



MY SLIPPER FLOATED AWAY

New American Memoirs

Edited by Justine Hope Blau

Cover photograph: Joe Raskin

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Introduction ~ by Justine Hope Blau

Most of the students in my memoir workshops at Lehman College in the Bronx are immigrants, first generation American, and/or people of color. They come from the Dominican Republic, India, Gambia, Kazakhstan – all over the world – and their writing is rich with fresh perspectives and beloved customs. Whether their grandmothers soothed them with warm *parathas*, milk chai, feta cheese *bureks* or *Pastelon de Papas*, the writers in these essays evoke both their love for their background cultures and their pursuit of an elusive American dream.

Some of the writers left behind traumas in other countries only to face staggering difficulties in New York, including barriers to employment and drug laws which disproportionately target their non-white families. Now, when I read media reports that condemn people who break drug laws or use resourceful skills to survive in a hostile place, I consider too that the person may also have been a generous provider, who helped extended family members to pay their rent and buy groceries, despite having only an elementary school education and few work skills.

The title of the anthology comes from Steven Ngin's gripping story of his family's escape from the brutal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia when he was four years old. He rode on his father's back as they crossed the Mekong River and watched his slipper float away. Steven was malnourished, had witnessed atrocities and often endured the terror of being alone for long hours at night in strange houses while his mother was forced by soldiers to work in rice fields. The image of his slipper disappearing is seared in his memory and provides the visual and poetic hook to frame his story – but the lost slipper metaphor also works for the other essays because they too are permeated by the theme of people moving forward after sustaining losses.

In every class, students bonded over their efforts to transcend trauma through the healing power of storytelling.

When I first started teaching in 2015, I realized that many of my students didn't fully appreciate that their stories were compelling. But then they started writing about growing up hearing gunshots and sirens at night, using fire escapes as basketball hoops, and a ritual I'd never heard of: dancing at Thanksgiving. One student wrote about how he and his brother, at ages 11 and 14, had to fend for themselves after their father was deported. As the students listened to each other, mesmerized, they came to realize that their own stories have the same effect on other people. That motivated them to learn literary techniques to weave their experiences into cohesive, artful narratives.

Many of the writers have since graduated and have become teachers and nurses; others are still in school or, having graduated, are struggling to find the kinds of jobs that they envisioned having, once they had earned a college degree. Yet, however their careers and their lives pan out, they know that continuing to cultivate their writing will give them some measure of power. Their stories of resilience and creativity reflect how American culture is enriched by their presence. To know them is to love them.

~ ~ ~

Jenifer Rodriguez



Jenifer Rodriguez's fresh and vibrant essay comes from a prompt to write about summer in the city. Jenifer was born in Washington Heights (Upper Manhattan), but her mother is from the Dominican Republic. Jenifer's mother would be away for 10 hours a day at her job, so Jenifer and her sisters and brother were often on their own. Jenifer wrote about her experiences 12 years earlier, during the hot August night of the 2003 blackout. She revised and enriched this essay, adding the specific kind of beer that the neighbors were drinking (Corona), the type of music that was playing (Merengue) and gave an example of a Laffy Taffy joke, which brought the reader right back to that memorable night in the city, when the electricity was turned off and everybody communed together on the streets.

Drums, Dominoes and Dulce De Leche

The television announced that in a few minutes the Northeastern U.S. would lose power. It was Thursday, August 14, 2003 at around 3:40 p.m. and my siblings and I overreacted because we were all alone. My mother was working and we had no idea what to do. As we

watched the news they warned us to buy all the necessary things for this blackout. So immediately my sisters and I got dressed to buy candles, water, canned food and a flashlight.

Our mother left us money but we had already wasted a large amount because we were hungry earlier in the morning. So, we broke into our piggy bank. We had just enough to buy two flashlights, candles, a pack of batteries and at least three cans of ravioli and meatballs.

At 4:10 p.m. our air conditioner turned off. “Don’t panic, we got this,” my sister said. Outside a man shouted, “*Se fue la luz*” (“The light went off”). My little brother was sleeping, so we were debating about leaving him while we went outside to get things. We argued which led to him waking up.

We went down the stairs and outside the temperature felt like 110 degrees. Walking towards Broadway on 160th Street was like walking in Times Square because there were so many distressed, confused people rushing around.

Our nearest 99-cent store was crowded and chaotic with 70 people filling their carts, running over each other, kids crying, people fighting over items. In less than 10 minutes the store went out of stock.

“Let’s go to Pancho’s store,” I said. Pancho is one of my mom’s childhood friends who owned a store four blocks from home. When we got there, Pancho called out to us, giving us a bag of all the things we needed for FREE.

“Take this home. Your mom has been calling and she’s worried,” he said. “She’ll be home soon. Just wait for her in front of the building.” We waited an hour for her, anxious and dehydrated. By 6:30 she appeared; it was the best feeling ever. We cried from excitement and fear.

Upstairs, we turned on the battery-operated radio. They warned us that water would probably go off as well. Instantly, my mother turned on the cold water in the bathtub, filling it to the top. “In case the water goes off, we have just enough to shower,” she explained. She had also bought gallons of water for us to drink.

We prepared a cooler with bottles of water and juice, tuna fish sandwiches, ham and cheese, chips, cookies, crackers, cereal. You name it we had it.

Thirty minutes into preparing all the emergency equipment we were hot and exhausted. Around sunset a hammer banged against something. “CLANK, CLANK, CLANK”. A lady said, “*Dale mas duro a esa pumpa, que me quemo del calor*” (“hit the pump [fire hydrant] harder, I am dying of heat”). The guys from my block had opened the fire hydrant. The entire block applauded. I asked my mother if we could go outside. We took our things and headed out.

It was dark and gloomy in the staircase. In front of our building was my entire neighborhood and they had a party going on. *Merengue* was playing from my godfather’s car. Four men were playing dominoes; the women were talking, eating, and drinking Corona beers. The kids were running, playing hide and seek. Minutes later my dad appeared. I felt safe and I was able to play and get wet in the pump.

The block was noisy and crowded but everyone was getting along. My sisters and I decided to walk around the block. Each building had their own thing going on. Neighbors from building 539 were playing Drums (Bongos), Guiro, Claves and a six-stringed guitar, playing *El Son Cubano*. The teenagers from building 537 were telling *Laffy Taffy* jokes (“What do you get when you cross a pig with a Christmas tree? A porcupine!”) as they played dice

and smoked weed. Neighbors from building 541, the Catholic seniors, were praying, holding their rosaries, hoping the night would go smoothly. We were well protected. We had cops patrolling the streets and for the first time we were able to do anything we wanted without getting in trouble. Around 9:00 we went back to our building .I saw a birthday cake. A Dominican cake to be exact, made of *dulce de leche*. The frosting was nicely decorated with patterns of flowers in my favorite colors; orange, plum and yellow.

“Oh snap, it’s my birthday, I almost forgot,” I said, out of embarrassment.

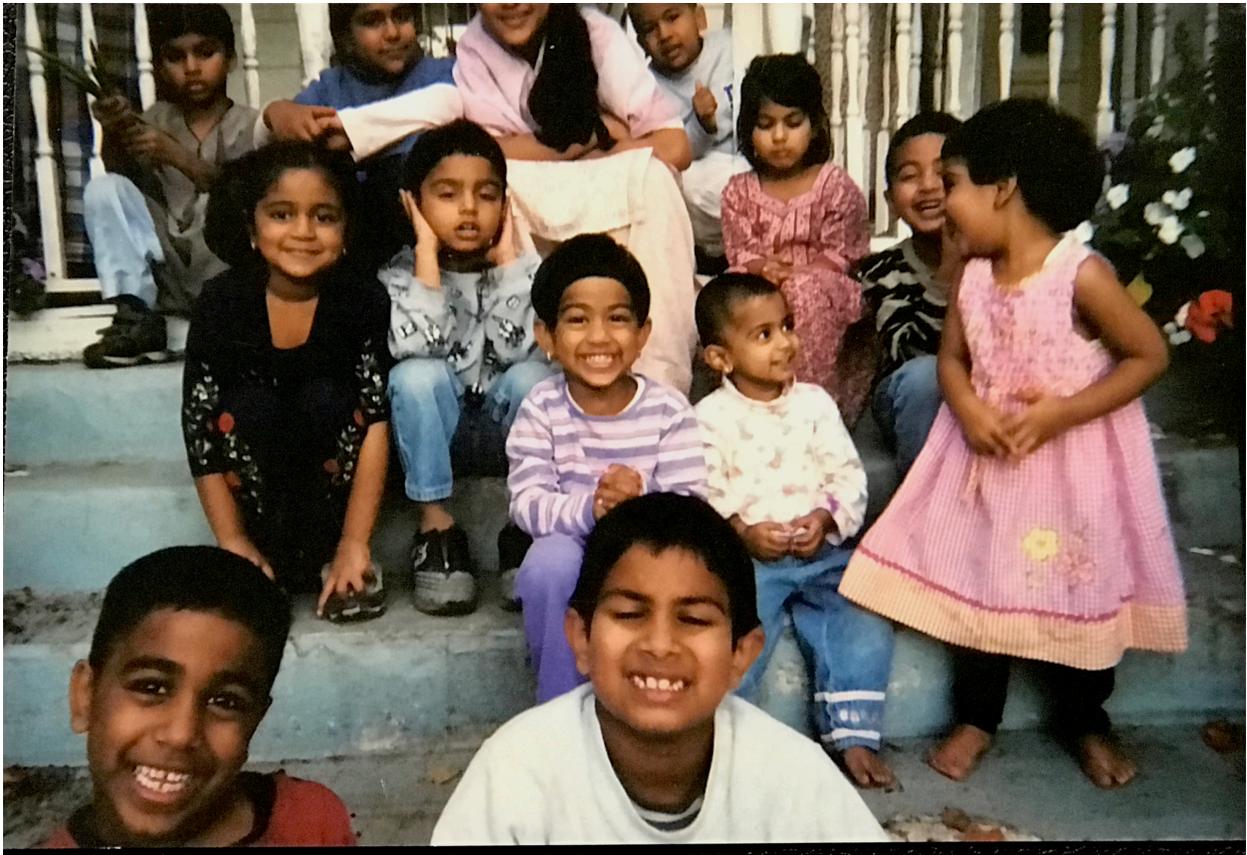
Everyone beamed their flashlights on me. All of a sudden my family and neighbors sang the Happy Birthday to me! Next thing I notice the entire block joined in too. It was the best birthday ever.

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Abdulhaq Syed



[Abdul, front and center, with some of his cousins in New Rochelle, 2004.]

Abdul: "Through poetic language I wish to make transparent my life in all the domains of my existence, as an intellectual, a pre-med college student, a son, a lover, a New-Yorker, and as a Muslim-American. I hope that my words can paint a beautiful story in the minds of my readers and set them free as it has done for me. To make transparent my religion, family, and culture to allow them to see and judge for themselves my life as a Muslim in the hopes of coming together, to accept and celebrate our differences because we are all human. We all have stories to tell and ears to listen with. These are glimpses of my life as a Muslim Indian-American, born to immigrant parents, growing up in New York."

A Glimpse Under Our Hijab

Coming from a life of poverty in Hyderabad, India, my father and his five brothers moved to New York to attain a better life for their families. The Bronx, with its cheap rent and rather large Muslim Indian community, soon became home. However, as gang violence grew rampant in the 90s and with our mothers being pregnant, my father and his brothers were eager to move their families out of the environment even if it meant living under a single roof. By 1997, they purchased a home in suburban New Rochelle and moved us out of the Bronx. As a result, there were five families and nineteen kids huddled together.

With always being around one another, teasing, joking, and playing, my cousins and I would always get into fights. Sometimes it was with Hamza; sometimes with was with Qadeer. “Stop cheating, harami! (infidel),” “You’re stupid!” or “Shut up, suwar! (pig)” would often roll off our tongues. With always getting into fights with them, I wanted to get my cousins out of my life; I wanted a new house.

Upon hearing my ungrateful complaints, my father was quick to remind me that he had nothing growing up. “I lived in a small shack and couldn’t afford shoes till I was eleven.” He repeated it so often that it made me think that that was his only answer to any question or demand I had.

When we weren’t busy fighting, my cousins and I were playing in our backyard. Every day was an adventure for us, whether we were playing hide and seek or baseball. On a typical summer’s day we played with a baseball bat and a Wilson tennis ball, shouting “Ball ko phenke! Ball ko phenke!” (Throw the ball!)

