out, an orange top and dark denim jeans, he told me his name was Benny and asked if he could sit with me. The words "yes" left my lips like a feather, as he grabbed a nearby fold out, directing it under his behind.

“I like your outfit. You got some swag.” I thought Benny was cute, with his tiny black freckles dotted underneath his eyes. But he was clearly older than me, I could smell the liquor through the glass in his hand. We both had on orange which he pointed out, trying to make a connection. He asked a lot of questions about where I lived, how old I was, and what school I went to. I thought after telling him my age, he would segue into another part of the house, but he just kept on, like it wasn’t weird for a twenty-something-year-old to be flirting with a freshman in high school.

“I like your hair. You’re really pretty. Why don’t you take my number so we can text sometime.” I was slow to respond before Theo came over and gripped the top of Benny’s shoulder.

“Hey! What ya’ll doin’ over here?” his island accent spiced up his speech, “Benny, you’ve met Miss Kiera before, right?” Finally, I’d find out who this guy was. Theo was rocking back and forth using his grip on Benny to keep him steady.

“This is my brother’s so-”

Before Theo could continue, Tinsley called for him to get everybody moving again with his instrument. Theo would jive through the house banging a cowbell with a baby drumstick to the Caribbean sounds blaring from the speaker. This would make everyone crowd back on the dance floor, and my chance to escape back by my mom.

I propped myself next to her against the kitchen wall and asked if she knew Benny. She said yes, he was our cousin. The relative term suddenly made me uneasy, my mind lingering on the way Benny sized me up amorously like a perusing creep. When my mom asked me why I asked, I told her how he was flirting with me, and asked if she thought it was odd. She just brushed it off as if he were just being “family,” told me I shouldn’t worry too much about it. I

wanted to listen but I couldn't get the interaction between us out of my head, knowing now he was my cousin, so I stayed beside her. Even begged her to go to the bathroom with me once so I wouldn't be alone long enough for Benny to find me again.

It was past eleven o'clock, and Nana was ready to go. Sometimes I felt she would only stay long because it was her sister's party. The majority there was kin to Theo's side anyway.

I saw Benny walking my way and quickly asked my mom to come downstairs with me. Tinsley and Theo would have the basement setup as another seating area because of how packed the house would get on the main level.

"No, we're about to go." my mom said swiftly.

"Hey, Aries!" Benny walked over, his round sugar cookie face stretched from his smile,

"Hey, Benny!" My mom went into the side-hug Benny initiated. "How are you? Are you here with your family?"

"Yeah, but I think we're about to leave soon. I was just coming over to speak. Haven't had the chance all night."

"I know! It's a lot going on in here. We're about to leave too." Benny nodded at my mom's response with a smile before fixing his stare back on me.

"Is this your daughter?"

"Yeah, this is Kiera. She says ya'll met." My mom wrapped her arm across the back of my shoulder.

"Yea, we did. Wow, you two look exactly alike. I bet ya'll get that all the time." Benny glanced over at me while he was talking. Before he walked away, he hugged my mom goodbye and leaned in to hug me as well, but I barely touched him. He moved his hand from behind me to inside of my own with a folded-up piece of paper. I waited till he was around the corner before

opening it away from my mom's peripheral. It was his number with the words: "don't forget to text me beautiful," etched underneath.

The car ride home was silent, my mom and I sitting at opposite ends in the back seat of Poppy's car. My grandparents watching the road. Georgia's cold was still, the night an oxford blue, and hints of smooth jazz seeped through Poppy's speakers as I pondered on the piece of paper I had in my pocket. I kept thinking it was wrong of me to accept the number, uncanny for cousins to have an alien interest. Was I interested in Benny? Then, I wasn't sure. But I was curious at the idea of being wanted by an older man.

Just like how Tinsley would have a Christmas Eve celebration every year, Theo's brother would do the same for New Year's Eve, Benny's father. He built his home with the help of his brothers and friends, and it was huge, like a lavish villa you'd see in the tropics. My family and I went once when I was in elementary school, but that was the last time. Even then I had no clue about Benny.

After my encounter with him a part of me wanted to go, so I asked my mom if we could. She said she would ask my grandparents, but Nana said "no." She was never the party type. Her idea of a good time was an intimate gathering with political men and women conversing about diplomacy, racial injustice, and governmental affairs.

I remember not going made me anxious for Benny's attention, even though I knew giving in to his desire was wrong because we were family. I couldn't stop thinking about what happened between us at Tinsley's, flattered by his focus. All New Year's Eve night I thought about texting him, ardently scrolling through my phone, tempting myself to reach out, picturing he was standing in a sea of his family and friends who were cross-talking amongst each other,

belting with laughter, and throwing back cocktails while he peered down at his phone for a text from me.

It wasn't until after the holidays and I was back at Saint Mary's that I decided to message him, and we texted a lot. Benny always telling me how pretty I was. He asked me to send him a photo once, but I was too shy to do anything like that back then. After a couple days of us messaging, Benny initiated a phone call. I was so nervous. When it came to talking on the phone with boys, I didn't do it as much, at least not with boys I was interested in, so I never knew what to say, let alone if the little I did say would keep him around once the call was over.

A lot of what we'd talk about would be our common interests. The only information I really knew about him personally was that he worked at a cell phone center. He'd make connections with me when it came to what I was doing, or how I was feeling that day, as if we were on the same level mentally and emotionally, but I knew we weren't.

I didn't tell anybody about our conversations, probably because deep down I was ashamed. But the more we talked the more infatuated I became, and there I was in my head, fantasizing him as my prince that not only found me, but chose me, wanting me as his own. And that "want" for some reason would always get me bubbled up inside, like pressure in the neck of a champagne bottle before it's popped.

Soon after, I noticed feelings for Benny were growing. The seed planted at Tinsley's was blooming with love. It was scary to admit to myself that I liked my cousin, and the moment I did, Benny started pulling away. I would text and text, but he wouldn't respond. I would call, but no answer. I thought maybe he was starting to feel like I did in the beginning, how it was strange for cousins to feel this way for one another.

I called him on private once because I missed him but didn't want him to know that it was me since he wasn't answering anymore. When I heard his voice I hung up immediately, feeling silly for reacting a little crazy. He called back, and I dropped the phone. How could he have known it was me? I used star-sixty-nine. When I answered,

“Stop fucking calling me!” Benny blurted before the line clicked. I was so embarrassed. I couldn't believe I was willing to take the risk with a family member who now, I believe only wanted one thing, my innocence. I was a victim of deceit all because I developed an “anxious attachment” to him: looking for reassurance and acceptance in a man because of the lack at home. Even the clinical psychologist noted in his report on me that I tend to look more to peers than adults for reaffirmation. In these moments, I wish Mateo could've been around to reassure me of my worth. I didn't feel I could discuss these things with my mom, or grandparents because our home-life didn't include mental and emotional support. Let Nana tell it, mental health was a quack. But to think how things would've been different if Mateo was around the way a father should be to their child, how much I wouldn't feel like I needed validation from male attention.

When Benny and I stopped talking, I started to think there was something wrong with me because I was reacting as if we spent months in intimacy until things got bitter enough for a break. Even though his presence in my life didn't last long, I was still hurt. And though what I wanted from Benny was unrealistic in our world, thinking back now, it felt nice to sample a sense of wanting. The same way Mateo's temporary presence in my life gave me butterflies.

Like I said earlier, during this time Mateo wasn't around much. The one out of five times I remember seeing him was at Pepper's house. She arranged for us to meet for our version of “quality time.” Whenever he would come around after months of distance, he would act as if those months never existed. Expecting me to react like I was that little girl in eighth grade again.

“Hey Ki” he’d say nervously, as if seeing me older without him stung. I noticed I get my mouth from him the way he smiled with all his long, crooked teeth. Pepper would leave us at her kitchen table to talk. I’d fidget in my seat, and shake my legs with anxiety, not knowing what to say, or how. He’d just smile to reduce the awkwardness before going on and on about he and my mom’s past, how much he loved her, how he wished he could still be with her, and with us, instead of his new wife ...

He *wished*, like our life together would be different from a burning piece of rock bursting across the sky. Guess I wasn’t the only one chasing fantasies.

MATEO

MAY 2012

Benny was no longer a factor in my life as I continued high school, but that didn't mean I wouldn't still see him at Tinsley's Christmas Eve party every year. I did, but we didn't share any interaction. If anything it seemed like he was avoiding me, not trying to blow the fact that he was once in my phone trying to trick his way inside my- I had nothing to say, so it was better if he was. Mateo was also an unknown factor in my life as well, but again, I didn't think about it much. I'm not sure why him not being their didn't have a drastic effect on me as a teenager.

According to Mckenna Meyers' blog, "Fatherless Daughters: How Growing Up Without a Dad Affects Women," young women usually endure early sexual activity, addiction, and even eating disorders, but my high school experience didn't consist of any of that. Sure, I had my fair share of boy encounters where I'd end up heartbroken, but my morals and boundaries were never crossed when it came to my innocence. Having a spiritual mother, and a critical grandmother, they made sure I grew up "normal." Even if that meant masking where I was broken with financial security, private school education, and material love.

The closest thing I had to my dad around this time was Pepper. I saw her a lot not just to get my hair done, but also to build a bond. She was my favorite cousin because she allowed me to act my age. Hell, anyone that got around her was immediately lifted in their spirits because she had this huge aura that smothered you with adoration. Pepper was over six feet tall with a body shaped like a plate full of food, and she'd make fun of her size to show how comfortable she was in her skin. I would always ask my mom to hang out with her, partially hoping when we did, Mateo would be there. But Pepper distanced herself from him for a while after my eighth-grade graduation, before I met Benny.

She arranged a meet-up for Mateo and me where she'd pick him up from one of his friend's house, and he'd ride back with us to her's, but he never showed up. She tried calling him, but he wasn't answering. This got her upset because she was always on him about doing right by me. She called a couple other people to find out where he was, and we ended up pulling up to this small electric blue house. I could see from the backseat there were a bunch of gingerbread, cinnamon, and penny-colored men surrounding the front. Some of them were shirtless, some had tattoo's stamped all over their chest, back, and arms, some had crazy looking knotted up dreads, some had mouths full of gold teeth, but all were smoking a cigarette, a blunt, or a black n' mild. At the time I didn't know what drugs were, but I could sense in the moment this was the "rugged lifestyle" Nana wanted to keep me from.

Pepper tried to call Mateo one last time before telling me she'd be right back. She got out the car barreling through the crowd of guys, unafraid of what they would do like I was. She banged on the chiffon fence-like front door. The bang sounding like a gavel on metal.

"Where's Mateo?" She asked the person who answered. Pepper's voice was naturally loud. I don't know what they told her, but whatever it was, upset her even more.

"Mateo!" She shouted from outside "I know you're in there! You need come outside right now! I have your daughter in the car!" I assume the person told her to leave because she shouted once more,

"I'll be waiting in my truck!" When she came back, I could see through the rearview that she was crying, which made me cry too.

"What's going on Pepper?" She didn't want to give it to me straight without giving it to me straight, so she just told me she was disappointed in Mateo. I climbed to the front seat and waited with her for a couple minutes before Mateo decided to come out. He had an oversized

black t-shirt on and baggy jeans, his walnut eyes heavy. Pepper rolled down the window when he approached.

“Hey Ki!” he smiled per usual, with his eggnog-colored teeth. I remember having an intuitive feeling of the word “high” inside of me, but I didn’t know what it meant. I just knew there was something wrong with Mateo. He wasn’t “there.”

Him and Pepper argued about him not being a good father, which made me cry even more. I remember Pepper telling him how he was wrong for not just showing up that day but being there for me in general.

“Stop it! Stop it! Please!” Their arguing made me scream. Pepper whipped back towards me, and pulled me into her stomach and chest

“I’m sorry Ki. I’m sorry. It’s ok.”

“I wanna go home.” She looked back at Mateo and told him he’d regret not being a father before pulling off.

The ride back to her house was quiet. I was staring out the backseat window, replaying what I just saw. I could hear Pepper sniffing and could see the tears running down her right eye through the rearview. When she caught me looking, her eyes withered back and forth from the road and me.

“Kiera despite your dad’s failings, you were always worth it. And I want you to know that you are always, always deserving of love.”

Pepper and I never spoke of that day after that, and I never told my mom, but that moment made us closer to where I knew I could always trust her, knew she’d always *see* me.

Years later leading up to my high school graduation, Pepper asked me when I wanted her to do my hair. Usually it was the other way around. My mom would drop me off in the driveway, and she'd open the door standing in a dingy t-shirt and sleep shorts.

"Come on!" She'd shout from the entrance. Pepper was always happy to see me, grateful to be around, witnessing me grow up.

"My baby is about to be in college! Yes ma'am!" I was sitting in the middle of her kitchen, twisting myself side to side in the seafoam-colored chair with my heels. Pepper was getting everything she needed for my hair ready, while singing in a church soprano voice that trickled like subtle water in a river rock landscape.

"Do you want me to invite your dad to your graduation?" she asked. By this time the incident that happened during my younger years was water under the bridge. And even though she still tried to be a bridge for him, she hadn't forgiven Mateo for not being there for me.

I didn't look at her when she asked me this question, still dwelling on the inside having to still be asked this as a senior in high school.

"Um... yea. You can." My answer stoic and always the same, as if that's what I was supposed to say because he was still my dad. At this point I was ok with receiving only half of him, settling with the fact that even though he wasn't around for the in between of my life, at least he would be there for the important parts.

The day of my graduation I had to be there early with my class. We all slid on our gowns in one of the classrooms. Ms. Castillo the math teacher, rounded us outside to take a picture next to statue of Mary Magdalene. It was a tradition for every graduating class to do so with the principal. What was supposed to be a thirty second photo lasted for ten minutes. Even the families walking in stopping to capture their own memories.

“Damn can they hurry up! My edges startin’ to sweat.” I remember saying through my teeth to whomever was standing next to me. Panning the crowd of people, I spotted Pepper walking up the sidewalk. My heart tightened before looking away in hopes that when I looked back I would see that gingerbread-colored man walking with her, creating the feeling of surprise like last time. I took a deep breath before looking back, but when I did, there was only Pepper.

Before we started lining up outside the gym door, I remember her asking me where my family was sitting,

“They’re in the gym, but I don’t know where.”

“Ok, I’ll find them.” Before I could even ask the obvious, “Your dad was supposed to ride with me, but he told me last minute he had a ride. I just talked to him outside and he said he was on the way. I told him he’d have to sit in the overflow room since he’s running late.” Our class had the most attendees in the history of graduations at my high school, so there was an overflow room in the auditorium where friends and families of families could watch from a projector. I remember thinking back on how he showed up last time, so I didn’t immediately get discouraged. Better late than never, right?

During the ceremony I wondered if Mateo could see me, if he was happy for me, if he was taking pictures for the collection of pictures I wanted to believe he had of me. I couldn’t wait to see him afterward, couldn’t wait to hug him and tell him I appreciated him for coming; putting in an effort to be there for the moments that meant the most to me (as if that wasn’t his responsibility in the first place.) I wanted to forgive him, wanted to understand, wanted to give him a chance, even if he didn’t deserve it. Recognizing the good in him that I knew was there because I believed in who he could be.

The father that took me on a ride around Bankhead, his neighborhood, in one of those old, classic Chevy sports cars. The car was mocha on the outside, with pale wood-colored seats on the inside. One of his favorite songs by Juvenile came on the radio.

“Oooooo dis is the shit right here!” He was hyping up as the beginning of the beat lead into the chorus. I giggled at the way he talked: a pitch like the “I can fix that,” man from *Holes*, but with a drawl like T.I.

“Girl you look good. . .” he’d mumble the in between when he didn’t know the lyrics, “... you’s a. . .won’t ya... ayyyy!?” Mateo would rock back and forth like a bent twizzler underneath his oversized clothes, one hand on top of the wheel, while his other hand was balled in a fist in front of his mouth. Busting out with a nasally chuckle, seeing him happy made me happy as if this was the start of forever. When I’d hear that song overtime I’d think of that day, and how for a moment it didn’t feel like I would go back to my grandparents’ house without him. Mateo coming back with me to *our* home together.

As my class stood and faced the crowd, the principal closed out the ceremony commemorating our achievement.

“And so, it is with great pleasure for me, for all of us, to honor and celebrate this year’s graduating class of 2012.” The gymnasium roared with applause, and my class stood and faced our loved ones with tears of accomplishment. I wasn’t crying though. I was saving my tears. The moment wasn’t over, and I wasn’t complete yet.

The procession to the lobby was a cheerful mess. So many “OMG Congratulations!!!” and “Are you excited about college?” I remember feeling like I was walking under water. Even though I had officially finished high school, my main concern was if my dad was going to walk out of the overflow room. But when the doors opened, I didn’t recognize any of the faces.

“Did he not show up?” I remember asking Pepper. She seemed embarrassed for him to even respond,

“He told me he was coming. I don’t know what happened. And he’s not answering his phone.” I could feel myself leaving reality, flashing back to memories from my adolescence where I’d come to my dad’s defense against my mom. She would tell me how I’d understand his failures one day, and standing in the lobby of my high school, my eyes opened to the boy he truly was.

I hated him. I hated Mateo. I hated how he wasn’t reliable, or responsible. I hated how even when I knew he wasn’t a father, I still allowed myself to accept his absence.

I didn’t cry, at least not on the outside. I chose to internalize it all because this was still my day. But on the inside there was a crack, like a frozen river in shock, and I wouldn’t know how much the feeling would fester, like mold growing on fresh fruit, until the rotting revealed the root of my damaged desires.

ANGEL

JULY 2012

After high school I chose to block out any mention of Mateo. I didn't want to care about him, even acted as if he never existed. I was ready to move on and let go completely the same way everyone around me did when he wasn't brought up due to Pepper's arrangements anymore. Even my mom stopped talking about him when it was time for me to go to college.

I had to choose between moving to Tennessee or staying home, and I chose Dale Clark University, approximately fifteen minutes away from my grandparents' house. My grandma graduated from the university in Tennessee, even pulled some strings to get me in, but we had hard heads and didn't agree much on anything. "My grandma never listens to me," the clinical psychologist noted I said to him. Although she paid for my education, and for me to do a plethora of sports growing up- dance, tennis, golf, piano, and swim, she never got to know me or my interests. What I wanted to do didn't matter because if she was paying for it, you had to do succumb to her needs.

I remember going to the mall with her and my mom after I graduated high school in the summer. Whenever she asked for us to come, she was going to buy us stuff. She loved going to Nordstroms, but I was into Urban Outfitters and Forever XII back then. We never went into those stores. When we got to Nordstrom's, there was a young girl working the floor. Nana asked her to help me pick out some clothes while she picked out some of her own for me. The young girl and I had a similar taste cause everything she picked out I loved. When it was time for me to try on, I didn't like the things Nana picked out for me. Like I said she never took interest in the things I liked, therefore she picked out the things she wanted me to wear, or things she would've worn at my age. In the dressing room I had the clothes I wanted to one side and the clothes I didn't on the other.

“You don’t like these? Why not? They’ll be cute on you!” Nana would whine.

“They’re not me.”

“Well what are the ones you like? Let’s see.” I showed her the couple picks I wanted.

“Yea, those are super cute.” The floor rep who helped added.

“Oh please! What I picked out looks better!” She pinched the bottom of one of the items, moving it back to eye it up and down, “This quality is cheap! I’m not paying for these. If you want them, you pay for them. You have any money?” She knew I didn’t. I didn’t have a job in or out of high school at the time.

“You said you’d take me shopping, yet I can’t get anything I like? I don’t get it.”

“Because what I like is better than what you picked out.” She left with the clothes she selected and said she’d be at the register.

“How old are you?” the young girl asked. I was seventeen at the time. She shook her head,

“I can’t believe your grandma treats you like that.”

“Yea, I know.”

I didn’t get anything that day.

Besides wanting to control everything when it came to me, she was mainly worried about my competence, like I couldn’t *live* without her watching me. I never trusted her judgment.

My mom went to Dale. We moved out of my grandparent’s house when I started high school. This was our first time living as one away from them because my mom spent the earlier years of my life finishing school. I assume Nana didn’t give her a choice. It felt like I was getting to know the woman who birthed me for the first time, but we had a tough time understanding each other. She experienced a spiritual peak with God just before we moved out, the start of my

freshman year of high school, but even though she was “reborn,” there was still a bitterness that bothered her deep down inside.

When I got the “ok” in July to move in the campus dorms early, I wasted no time packing my things. I didn’t even neatly fold everything in my suitcase, just tossed it all in. I wasn’t going far, but I was ready to get from under my mom’s. I loved her, but sometimes she seemed more interested in making sure I wasn’t making any mistakes that we didn’t have a real mother-daughter relationship. Probably because Nana was in her ear about me not becoming like *her*. I could only imagine what my mom had to deal with at sixteen, and pregnant, from a mother who probably made her feel low for what she did, and bad for how it would make her look.

All I remember of our time together in my mom’s house was mostly quiet. We didn’t talk to each other much. The little conversations we did have never lasted long. The only times she showed interest was when I got home from school and had to read the bible with her. We read it from beginning to end, starting with a couple passages a day.

“So what do you think God is trying to say here?” Sitting in the scarlett red living room at the carob table, with a vase full of life-sized hay straws, she’d ask questions after every chapter, parable, verse. I didn’t like having God forced on me like that, I wanted to know and understand Him on my own. But my mom insisted as if it was the only way she knew how to raise me right, by making sure I knew God and Jesus. Thinking about it now, I feel like that was her way of having an open relationship with me as well, being able to discuss the situations the people in the bible went through in relation to our own; how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit was the only way through. I believe that now because with her mom, she couldn’t talk about what she was going through and how she was feeling, and since God saw my mom through, she believed he’d do the same for me.

But because the bible was the only thing that brought us together at home, we didn't with me, it was just hard because we both were unknowingly trying to heal from resentment. But I was ready to be on my own, ready to feel what it's like to be free.