Living in New Rochelle, I became accustomed to its Eden-like environment; lush and vast green lawns, fresh piney scent, and pristine streets that were comfortable and serene. I enjoyed my early childhood days despite having an overcrowded house. We were fortunate to have an extensive backyard, fitted with basketball hoops and a view of the City Hall resembling a miniature Versailles.

Living in an area with such amenities and luxuries made me realize how deprived the Bronx was. When we visited my grandmother there, I strolled down its grubby streets, holding my breath in disgust, till the point when I had to gasp for air. Simultaneously, I wondered why I was brought there because I was absolutely sickened by the pervasive odor and filth.

My grandmother lived in old deteriorating building with graffiti covering the dark maroon brick walls. The bricks, the smell of piss and the sound of sirens wailing in abundance flooded my senses. It was a true concrete jungle.

The first time I came to visit Nanima there, cop cars swarmed through the streets. The siren of one cop car was soon replaced by a much louder one thundering away. So, I did what most six-year-olds would do, and sought refuge.

“Abu! Abu!” I cried frantically. “What’s going on and why are there so many police cars?!” We lived behind the police station in New Rochelle but this was just madness and chaotic. What scared me even more was my father’s unconcerned response. “This is the Bronx, Betoo,” he sighed. He explained to me that this is as normal as us hearing the cicada during a warm summer day or the sound of our own breathing, desensitized and zoned out to our ears but one hundred percent present. I looked around to assess the environment.

People were laughing, shouting, swearing, and cars and buses were honking. Everyone and everything was so spontaneous. I kept looking around, analyzing all the simultaneous and rambunctious events.

Upon entering the apartment building, the lobby reeked of a nasty stench. “Abu!!! What is this horrible?” I cried out. “Get used to this smell,” he replied. “You’ll be staying at your grandmother's for the next two weeks to spend time with your cousins.”

As we climbed the stairs and stopped in front of the apartment door, I held my nose. I remember impatiently waiting for the door to open, “1G”, imprinted on the reddish door. Suddenly, the door swung open. “Assalamalikum,” my Nanima said as she hugged us and welcomed us in.

My father looked irritated as we entered and I wondering if he also was upset about his decision to bring the family to this smelly place. We were seated in the living room and I was told to go into another room where the other kids were. However, I didn’t want to leave my father’s side. I thought that if I stayed with him then maybe he would take me back home to New Rochelle.

I thought to myself how small this place was compared to my home. I used to complain to my father that our house was congested, but this place made my home seem like a palace.

While my father was sipping his tea socializing with my grandmother, I was again directed to head towards a bedroom at the end of the dully lit and narrow hall. Upon entering the room, my Gujarati cousins Mohammed and Aslam approached. They were ecstatic to see me but they noticed that I didn’t feel the same way.

“What’s wrong?” Aslam asked but I couldn’t share how I felt.. What really went through my mind was that I was stuck in a place filled with buildings, lacking parks, fields, basketball courts, or any form of outdoor activity for a kid to enjoy during the summer days. There was nothing to appreciate about the Bronx.

As I was ruminating, a loud thud came from the bedroom window, startling us. We immediately got up and looked out, where a thin Pakistani boy around our age was staring excitedly right back at us, a blue ball in his hand. “Yo, Aslam, water park is open!”

Filled with excitement Aslam yelled, “Yo Altaf, for real! I’ll be there in a sec!” Aslam grabbed me and Mohammed by our hands shouting, “Adventure!!” As he pulled me I was confused. Waterpark? Here? There’s no way, I thought to myself; this is the Bronx.

We ran to the lobby, and I began to hear the roaring of a mountain waterfall accompanied by the laughter and screams of children. Aslam then pushed open the front doors, leaving me in a state of awe. Beyond the glistening mist that showered the streets, was a rusted fire hydrant from which water was now gushing out. As the water continued to come pouring out and into the streets, Altaf and other neighborhood kids were running through its stream, getting soaked and jumping around as it pooled under them. Upon joining them, I was no longer blinded with intolerance.

. Instantly the streets transformed from a waterpark into a basketball court. Teams were made and we all began playing a game of intense rivalry. While dribbling the ball, we rushed down the streets to the basketball hoops that were shaped like fire escapes! The rule was, the higher up the fire escape ladder, the more points you scored. This was completely different from what I experienced at home. I was amazed to see the Bronx kids using the

street and everything they had, to make it more thrilling and exciting. With no basketball court within the vicinity, they made a basketball hoop out of the spaces between the steps of the fire escape.

The next day I woke up to a delicious smell. In the kitchen to my Nanima was making fresh, warm, crispy parathas. My mouth watered as I sat down waiting for her to serve me one. I quickly devoured the buttery warm parathas. But what I enjoyed more than the parathas was my Nanima's warm and heavenly milk chai.

My cousins were already awake and they had already eaten breakfast. "Abdulhaq! Hurry up so you can come join us," said Mohammed. I quickly chugged down the chai that I loved so much to go ahead and join them. We headed out searching for more adventures.

During the next two weeks, I continued my routine at Nanima's house. Every morning after having my crispy parathas and warm milk chai, I roamed with my cousins throughout the streets, especially around Jerome Avenue. We would have our small adventures to the corner stores, pizza shops, all on our own with no adults. We played on the streets and spied on the neighbors of adjacent buildings through our bathroom windows.

After thinking that the Bronx was a dirt hole, I fell in love with it. For some the Bronx was an area of danger and disgust, encouraging them to move out of it, such as my father. But for me, it was a joy, an excitement, a thrill, a freedom, and strength. Although the Bronx was not the prettiest sight, or a welcoming area it still felt more like home. Every day in the Bronx for me during my stay felt like a daring adventure. Even with the odor of urine, the bundle of weave [artificial hair] lying on the floor, and the piles of dog poop on the sidewalks, I came to love it. I realized that despite looking deprived of many luxuries, within

its crowdedness the Bronx had a beauty and luxury of its own. Despite not having the amenities that I was fortunate to have, the kids of Bronx were able to have just as much or even more of an adventure. They helped me realize that I didn't need a large backyard or a basketball hoop to have fun. In all its filth, the Bronx left me with nothing but cherished memories.

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Joel Alvarado

Joel wrote a riveting story about how he and his older brother had to fend for themselves, when they were 11 and 14 years old. His mother was only 14 when she had her first child, and both his parents had only elementary school education. While doing research for his memoir, Joel Alvarado learned that kids like him, who come from a family of low socioeconomic status and endure the disruption of having a parent deported, are at higher risk for emotional and behavioral problems later in life. Joel is beating those odds. He brought a dynamic, intellectual and mature perspective to the class discussion. After graduating in 2016, he became a middle school math teacher in the Bronx.

Someone to Fight for Me

When I was 11, my father got deported to the Dominican Republic for attempting to sell drugs to a federal agent, and my mother ran away with another man, leaving my brother and me to fend for ourselves. Growing up without parents made me extremely vulnerable and made me a statistic in the at-risk population for becoming a drug addict, at risk of becoming a criminal and at risk of being economically challenged.

Fortunately, I did not fall between the cracks. I was one of lucky survivors who was able to weather this traumatic experience of growing up without my parents.

At the time, my brother was 14, working at a grocery store making \$200 a week and was able to afford a room that we used to live in. We only spent what was necessary and budgeted ourselves very carefully. From the \$200 my brother paid \$75 for the room and we stretched the remaining \$125 for the rest of the week. I will never forget the foggy smell of that tight room, where the only things that put a smile on my face were the pigeons that nested in our big old air conditioner. We were both given the ultimate test that solidified our

bond. Although we were on an emotional rollercoaster, we made it through what we call the dry season of what was once a flourishing garden.

I was that kid at school that would always show up with the same clothes. I tried alternating clothes as much as I could, but there were very limited combinations; I spent about six months with the same black and red shoes. Looking back, at least I was lucky enough to have someone to fight for me. Seeing my brother struggle the way he did really kept me on task and focused on what was important at the time, school. I became so invested in my studies that I was the top student in most of my classes; however, that was not repairing the financial issues that we were facing. After about a year of misery, I managed to get a job at the store where my brother was working. I worked 25 hours a week and got paid \$75 for it. It wasn't much but I was able to buy my own things without depending on Jordan.

Slowly, I learned how to manage and how to budget myself in a way that nothing mattered besides the goal that I had in mind. Slowly, things were starting to get better. We moved into a bigger room and we both got better paying jobs working with our uncle. I became consumed with the idea that I never wanted to be broke again. I found myself working 70 hours because there was no going back. It got to the point where I was able to save enough money to become a partner with my uncle and invest in a bigger store that was built from the ground up. For the first time in a long time, I felt some sense of belonging. Although it wasn't much, I felt like I had invested in a multimillion-dollar investment such as Google.

Although I still carry the emotional scars that crushed my childhood, I did not allow it to consume me completely.

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Gertrude Kobbah



Gertrude melted everyone’s hearts when she described how her father, when they lived in Ghana, would bring the kids pineapples and mangos -- and Gertrude would name each fruit after countries she wanted to go. Her father recalled, “Nobody could eat Zimbabwe until you were ready to eat it. Your siblings used to be so angry at you.”

Pray Without Seasons

My family was trying to escape from armed rebels, searching for the refugees’ bus, during a civil war in Liberia, 1993, when my mother gave birth to me in the bushes. My umbilical cord got caught onto a honey locust thorn and detached. They feared I wouldn’t survive and my loud cries didn’t make the journey any less stressful.

I was wrapped in an orange and black Kente cloth, a traditional Ghanaian gift from my Ashanti grandmother. On the lining it says “Pray Without Seasons”. As my mother ran

with me, she prayed no matter how loud I cried. At this point they had already lost their home, some relatives, their jobs, their dignity and pride. They were determined not to lose my siblings and me.

Trekking for two hours with a parched, hungry and weeping newborn and other children was never a part of their plans but they made it work. On their way to refuge, they came across a barefoot young girl about fourteen years old who lost her mother while trying to escape. She was so scared and she barely had any clothes on. My father took off his slippers and gave them to her. My mother begged the girl, Yeneh, to come with us, reassuring her that my family would help her. She eventually told us that rebels forced her family from their home. Her mother was beaten and raped in front of her, as a bargain with the rebels to let her daughter go. She was concerned she might never be reunited with her mother again.

My mom and dad took turns carrying me. My dad stumbled upon some egusi leaves, a plant that restores good health and brightens eyesight. He mashed the leaves on a rock and gave me some in hopes that I would stop crying. I finally did. When they got closer to the bus station they stopped for a bit to get my mother situated. She was still bleeding from the birth. My father took off his undershirt and created a diaper to catch the blood.

Up ahead hundreds of people were crying and hugging each other. Yeneh recognized one of her mother's friends. She quickly ran over to her and the lady told her that her mother had died while trying to escape from the rebels. She was found lying naked in the mud in the middle of the woods. My mother grabbed her and hugged her, reassuring her that we were her family now and she wasn't alone.

My parents left their birthplace not by choice but because they were forced out. They settled into the city of Accra and began rebuilding what they had lost.

In Accra, if you lived in a hut, it meant you were poor; if you had a house made of cement you were middle class; if you lived in a two-story cement home with a fence around it and a gateman, you are considered affluent. I was content with the house my father built for us. We were middle class people. We didn't have a fence, or the proper roof, but we believed that we would progress by moving elsewhere someday. Deep down inside my parents knew they wouldn't be in Ghana for long.

My mother was a fisherwoman, and my father was a construction worker and a full time student. At six years old I was thinking of ways to help my parents bring in more income. I convinced my father to build a garden in our backyard, assuring him that he wouldn't have to worry; it would be my responsibility. He agreed and I was more than delighted to take on that task.

I grew tomatoes, onions, peppers and mangoes. Later I asked for a swing and a bench. My father never turned down my requests. On most days I slumbered in the garden until my father came home. My family was separated during mornings, but together at night. I anticipated those nights. My mom would cook a delectable meal and we would all share one large bowl and talk about our day with our mouths full. Those are the times which I vividly remember.