In August I would have three other roommates, one being my dorm mate, the other two our suitemates, but for the remainder of the summer it was just me in the room, followed by the residence hall directors that moved in early as well. I was there for football training as one of the new managers. I first tried it in high school because I liked being able to go to all the games, sitting on the sidelines as part of the team. Plus, I got along with the guys great, but I've always been that way. Guys came around me more than girls did. I was tom-boyish back then. Being raised by an independent woman rubs off on you, and it showed in the way I carried myself as "the strong one." The romantic one's, however, were drawn to me as if the unhealed part from Mateo's transgressions reeked with a luring scent; like in the scene of *The Wiz* where Dorothy, Scarecrow, and the lion were getting seduced by the hot pink fog and glitter being blown in their faces.

I met the assistant coach of our football team on my first day. My mom came with me which made me uncomfortable. Nana would get in her head about me not being "capable" when it came to doing things on my own, leading me to believe that even when I could, I couldn't.

Coach Rowan developed a liking towards my mom, which made him think he could develop a relationship with me, but I didn't talk much, and I especially didn't like dudes being interested in my mom. The thought of someone else taking the place of Mateo and "playing father" didn't sit well with me, or maybe I was just content with the way things were.

I was going to be late to our second or third practice because I was getting my permit. Coach Rowan said we were going to be doing introductions that day in one of the university

classrooms. When I got there, the room was stadium style, with rows of tortilla-colored chairs descending to the front. The team filled majority of the center. I wasn't expecting to have to go down there and speak until Coach called the name of the other football manager to come down. She had cinnamon eyes that matched her skin, and was loud, articulate, and mature. Because her name rhymed with mine I thought to myself how she was a version of what Nana wanted me to be. Assuming being judgmental towards me would make me a reflection of what it looks like to grow up with a mom and dad the way she, and I hadn't.

Coach sat back next to me and the other coaches while she was speaking, and I was begging him to not make me go down there. I was terrified. Nana knew that I didn't share the same "reticence as her children" when I was younger, the clinical psychologist reported it, but she wanted to have things her way having her as a guardian, and criticism was her imprint. Shying me up as I got older, I couldn't bare speaking in front of a crowd, let alone a team of boys.

When it was my turn, I cringed with every step down to the bottom. All these melanated men staring at me in my fossil-colored tee and emerald short-shorts. When I initially put the shorts on, I remember my mom telling me I should be mindful of what I wear around all the guys, but I brushed it off.

I wished for sweatpants in that moment.

"Hi, my name is Kiera, and I'm from here." That's all I said. Looking down at my sperrys, I would steal glances from time to time at everyone in the room. Once I finished, I dispersed back to my seat, fluttering with nerves. Something about guys staring at me made me squirm, as if their eyes were mirrors exposing my heroine.

That's how Angel met me, aroused by virtue. He was in his junior year at Dale, and we didn't start talking to each other until the homecoming game. Up until then he'd make frisky comments for my attention during practice, gazing at me with hickory brown eyes like a pothead stuck on pastel shades in the sky.

Our team won homecoming night, and the energy from everyone in the stadium sounded like roaring waves crashing in the ocean. There was a party happening at a hotel nearby. The promoters of Dale's campus were able to rent out the multi-purpose room. My friends at the time and I got there early so we wouldn't have to wait in line too long. When Angel walked in, I shrieked. My college friend teasing me for my reaction. He pulled me into his chest when he saw me, his chin just above the top of my head. He was wearing all black with gold accents and smelled like an expensive bottle of cologne. The ceiling lights made his skin look like a honeybun fresh out its wrapper. We danced once, before he asked for my number. I didn't hesitate to give.

Later on in the football season, I ended up leaving the team as football manager due to complications within the department, but Angel and I still stayed in touch. Because he was older than me, I felt like a little girl in his eyes. I noticed I attracted older guys a lot, Benny being the first. Thinking about it now, I figure it has something to do with Mateo not being around. One of the characteristics research says about fatherless-daughters is that they tend to go for older guys. I do prefer them, but I never forced it.

In the beginning, Angel made me feel like he couldn't let go, showing up at my dorm room in the middle of the night.

“I’m downstairs, get ready so you can come. And bring a bag cause I’m not bringing you back.” Phoning me out of my sleep, his voice was rugged with rhythm, soothing but sizzled, demanding yet luring.

“Ok.”

I’d say breathless. In my mind that was the closest thing to my prince swooning me from his carriage. My fairytale fantasy I still went back to, still hoping in the end it’ll all be true. Looking for a perfect love story led by the hole that was left after deadening Mateo.

My love for the “happily ever after” stirred at a young age. At night, I had two life sized stuffed animals that I’d play boyfriend and girlfriend with under the covers. Imagine me picking made-up fights between a plush white teddy bear that had a cherry red bow around it’s neck, and life-sized Flick from *Bug’s Life*; wrapping their lifeless arms around me, pushing one away to go to the other, and then back again.

My mom reading princess stories to me before bed added to my fantasies. I was fascinated by the thought of being saved, hoping one day it would be me being rescued from my grandparents’ house, under Nana’s judgment, and my mother’s distance.

Angel made that dream a partial reality when he would come to me in the middle of the night. I’d stay with him from time to time, each time our attraction progressing. For me it was emotional, but for him both a gambol and a game.

After one to two months of spending time together, I was starting to believe that Angel and I were meant to be. It was clear we liked each other, his constant showing up to take me back to his place and texting throughout the day, reeling me in. All that was left was making it

official. He invited me over one night for a movie, and I was contemplating with myself, and my friends, to ask him what he felt about “us.”

He picked me up in his silver car, the ride just as smooth as the nickel-shine. Angel preferred his music gliding down the highway, playing a lot of Drake. His apartment wasn't far from campus, and after parking in the garage, he'd mess with me on our way up. Nudging me in my shoulder, tugging my hair, it would turn me off by the time we were inside. Angel could tell because he'd point out the change in my energy.

“What's wrong? Loosen up. Nothing to be afraid of.”

We were on the couch trying to figure out what we were going to watch. Angel functioned as the aggressor when I was unsure. I suggested a lot of old movies like *The Brother's Grim*, *Mean Girls*, *Transformers*, or old episodes of *Law & Order: SVU*, but all the suggestions I made he dismissed as if he'd seen them all before, like he was hard to impress. I don't remember what we-I mean he decided on, but I do remember I didn't want to watch it. I settled because I thought I could use the silent space to softly bring up what I was eager to discuss, but moments I tried were getting on Angel's nerves. He really wanted to watch the movie, while I really wanted us to become more.

One thing about Angel, when he was annoyed, he would get rude with his words. Hunched over with his hairy forearm resting on top of his thigh, he'd look back at me with furrowed eyebrows.

“You talk too much. Can you just sit back and be quiet for a while.” The back of my throat would tighten and my heart would speed up as I folded my arms pouting like a little girl not getting her way. He would continue browsing the TV options unphased by my annoyance, but I'd remain silent until he'd address his rudeness.

“I’m just joking.” He’d grin. When I didn’t think it was funny, he’d coddle me with sweet words that felt sneaky, always a hook behind his charm. I would sense it too but shoo it away because I didn’t want to believe what I felt for him was all for no reason. That I was naïve enough to reel myself in, choosing the idea of our “fairytale” over what I knew may not be good for me. My fatherless flawed affection.

In the midst of the movie, I remember he turned off the lights and had a bottle of brown on the table for us to take shots. I was annoyed with him after hearing his response when I finally asked him what we were. He couldn’t really give me a straight answer, just made it seem like the way we were moving was good for right now, reminding me I was different.

“I can see *it*,” is what he said, but that wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I was ready to be his girl, grant him access to the raw parts of me as if that were the magical antidote for my deep need to be saved.

Angel was trying to get me drunk, buttering me up with attention, kissing me on my neck, and down my shoulder. I was still a virgin my freshman year of college, and he knew, but that never stopped him from lusting things up. I would respond the same, slightly wanting it, slightly pushing him away.

“Stop it Angel.” I’d blush as he got closer and closer. Sometimes it felt like he would only try because he could smell the innocence off me, thinking I’d give in because he was older.

I’m not sure what possessed him to react like this after dismissing his carnal need, but all of a sudden Angel’s teeth were gripping my arm. The expression on my face didn’t compare to how painful the bite was, but I didn’t make a peep, not even a facial expression, just silence.

Angel shook me a little to ease me up, but I was at a loss.

“Take me home.” I calmly said. I could tell in his round, syrup tinted eyes, he thought about his rebuttal in relation to how fed up I knew my face looked. When he agreed, I got up, gathered my things, slid on my shoes, and stood by the door to wait for him.

I was well aware of how not ok that was, and I was ready to stop talking to him. But after that night I didn't keep away for too long. The void in my life chasing after budding promises as the remedy to my family and Mateo's dismissing attachment.

SEAN

AUGUST 2013

I moved into Culture Hall my sophomore year, the university's apartment style dorms. All the students in my class wanted to live there. The setup made you feel like a young adult, with the shower being the only thing shared between me and my roommate. Angel and I were still on and off minus the relationship. His constant showing up at night turned into him being in and out of my life. The feeling familiar to me, so I was ok with it.

I was on my way back to my room from the cafeteria when I ran into Sean. Standing at six-four with a body and smile like Gerald Levert in his younger years, I remembered him from the football team, so I wasn't hesitant to talk. He had a cheerful spirit that was easy to connect with, which made me over-confident. Sean was the first guy to get that type of reaction out of me, and I could tell I made him nervous because he'd chuckle with parmesan-colored teeth and vampire fangs that rose his cheeks underneath his eyelids.

He was inviting me and my friends to meet him and *his* at "Thirsty Thursdays." The promoters of Dale rented out this abandoned black building deep in the west side of Atlanta, and every Thursday there'd be a line out to the sidewalk. When we got there, I remember feeling the need to overdue my personality. Seemed like it impressed Sean the way I would play hard to get yet submit at the same time. Plus, I enjoyed the rush it gave me. I felt in control of my emotions for once, and not twiddling around the multifaceted arena in my mind where the maiden thinks she's found her prince yet again, because of how he bears her. I didn't see Sean that way though, at least not in the beginning. I was still painting an Angel as my prince, with shallow eyes focused on what fits instead of what's best for me.

We got acquainted fast, and I'd become accustomed to him and Angel's relationship. They were in the same class, a part of the same crew, and a little more than teammates. But Sean had no idea we were involved.

The first half of my sophomore year at Dale, I got more into the party scene on campus. By then I solidified my friend group and we were always on the move, journeying around Atlanta during the day and dressing up for house parties or flashy functions at night. I'd invite Sean to come with us because my friends thought his were cool, and they saw how much Sean was into me. They liked him and encouraged me to give him a try.

“He treats me like a princess.”

I would tell my friends, but the weight of his aura gave me pause. I couldn't look past how big Sean was, and I wasn't ready to give up my perception of Angel as my protector, my prince, even though what I believed wasn't a message from God. I know Mateo not being around skewed my perception of men when it came to how I'm supposed to be treated. My idea of the ideal male figure in my life stemmed from my imagination as a child, and after Mateo's final disappointment in high school, that idea became the forefront. I was fixated on fulfilling my creative fancy, not realizing the blur that was happening between right and wrong, what I was worth vs. what I was settling for.

That learned behavior of accepting the bare minimum having painful side effects disguised as medicine to reduce subconscious pain. But in the moment it didn't feel like it. Though I was pursuing a figment of my imagination, I was aware of how I'm supposed to be treated by a man, Mateo not being the only father-figure in my life.