~

They lied. They told me the United States would be very clean and I could press a button on a machine and chicken will come out. I can select the flavor I wanted whether it's spicy or honey glazed, the machine would provide it. It was all a ploy to motivate me to be eager to come here. I was devastated that Yeneh did not come with us because she was pregnant and wanted to stay back home with the love of her life. I first arrived in the United States at age eight, in the fall of 2001. We were stuck in the airport waiting for my aunt; her car had a flat tire in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge. We were stuck at that airport; so many thoughts were going through my head. "Does this mean no more chicken?" I asked my dad "Don't worry you're going to get all the chicken you want" he replied. I tried to stay awake and be content and hopeful but ended up falling asleep on his lap. I woke up to the sound of my mom's voice; she kept saying "Woowww" in amazement. The cool breeze hit my face as I looked out the window at tall buildings across the large body of water. It was absolutely stunning, such a wonderful site. I was so used to seeing huts and houses with zinc roofs, that I wanted to jump out of the car, run across the body of water and just hug the buildings. I suddenly wanted this never-ending bridge to come to an end.

A month later I enrolled in PS 316, very excited to wear a navy blue and white uniform. I was the only African in my class, I spoke a different language, and I always isolated myself from my peers. I never did like the lunches; they smelled like garlic mixed with hot dogs especially the beef patties. The only thing I was fascinated by was the pizza and fried chicken, of course. Even though I didn't receive the chicken through a machine, I was absolutely pleased with the taste. The cheese and the crust of the pizza was my favorite. I use

to peel the cheese off the pizza and rip off the crust and eat it. I thought broccolis were trees and I just couldn't bring myself to consume trees.

I was never able to walk home from school by myself, even though it was five minutes away from home. My dad was so overprotective and he had every right to be. There were lots of awful things going on in that neighborhood. Every day there were fights and some nights I would hear loud noises that sounded like fire crackers, but there was no celebration afterwards, just ambulances and cop cars.

No one told me about winter or how brutal it could be. My family wasn't rich and it was hard to find a jacket that would keep me warm at an affordable price. I use to wear layers over layers, just to prevent my body from becoming numb.

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I went to sleep away camp in New Hampshire. Trees surrounded the camp; we had to drive at least an hour to start seeing city lights. There were bunks, cabins, tents and all of my peers from different parts of the world, that's why the camp was called "World Fellowship". I met kids from China, Germany, Poland and Madagascar. It felt great getting away from my parents. I felt a sense of independence; peace and most importantly I didn't wake up to my mother demanding that I completed my chores prior to going outside. It was always scorching hot outside, and the trips to the pond were so long, by the time I got there I was discouraged to swim. I tasted things I didn't know existed. I started eating things like roasted duck with a hint of hot sauce, and spring rolls that were filled with vegetables and snail. I would sit in the tree at times and read my favorite saga *Twilight*. Some mornings, I woke up

to birds chirping. My favorite weather was the rain, for some weird reason I loved it when the rain hit the zinc of my bunk. Not being around social media and technology made me feel more in tuned with nature. I understood the importance of quiet, I heard my thoughts more and for me I valued that a lot. Coming from a city that never sleeps, I appreciated the difference.

I was sleeping when my cell phone rang in my dream. It was 11:00 pm and my mother's voice sounded so desolate. I knew it was serious because she called me by my native name, saying, "Nyemadie grann ou te mouri". It felt unreal, I thought I was still dreaming. Reality hit when my warm tears dripped on my thighs. Hearing her say that my grandmother in Liberia had passed away took a toll on my whole being. I wish I could've prevented heart failure. My heart burned and I asked, "Why God?" It felt like the world collapsed on my chest. I couldn't breathe properly. My bunkmates woke up in fear, hearing me sob. When I told them the bad news they shared my sorrow, staying up with me until the sun came up.

Suddenly mornings were so cold. Rainy days felt lonely, sad and uncomfortable. My grandmother was on my mind every day, my heart always felt heavy. I barely ate, food didn't taste so important anymore. I walked into my camp leader's office breaking down and said I want to go back to New York. I wanted to be there for my mother.

Traveling on that bus back to the city was bittersweet. I was on that bus thinking of things to say to my mother to cheer her up. I remembered thinking, "When I get home I'm going to do all my chores before she even tells me." I wanted to do everything and anything

to help her. In the back of my mind I missed my World Fellowship friends. I missed the pond, reading in the trees and picking berries. As soon as I arrived in New York City, 42nd Street was so noisy with cars, tourists, children and families everywhere.

I finally arrived home and embraced my mother with a warm hug and told her, “I’m here for you”. That look on her face was priceless. I saw hope and I felt needed. That feeling of knowing that I was helping her get through such a tragic time by just by being there was the most amazing feeling in the world. I missed World Fellowship, but I knew I was welcome to come back anytime.

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## Griffith Nunez



*Griffith: "Through my writing I've come to see how many things I'm not over. My mind has covered up a lot of the traumas I've endured. Through writing, I've noticed how alive my traumas really are, living through my fears all this time. I have not completely processed, understood and overcome all the winters of my life."*

## The Struggling Hero

As I made my way through life I was social out of necessity. Growing up I looked different than most of the neighborhood. By 10 years old I had a lot of friends who would scream out my window and ring my doorbell for me to come outside to play at different hours. The schedule of my life was spent running around making friends and learning how to navigate between social circles.

When I was 10 years old, the kids from the neighborhood would get together in front

of C.E.S. 109. That's the elementary school most of us attended. Sometimes the kids from the closest blocks would come to play games in front of my house. I was the kid that lived next to C.E.S. 109 and they would all be in front of my house screaming my name to come out to play. "Griffith! Griff! Yo! Yo," they'd scream. I would walk to my window and tell them whether I wanted to play or not.

They knew the deal: I had to watch *Toonami* and *Dragon Ball Z*, which were on Cartoon Network where I would watch Anime (a genre of Japanese cartoons). The main Anime character and my childhood hero, Goku, would train and train to test himself against the strongest people around. This characteristic became a part of me. I would run as fast as possible in my hallway while there were commercials, practicing before heading outside, always trying to get faster.

Once my cartoon was done I would see how many kids were outside. Most of the time we got three blocks' worth of kids coming to Popham from Andrews and Montgomery Avenues. As we grew up we played football or basketball but never baseball. But on Popham we played Manhunt. All the nearest basketball courts were controlled by different gangs and blocks, and were far away for kids our ages.

There would easily be 30 of us playing Manhunt ranging from ages 9 to 14. When we played I would wait until they all caught each other so they could then chase after me. I loved to prove how fast I was. Often, we would "cut ass on each other," something I learned quickly when socializing with the neighborhood kids. "I don't know how you're so fast, Griff, you're not even black," they'd say. "It's probably because Dominicans don't wear socks and that makes you light on your feet," or some other racially influenced joke. Quickly I'd

tell some racist joke from the 90s and early 2000s that would not be politically correct today, or I'd make a joke about the next guy to continue with the aggressive banter and not have the spotlight on me. They all knew my weak spot, the "hot mom" jokes that led to instant fights.

When playing Manhunt we would climb the school gates and hide in the back of the school. Other kids would climb nearby fire escapes, anything to make it difficult for the girls and the less athletic kids to catch us. The police stopped us many times, and we would tell them what we were doing, and they'd drive away. Every night ended with us telling the most horrible and racist jokes to one another. In the morning I would wake up with scratches and aches from the night before. We didn't stop playing games together until we were 18 years old.



While my mother was growing up in the Dominican Republic, the dictator, Trujillo, was ethnically cleansing the Dominican side of the Island of our Haitian neighbors. On many occasions my oldest uncles went into hiding in the mountains, so they wouldn't get harassed by law enforcement. On many occasions my mother saw men hanging from trees along the road where she would sell fruit. She always dreamed of leaving the countryside and moving into the city, Santo Domingo.

To get to school she would hitch-hike alongside the main road or walk about 11 miles. This one time, two men tried to grope her and her friend, but they ran and screamed for help.

The neighborhood men saved them and apprehended the men. They were never seen again.

Some years later my mother and one of her brothers, Juan, left to live with distant and more

well-off relatives in a bigger town for the promise of a better life and employment. She was roughly 10 years old.

A little over three years later my mother came back to the countryside because her oldest three brothers who worked at the town's gas station got mugged, shot and killed. Juan was there, and he hid during the homicide and robbery. He was able to later point out the police officers involved in the killing. Eventually they escaped and went into hiding. The family went into economic and spiritual shambles shortly after. This led my mother and two sisters to leave the country for a better life in the U.S. for everyone by sending remittances.

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I live the motif of the struggling hero. As I grew up my mindset changed, I wasn't an idealist anymore. I ruminated because of recurring situations with malevolent people. For years I brooded on the idea that I wasn't safe, that I was being preyed upon. But as my body grew so did my capacity to believe in myself.

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## Danny Caceres

*Danny Caceres got all of our attention when he wrote about the family dinner that changed his perspective about his father, and when he interviewed his "Uncle Z."*

*"This is not a life you choose," his uncle told him. "It chooses you and it doesn't come cheap..."*

### When the Dishes Crashed Against the Floor

Many people come to America with their new lives fully planned out and others have to wing it. No one seems to anticipate the struggles like learning a new language or finding a good-paying profession with a decent salary; this is the promised land after all.

Growing up in a traditional Dominican family came with many obstacles. Protecting our identity as Dominican-Americans was a major priority for my parents, and they took many measures to strengthen our connection to our heritage. At home we primarily spoke Spanish, and when speaking English, slang was strictly taboo. Throughout my entire childhood and adolescent life, I spent every summer vacation in the Dominican Republic. The only downside that came with being so tightly rooted to Dominican culture were the outdated ideals held by that culture, machismo especially. The idea that a man holds unquestionable power is an idea that hopefully will never stand with me.

I was ten years old when I lost my innocence. It was a summer night, when the dishes crashed against the floor. My father had just arrived from the grocery store down the block from our house (he spent most of his evenings there after work). He walked into the house, finding my sister on the phone with her then boyfriend. Unaware that my sister had a

boyfriend, he leaped into action, shoving her into the wall furiously yelling, "You are only thirteen years old, how dare you disrespect my home?" As I ran into the kitchen my sister responded, "I am twenty years old, you drunk!" Angry and in shock my father struck her to the ground.

That was the moment Superman was no longer super. That was the moment I learned I would no longer give respect upon command. That was the moment I began to lose my innocence.

The following morning, there was an odd stillness in the air. My parents spent most of the evening arguing about what had occurred, but when we all awoke and met at the kitchen table for breakfast it was as if nothing had occurred. Growing up within our traditional home, we learned at a young age that going with the flow of things would help prolong peace for as long as possible. Our mother worked extremely long hours; she and our aunt had successfully created a small chain of restaurants called "La Estrella." It was safe to say that we knew how blessed we were due to her success, but we also learned success came with a price. For my siblings and me, our silence was always due on the first of the month.

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Uncle Z is one of the greatest hustlers. To hustle means to do anything you need to do to make money, be it selling cars, drugs, your body. If you are making money, you are hustling. Society doesn't take to kindly to hustlers, who might have a *money above everything else* mentality. However, Uncle Z was a stand-up guy; he was the neighborhood watch patrol and the parent that spoiled the children rotten. Z lived his life straight out of a 1920's mob novel series; , he handled all his business in the shadows, and while in the sunlight he was

everyone's go to guy. Back in the late 70's, there were many choice words used to describe my Uncle Z; I guess it all just depended on the time of day in which you saw him.

In a recent sit down with Z, I was able to get a little more candid about the things that inspired him both now and back when in the day. He began with saying, "People always assumed I was evil, but I was just a regular guy who did what he had to do to survive." He went on to tell me about how different things were back then. Money basically littered the streets, you just had to earn it.

"The cops and laws were not so heavy; they were only after you if you were hurting other people." I did not intend on asking him specifically what he did, although part of me already knew that answer, but the curiosity got to me.

"I sold weed and coke. Sometimes I'd sell pills and other stuff, but the most demand was for weed and coke," he said. He doesn't sell today because it's the kind of job he would only recommend for short periods of time, but he did admit to still making some sort of profit. "I don't touch any of that stuff anymore besides what I use myself, but I do connect the right people to each other." When asked to elaborate, he basically went on to say that being in the game for as long as him gave him an extremely large phone book; he makes sure the right people hear about certain business opportunities. It's one thing to have heard what someone you admire did in his past, it's another thing to begin hearing actual details from the man himself.

As the conversation continued on, I got to hear about my uncle's dealings with the family and how he'd make sure to give everyone the chance at setting themselves up for a brighter future. He refused to see any of his sisters having to depend on a man financially.

He helped them buy the restaurant they worked in (that's how my mother got into the business). He said, "I knew when it came to their love lives I could not do anything because that would only make me a hypocrite, but I would do everything I could to make sure they had opinions and tons of respect from everyone." Over the years, my uncle saw the decline in business in the streets as Giuliani came into office. He began to invest all his money in little businesses, both here and in the Dominican Republic. In the Dominican Republic, he focused on real estate buying lots and building beautiful condos. He said, "I'd walk into real estate agencies on my trips to California, have them show me apartments and grab brochures and I'd take it all to DR where I'd replicate it." My uncle knew what it was like growing up with nothing. It's pretty clear that he would rather die than go back to that. Z is sixty-seven years old, and still gets up every morning at 6 a.m. for his morning run. By 9 a.m. he's on the road off to collect the interest on the loans he's currently owed on the streets.

Towards the end our conversation, I asked if he held any regrets. As he began to talk he became somewhat emotional.

"This is not a life you choose; it chooses you and it doesn't come cheap.... You come across scammers and people who challenge your honor. In this game you cannot allow that to happen because it makes you weak," he explained. He spends every day trying to make amends whether it be within his own community or amongst his family. Suddenly, it all made sense to me within our family my uncle is the first man to scold you if you aren't doing well in school and also the first to reward you if you are doing well. He was the one person in the family you did not want to disappoint because it could cost you a lot. I think I am going to start referring to Z as the Godfather.

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\* Danny Caceres studied psychology at Lehman College and helped found and run a wholesale real estate company operating out of Baltimore, Philadelphia and New Jersey. Correspondence should be sent to Email: [dannycaceres1@gmail.com](mailto:dannycaceres1@gmail.com).

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## Steven Ngin



["This is a picture at the refugee camp in Thailand. My dad is on the left, My mom, my second brother (John), the little red head is me and a friend of the family stand behind me."]

*The title of this book comes from Steven Ngin's story about his family crossing the Mekong River, from Cambodia to Thailand, when he was four years old. They were fleeing from the Khmer Rouge (soldiers of Cambodia's totalitarian regime) in the late 1970s. Steven's struggles didn't end when he came to America. His family lived in a dangerous Bronx neighborhood, his father could only find minimum-wage jobs and Steven had a tremendous amount of responsibility, taking care of his four younger brothers. But Steven's dogged perseverance was moving. His description of how he tenderly took care of his daughter makes his love for her palpable.*

### My Slipper Floated Away

I was born just as Cambodia's civil war started. My mom told me I was lucky to be alive because I was born only two pounds and had to be in the incubator, connected to tubes for a month. In the middle of April 1975, the Khmer Rouge took over the country, and they

were shooting and dropping bombs near the hospital I was in. Everyone was running out of the hospital and taking cover, but my mom was running in to find me. She was so scared, not of what was happening, but afraid that if I was still attached to the machine, and we had to leave quickly, she wouldn't know what to do with the wire and tube they had me hooked up to. Fortunately, the nurse had already removed everything before the fighting started. I was too small to carry and run because my mom might have dropped me, so she wrapped a long towel around her neck over one shoulder and put me into the fold. She wore a shirt over it so no one could tell she was carrying a baby with her.

My dad wasn't there during the time of my birth, because he was in Phnom Penh studying to become a math teacher. There was no phone during that time and the form of communication was through snail-mail. However, the mail wasn't being delivered because everyone was scared of getting robbed or killed by the Khmer Rouge, who were monitoring the roads. The fighting was even worse where my father was, in Pnom Penh because it was the capital of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge were rounding up all the educated people, teachers and government officials and executing them or forcing them to work in the rice fields. They burned books and destroyed school systems. The Khmer Rouge managed to set Cambodia back hundreds of years in their short reign of terror from 1975 to 1980.

My mom wasn't able to breastfeed me because she didn't have milk and was malnourished. Fortunately, she escaped with someone who also had just had a kid. Seeing how small I was, the woman felt sorry for me and helped my mom out. My mom was able

to find some grains of rice and made porridge out of it and fed me. She was always on the move because it was the only way to avoid being captured.

When I was about three years old, my mom and I were separated and I stayed with my grandmother and uncle. I remember playing hide-and-seek with my uncle. I got scared of being left behind and just sat there and cried until he came out. One time he climbed up a coconut tree and got some honeycomb from a beehive. He tossed it to me and told me to be careful because there might be a stinger in there. I said okay and without hesitation I took a bite out of it. I started to cry and my inner cheek began to puff up. He laughed and said, “I told you to be careful.”

My last memory of my uncle was when he found out where my mom was and he decided to take me to her. I can't tell you how long it took but he put me on a bicycle and we rode all day and most of the night. I was sitting on the back with my arms around him, trying not to fall off. At night he asked me if I was tired, and not wanting to be inconvenient, I said no. Looking back, I wish I'd said yes because he must have been tired of riding for such a long time. The reason why he must have pushed so hard was because he wanted to reunite me and my mom. REGRETS are what I am feeling because I never got the chance to say “thank you” and “I love you” to him for all that he did for me. His name was Uncle Ley and he was killed while collecting landmines to help support my grandmother in 1982.

After I was reunited with my mom, I was alone at night all the time. I was scared because of the rattling of the tin roof, and the rain hitting it sounded like gun fights and

bombs going off. I could do nothing but hide under my blanket and wish for daylight or my mom to return.

Another house I was left alone in had a cemetery in the back. I remember lying on the floor, scrounging into a ball under my blanket and placing the pillow on top of it for extra protection. Morning never came fast enough and nights were just too long. My memories of that ordeal are more vivid than what I did last week.

The third house was next to a river and I only remember the night. One night while I was alone, an old man came by and begged for food. I gave him what little I had in the pot and when morning came my mom asked where the food was and I told her what happened. I was in trouble because we didn't have much to eat and she was hungry.

The reason why we lived in so many houses was because we went wherever the Khmer Rouge put us. I was left alone at night all the time because they forced all the adults to work at night in the rice field and those that didn't were killed.

I met my dad for the first time when I was about four years old. My mom called me into the house and there sat a man who I'd never seen before. She told me to call him "Pah," which means dad in my language. I hesitated because the word felt strange to me and I'd never used it before. I finally did, and she also wanted me to give him a hug. It was one of the most awkward moments in my life. I was always a shy person and expressing myself to my parents was never one of my strong points. My way of showing my feeling was always helping out or doing things that needed to be done.

One time my dad and I were crossing a cold river to escape the Khmer Rouge. He carried me on his back. The reason why that sticks out in my mind was because during our

crossing, one of my slippers floated away. I remember trying to get it but couldn't do much but watch it float away.

Another time we rested at a place and a man took someone's baby. I could see and hear a mob of people chasing after him. They caught him and he was killed. That night, a dog was howling as if he saw a ghost and I laid under the cover shivering and trying not to breathe. It was a long night but this time my parents were by my side and eventually I fell asleep.

We made our way to Thailand and stayed in a refugee camp for almost a year. My second brother was there and I remember helping my parents take care of him. I would get on the hammock and place my little brother on my chest and swing him to sleep. One time, as he lay on me in the hammock, he had diarrhea. Unfortunately, with a cloth diaper it seeped through and got me on my stomach. I almost threw up, but was able to clean it and change him. We were trying to live a normal life because there was no more running for our lives, but every time it would rain, the sound of thunder and lightning scared me to death because I got it confused with bombs and bullets.

Being in the refugee camp was hard but it was better than where we had been. I went to school, but I didn't like it because if your nails were dirty or long, you got hit on the hand with a ruler. They usually checked at the end of the day. Sometimes I bit my fingernails because I didn't have a nail cutter. Sometimes I still got hit, so I got smarter and ask to go to the bathroom before they were about to check. The good thing about school there was that it wasn't monitored well, so sneaking home was easy. The bathroom was a large outhouse, so I just crawled out of the hole in the fence and ran home.

One thing I admired about my dad was that he learned a lot of different languages. He spoke Cambodian, French, Thai, Chinese, Vietnamese and English. He always liked to help people and when we were at the refugee camp he would translate for people who needed help and filled out paperwork for visas. The day we got our visa to come to America he was arrested because he was defending a woman from a Thai guard. Fortunately, the people that he was helping were able to convince the officer to release him.



I got married in 2000, to a girl in Cambodia who was my dad's friend's daughter. It was an arranged marriage. To marry the person your parents thought was perfect for you – for some people, it's easy to say that it was stupid, but when you're raised in a traditional culture and want to please your parents, it isn't so stupid.

On December 25, 2009, my life was turned upside down because my nine-year marriage came to an end and I became a single parent.

The best thing that came out of that marriage was my little girl, and having her by my side made me forget all the pain. She was only five years old at the time and no matter how hard things got or how tired I was, her smile always gave me the energy to move on.

My first job, as a Ramp Agent at JFK, required me to leave the house at 4 in the morning due to the two-hour commute from the Bronx. After I was done with that job, I went directly to my second job, with the U.S Census. I finished around 6 or 7 in the evening, but I never neglected my little girl.

Almost every night we walked to McDonalds on Fordham Road and Davidson Avenue. She got her Happy Meal, either a plain cheeseburger or chicken nuggets, and I just

got a cup of coffee to stay awake. We usually stayed for an hour or two because she loved to play in the little playground. Most of the time I told her we could only stay for a little bit, but I never had the heart to end her fun. When there were no other kids for her to play with, I played and chased her around until my coffee wore off. When there were other kids, I just sat and watched her. I admit I dozed off sometimes as I watched her play, but it was only for a couple of seconds. The only time I could get her to leave early was when I told her we had to walk to Blockbuster to get her a cartoon. That was our daily routine and the best part was tucking her in and kissing her good night.

On October 25, 2010, I woke up my baby and gave her a big hug and a big kiss and told her how much I loved her. She responded, "I love you too daddy." I could feel the tightness in my heart and the air was choked out of me. I fought back the tears and told her, "Daddy is going to work now and I won't be back for a long time. You be a good girl and stay with Grandma and Grandpa okay?" "Okay daddy, I love you." She was only five years old and I knew she did not fully understand the concept of time. She was used to seeing me leave to work early and come home late.

That day I left with a heavy heart and not to my regular job, but to Basic Training. I had joined the Army, as I was tired of working two jobs, not having enough time to go back to school and barely have any time for my daughter. I wanted something better for her, but I had to make the toughest sacrifice of all, to leave her temporarily.

Basic Training was four months with no phone call to family. The first two months were hard because it was the first time that I was away from my daughter for so long and she

was always on my mind. I didn't know how she was doing or how she felt not seeing me come home. My biggest fear was her thinking that I had abandoned her.

In the middle of basic training we had a two-week break and everyone got to go home. I was excited and nervous at the same time. When I got home I surprised her by picking her up from school. She was so excited and I was very happy to see her. We didn't go straight home that day. We took the D train to 42nd Street and walked around. We took pictures and I had one of those wacky drawings done of her and then we went to Dave n Buster to eat and play games. We ended the night with a movie on 8th Ave. I don't remember what time we got home, but time always flies when I'm with her.

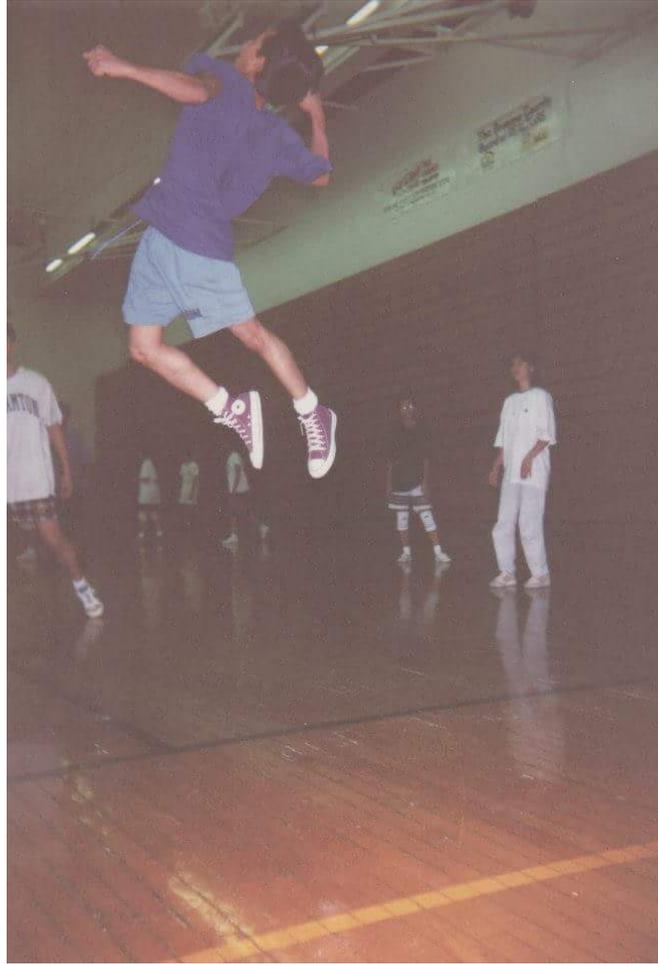
The two weeks did not last long at all. When it was time for me to leave, she came along and dropped me off at the airport with my mom and dad. This time when I told her that I had to go back to work and wouldn't be back for a long time, she began to tear up. I reassured her, "I will be back soon and when I come back, I will take you with me. We will be together forever, ok?" She hesitantly agreed and I kissed her goodbye, not letting her see the tears in my eyes.