Because my grandparents took custody of me, growing up, I'd fairly experience what a two-parent home looks like, despite the downfalls. Watching my grandparents together was like

watching a majestic alliance grounded by steady seeds of acceptance and love. Something rooted in me, but never planted. Albeit not that I fed it.

I know what statistics say about fatherless-daughters, but one thing that breaks me apart from the label is my grandfather.

POPPY

MARCH 2010

Spring in Fayetteville was when Georgia's heat stuck to you like the remains of popsicle juice on a popsicle stick. The summer more volcanic. My uniform made it even worse: a white button up with a burgundy vest, plaid skirt just past the knees, and long, thick, grey socks gathering the sweat beads forming behind my kneecaps. The air breathed tree pollen, exhaling a thick gust of invisible, powdery, winds. I'd often wait in the lobby with the other students after school for my mom to pick me up. When we moved out of my grandparents' house, we were fifteen minutes away from my high school, but sometimes she'd work another thirty, not counting rush hour. I wouldn't mind when my friends were still around to hang out with, dance with, walk to the Waffle House next door and order a slice of their oreo cookie pie with. But when no one familiar was around, I'd constantly ring her phone.

"How long?" being the first thing to come out my mouth. I know I was getting on her nerves, but the school officer always kicked us out at five o'clock, and I had horrible allergies.

"Call Poppy and ask if he can come get you." My mom would say to me. Even though my grandparents didn't live close to my high school, Poppy would pause whatever he was doing to be there for me. Save me. My hero.

When he got there I would rush to the car, shielding my face from the bird's and the bee's happening around.

"You got everything?" The first thing he would ask. I remember thinking why would I not have everything, not realizing the point of the question: I want to make sure you don't leave anything because I care about you, and I also don't want to have to drive back up here: *You got everything?*

“News and Talk” mumbled through the radio something about politics. Poppy steered with one hand while clasping his chin between his index and thumb as if he was sitting at the round table with the radio hosts. I would glance over from time to time at his profile, how his thick cop-stash bristled like a brush with hints of smokey gray strands under his beige index finger. A hat covering his bald head with salt and pepper hair still growing out the sides, and eyes that seemed glazed over when looking at the road. Watching him, I remember wanting to say something, spark a conversation but,

“Can I change this?” was all that came out.

“Go head.”

“V 103 is my free money station now give me my money!” The radio stations slogan would sound. Poppy’s eyes never left the road.

When one of my favorites came on I’d reach for the knob to turn up the volume. Poppy’s eyes struck down at my hand, then back in front. That made me only turn it a little. On the inside, I was jamming, but on the outside, my head would bob and I’d slightly rock my hips in the seat; the only things I was comfortable with. I remember my glances over at Poppy becoming more like stares. I wanted to know what he was thinking, if he liked the song, if we shared the same feeling. I could hear myself under my breath singing along, and suddenly, a tapping that wasn’t my own. I’d look over to see Poppy nodding his head to the beat and jigging his shoulders. This made the tightness in me relax. It was nice to see my grandpa enjoying something I liked, making it a safe space for me to open up.

After that, I would show Poppy a new song every chance I got, and he would once again, stop everything he was doing, just to hear a plethora of pop, rock, hip-hop, r&b, and indie music. Poppy didn’t always like every song I showed him, but it was the fact that even if he didn’t like

it, or didn't feel like listening, he would still give it a chance; give *me* a chance. And these moments would escalate into more interactive experiences: comedies in the living room, *Law & Order SVU* re-runs, shared inside jokes.

The summer before eighth grade at my uncle and aunt's wedding, the DJ settled down the reception with a slow song. I remember looking around at all the family pairs that made their way to the middle of the floor, mostly mother's and sons and father's and daughters. I wished Mateo were there. I went from bouncing around the whole room to sitting off to the side, watching alone.

"You want to dance?" Poppy came out of nowhere. His question birthed butterflies in my bowels. "Come on let's dance! Come on!" Poppy insisted, but I was hesitant. "Why don't you wanna dance?" *You're not my dad*, I remember thinking. Eventually he gave up, walking away with an expressionless face. My mom came over moments later asking why I didn't want to dance with Poppy.

"Because I just don't want to," I said as if I was the victim. He was around for all of my life, making up for where my dad lacked, yet I still never saw him as the father-figure he was. I was aware, but never could combine the two in my mind, keeping who I knew him to be separate. Poppy catered to me with what I deserved while I was drawn to the fire from the place inside where it rained.

"Well you should have. You probably hurt his feelings." My mom said before leaving me to continue watching everyone dance, alone.

ANGEL

SEPTEMBER 2013

After Sean and I started hanging out, Angel started coming around more and more, as if he could sense my attention being pulled elsewhere. At first, I wasn't responding to him the way I would. Sean's gentleness and genuineness was beginning to swaddle me. He was very attentive, and I didn't have to question his motives. But one day I gave in and reached out to Angel.

He picked me up late at night as usual in front of the dorms. By this time, he and his roommate moved into a house. When we were in his room, I remember thinking how I missed seeing his face *entre nous*. He would get so close, the tips of our noses would almost touch, his smile leaving me unsettled like I was teetering heaven and hell. He had a bottle of vodka this time, and I was ready to drink, ready to go against my morals just a little because I was upset with Sean.

I was around campus one day when I got a text from this girl named Zora. She was a part of my sophomore class. Her and I weren't friends but I'd see her around from time to time. She told me she got my number from Brady, the head editor of Dale University's newspaper. I was one of the writers, but it was short-lived. Zora said she needed to talk to me about Sean. I was under the impression they were friends, or at least that's how Sean put it, but apparently, she was his paramour. We met in her room. She lived in Culture too. I told her what I knew of her and Sean, she told me what it was. I was surprised. It didn't seem like Sean's character to frolic with my feelings, and Zora's. Even though he was heavy, he carried himself like he was walking on a cloud. The epitome of a gentleman, and my grandad.

When I left Zora's room I didn't immediately confront him. Instead I texted Angel, told him I missed him, and asked if he'd get me later so we could hang. I knew it was wrong of me to

react out of spite, but I'm aware now that even though I wanted something unconditional, I didn't quite understand how to appreciate it. The unstableness of my life leaving me unaware of what a healthy relationship is. Since Sean was playing games I decided to play back, instead of reacting with weakness, pitying myself for being fooled.

When I got down to Angel's ride, he was grinning at me through the passenger window. Shuddering inside, I smiled back, delighted to know he was happy to see me.

In his room, we settled on the futon in front of his bed. The carpet in his room felt like I was walking on playdough. He turned on *Love Don't Cost A Thing*, a classic, and complemented on how fine he thought Christina Millian's character was. The comments made me overthink my own appearance, so I segued his attention elsewhere. We talked awhile before Angel was tipsy enough to lust, only this time I wasn't opposed.

He turned off the lights and got in bed with me. I was holding myself in a ball underneath the sheets. I still didn't want to have sex with him because just like the enchanting ending I premised in my mind about the love of my life, I also had a vision of how I wanted my first time to happen with *that* love. Yes, in my head, Angel still fit the fantasy, but in the back of my mind, connected to the null, I was being tugged towards Sean. *He treats me like a princess*. A desire I deserved, and a mindful similarity to the *king* in my life all long.

Lying in the iron shadow of the moon reflecting through his window, Angel was in between my legs. His wings gripped the sides of my thighs, and his brain was flirting with my *lips*. Gazing up at the ceiling, I waited for the arousal.

Because this was my first time receiving oral, I was shy at showing sexual pleasure through moans and yelps. The little noises I made came out as muffled puppy cries. I remember thinking the whole time what I must taste like down there, smell like too. Angel seemed to be

enjoying his self the way he'd bury his face as if he won the prize of deflowering the princess.

What was supposed to be royal fellatio, felt more like a joke from a jester.

When he finished, he climbed back up to kiss me and asked if I enjoyed it. I told him I did, but his eyes still searched mine for the euphoria.

SEAN

OCTOBER 2013

The next morning I met up with one of my friends apart of our friend group. Arya and I were the closest, and she was the only one that knew I'd stayed with Angel the night before. I called her up and asked if she wanted to go to the caf (what everybody called the cafeteria). She lived two floors below me, so I'd walk down to meet her at her door.

Everything on Dale's campus was in walking distance, and the closer we got to the caf, the more we'd smell the herbs and spices still simmering in the kitchen's chafing dish. Arya used her card to get me in when mine ran out of swipes.

The caf looked like a large break-room with shortbread shaded walls, hickory ladderback chairs, and umber tables. Whenever I was anxious to share information, I rushed, so I didn't really grab much to eat. Arya did though. She had a plate of whatever the main course was for that day, some kind of Chinese chicken, rice and vegetables, with a couple fries and a slice of pizza on the side so she'd be full. If she was going to listen, she was going to eat.

Immediately she asked me what happened, and I told her how we only did oral. Smirking, she stabbed her food, shaking her head before chewing.

"Did you go down on him?" I told her no. He didn't even ask me to. But that was hard for her to believe: a guy tendering without wanting anything in return. I remember her giving me kudos towards my effect on men. How I happy I should be that he didn't ask.

"Have you talked to Sean?" I hadn't, and I was being a brat about it. Arya told me she thought I should give him a chance to explain, that Sean made a mistake and I shouldn't let this one time take away from our possible future.

"Plus, it's not like ya'll together."

“Yeah but he pursued me, and I was starting to fall for him.” That’s what upset me most about the situation, how the moment I started to look past my shallowness, started to think Sean was different, he proved to be just like Mateo, wanting to have his fun while becoming a man. But Arya thought I should still hear him out, and there was a party going on that night I knew he would attend. I suggested we go.

The night of the function was a blur. Only thing I remember was leaving early because one of the girls I came with drank too much. I didn’t get a chance to speak with Sean before I left, but he was calling and calling. When my group and I got back to campus, we tended to the friend vomiting caf food, took off her clothes, and tucked her into bed before Arya, Mickie, and I, walked back to Culture Hall. We went back to Arya’s room, her and Mickie were roommates.

Sean was still calling.

“Just answer!” Arya insisted, but pride held me back. I wanted him to feel bad for what he did, see how long he would persist.

“At this point, you’re playing with him now.” Mickie chimed in.

She was right. When he called again, the number was foreign to me. I answered, but it wasn’t him on the other side. His roommate was talking because Sean was too choked up, sobbing in the background. Mickie and Arya thought his tears over me were sweet, but that wasn’t the douse I needed.

“Why’d you lie to me about Zora?” I could hear him in the back talking through his weeps, but I couldn’t understand, so his roommate had to repeat.

Sean said he should’ve been honest about her, that he had no excuse and hoped for my forgiveness because he didn’t want to lose me. His roommate cosigning, even bringing up how I

didn't tell him about Angel. I did after I discovered they were friends, but the night before was still a secret.

The dorm room was silent for a while. Arya and Mickie prodding me to cave as I sat on Arya's bed with my back against the wall, pondering on how he still lied to me.