My parents drove off with her and five minutes later I received a phone call from my mom. She told me that Celeste was crying and not stopping. I asked my mom to hand her the phone. "Hey baby, daddy's here." I could barely hear her say, "Hi, daddy. I miss you and love you..." She continued to cry; it was hard for me to comfort her because I was getting choked up. I paused for a bit and told her, "You are going to make me cry, hon, and remember we are going to build a tree house right?" All I could hear was "uh huh." She sniffled and wiped her nose.

She loves tree houses and I distracted her with questions of what kind she wanted to build, how big, and what color. She began to calm down and thought about all the questions I asked her. She began to describe the tree house and when she said she wanted to paint it pink, I exclaimed, "PINK?" "Yes, daddy." I told her pink is such a girly color, how am I going play in it? She began to laugh. We talked for forty-five minutes until she became quiet. Then my mom said she fell asleep. I told my mom I love her and asked her to take care of Celeste for me until I got back.

The second half of basic training was even harder and I almost didn't finish because I missed her so much. Lucky I have friends in basic training that reminded me why I was there; to give up would have meant it was all for nothing.

Coming from a country of war, I am definitely grateful to have an opportunity in America. My dog tag will always remind me of my daughter. The pain she felt and the strength she gives me when I believe all hope is lost. This dog tag gave me the opportunity to give my daughter a childhood I never had. I rarely take it off because it is a reminder of something I earned with her.



[At Binghamton University playing volleyball.]

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\* Steven Ngin is a US Army veteran and a single parent. He is working toward his degree at Lehman College. Email: [steven.ngin@gmail.com](mailto:steven.ngin@gmail.com)

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## Alfiya M.



*Alfiya, a nurse and mother, has a gift for description that mesmerized us in the summer 2016 memoir class. She is Russian, but grew up until she was a teenager in Kazakhstan, where Russians are in the minority; her family faced life-threatening, sometimes fatal, prejudice. Her writing about the fierce way that she and her little sister played with their knock-off Barbie dolls perfectly captures their fraught situation. Then, after Alfiya's parents moved to the U.S., before they were able to send for her and her sister, things got even more intense.*

## Makeshift Barbie

There is no stronger bond than that of sisterhood. When I was ten years old my baby sister, Elina, was born. I think it was the happiest moment in my life because I realized I would no longer feel lonely or, that at least, we could be lonely together. Spending time with my sister became my favorite thing to do. Giving her all the attention became my mission. I wanted her to have what my parents seemed to deny us – affection. I would sit through my classes, only half listening to my teachers (which often got me in trouble in school) because I was making grandiose plans about how I was going to entertain Elina when I got home.

Every time my mother would ask me to take her for a walk I would get so excited and overjoyed that by looking at my face one might have thought I had won the lottery. I would get all dressed up; after putting on my best dress, I would sneak into my mother's room and apply her red lipstick or borrow some of her jewelry. I was thinking, or at least hoping, that adult clothes and makeup would make everyone think I was a responsible adult. Such mischief, of course, was not left unpunished. One time my mother got very furious because I took something expensive from her jewelry box. When she was screaming at me the only thing I could think of was: "Wow, her face is like a red balloon." Since I was trying to figure out if her face was going to explode, I pretty much missed everything she was saying about why taking her jewelry was wrong. And so, right after she dismissed me from her room, I dismissed whatever she said because I continued to sneak her things out of her room every once in a while.

It still puts a smile on my face when I imagine my ten year-old self-dressed as an adult woman, pushing that orange stroller at least twice my size, with a proud and serious expression on my face. It was not an easy job for a ten year-old, especially given the worn-out, bumpy streets of my town. Yet there was nothing I would rather do. At those moments I felt like there were not two other people closer than Elina and me. I believed that nothing would ever be able to tear us apart and that we would be the best sisters and friends and partners in crime. Alas, when she turned two she was diagnosed with malignant liposarcoma. Just like that, our lives changed once and for all.

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I was twelve when I first felt the weight of the world on my shoulders. My beloved, precious sister was diagnosed with cancer. My parents, who were never there for me to start with, now seemed to be lost for me forever. From ignoring parents they turned into neglecting ones which made me feel I no longer existed. I felt invisible. I was wishing it was me who had cancer because not only would that save my baby sister, it would also make my parents care for me.

When chemo and radiotherapy were no longer enough and Elina required surgery, many hospitals declared my sister's tumors inoperable; others bluntly told my parents she was not eligible because she was Russian. Meantime, her tumors were growing with spreading metastasis.

After a year of being denied treatment, being referred to other hospitals and given multiple crappy reasons as to why my sister can't have the surgery there was one hospital, in Almaty, where the doctors finally agreed to do the surgery. How relieved and happy we were! My mother ran and hugged my father and said, "I can't believe it!" It seemed that all our problems would end right then and there.

But this moment of happiness was not to last long. After the surgery had begun one of the surgeons stepped out of the OR. He said to my mother, "If you want your daughter to live, you will have to pay." I don't think I entirely understood what he meant by that but I remember seeing my mother's face began to skew as if she was having a stroke.

That same day my parents were making millions of calls to friends, relatives, acquaintances and banks to get the money the surgeon demanded. They had eight hours, the length of the surgery, to find the money.

I was sitting in a small waiting area outside the OR, confused to see my parents so concerned and worried. I was sitting, praying and hoping my sister would be all right. There was a nurse, wearing all white, sitting next to me. She was Kazakh. I did not trust her, in fact I think I was afraid of her. But she was just sitting there with me as if she did not have anything else to do, and somehow, her presence, the presence of another person waiting for the verdict made things different. Occasionally she would gently smooth my hair with the palm of her hand or put her hand on top of mine, look at me with her big, light-brown eyes and say in reassuring voice, "Everything happens for a reason, and there is no reason for your sister to suffer. Let's pray she will be OK."

And she was OK. In what seemed like ages, my parents got back. I don't remember what happened after, other than my father storming past me toward the OR. What I do remember was my mother's feet. Her black shoes she had put on for the first time that morning looked like they were a few decades old: they were dirty and dusty and had holes in them. Through the holes I could see blood on her toes and blisters next to her heels.

It wasn't until I got older and we all lived in the United States that I asked my parents to tell me about what happened that day. My mother told me that the surgeon wanted money in exchange for my sister's life and even though he never said it directly, his words made it clear

that what he meant was, “If you don’t pay, she won’t make it through the surgery.” My father explained that the reason they were so worried and anxious and why they left me with that nurse was because they did not have the sum of money the doctor required. So my father was trying to sell some of our property and gave our house and car to the bank in exchange for cash. Meantime my mother was trying to sell jewelry. My parents raised enough money with the help of friends and relatives, and my sister’s surgery went well.



After the surgery my father sold the rest of whatever little property we had left, borrowed more money from friends, bought fake documents, and just like that, he was gone. The year was 2005. We did not see him for the next five years.

My mother, my sister and I were living (or rather trying to survive) together in our house, which wasn’t technically ours anymore since it belonged to the bank. My mother had to work hard. She worked days and nights to pay money to the bank so we wouldn’t end up on the streets butt-naked. In the daytime she would cook for restaurants and cafeterias making a variety of dishes; at night she would transform into a dressmaker, sewing black and white uniforms and prom dresses for schools.

While our father was fighting for us to come to the United States and our mother was working to the point of exhaustion, the bond between my sister and I was growing stronger. Chemotherapy and radiation made it impossible for her to attend any daycare centers, pre-K or kindergarten because something as minor as a sneeze could be lethal given her

compromised immunity. So it was just us. I was teaching her how to read and write, she was showing me what it felt like to be loved.

I remember the first time our father sent us money. My mother took some to pay the bank and gave the rest to us, saying, “Go, treat yourselves for being nice girls.” Elina and I exchanged looks and instantly, without saying it, we knew what we wanted. I grabbed the money and then we ran. Her short three-year-old legs were moving with unbelievable speed. In about ten minutes we pushed through the doors of a pathetic version of Toys “R” Us in the town we lived. (Well, we didn’t know then how pathetic it was. To us it was colossal and magical). We went straight to the section where Barbie dolls were sold. We had never owned a Barbie doll but we always wanted one. We would often come to that store and stare at the dolls for hours. But Barbie dolls were very expensive. In a country where the monthly salary is a little more than a hundred dollars, a doll that costs \$50 does not make any sense. But, oh well, neither do a lot of other things in that country.

These Barbie dolls could probably be stars in *Chucky* horror movies. Their plastic hands and legs, unlike the dolls in the U.S., were empty on the inside, could bend and break easily and were of different lengths. Their hair was the color of vomited bile, let alone the fact that there was barely any hair at all. Their clothes looked like these Barbie dolls were in some serious economic situation and were homeless. But we loved them. To us these dolls were beautiful. After the purchase we stormed home. We tore our dolls out of those carton boxes like two hungry savages. That day we never went to sleep. We played and laughed, cooked imaginary dinners and saved imaginary lives, and yes, I was thirteen and I played dolls but I felt happy and I did not care if someone found out.



I still remember how excited I was when I heard people calling my name on the street. We did not have doorbells then, so any visitors had to stand by the gates shouting a name of a person they came to see.

“Alfiya, Alfiya,” they called. Barefoot, wearing my mother’s old robe, overjoyed by the thought of finally having some visitors, I ran outside. That evening was unexpectedly cold for July and the moment I stepped out the door I felt series of goosebumps spreading all over by body.

When my parents left to the United States, my sister and I had to move in with a man we barely knew. There was an agreement between our families that while he fostered us, my parents would let his wife stay with them in their apartment in New York. Because this man lived far away from where my sister and I lived prior to our mother’s departure, I lost my friends. I also lost connection with my classmates because my sister was sick and I had to drop out of school to be with her. I was longing for some friends, for any kind of human contact, for anybody to talk with.

As I opened the door I saw a group of girls, squatting across the street. Evening darkness, combined with clouds of cigarette smoke, made it difficult for me to see their faces. They appeared to be in a middle of a heated discussion, using the most vulgar vocabulary I ever heard. They yelled and cursed at each other, only stopping if they had to spit or to take a pull

from their cigarettes. My intuition told me to stay where I was, to stay by the gates, in the safe zone but my desire to talk to someone silenced it and so I made a step toward them.

It was not until I got close to them and too far from the gates that I recognized them. They were older than me and they were dangerous. I remembered them from school days when they used beat younger kids to take away their money or to humiliate them. I made a step back, thinking of how I could get away unnoticed, but it was too late. One of them grabbed me by my hair. I began to struggle to worm my way out but then I saw another one taking a knife out. They were saying something about my parents living the United States and having a lot of money, promising to set my house on fire and giving every detail of how they would kill my sister in front of me if I was not going to give them what they asked for. But I was too preoccupied with survival to be listening to what they were asking for.

In what seemed like ages, I wiggled myself out but found myself unable to run. I felt piercing pain in my right side, followed by a burning sensation in my lower abdomen. My mother's robe felt wet and sticky in those places. I looked down and the last thing I saw before I drifted into world of peace and darkness were rivers of blood that looked black under the moonlight. My eyes closed and I hit the ground. Last thing I heard was their laughter.

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## Alibamba Sillah



*Early in the semester, Ali wore his hoodie with the hood on, in class, and sat quietly along the wall. Within weeks though, he became kind of radiant, and the class was riveted by his incredibly dramatic story and his recital, by heart, from the Qur'an in the mellifluous West-African singsong style that he was taught. Ali was born and raised in the Bronx, but his parents sent him to Gambia when he was nine to study for six years at an Islamic madrasa. To say that he experienced culture shock does not do justice to what it was like for him.*

## My World, My Air and My Life

I made my mom promise to take me to the movies for my seventh birthday to watch the new Power Rangers movie, *Lightning Speed Rescue*. She, my aunt and my cousin Saikou went to the Concourse Plaza movie theater on 161st Street in the Bronx, pretty close to my house. I was amazed to see so many fast food restaurants and stores. A guy was selling t-shirts and Pokémon cards at a stand and my mom bought me the cards because most of my second-grade classmates had them. Saikou got some too.

Downstairs my aunt bought us some popcorn and I had a big cup of orange juice, while Saikou had a Sprite. We didn't eat the popcorn as much because it made us dehydrated. We start screaming a little when the lights dimmed down for the movie to start. The best part was the ending, when the white ranger rescued the other rangers. Everyone in the crowd was cheering and clapping at that part. "This is the best birthday gift," I told my mom as we left the movie theater, and I hugged her.

Upstairs we ate my usual meal at McDonald's, a cheeseburger with fries and drink. It was our first time going to the movies together; I was cheesing so hard and thankful that my mom kept her promise by taking me to the movies.

When we got home that night, I overheard my dad tell my mom that he was sending me to Gambia to become more disciplined and learn about Islam and the culture.

I was not aware of what to expect. All I knew about Africa were some of the stories my mom use to tell, and what I'd seen on the Discovery Channel. I assumed Africa was just filled with wild animals and people living in trees.

My parents were living paycheck to paycheck in the Bronx. I used to look at my friends at school wearing the latest Jordan sneakers, brand new clothes, and always having lunch money. I didn't see that my mother was doing the best that she could. I was ungrateful, or maybe I was eager to be living in the materialistic world.

In Gambia, the last thing any kid worried about was what brand of shoe they were wearing. I saw kids walking barefoot, and still happy. Living in Gambia made me feel so free and open-minded. It made me look at the world differently. When I was living in the Bronx, I was never hungry, had a place to sleep, clean clothes to wear, but I wasn't satisfied.

I spent about a month living with my aunt and a lot of family members in a huge two-story house, a big compound. I had a hard time communicating with my family because I wasn't fluent in the Soninke language and they didn't speak English, but after a month I picked up on the language.

One morning after eating breakfast my father called to say that I would be joining my cousin Ebrahim at his boarding school, Ibn Masood. When my aunt told me the news, I was scared, because I'd heard scary stories about the boarding schools in Gambia. It helped that my cousin Ebrahim was there. My uncle told me to pack my belongings because we were leaving at five o'clock. My heart was beating so fast. I slowly put on a short-sleeved shirt, Nike shorts and slippers. I carried my luggage to the car and while I waited for my uncle, all I thought about was my mother. Tears streamed down my cheeks as we drove off and I slowly waved goodbye to my aunt.

We had six to eight bedrooms at Ibn Masood, each bedroom housing fourteen to eighteen students. At meal times each room received just one bowl of rice. Our Dean was stocky, bald-headed Mareco; I used to hate him. When it was time to eat he would go through all the rooms yelling, "Everybody come out! It's time for dinner." On my first day I was confused to see everyone rushing out from their rooms. A boy tapped me and said, "Hey if you want to eat you better hurry up or else you won't be eating for the rest of the day." So I followed him, running out of my bedroom. I was in such a hurry, I forgot to wear my slippers. The boarding school was a massive compound, and we ate outside of the house. We joined our roommates around two bowls.

Our room leader, who was the oldest person in each room, took the plate covers off the bowls. They had cooked fried rice that day with two skinny fried fish. As we sat down I was confused as to why no one started eating. I tried to put my hand in the bowl, and Musa held my hand back. “We have to wait for our room leader Haji.” Haji took the fish and started dividing it into pieces between all eighteen of us. It was obvious he would get the largest share. I kept quiet like the other kids. It wasn’t normal for me to eat fast and I wasn’t too good at eating with my hands. But I was so famished that I ate it in the blink of an eye.

Ebrahim showed me around the school. “There are no showers or toilet seats,” he explained. “You must learn how to bathe yourself with a bucket of water and use a cup to pour water on yourself.” We had limited water, so every pour counted. Otherwise, you would have soap stains left on your body. The toilet wasn’t the most comfortable. You must know how to use it, and you couldn't depend on a toilet seat. You had to learn how to control your balance because there’s a little hole where you bend your knees and crouch.

We were pretty stressed because of the struggle that we had to go through living there, so every student was always looking forward to our mini vacations. Throughout the year, we only had two short vacations at the boarding school, for the holidays of Eid ul Adha and Eid ul Fitr. We were grateful for them. Although I loved the vacations, I also hated them. They reminded me of how much I was missing out on during my childhood. However, they also motivated and encouraged me to graduate faster, so I could live life in the real world.

On these two holidays I went home to my extended family. Ramadan is when we fast for the whole month from sunrise to sunset. We are usually sent home by the 20th day of

Ramadan, and come back a week and a half after Eid ul Fitr. In my boarding school life, nothing felt better than leaving and going to my Aunt Mahoreh's house. The night before vacation no student thought of sleeping. Everyone would be up washing their dirty clothes or planning how they would spend their vacation. In the morning every student would be sitting on top of his beds, excitedly waiting for his parents to pick him up.



Nothing felt better than hearing "Tomorrow is Thursday," the day we were allowed to go outside the school. As Muslims, we pray five times a day, and when we prayed in the boarding school, we prayed together in one large group. The first prayer of the day, at 5 a.m., is called Fajr. Usually after Fajr prayers we went back to sleep. However, on Thursday mornings, most students did not go back to bed. Some of us went back to our rooms and talked with our roommates, in soft low voices. If you ever got caught talking by Dean Mareco, you would get punished. Some students would go outside, near the bathrooms, washing their socks for our soccer game later on that day. Thursday mornings were joyful for everyone. You would wake up and see the happiness on everyone's face.

By 7 a.m. everyone was up putting on their sports gear. Most of the students couldn't afford a soccer uniform or soccer shoes. They would wear any shorts they had, and any clean or unclean T-shirts they could find. By 8 a.m. Mareco made us stand in two straight lines by the entrance, and gave his little annoying speech. "If we go out and you misbehave, you'll regret it when we get back." So we would leave the compound, marching towards the soccer field, about 10-15 minutes away. Just being outside the school, looking at

other kids playing in the sand outside the streets, running in and out of stores, and watching grown men argue, was exciting and a relief to see.

Those who didn't want to play soccer would just walk around the track or play hide and seek. The rest of us divided into two groups, one with the younger kids, and one with the older kids. I was a part of the younger group. We would play for about two and a half hours. If you scored an excellent goal or did an impressive trick with the soccer ball, that would be the highlight of your day. We would be talking about it when we got back to school. After we arrived, we took our showers, ate breakfast and laid down in our beds. "Till next Thursday again," we would say to one another.



I received the worst beating of my life in boarding school. One day we were sitting in our study circle memorizing our Surahs [chapters of the Quran] that were given by our teachers. I was sitting next to my friend Hajie and instead of studying we were talking and play fighting. Mareco came in while I was twisting Hajie's arm. He told me to stand up and commanded me to wait for him in his room. The room was dark; he had one big mattress on the floor. He walked in with the wire from a machine hair cutter. He grilled at me while he was taking his shirt off, only having his tank top on. He told me to take my shirt off and I took it off. Mareco was a big stocky guy--he wasn't that tall but had huge arms. He raised his arm high with the wire and brought it down on my back with force. Not only my back, but arms, legs, and my whole body. He wanted me to feel every painful strike of the wire, and I felt each one of them. After the punishment I was not able to wear my shirt

because of all of the blood on my back. I went to my room, lay on my stomach, and cried myself to sleep hoping I would feel better before class in the morning.



Out of all the teachers in the boarding school, I liked my “Ustaz,” (teacher) the most. His full name is Jibril Tall, but we called him Ustaz Tall. He’s from Senegal, bordering on Gambia. Ustaz Tall had a dark complexion, about 5’9, and he had a beautiful voice. I’ve always wished I could recite the Quran just like him. Most regions have their melodic way of reciting the Quran, and Ustaz Tall made me fall in love with the West African melodic voice

One day he was a bit late to class, getting dressed in his room. At that time I was leaving the bathroom heading to class and saw his window was open. I hadn’t memorized my surah that day, so I thought if I read out loud by his window, using his African voice, he would be so impressed that he wouldn’t punish me in class. Once I reached the third line, he looked out the window saying. “Ay, don’t you know class started, and you’re still out here. You better have memorized your Surah today.” I think he figured out my plan and sadly it didn’t work. I went to class without having the Surah memorized, and I had to monkey dance in the corner, although I still to this day appreciate him.

He was fair to the students. Don't get me wrong, he would beat you if you continuously didn't memorize a Surah. Compared to other classes, though, we had it more relaxed. Every Saturday morning we would always hear kids screaming and crying from the other classes. All you could do was feel bad for them and thank Allah for being fortunate not to be placed in any of those classes.

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At boarding school I lived without my family, got whipped every day, had to ask my friends for a piece of their breakfast bread, wore the same outfit for the whole week and worried about students stealing my clothing. I would say maybe life in prison would have been simpler. I couldn't wait to gain back my freedom and reconnect with my family. After six years of struggle, that day finally came when my uncle Ala came to pick me up on my graduation.

I graduated with three other students. We didn't sleep for two straight nights because of our excitement. The night before my graduation I had a visit from all the students at school giving me letters for their family and friends. That same night I remember hopping the fence to go and buy a pack of juice powder. When I got back, I found a pocket of water and poured the powder into it. We only had one cup, and it used to allow all the students to drink from it one by one. I spent that whole night with my roommates sharing our future plans after boarding school. I shed a tear while I was leaving the boarding school when I looked back and saw my friends faces. I told them, "In sha Allah we will see each other again."

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Coming back from Gambia in 2006 was one of the hardest times in my life. It was my first year of middle school, and the school I attended had a lot of gang members. That's why I found myself having to deal with the bullies. Every other day after school would lead to a fight, and sometimes it would cause me to get into a fight with more than three people.

I had to fight for my respect because telling my teachers or the principal would just cause more problems. I felt alone since I had just arrived back in America. Even though I was quiet, I did not tolerate anyone who was out to bully me; I fought back every time. That was the only way to solve the issue, and it worked.

One day after lunch we were sitting in the school auditorium, and I was sitting with my new friend Morris waiting for the talent show to start. That's when the two teens behind us began mocking Morris, saying how short and fat he was. They kept on going for an extended period, so I finally got up and asked them to stop and then Pierre a light skin Puerto Rican who played for the school football team, told me, "Shut the f\*&\$ up and sit down." I responded, "Come make me." As I was sitting down, he went around and tried to swing at me with his right hand, and that's when I blocked him and punched him back and slammed him against the floor and sat on top of him and continued to hit him. The security guard came over and broke off the fight, taking me back to the office, where I was suspended. I tried explaining to them that I was the victim but they didn't believe me because I was the kid on top. But after that occurred, I gained respect and was no longer bullied. When I returned from suspension, I was shocked to see Morris hanging out with Pierre. I tried to give Morris a hand shake but he ignored me. Our friendship was broken.

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My Qur'an, my everything, my world, my air, and my life. The Quran is the holy script book for Muslims. The Qur'an guides me in life so I can be successful in the afterlife. The Qu'ran

is a book that contains the word of Allah. It advises me how to live my life and tells me what is permissible and not permissible to do.

Till this day I carry my boarding school Quran with me everywhere I go, because my Quran became a part of me. I always keep it on the side of my backpack. My small, pocket-size brown Quran, with leather covers that makes it feel so vintage. It has a little zipper I open and close every time I recite. My Quran, I love it with all my heart. I recite it whenever I'm feeling down, depressed or stressed. It always changes my mood into happiness and joy. The recitation is so soothing. I feel it in my heart; it brings light to me, and everything becomes clear.