I forgave him, the words coming out of my mouth in the moment feeling faithful, but was I? Even though Mateo wasn't a thought anymore during my college years, I do believe that his constant in and out of my life stirred trust issues inside of me. All it took was one time, and I'd question you forever. Like Mckenna Meyers states in her blog about fatherless daughters, because I was unknowingly scarred from the rejection of Mateo, I'd make sure I wouldn't let someone make me feel the way he did ever again, especially a guy. So, even though I said I forgave Sean, I never forgot, nor would I let him forget either. Was I being a hypocrite considering I went behind his back too? Yes, but like Arya said, it's not like we were together.

On the other end of the phone Sean was chuckling with cries of relief. I told him I'd talk to him tomorrow before hanging up. Mickie went to her room satisfied with the drama's end, and I was still sitting on Arya's bed staring down at my phone.

"Are you going to tell him what happened with you and Angel?" Arya's question snapped me out of my world. Still looking down, I nodded. I knew it was only right I came clean. Besides, it was time for me to make a decision between the two of them.

Funny how the fantasies we think we want as children, manifest themselves as we come of age.

NOVEMBER 2013

Angel was still hitting me up from time to time after our titillating night, and out of habit I was eager to respond. But as soon as I began typing back, the thought of Sean would rush

around my mind like waves in indigo. I was going back and forth on who I should continue giving my attention too. The answer, obvious, but so was the temptation. Sean was safe, grounded, and checked all the boxes in my fairytale. He accepted me for who I was and was interested in the things that made me happy. He saw me, a feeling that watered the void of not having that at home, except with Poppy.

Angel on the other hand was inconsistent and brought uncertainty, adversely guiding my adoration. It wasn't him, but who he reminded me of. Mateo still haunting me through the male interest in my life. Even when he's not around, I'm still programmed to hold on, cradle souls like him with arms of passion, prepared to sacrifice. Choosing Angel meant choosing where it hurt, and I didn't, or wasn't ready, to lose myself.

I phoned Sean from my dorm room telling him we needed to talk. When he came to pick me up, he drove back to the parking lot in his apartment complex. I told him about my night with Angel, explaining why I went. He wasn't mad. Instead, he wanted to move past the past, and it was easier to give in to what was safe, than what I needed to face.

DECEMBER 2013

Although our immediate friends and family knew we were a couple, a post on Instagram made it official. During the 2013 era, and even now, posting your significant other on social media for the public was like having a permanent stamp across your page that said "taken." The picture was a selfie of us standing outside. It snowed the day before, and Atlanta was buried under a pearl frost. I had on Clark Kent glasses without the prescription, and my hair was wavy from the wash a few days prior. Sean had on a dark grey beanie, and an even darker grey jacket. I was blowing a kiss with rouge glossed lip, Sean smiling, hovering behind me. When he posted the photo, he added a caption that said, "I never thought I hear myself say, ya'll go ahead, I think

I'm gonna' kick it with my girl today." The line was a lyric from Keri Hilson and Ne-Yo's song "Knock You Down." When I asked him what made him want to use it he said it was fitting towards his feelings for us, choosing me over his own wants. Something my own dad had a hard time with, but not my grandfather. Sean would remind me more and more of him the way he spoiled me, showed up for me, took care of me.

I remember when I had a stomach virus, Sean picked me up from Culture and brought me back to his apartment just before he had to go to work. He was an assistant teacher for an elementary school, his major at Dale was in education. Sean wanted to be a mentor to young black boys, teaching them how to be great men.

He'd call me every chance he got to check on me. Even stopped by on his lunch break to bring me medicine and ginger-ail. He'd make fun at how dramatic I would act, flailing over his bed with my head in the trash, but he treated me like I was a part of him, a priority next to himself.

Towards the end of the first semester, he chose to spend the holidays at home with his family. He's from a small town in North Carolina. Trust me if I'd told you the name, you wouldn't know. I'm not a big fan of Christmas but I appreciated how the spirit brought my family together (even if the cheer was seasonal.)

It was Christmas night when great grandma Nora surprised me with my first car. I still remember how good she got me. The key was in a cute little Macy's box, wrapped in polished paper. My head told me it was a necklace, which made my heart a little acute. But I was quick to push away the feeling because great-grandma Nora praised me. When I peeled back the covering, and opened the box, it was like a timer ticked on in my head before it clicked there was a key in my hand. I yelled, covering the tears falling from impact, and felt a flash from off to the

side. A family friend capturing the moment. My head was in my hands, the back of my head parted down the middle into low space buns. My mom was leaning on the garnet chair across from the one I was sitting in, her laugh was still, her smile protruded the dimples in her camel-colored skin.

After stepping outside to take pictures of my obsidian beauty, with a taffy tinted bow settled on top, and basking in merit from my grandparents friends and immediate family gathered at the house, I found a moment to sneak away so I could phone Sean. I was anxious to tell him the wonderful news. He was thrilled for me, told me I deserved it and reminded me how much my family loves me.

Sean knew about how I felt about my family, how I was like the black sheep. But he would always reassure me that in life we only get one, and because I don't get to choose, I should appreciate them while they're here. If I ever lost any of them I'd wish I'd taken advantage of the time we had together. But it was hard for me to see it his way, because I felt like I was the only in my family that saw the flaws. No one else was willing to admit where they went wrong, including me.

It was going to be a few days before I'd see him again, and the day he was driving back was the same day I was getting my hair done. I didn't see Pepper as much anymore, and eventually I stopped going to her to get my hair done all together. The older I got, the less I looked back.

Back outside in my grandparents driveway, I admired the sheen shining off my new Nissan Versa, sitting inside a few times, clasping the wheel, messing with the knobs and buttons, looking at myself in all the mirrors, groping the seats. You'd think I was trying to make sure it was all real. Poppy even got me an aux cord for my music. He knew I'd appreciate that.

The morning Sean was driving back he texted me to let me know he was on the road. It was around five in the morning then, so I didn't see the message till I got up later on. After my hair appointment, he sent me a text saying he was fifteen minutes out, and I packed a bag so fast before hopping in my car. I was staying at my grandparents' house for the holidays, but I didn't like being there for too long because of Nana and I's relationship. Around company she'd act as if we were the picture-perfect family, but when it was just us, her true side would show, the flawed side, the part of her that hadn't healed from what she was born into: a critical mother like her, and no father, like me.

Shortly after great-grandma Nora surprised me with the keys, I remember Nana mentioning how she only gets cars for "A" students. It's not like I got bad grades. I was more of a B/C student. *She's always pointing out something. It can never be positive,* I remember thinking, like I wasn't deserving. I didn't understand why she had to make the point, but I refused to let it take away from the gift of freedom.

It was dark out when I finally headed to Sean's complex. The wheels on my car made the ride feel like I was dancing the Beryozka down the highway. Sean was already there when I pulled in. He'd come down to carry my stuff and walk with me back up - a prince greeting his princess in front of the castle after a long travel back to the kingdom. When I saw him come around the corner, I jumped out the car and darted his way, like baby me crawling over to the sound of Poppy walking in the front door with a kid's meal from McDonald's. The little girl in me giddy all over at the sight of a hero.

I leaped in his arms, kissing him all over his face. Sean was starting to flush from all my affection. I was talking so fast, trying to tell him everything all at once on our way up.

When we got inside, I remember us watching *We're the Millers*, a comedy. We laughed so hard till our guts ached, made oven baked pizza, Red Barron being his favorite, and got high all night. His two roommates were still in Florida with their families and wouldn't be back for another week.

Relishing in that altered state, aroused my fleshly senses. Sean laying behind me on the couch, his belly leaving me on the edge. As I mentioned before I was a virgin and Sean wasn't, Zora being one of his bodies. But the one thing that made what we had special was his respect towards my decision to wait till marriage. If anything, the connection we were building without sex made what we had intimate as if his stature foreshadowed the weight of our attachment, satisfying our urges, without having to probe.

NOVEMBER 2014

Our relationship was great and I had no complaints, other than the fact that I didn't trust him all the way. As I said it only took one time with me back then, afterwards I'd question the things he said, and did. Majoring in education, he had a lot of female classmates. He and one other guy were the only males in the program. My concerns were subtle at first with me asking questions every now and then whenever he'd get a late text or call from one of his classmates, or casual female friends. He'd softly tell me I was overthinking and reassure me of his love, but all I kept reverting back to was Zora. When I'd bring it up, I could tell it annoyed him, but he never showed it in his tongue, remaining gentle.

I knew he wasn't doing the things my mind led me to believe, flirting with these girls behind my back, treating them the way he treated me. I can admit I was insecure, and slightly possessive, but it isn't to say I didn't try to not be that way. I couldn't help it sometimes though,

not realizing the root of my insecurities. The constant thought of it being a matter of time before he disappointed me the way Mateo did, showing his true colors like Nana behind the public eye.

When Thanksgiving rolled around again great grandma Nora came to town, and it was surprise to everyone. She'd normally only come for Christmas. When I found out she was here I immediately wanted her to meet Sean, so I arranged some time for us to go over Tinsley's. I was nervous for him. Great grandma Nora was the type to say how she felt unfiltered. I remember telling him how she might comment on his weight, but he wasn't worried. Seeing him calm, comforted me, and I knew no matter what was said, he'd know how to handle himself, moving her with modesty.

I hadn't been to Tinsley's house without my family before. Walking in during the day didn't have that same vibrant feeling as Christmas Eve night. Everything normal. Great grandma Nora was sitting in one of the kitchen highchairs. Something told me she'd been waiting for our arrival. When she saw me her smile was short, and her eyes moved to Sean. She gasped, blurted out in Spanish to her husband Alberto and Tinsley. I never knew what she was saying. Nana didn't pass her culture down. At first it didn't bother me, but as I got older, I wondered why she didn't want us to embrace our roots.

Great grandma Nora chuckled before greeting me with a kiss, followed by a dragging moan as she kept her lips pressed to my face. She was wearing a magenta blouse that made her blossom like a petunia in full bloom. The whole time we were there she picked at Sean's body, telling him he should lose some weight. Sean would laugh it off, but I would tell her to stop,

"There's nothing wrong with how he looks." But she'd wave me away, going on in Spanish. I recognized in that moment she was criticizing him, but deep down I wanted to believe she didn't mean any harm, this is just how she was.

I remember being in the backseat of Nana's car, my mom beside me, and great grandma Nora sitting in passenger. She would pick at Nana for riding with her seat too high and too close to the steering wheel. Nana would shake her head, scoffing under her breath, but great grandma Nora wouldn't stop, like the more it upset Nana, the more it satisfied her. I'd be in the back laughing with her, instigating it all. Grandma Nora glancing at me with winks, appreciating my enjoyment. The only reason I'd encourage her was because I found solace in seeing Nana in my shoes. Her mother teasing her with a critical tongue, I didn't realize the pattern.

But great grandma Nora favored me, which meant she had to accept Sean. So, I figured she'd come around the more they encountered. We moved into the rouge-colored dining room, where the food for Christmas Eve would be. Great-grandma Nora sitting back down in one of the table chairs.

"So you go to school with Miss Kiera huh?"

"Yes ma'am" Sean responded with a smile as we both sat across from her.

"How old are you?" Great-grandma Nora made this sucking sound with her teeth, even when she wasn't trying to get something out of them. The noise was cringy, like dragging nails down an ice sculpture.

"I'm 24." Great-grandma Nora squeezed her face, looking over at me.