Writing about my childhood and past is so precious and brings back so many old memories that I forgot even existed. I am writing this for the readers who went through a struggle similar to mine, to guide and motivate anyone that wants to make it in life. I have a fascinating life to tell, and this is only the beginning.

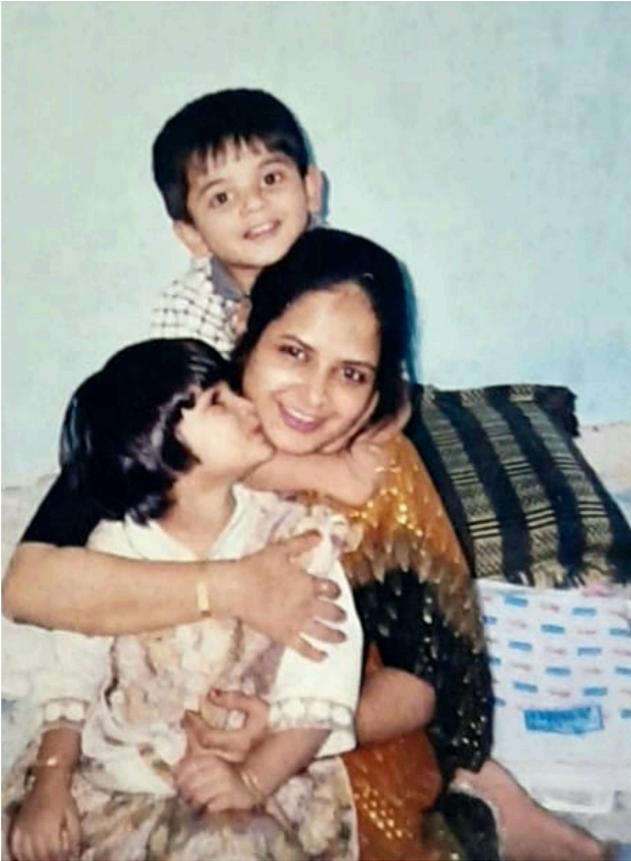
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\* Alibamba Sillah (Ali to his friends and family) graduated from Lehman College in 2019 with a bachelor's degree in accounting. He's working towards his master's in education and plans to run an after-school program in his community. Correspondence should be sent to Email: [alibambas51@gmail.com](mailto:alibambas51@gmail.com)

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## Nabeela Van



*Nabeela Van grew up in India and moved to the United States after her mother died when she was 16 years old. Nabeela is a poet and her writing about her mother was passionate and heart-wrenching. For Nabeela, bearing witness, artfully, about her mother's anguish was essential.*

## Emotions and English

My mother was educated but not in English. In Mumbai, where I grew up, English worked like cash. Cops made an effort to be helpful if the person filing a case spoke fluent English. While performing her daily housewife chores, my mother ruminated about the lingering British influence on Indian citizens, even 50 years after Independence from the Britishers. The impact was so powerful that my mother, a Hindu woman, felt under-educated just because her degree was in her country's national language, Hindi.

My mother grew up in a simple wooden house. When it rained, scorpions, mice and insects sought shelter in her house, entering via the open, glassless window frames. She was thrifty and managed to complete her education in commerce, for it was my grandmother's wish to see at least one of her five daughters earn a bachelor's certificate. The appetite in the culture for English motivated her to take English classes after college graduation, after work. Unfortunately, the course she could afford wasn't serious, and focused on reading alone.

The grip of poverty on my mother loosened as she started working as a secretary for a diamond firm. Then she fell in love with my dad, her boss. In their three years of strained marriage, my dad taunted her, saying his previous lover deserved him and his money more than my mother did. I believe this was the root of her insecurities. It is the nature of roots to grow deeper. So when my dad divorced my mother to marry his ex-lover, a woman with a graduate degree in English literature, it only added fuel to my mother's doubts about her own worthiness.

Though I remember her trapped in her own tears after the divorce, she didn't let the vacuum of her sadness and low self-esteem suck my brother or me in. We meant the world to her. Usually while preparing the dough for roti from wheat flour like any other ordinary housewife in India, she would have us recite science definitions and math tables. She was strict about our studies, and would not only keep a tight rein on us until we finished our homework, but also strained her every nerve to teach us. Once she pronounced "goat" as "got", and my brother let out an involuntary snort of laughter which ended up with her breaking down into tears. She screamed in Hindi with her wet eyes and frustrated face. "Yes, I cannot speak English," and continued to cry with those tears streaming down her cheeks.

In the early 2000's, our relatives, permanent residents of New York, came to visit us. I felt her heart pounding as their footsteps entered our house, and later her euphoria when she said, "Nice to see you," without any hesitation. After they left, I couldn't count the number of times we retold that moment.

English was turning into the drug she craved more with every passing day. Being able to speak a few common phrases right was her stimulant, and the extreme worry of not being able to do so was her depressant. For some reason, the irrational fear of embarrassing herself had settled on her like footprints on wet concrete. Maybe I was a part of that reason. In the ninth grade, she saw me bend down a little to the culture's demand. It was a week before my friend Nikita's birthday, and her mom was planning a surprise party for her. My friends' parents were invited to Nikita's party, and I asked timidly if their parents spoke English. When my friend replied back, "Yes, of course!" my worry over this fact became contagious, and unintentionally transmitted to that one person who was paranoid over the whole English speaking thing. It stressed her so profoundly that by the time the party invitation came, she had eaten up her nails to the flesh.

Rehabs exist to save people from drugs, but not from swamps. This mangrove swamp of anxiety pulled her in completely. I observed it when she had to talk to my high school principal concerning one of my teachers. As soon as she entered his room, her fear of not being able to handle the conversation made her sweat, stutter, and act hesitantly. She ended up crying.

After her death in 2010, I moved to America. In spite of America being an English-speaking country, I noticed that many immigrants struggle to communicate in English, and

many natives misuse English. In fact, here I've met several people who are fond of Indian culture, colors, clothing, and especially the Indian poetic language, Hindi. So maybe all that English craze was unnecessary, and thus the fear totally irrational. She could have lived more happily, if she hadn't burdened herself. Blinded in emotions, I still try to collect and preserve English, because to her, my mother, to be able to speak those words correctly was all that was needed.

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\* Nabeela Van is a chemist by day and poet by night. She is also a court-appointed special advocate, providing emotional and administrative support to youth in, and aging out, of foster care. Email: [Nabeela.van@lc.cuny.edu](mailto:Nabeela.van@lc.cuny.edu)

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## Robyn Ransome



*Robyn Ransome has to grapple with memories of childhood homelessness, her mother's drug addiction and her father's abandonment, even though her grandfather was a prominent New York City politician. She transcended the chaos by studying psychology and is on her way to becoming a therapist.*

## Fire of '94

We sang, *"The roof the roof the roof is on fire. We don't need no water. Let the motherfucker burn. Burn motherfucker, burn,"* [Rock Master Scott and the Dynamic Three] laughing all the while high on weed and tipsy off St. Ides malt liquor. It was January winter of '94 and we had already had two snow storms. I had on a raggedy black leather jacket, Rebock classic \$54.11, too-tight jeans, no hat, no gloves, no scarf. Faye, my best friend had on Nike Air Max and a

colorful short jacket. We were black girls lost, living in Brooklyn, New York walking the streets because there was no one concerned about our whereabouts or well-being.

We laughed the whole way home while I entertained us with song and dance moves. It was cold and I didn't know what else to do as we walked. Silence made everything loud so doing this made me forget about home, yet this night home would be loud.

As we approached the building I shouted, "Some shit is burning!" The fire was huge, the colors were beautiful, we just laughed. Yet as we got to the entrance those laughs became concerns. There was my whole family in front of me with gray blankets and tears in their eyes. I didn't understand what was going on. As I approached my mother someone stopped and pulled me aside. "Where were you? Did you leave the stove on?" I didn't know what to say. I just kept asking what happened. No one would explain anything to me. Finally, I got to my mother and brothers. No words were exchanged; we just sat there. I was embarrassed, ashamed, and angry. I knew deep in my heart she had done this. Guilt was all over her; she couldn't look at us. She was still high on crack cocaine yet in shock. Her secret had been exposed. Now everyone knew and she had prided herself on no one knowing.

Yet I did. I had watched her for months; she was a mess. The drugs were taking over fast. My mother was strong, beautiful, and everyone loved her. She was the neighborhood mother; whatever you needed to know, she could assist you. However, when it came to her own children there was a disconnect. She never knew how to help or parent us in the right direction. It was like we were a burden to her. I always felt as if she wanted to be free. She didn't fully live her life, raising her brothers and sister, then having her own kids didn't allow her to know who she was as a woman.

Once she and my stepfather went their separate ways things begin to crumble. She wasn't herself anymore. I think the betrayal was too much for her to handle. She left him, then went to a shelter. We never had anything, no money, no food, no clothes, not even a place to live. How could she burn down the room? A room in a shelter. Damn. She must have been on a mission this night. This was her rock bottom and we didn't even know it. I just keep staring at her. She knew I was furious. My brothers were confused, scared, and had no understanding as to what was taking place. We were given another room that night yet I didn't stay with them. I asked Faye's mom if I could stay and she agreed that would be best. I woke the next morning learning that my mother and brothers had gone to my grandfather's and they would be back that evening.

I knew if I went to my grandfather I would have to answer questions. I knew what mom was doing but so did the family. They just chose not to deal with the issues of her drug use. This time around it had to be dealt with. See my granddad was Roy Innis, a prominent politician and activist in New York City. If word got out that his daughter had a drug problem, was living in a shelter, and had burned it down, this wouldn't look good on his part. He made deals with whomever and mom was on her way to a detox program. When mom went away we were all separated. The boys went to our grandmother's house and I went to my grandfather's house. This was hard; once again we would have to suffer for her choices and decisions.

*Daddy's Girl*

He was lying on the bench sleeping. I was shocked it was him. This night I happened to be alone; normally it would be a crew of us. I guess God knew I wouldn't be able to explain myself to my co-workers. It was the end of summer and the 59<sup>th</sup> Street train station was hot as hell; no air was circulating, it felt like a sauna. I was wearing my favorite denim dress with red Nine West Mary Janes. He had on all denim with scuffed up white sneakers. I hadn't seen in him months. I was nervous and happy altogether. He was home, no longer in Rikers Island, a correctional facility in New York. As I approached him I really didn't know what I would say so I called his name. He didn't move, so I tapped him and once he looked up his face went blank as if he had seen a ghost.

I know he didn't expect to see me, not here not now. He sat up and looked at me again. No words from his mouth but I could tell he was in shock. He had told me on our last visit that if I ever caught him in a bad situation he would keep it moving. I laughed because I didn't believe he would do that. But you see, he was a man of his word. He jumped up quick and started walking to the back of the train. I called after him, "Robert Ransome! Dad!" No response. I was right on his heels

"You're not going to speak? Hello, I know you hear." Still nothing; he wasn't even looking at me. The train was pulling into the station, so I took a piece of paper from my bag and wrote down my number for him. And I said, "I love you, no matter what." He continued to ignore me. I could not believe he was doing this to his first-born child.

This wasn't the man I went to visit once a week. We would laugh, I would cry, we would have deep conversations. I even brought my brothers up to visit him. Shit he had

made promises. We had made plans. Now here I am, standing on the train platform like a little girl lost. My father, the man I love, was rejecting me. This sting, it felt like I was in a dream.

He looked at me one last time and went through the cars. I could not move. This was not happening, is all I thought to myself. Did he just walk away and say nothing? Was that my father? Yes, Robyn that was him. He warned you if he was ever fucked up he would leave. You cannot be mad.

A man then came up to me starting to talk. I couldn't hear a word he said. I then snapped back into reality. He was asking for my name and number so I gave him the paper that I would have given my dad.

He asked, "Shorty, who is Robert?" I tried to explain to him what just happened. He looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe I was. Shit how did I just give him my number with all this going on? I kept looking each time the train door opened to see if my father had gotten off yet.

As we reached 125<sup>th</sup> Street the man was mouthing something I couldn't hear. Once again I was too busy looking for my dad, confused as to what just happened. I stood there frozen. The doors closed and he vanished.