"How old are you Miss Kiera?"

"I'm 20 Grandma."

"Hmph." I knew she was probably thinking he was too old for me. Nana and my mom not only saw me, but still treated me like I was a child, like I wasn't capable. But if great grandma Nora didn't live in Tampa, a part of me feels like she would've been the same way. During the weeks leading up to my aunt and uncle's wedding, my family and I were staying at a

hotel. The wedding was in Michigan, my aunt's hometown. Great-grandma Nora and Alberto took me to the indoor swimming pool. I peeled off my clothes, antsy to jump in the deep end. But as I gave myself a running start, great-grandma Nora yelled for my attention.

She didn't want me jumping in because she was paranoid about something happening. Me drowning for example.

"But I can swim grandma! Nothing's going to happen, believe me!" But she didn't listen, just made me feel bad for not listening. I'm glad we had time apart.

"What you in school fah'?" Great grandma Nora wiped her mouth with the mushed tissue she kept in her hand.

"I'm majoring in Education. I want to be a teacher." Sean sat with his hands clasped over his lap. He had a button down on as if he was dressed for casual Fridays at work.

"Good, good, that's good." Great grandma Nora said something in Spanish to her husband again before continuing the conversation with us. She asked a few more questions about where he was from and what spirituality was. In the end he won her over,

"But you should still start working out more and eatin' less." She reminded him. At least she knew I was in good hands.

The night before Thanksgiving, I stayed at Sean's. He was spending the holiday with my family this year. We were in the living room with the gritty oat-colored carpet, and pale brunette couch. Their vintage, Sony big screen sat in front of the balcony window, and the oval, glass coffee table was dusted with blunt ash, and stained with water glass rings. It was late, all the lights were off in the living room, and the alabaster glow from the TV filled the space. Getting high, watching *Orange is the New Black*, I was facing more than half the blunt on my own. The

smoke rising inside taking my mind on a roller coaster of high's and low's. Marijuana never altered Sean's perception on things the way it did with me.

It was getting close to two in the morning when my phone rang. I was too delirious to answer but when I saw it was my mom I thought it was strange for her to call this late; curious as to what she could possibly need. Her "hello" was muffled, as if there was a fizzle in the connection, but when she continued I realized it wasn't the service,

"Grandma Nora died." The choke in her throat gave me pause. My mind on another planet.

"Quit playin,' Aries. . ." I called both Mateo and my mom by their first names. If you ask me why I couldn't tell you why I did, my family rarely making it a big deal. Maybe it was because Mateo and my mom were close in age to me. To this day my mom sometimes refers to Poppy as my "dad" when talking to me.

"Kiera, I'm serious." I gulped down my laughter, but the tickles were still in my stomach. It wasn't hitting me what she was saying was real because of how clouded my awareness was. I remember her saying her and my grandparents were headed to the hospital. Tinsley, Theo, their daughter, and Alberto were already there. I told her I'd meet them.

When I hung up I repeated to Sean what she said. *Grandma Nora died*. I could tell in his eyes the high had left him, but I was still withdrawn, and giggly. Sean understood but hurried me to get my shit together so we could go.

The ride there was slow, like I was drifting in a gondola. The city, and the red and white lights on the highway, slid by me like a flipbook. She was at Newlife Hospital, where my mom's brother's wife worked, and I was conceived. When Sean parked the car, that's when it finally clicked.

“Are you ok?” I could hear him, but I couldn’t speak. The walk to the front is a blur, but the steps towards the front doors, I panicked.

“I can’t go in there Sean. I can’t do this. I can’t . . .” clenching through my cries, trying to catch my breath, I was pacing back and forth, gripping every inch of me like I was trying to rip myself away from it all. Sean rushed toward me, bearing me in his arms, telling me to breathe.

“I got you.” He said, as I buried my face in his jacket. He suggested I let my mom know we were here.

Using the sleeves of my sweater to wipe my eyes, I pulled out my phone to text her. She said she was coming down and I started to panic again. I hoped they couldn’t tell I was high, plus showing this kind of emotion around my family wasn’t normal at home. To this day I’ve never seen my Poppy, or Nana cry. . . but I’ve heard. My mom I’ve seen, and I don’t like too, but them seeing *me* like *this*, was like standing on stage under a spotlight with glossophobia. Sean reassured me that everybody’s emotions were the same because we’re family, that I had no reason to feel ashamed. When my mom came out the door, the crimson gloss in her eyes, welled mine. She walked us to the elevator, and we rode up together.

My family was sitting in the waiting room, with lights like sky panels beaming a mix of pearl and arctic blue, and black chairs on both sides lined up in a row. Everyone was silent, grief bellowing from their faces. My mom went back to the side she was sitting on. Sean and I sat on the other. We were waiting for the doctor to let us see her one last time before they took her body away to be prepared for memorial.

I kept my face tucked under Sean’s arm so I could control the cries that came, his arm cradling me through the distress. I’d catch some of my family watching us, my mom especially, like seeing me with a man *there*, made her ~~wish~~-wonder. Up until this point in my life it was just

her and I, and I knew she deserved *it* - deserved love, but I also knew she was still processing her own life.

The doctor finally came and walked us over to great grandma Nora's room. Sean and I trailing in the back because I wasn't ready to see her lifeless. I was never comfortable with the feeling of knowing I was looking at someone who would never look back. They all gathered around her to pray, but I was still outside her window with Sean, telling him how much I couldn't see her. I could hear them, and silently prayed along in Sean's arms. I don't ever remember seeing my Nana. But thinking back now, I wonder if she felt a sense of regret, not having the chance to mend the resentment with her mother. I hoped for change between us.

Tinsley came out to get me to stand with them, completing the circle; gripping my shoulders, as if to say, "you're one of us."

I'd come to find out later that my family suspected great grandma Nora knew her time was coming, which was why she came to town during a time that was sudden for all of us; spending her last days with her own.

DECEMBER 2015

Christmas was different this year, like a puzzle missing a piece. Sean told me he and his family were going to Philadelphia for Christmas. His mother's homeland.

"You can come if you want, meet me in North Carolina and ride with us." Of course I wanted to. His family was such a blessing to me with their kindred spirits. I'd often tell Sean how much I wished I had a family like his, one that allowed you to be yourself and not make you feel like you were constantly preparing for a business interview.

On the day I planned to leave, I was trying to buy my bus ticket. But either something happened that held me back from getting it in advance, or I waited to the last minute (until pay

day thinking I'd have enough). I didn't have sufficient funds to pay for it and had to ask my mom for help. I didn't want too because I knew she'd give me the speech on how I needed to be more mindful of my money. I was, or at least back then, I tried to be on an "odd job" salary. But I admit, I had careless moments. In my head the conversation was only going to go for a minute before my mom paid for the ticket. But she criticized me for having to ask, so I retorted back with attitude, like when Nana and I would disagree when I was living with her.

"I'm sorry I don't have a professional job like you, getting paid more than enough. I'm still getting my life together, trying to figure it out." I'd feistily say.

"Kiera you just got paid a couple days ago. Where did it go that fast?" I didn't like being reminded of where I fell short, made me feel pathetic. Nana didn't take kindly to mistakes, and I assume great-grandma Nora, and the generations of mothers before didn't either. But apart from feeling like one, I seemed to make them a lot; not fully living up to my potential because the bitterness I still held on to was holding me back. Something inherited at home from the women around me trying to heal.

When my mom turned back to look at me after my response, her face was buck with bulging eyes, and her lips were tucked over half her teeth. The face she'd make before she'd get physical. That bitterness I mentioned she still had inside came out through impatience, and I believe that even though she turned her life over to God there was still a battle brewing in her from Mateo's rejection, and her mother's. Seeing me in those moments of anger probably didn't help either because I'm the spitting image of him, and her when she'd uphold herself against Nana. She grabbed me by the arm, yoking me up to give me a spanking. My immediate reaction was to cower like I did when I was a in elementary, middle, and high school. But I was twenty years old.

I didn't need whippings anymore.

I scrunched my caterpillar eyebrows, squinted my chestnut eyes, scrunched my beady nose, and stretched my mouth. Wringing myself from her grip, I stepped back.

"I am not a little girl anymore! You do not have to put your hands on me." My crying made my scream sound like a baby trying to talk through their gurgling weeps. The pale lady from *The Grudge* in the back of their throats.

"Ok, ok." My mom had her palms up, her protruding eyes, softening. She started to calm down but I was still in the heat, which made her irritable again. Only this time, she hit differently, said she wasn't going to pay. I gathered my things telling her I was going to find a way to get the money and meet Sean.

"You're not gonna' take away my happiness!" I shouted as I ran up the stairs to get my suitcases, throwing them in the car. Even though Sean wasn't around for all the pieces of my life, he brought out the best parts I'd hold on to forever; illuming tunnels in my mind and making me feel most at home.

I got in my car and sped off, dashing down the highway. I thought to go to my grandparent's house, even thought to ask Nana for help. I don't know what made me think she'd understand, let alone care, but I was desperate and anxious enough to try.

I pulled up, hopped out my car, and rushed over to the side door. Walking in, Nana's back was facing me, while she read the paper at the kitchen table. There was a mug in front of her, freshly stained by her coffee lipstick. She turned a little, peering over the rim of her glasses at me. Her downturned eyes, heedless. When she continued to read, I walked past her on the tawny wooden floors, rounding the staircase where she couldn't see me. Her action made me

hesitant, questioning the thought to ask. Pacing, I was going back and forth with myself on what to do.

Maybe she'll say yes. Maybe she'll listen to me for once, and not make it about her.

But all she did was use my need as her chance to reveal my flaws, pointing out the times I didn't give in to her disapproval. I could never stand for too long without a rebuttal, which led to an argument, and her telling me "no" as well.

I told Sean what happened and he agreed to pay my way. He didn't want me fighting with my family but consented to my wanting to leave. I was angry with my mom, but not because she wouldn't help me out, that was just the icing to it. It was the deeper issues I was harboring inside; her way of being a mother, and how distant we were living under the same roof. And now, my grandmother was once again confirming what I already knew her to be, in an instance where I thought we could see eye-to-eye for once.

I was halfway sitting at the desktop in the kitchen with the greyhound website up. Nana and I were still going back and forth while she was sitting behind at the kitchen table. I remember she called me crazy, and I didn't receive that sparsely. It was as if all the things Nana called me growing up were replayed in my mind over and over: fat, hardheaded, ignorant, stubborn, *evil*. Back then I'd just cry in my mom's room, cuddled on the sand-colored carpet behind her bed. I'd call her from the phone in her room at my grandparents' house. She'd be in her dorm at Ohio State. I'd tell her how Nana was saying mean things, and she'd tell me not to listen.

"Don't worry about what she has to say. She doesn't know what she's talking about."

She'd tell me to give the phone back to Nana, and I'd hear them bickering about Nana's judgmental ways. My mom would come to my defense the same way she did when Nana found out about me in her belly.

"Inured to criticism," words on the last page of the report the clinical psychologist typed up for Nana, my keeper that knew I was naturally accustomed to harming self-talk, my guardian who was once a teacher herself, grounding me in judgment as if she were God.

"Crazy!? Oh, I'm crazy!?" I stood up. Turning around, I felt my fist ball. I charged at her with a thought to *strike*, but as soon as I got inches away, her face stock, yet startled, I stopped. Looking at her sitting with her legs crossed and the day's paper opened in front of her, all I could see was someone who had no idea the bestrew of anxiety I faced. The internal battle of wanting better for myself, only to clash with the little girl inside wanting her family to recognize the lack of support shown towards the fatherless reality she was born into.

Someone who acted as if she had no idea what it was like to be young, in love, and to have her own family, own father against her. Someone too guarded to heed, to disregarded to care, and who was similar to myself, yet would never understand me.

Poppy came up from the basement because of all the noise. I was walking back to the desktop with tears in my eyes still disagreeing with Nana. He was trying to calm us down, screaming "hey!" and "woah!" in repetition.

"What's going on?" Poppy looking at me with Ice Cube-confusion.

"Tell her to stop talking to me! Tell her to leave me alone!" Nana was shouting something back, but the yelps coming out of me at the same time, drowned her out. Poppy stood in the middle looking back and forth at both of us, probably thinking to himself how we were one in the same.

“Stop! Stop it! Just be quiet and stop! Leave her alone!”

“Me!? Why are you telling me to stop, she-” I don’t remember what else Nana said, and I didn’t care. I was too focused on how Poppy saw the emotion coming out of me and chose my rescue. I figured then, he knew how disparaging she could be, and how harsh her tongue was. He, my mom, and uncle would react the same towards Nana when she act that way towards them: timorous talk and irritable remarks.

It was quiet in the kitchen when Poppy when back downstairs. I rushed through the payment and had him take me to the station. It was late when I got there because I remember my ticket time saying I would arrive in North Caroline between three and five in the morning.

I didn’t have to wait long for my bus to pull around, and when it did I made sure I was the first one on so I could sit close to the front. It wasn’t a lot of people riding with me, but they were strange. I ended up sitting next to a homeless guy who smelled like he had a pile of horse-dung sitting in his pants.

I held my breath majority of the ride. It was awful. Imagine six hours of straight ass engulfing your nose with Samson strength. Apart of me thought it was karma from the way I acted with my mom and Nana - taking my *shit* with me.

There’s was no escaping the brooding cycle.

LATE NOVEMBER-EARLY DECEMBER 2015

Back in Atlanta, I called Poppy to pick me up from the bus station so he could drop me off at my apartment. Sean was coming back the next day. When I got to North Carolina, I didn’t tell my mom I made it because I was mad at her. I found out Sean did it for me. While I was out there with him he encouraged me to talk to my mom and tell her my feelings toward our family dynamic, and her and I’s relationship. Despite my mom’s shortcoming’s as a mother, one thing I

knew to be true was, she didn't want to be like Nana. She wanted to be better, and her spiritual peak with God proved that she wanted to turn her life around, forgive Nana, Mateo, and the situations from her past that made her reserved.

Even my roommate at the time, Denver encouraged me to go into the conversation with not just an open mind, but an open heart as well because at the end of the day our families are just older versions of us in need of the same reconciliation. When I texted my mom, she told me she wasn't at the house yet, so we agreed I'd come over later that night.

When I got there, she was in her room sitting on top of her mauve, lilac, and amethyst comforter in boxers, an oversize-tee, and her silk thistle shaded scarf on her head. My heart thumped in my ears as I sat on the opposite end. I started telling her my perception of what it was like growing up with her: not having the relationship where I could tell her everything without her dismissing it because it didn't align with God's word, or because she didn't know how to relate to me, even though I was her child. Disagreeing with some and sympathizing with most, she admitted that a lot of what I was feeling was how she used to feel with Nana, and a part of me knew because of how I'd watch them interact.

We'd be in the living room at my grandparents' house, my mom watching TV in one of the currant red chairs, like the one Steve sat in, in *Blue's Clues*. Friends I brought to my grandparents' brick home considered it a mansion, but to me, it was a house that held onto trauma. Nana would trot down tan shaded carpet of the railed stairs. The sound of her heels clapping against her sandals riled my nerves. The energy she brought was unpleasant, all of us used to her picking at us in some kind of way. Poppy would get it about the way he drove, or how he'd sit on the couch in the living, or how he ate his food, or how he would be himself when company was around. My mom would get it when it came to how she carried herself, Nana

wanting my mom to be more like her. Who wants to be like someone they're not? My mom's brother, however, didn't really get it as much. If he did, I didn't see it a lot growing up. Nana was different when it came to raising boys, falling in line with the stereotype of raising boys with slaps on the wrist, while reprimanding the girls. I see it now with my uncle's children.

When Nana would reach the bottom of the stairs, she'd walk over to her usual spot at the corner of the bar style granite table asking my mom questions. The one's friends of family would ask when wanting to know if you were doing anything special with your life.

My mom's face would tighten as she'd take a deep breath, shaking her head. Her responses short, but careful so that she wouldn't tip-toe herself into an area of the conversation where Nana would pick at something on her or about her. She'd hold down her bark as if holding her breath, before feeling the need to speak up. Nana would make her feel like she wasn't doing enough with her life, not applying herself. My mom wanted to be an actress, but Nana never supported the dream if she didn't understand it. Watching as a little girl, I was aware why what Nana was saying made my mom irritable, and I'd be in my head defending her emotions.

But when we moved out, I thought things would be different, that not having Nana around would allow her to be the mother she wanted to be.

"I feel like I failed you." Cupping her hand just above her nose to wipe away the tears, my mom wept.

"No, you didn't. Don't say that." I was too. Although I had my reasons for holding on to the burden I felt, I didn't want my mom to feel shame. Even now thinking back, her saying that said a lot more about me than it did her, when it came to who I was. *Was I a reflection of the generational trauma?*

I remember us agreeing to start a new tradition on getting to know each other.

“How about we go out to eat every Friday?” She proposed. It all sound good but I was more lasered on physically seeing our relationship move forward.

I left and went back to my apartment, anxious to tell Sean the next day. When he got back from North Carolina, I met him at his place, summing up the conversation between my mom and me. He was delighted to hear the seed of change had been planted, and it seemed things in my home life with my mom were starting to look up. The trust issues I had with Sean, however, were still prominent, even though he gave me the stars. At that point I couldn't say it was still because of Zora, it had been two years since. I think the same way my mom and I shared a vulnerable moment opening up to one another about what we know, was something I needed with Mateo, and Nana.

But I wasn't ready.

BEGINNING OF DECEMBER 2015

One night, Sean and I were at my apartment. My new roommate Marianna expressed to me recently how she didn't see me as much and wanted to hang out sometimes. Her and I went to high school together and we were cool, cordial. But I was choosing to stay at Sean's daily, so I we started switching it up to where he would stay with me some times, so we could all hang out.

We were in the living room talking, listening to music, smoking. Sean and I brought weed. Him and Mariana started getting deep into the educational system and how the kids back then, and now, need more developmental support in the classrooms.

I remember I left them alone and went to my bedroom to go lie down. The mixture of wine and lime-colored hues was making me woozy. While I was in my room I waited up for Sean, assuming seeing me leave would hint to wrap things up with her and tend to me. But he stayed in there for an hour talking to her. It was dark in my room, my ears pressed up against the

wall listening to them. Based off hearing his low, deep, raspy chuckles, her giggles, and how they bounced off each other so naturally, it seemed for the both of them, I pictured Sean sitting in the little red couch chair in front of the window, hunched over a little with his forearms resting on his thighs; his thick meaty fingers intertwined. Smiling down at his feet, his cheeks like meatballs underneath his eyes, while Marianna sat at the end of the couch closest to him, with her latte-colored legs bent at the knee, resting on the couch, gazing over her knuckles at him, like a baby gazelle. Sean would look back at her and continue smiling while he talked, aware of her admiration . . .

I could easily blame the drugs and alcohol, but that would just make me incorrigible. The truth was, my mind moving against me, and I was allowing it. Allowing my insecure button to be pushed, and jealousy to stir inside me like a blender. In these moments, when my nerves felt like bugs crawling underneath my skin, holding myself back from what I really wanted to do, I'd rant to myself.

"I can't believe he would leave me back here, and for her!?! So he can flirt with my roommate at my place, on the other side of my door?!" When Sean finally came back in the room, all I remember are glimpses of myself screaming like a gremlin in his face, blaming him for my insecurity.

Like Mateo at the news station.

He looked at me like a parent witnessing their child lose their mind, in disbelief at how I was accusing him once again of disloyalty. I'd done so many times in the past leading up to this moment, and every time after we argued, I'd tell him how I wouldn't do it again . . . but I would. ". . .blame and guilt often manifests itself in the form of depression and low self-esteem." (Castetter, 2020, 9.) And this time, Sean had enough.

“Kiera . . .”

There was a pause. His eyes glossing over. “. . . you’re roommate of all people . . . are you serious?” Looking away from me with woe in his eyes, he shook his head. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“You’re not breaking up with me. . .” I huffed not believing he was serious. I was the one to make the break-up threats, even though I wasn’t going anywhere.

“I don’t want to, but it feels like I have to.” It was silent for a second. I stared off to the side, and a flash of our relationship from start to now flicked through my mind like the flashback scene Bella has with Edward at the end of *Breaking Dawn Part II*.

Just like that, three years spent together, getting to know each other and ourselves, was over. I couldn’t blame him though, I would get tired of someone constantly nagging at me with narcissistic criticism too. The same way Nana would Poppy, my mom, me. I didn’t realize then how much I’d harbored her flaws as my own. And in doing so, losing the one man, aside from my grandad, who saw me.

I didn’t tell anyone immediately that Sean and I were over. Partly because I didn’t want to believe it. He was working late at Macy’s one night, and I popped up hoping he’d hear me out; praying I could persuade him to change his mind. Standing in the empty parking garage, all the ceiling lights buzzing, I saw Sean unloading one of the truck’s. He told me to wait by his car.

When he came over all I could do with my face was smile, while his was still. I pleaded with him to give me another chance, apologized for being crazy, told him I’d stop accusing him of shit I knew deep down he wasn’t doing, admitting to where I was damaged, promised I’d work on it.

“You say that all the time Kiera, but then you just fault me again, yell at me, hit me, threaten to break up with me, I’m tired. You’re draining me. Don’t you see that I really care about you? No, you don’t. Because if you did, you would at least have the decency to trust me.”

A final kiss on the forehead, and I was alone in the parking garage. Funny how I’d always questioned his loyalty because of my assumed suspicions, and now he had every reason to question my ability to change.

Sean was a great friend and an even better boyfriend, but I was selfish to think he’d inure as my punching bag forever.

JABARI

JANUARY 2016

It had been damn near two months since Sean broke up with me, and the university was still on holiday break. This particular night I was in my apartment with Arya, figuring out our plans. She said Sean's roommate told her about Cash's birthday party, and that Sean was going to be there. I knew Cash from the football team. When I asked her how she knew, she said his roommate told her. Arya and Sean's roommate were hooking up at the time.

What she didn't know was, I already knew about the birthday party, I just wasn't trying to go. But now that I was aware Sean was going to be there, I changed my mind. I told Arya I would only go to see him so we could "talk," get a gist of where his head was at since we last saw each other, hoping that maybe seeing me would reignite the sparks.

I'd been to Cash's pool parties every summer, but this was my first time coming out to his winter shindig. When we got there the driveway and front yard were packed with cars. Arya and I weren't surprised. Cash's parties were always swarming because he was well-known on the east side of Atlanta.

"How does Cash get all these people to come out."

I'd comment every time. I thought it was dope how much his events were supported by his friends from Dale, homies from high school, and the whole neighborhood.

A thick cloud of smoke lingered around a group of guys crowding the driveway. I recognized most of them from Cash's pool parties. There was bonfire in the backyard before we walked in the side door; my first time seeing one in Atlanta. My eyes were stuck on the golden red-orange flames fanning like one of those blow-up cylinder men you'd see in front of a car dealership.

“Ki! Come on!” Arya called from the step leading into the side door, snapping me out of my daze.

The inside was dark, with a ruby red lowlight buzzing above the second door that led to the music. Arya was ready for a drink, but I wasn’t trying to get drunk. The goal was to get to Sean, but he wasn’t there yet. Loitering by the orange Igloo cooler carrying the crimson liqueur, there was a tall guy with hair in a low pony, pointing at me.

“Who’s that?” I asked Arya. I never seen him before. He started heading our way to get more alcohol, and I whispered to Arya how I thought he was cute.

“He too light skinned for me. You know I like mine chocolate!” Arya wasn’t the type to date outside her race. Watching him walk away, I refocused my mind back to why I was there.

Soon after, Sean walked in with some of his classmates in the graduate program at Dale. I didn’t immediately say anything, but we did make eye contact. I could feel the fireflies rumbling in my gut, so I finally poured myself a drink to flush them out. I waited till he was settled into the party before I approached him. He seemed happy to see me, but there was still an aloofness.

“So, Sean, I was wondering if we could talk about . . . us . . .” He said he didn’t think now was a good time, reassured me he still had love for me, but that his feelings were still the same. After that I was ready to go. There was no point in me being there anymore.

“Wassup, I like yo jacket! What’s yo name?” As I was walking back towards Arya, the tall guy staring at me was now hovering like a tree. Shading his eyes with black glasses, it was hard to tell what he looked like.

Tinsley’s husband always telling me, the eyes reveal the most.

“Thanks, and, Kiera, what’s yours?”

“Jabari.”

“Nice to meet you Jabari.” I held out my hand for a shake, but he was confused as to what he should do so I pulled back, scratching the side of my head like it never happened.

“How do you know Cash?”

“He and I go to the same school. I’m in college at Dale Clark University.”

“Oh word! That’s wassup! What’s your goal or, degree, or, what do they call it?”

“Major?”

“Yeah, yeah, your major.”

“Mass Media Arts, with a concentration in TV & Film. What about you? Are you in school?” I don’t know why I asked when clearly he knew nothing about college.

“Nah, school ain’t for me. Ain’t nothing them teachers can teach me dat I don’t already know or can learn on my own.” *Interesting*. I never met anyone who wasn’t in school. In my family, school was a must, school was important, school paved the way for success. I was hesitant yet intrigued. Why did he feel this way? What kind of life was he living? What kind of experiences existed outside of tradition?

“Oh ok. Yeah, school isn’t for everybody. So, what do you do then?”

“I’m a model.” He pulled out his android with a shattered screen, the light reflecting off the dirt underneath his claws.

“Oh wow, these are dope.” I could barely make out the pictures.

“Yeah, I got some more photoshoots coming up probably next weekend.” For some reason I didn’t believe him. “I would like to see you again Kiera. Can I have your number? Do you have Instagram?” I gave him both. In my mind if he called, I’d him like any other guy at a party wanting my attention, not take him seriously.

Before we went back through the hallway towards the side door, Cash came up to us wanting a picture. This caused us to stay longer than I wanted, and Arya was starting to feel her drinks making her want to dance and socialize. Sean and his friends had gone, and Jabari was in my face a lot, groping at me, pulling me in. At one point Arya got in between telling him to give me some room.

“Damn, are you her bodyguard or something?” Jabari asked seriously, yet sarcastically, with a red-neck drawl that made you want you laugh. I pulled Arya away as my chance to tell her I was ready to go, but walking through the hallway Jabari tugged me back,

“Please, please, don’t leave yet. Stay. Just a little longer.”

“Oh my gosh.” He was breathing in the sweat off my neck, “I have to leave.”

“Will I see you again?” I said yes, but in actuality I just wanted him to let go.

After dropping Arya off I was back at my apartment. Mariana had guest over so I went to my room night-capping with myself. The only moments resonating inside my mind was with Jabari . . . not Sean. I think that was the first instance of the spell he had over me. The interest that riled my awareness as if I was twelve-years-old again, in the back seat of my grandfather’s car leaving Tinsley’s party, tripping over the memory of Benny’s favor.

A couple days had passed and Jabari had liked all my photos on Instagram, left praises to my appearance, and texted me a couple times to “pull up.” I made excuses like I would with all guys I met at a party, until one day I was with Arya venting to her about not having Sean around. What’s weird, I wasn’t exactly heartbroken. It hurt not being able to call him throughout the day, attached to hip in person, but a part of me still felt like myself, like I didn’t lose anything.

I mentioned to Arya how Jabari’s persistence had me contemplating his invites.

“Well, why don’t you see wassup and hang out with him! If you start to get uncomfortable, just leave! It’s not like you’ll ever have to see to him again!” A few seconds later, Jabari was texting me to “pull up” at his house again. What were the odds. My fingers hovered over the keyboard like a magnet before typing back.

Why not.

Before I left Arya, she gave me the safety speech: the talk when one of us goes somewhere unfamiliar without the other. Jabari told me he was on the way home and to give him twenty minutes, so I went back to my apartment waiting in my room, thinking out loud about my decision.

“I can’t believe I’m actually bout’ to meet up with this boy! This is so new for me! What’s gotten into me!?” I’m not going to lie, I was nervous, and I didn’t understand it. I barely knew this dude, yet here I was being reeled in like a foolish fish infatuated by his fascination. When he sent me his address, I was forty minutes away.

“Damn he lives far!” I said to myself. Looking back, that was probably the first sign I shouldn’t have gone. It wasn’t worth it.

Headed east, I was familiar with the route. I went to elementary and middle school out this way. When I drove past the exits, the GPS said that I would be taking the next one in two miles.

“Oh, he’s the exit after Tinsley’s. He must be good people then . . .” There was a bridge I had to drive under that shaded the name of the exit I was taking, When I crossed over, the whole night changed as if I transported to another part of the state.

“Take the exit.” Siri sounded.

The words Winter Chapel Road gleamed off the green backdrop. Five minutes away and my palms were starting to sweat. When I told him I was close he told me to park by the sewer. Turning down his street, my GPS told me that his house was the one in the middle of the cul-de-sac. I had to round the circle in order to park next to the sewer he was referring to.

I told him I was here, he told me he was coming. I waited out there for about fifteen minutes before he came out. At first I wasn't thinking about it because I was too busy prepping myself in the mirror, but after a while I started to get agitated at him having me wait as if I was the one pursuing him.

From my rearview mirror, I saw him walking up the driveway. Wearing all black, his body was almost a shadow.

“Wassup, my bad I took so long.” Cramping himself inside my car, he whipped his face around and a part of me flinched. Keeping my smile on, I wasn't expecting him to look the way he did: water chestnut skin, squinty racoon eyes, and a devious grin like Scar from *The Lion King*. I asked him what took so long, he said he was freshening himself up, talking to his mom and brothers, making sure he looked right for me, but he stunk of weed. At the time I stopped smoking after Sean. I wanted to clear my mind during the earlier days of our breakup, and not cloud it with judgement.

Jabari and I talked and talked about our interest and commons, and I could hear that little voice inside claiming I knew him, or at least met him before, but I couldn't finger it.

Another night I pulled up in front of his house again, and this time we talked until five in the morning. Jabari in my passenger seat with a shamrock jersey on and dark blue, straight-leg jeans. Thick strands of his hair sticking out from him tugging at the bun he had in the middle of his head. He was high as Pluto.

I was in the driver seat, canary yellow baseball cap, apple red puffy jacket over a plain white t-shirt, shying away from his rose gloss glazed over the whites of his eyes when he'd lean over the brake in between us.

I was enkindled by our connection, how are birthdays were two weeks apart, how we were both half Cuban, had feather tattoos on our left arms, loved anime and, ultimately, how easy it was for me to talk to him. Going on and on about whatever with someone new that felt familiar. From the lankiness of his body to the twang in his voice, everything about him turned me into a little girl again. The hole Mateo left giddy from the similarity.

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STATEMENT OF INTEREST

I'm a creative with experience in editing, proofreading, producing news and feature stories in a professional setting, cultivating writing workshops, and event coordinating. As a writer I'm proficient in poetry, short stories, fiction, creative non-fiction, essays, articles, and blog content. I'm seeking careers that allow me to identify and generate compelling, unique stories, and work closely with an innovative team to develop pioneering ways of delivering information to the public.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**Dance ATL "Promenade" Writer**

May 2022- Present

- Article writer for Dance ATL's Newsletter "Promenade."
- Conduct interviews with nomination candidates.
- Produce 800-word articles by monthly deadline.

Graduate Research Assistantship

August 2021- May 2022

- Served as a graduate research assistant for Dr. Lara Smith-Sitton, a faculty member in the Master of Arts in Professional Writing Program at Kennesaw State University.
- Responsible for researching internships and crafting content for the *Professional Resource Guidebook for Writing and English Majors*.
- Provided support for a book project on internships.

Atlanta Writers Collective

May 2021- Present

- Co-coordinator of Atlanta's first writers group.
- Provide a platform for writers to workshop, self-publish, and perform their work.
- Coordinate our spoken word event, "Intimate Expressions" by handling the preparations.

The Epoch Times

May 2021- July 2021

- Article writer for the print and online magazine of "The Epoch Times."
- Worked under the Editor in Chief to pitch and submit four 800-word articles a month.

Study Breaks

January 2021- May 2022

- Article writer for the spring internship program.
- Worked with the editorial department to pitch and submit 1000-word articles a week, including a byline.

Meredith Corporation, CBS46 News

October 2017- June 2019

- Served as a Studio Technician.
- Operated and troubleshooted technical equipment including audio equipment, and teleprompter.
- Prepared and tore down studio for broadcasts including distribution and upkeep of IFB, light/light system, activation of set monitors, projectors and computers.

TECHNICAL SKILLS

- Slack
- iMovie
- Microsoft Word
- PowerPoint
- Excel

PUBLICATIONS

Atlanta Writers Collective (Self Published)

May 2021-Present

*Whispering Bodies**Dream Jumper**Bleeding Petals**Autumn Trials**Blue Echo 's,**Skin Abandoned**Rowdy Recess**Radioactive Cocktales***Harness Magazine Publishing**

December 2019-February

2020

*Tips for Every Fingering**IDK WHAT ELSE TO SAY**Charmed**!SUCKA!***Amazon Self-Publishing**

June 2018-August 2018

*The Change vs. The Transition**Questions*

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

St. Francis Table Soup Kitchen – Assisted with providing food homeless persons**Hands on Atlanta** – Took part in beautifying school grounds at various schools in Atlanta