Once I got home I was a mess. I cried to my uncle but he could not understand why I was making a big deal out of this situation. "FUCK HIM," he kept shouting. "What can he do for you if he's on the street?" See what my uncle didn't understand is that I was a daddy's girl. I love my father. I missed my dad. I needed him. I wanted this man in my life. No one understood the hurt I felt seeing my dad and being rejected. Each time I would talk about it,

their response would be the same: “Get over it. He didn’t want you; if he did he would have never walked away.” So, after hearing this so much, I took their advice. I buried my hurt and went on about my life. However, I would become the ICE QUEEN. My heart was no longer available it was broke. I would go like this for years.



[Robyn and her father, in better times.]

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\* Robyn Ransome graduated from Lehman College with a degree in psychology and is working towards becoming an holistic clinical therapist. Writing helps Robyn to articulate her thoughts and feelings; it’s a form of therapy for her.  
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## Socheath Sur



*I could always count on Socheath Sur to make us laugh when he was in my class in 2015. He worked full-time as a medical lab technician at Montefiore Hospital but he still had the stamina to comment on his classmates' work and delight us with quick-witted jokes. His writing style was influenced by the super-hero comic books he read as a child and later by Japanese anime; his prose is distinctive and enthralling. Now, five years later, Socheath has just been accepted to the Montefiore School of Nursing.*

## Resist the Temptations of the Wolf

My tale begins with those responsible for my creation. To my father, Kheng, who in my eyes will always be the most intellectual person as well as the most stubborn person that I've ever

known. I am honored to have you as a dad. To my mother, Chorvy, the most hard-working and motivated person who has kept me out of more trouble and who was always there to give me a swift ass-kicking when I needed it.

Born in a small village in Cambodia, my dad learned from a young age how to survive and adapt to the changing environment. Cambodia is a third-world country, a place where children become adults the moment they walk; a place where the demands for food far outweighed the amount the environment was able to produce during the times of turmoil; where even clean running water is still considered a luxury and the government is about as corrupt and worthless as the charred soil left tainted by war.

The Vietnam War brought fire and chaos to the land of Cambodia. Among the hailing rains of napalm infernos, the screeching fighter jets and the never-ending agony of bullets, fire and bombs, there was a family that was desperately trying to escape, grasping at any glimmering chance and never losing hope for a better life.

My father was but a boy of eighteen; small, very thin, as if malnutrition was the diet plan of choice. There was no time to grow up, no words to express, only action to take; like a road with only one direction, the only path was forward. He had to make his way out as best he could, huddling together with my mother, grandmother and other family members, leading them towards a ship of salvation. Stubborn to a fault, a trait I deeply respect, he does not hesitate once his decision has been made. You'll be damn sure he'll reach the finish line.

They battled the grueling terrain, riddled with land mines that claimed the lives of both enemies and allies alike. So many bodies littered the ground, it was impossible to even

fathom the exact number. Even among the symphony of chaos and destruction that was happening from one day to the next, my family would be able to sing their own celebration song as they were able to board a boat and sail towards refugee camps and eventually towards the warm embrace of America.

New York City would be the starting stage of a quirky problematic character, none other than myself. My mother, Chorvy, is a glorious, warm, tender and loving woman, who gives her all for her children. But make no mistake, she can go from zero to a 60 real quick if you have wronged her in some way.

My older sisters are a pair of demonic beasts, who I truly believe were conjured up in some ritual to destroy my life. The beginning days of my life were constantly plagued with vicious attacks ranging from punches, dropkicks, elbow drops, hay makers and moves only a pro wrestler could identify. Others might call it tough love but I called it hell on earth and they tested my limitations as evil siblings do. I felt like my parents brought me in this world, tossed me into pit with two lions and told me to fend for myself. My survival instincts were crafted at a young age. I jest of course, describing them in this fashion. Of course I adore and cherish them greatly.

I pause to remind myself of a fond moment in time. A vivid memory as a child, mischievous at that, forever the little explorer, mustering up nothing but trouble for my family members. I remember as a toddler our first bicycle that we all shared. My inner selfishness would hog it most of the time, as my sisters devilishly struggled to keep it out of my mitts. I used to race down the block, getting my first battle scars from reckless behavior. They would always teach me a lesson by hilariously beating me up, a battle I always

participated in and lost. With my small fingers and knobby legs, I soon discovered the odds were against me; nothing I did would turn the tides. They did allow me to get away with a lot of stuff. Only when I was too selfish and couldn't understand that we wouldn't be able to buy something, did they literally beat it out of me.

Early life for my parents and sisters was an everyday fight to survive. Being the youngest, I was ignorant to all of it; only now do I understand the reality of the situation. It wasn't the bicycle that was special, it was the moments we joyously shared and the realization that even at my family's hardest time, they still made the effort to provide happiness in whatever way they could.

Time flew past to the era of education, the dreaded first day of kindergarten, where rules and regulations were enforced by control-obsessed, ginormous people called adults. The whimpering songs of freedom were slowly fading in the wind, my days of oppression had just begun. I was forced to embark on a journey of new experiences, the introductory stages of the game we call life. My world before this moment had consisted of charitable titans called parents and those demonic entities, the torturers of my existence called sisters.

Though my initial feelings were sour, I had a eureka moment, an epiphany: no longer would I be at the bottom of the totem pole. There were new possibilities, the laws of the jungle will now be reset. The days of being trampled down by those carnivorous, vicious, sibling predators would be no longer. The transition from zebra to lion would be in my hands, I had a shot at the champion belt and I was gonna take it.

As I entered the realm of possibilities my eyes lay siege on this new chaotic world called school. Physical stature had no advantage here, everyone was my size or so I thought.

Then, amid the crowd came the behemoth, overshadowing the other kids, one kid to rule them all. My one threat to the top had shown himself immediately. I knew the outcome of this scenario all too well, David vs Goliath, but in my case I already knew from experience it wasn't going to end in my favor.

With my basketball sized head, I knew a crafty, more tactful approach was in order. As I huddled in the corner, deviously planning my war strategy, I noticed the ground shaking. Preparing for the worst, I turned around to face my opponent, only to find a large jaw-dropping chocolate chip cookie being handed to me in front of my eyes. Sensing no hostility but in fact genuine kindness, I accepted the gesture from what I thought was a dangerous encounter. It was then, in that moment, I would make my first friend.

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It was high school where I would meet the troublemakers who became my best friends. Hahn, the Blasian (half black and half Korean) visionary, who was the type to always have a grand project in the works and the tenacity to make it happen. Then there was Ray, the constant go-getter, who could never sit still, always traveling and out partying.

If I had to choose an object that best reflects us, to place in a museum exhibit about my life, it would have to be a compilation art piece made by my best friends and me in high school. The drawings were depictions of numerous imaginary characters we had fabricated with the wonders of a teenage mind.

We all contributed to putting our art pieces on blank spaces of a large cheap poster board. It would be our open canvas, riddled with the inner emotional states we had come to

terms with, characters we had drawn to represent ourselves. Mine was a dark slender swordsman with an aura of mystery who bore my lone wolf mentality. James drew a large stoic courageous Orc warrior to convey his open and brave ways of adhering to new situations. Lastly, my spontaneous friend Ray, painted an energetic assortment of colors to form what could be a silhouette of a man, whose direction was never certain or confined.

The drawings themselves were nothing spectacular but, the bonds we shared during those times and memories we made during their creation would pave the foundations of our relationships to this day. We were the band of rambunctious kids that didn't fit into any category of the traditional high school hierarchy.

I would love to have called us the rebels, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Like all kids, we had our own bullies, who would judge us as different and weird and acted out the classical high school drama everyone had to go through. In fact, we were that cast of awkward characters that were united through our differences.

While other kids were all eating lunch in the cafeteria, we had a special spot in the library where we could escape the stagnation we had felt from the education system, making it slightly more bearable. Our collective unit of delusional rebels made the library our home base, where our imaginations were allowed to run rampant through art and internet usage. We had countless debates over which fictional heroes would triumph in fabricated scenarios of our choosing. It was a safe haven from the prosecution of judgment, the struggles of an adolescent and a pause on life in general. I will forever remember my adolescent years and this artifact embodies my strong memories.

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As I grew, so did my feelings for girls. It never worked out too well for me in this department. I was very socially awkward and not blessed with the gift of good looks. Girls would never really pay me much attention or bat an eye in my direction. I filled the nice guy profile all too perfectly. Like the saying goes, “The girls always chase the bad ones,” and I was far from it. Then came the human tornado that would turn my life upside down.

The ex-lover’s name was Manar, a beautiful girl with dirty blonde hair, equipped with exotic yellowish green eyes with a figure that had men kneeling at first sight. Born in Syria of Muslim faith, coming from a rather wealthy family, living her earlier privileged childhood days there until her family immigrated to the United States, ending up specifically in New Jersey. Though born in Syria, her cultural background was of the Circassian people.

I never heard of these wandering gypsy-like folks. They had no real land to call their own and through some recourse had migrated and settled in Syria. She spoke English very well regardless of her birth, but she also spoke an Arabic dialect that sounded to me like she was machine gunning a lugee all over the place. However, I put my own hilarious twist on her name and called her, Manasty. Because in the beginning and the end, she would be so nasty and rude about everything.

She was the type of girl who was good-looking and thought they could get away with murder because of it. I would meet this she-devil while working in a hospital which I'd rather not name. We were complete opposites in every way and we waged war against each other daily at work. The first time I laid eyes on her, I thought she was pretty, though she fell under the stuck-up category. That category was on the bottom of my list.

Day after day, doctors, nurses, clerks, any guy who had a lust for women would

constantly come around to praise her appearance. While I, on the other hand, couldn't help but crack jokes at this thing who I concluded was a velociraptor, straight out of Jurassic Park, disguised as a woman.

Our excessive need to bicker and nag each other caught the attention of other staff members. In time, they began labeling us as husband and wife, because the rants were endless. Words soon transformed to violence, she began to unfairly attack me daily, in response to my humorous jokes. It was in her nature, being the prehistoric predator she is. This femme fatale came equipped with claw like hands that pinched me mercilessly for my verbal transgressions. “You guys are straight out of a romantic comedy,” said one of the supervisors of the microbiology lab. Little by little, she broke my exterior shell to keep her out. Only to find I had changed, unexpectedly to a sense of fondness.

It was 5 a.m. in the morning, when I received the call that would start me off on this crazed adventure for which I had no preparation. The sun still snoozing while darkness loomed over the city of New York. The robust vibrating hypnotic tone of my cell phone was the first noise to assault my eardrums and rudely awaken the hibernating beast that I was in bed.

Alarmed and unaware of my surroundings, I desperately reached out into the darkness for my phone, which I could never accurately locate from underneath my covers. After toppling over nearly everything in my room, I successfully got hold of that feisty electronic device. My eyelids still struggling to open, I peeked into the screen's shining light to see a familiar deviant face whom I'd grown to love and hate at the same time.

Her Circassian Arabic eyes glaring at me, I answered the phone, only to hear a

hysterical crazed woman on the other side of the phone shouting. “Malaka! Suka! I need your help!” She frantically said other words that if translated, would have caused parents to slap their children if they heard it. Yes, it was profanity, curse words of a foul nature that she had associated with me for comedy’s sake. I thought she was joking at first only to fearfully realize she was serious. I immediately dived out of bed and stood upright so as to hear clearly what came next.

“I hit something, my tire is flat and I’m stuck in Jersey on my way to New York. I don’t know what to do; I’m terrified,” were the dreadful words she exhausted no time to say. After numerous games of back and forth problem solving tactics I suggested, the effort was all in vain. She was completely incapable of listening to reason due to fear and panic. I decided the best course of action was to rush to her aid personally. “I’m coming to you. Stay where you are. I will find you.”

With no train of thought, or resources to solve the problem myself, I decided to gamble on the sure fire possibility that her car had a spare and jack that would solve the problem. “How will you know where I am? You’ll never find me.” She doubted me like she always did.

“You’ll be the only car stuck on the New Jersey Turnpike with hazards on,” I said raising my voice slightly to convey complete confidence. Like the wind, I jumped in my car and rushed towards Jersey still on the phone with her. Though incredibly foolish and dangerous, I juggled driving and talking at high speeds to ensure I would reach her in a short time.

As I was driving, I heard her hyperventilating on the phone. She’d had a traumatic

experience in a car crash with an 18-wheeler in her childhood. I could hear her breathing becoming sporadic, as she started to utter a confused rush of depressive thoughts. Now I added keeping her calm to the list of actions I was already haphazardly doing. Mother nature had it out for me this day making things worse; heavy rains made the roads slippery and visibility low. Interestingly enough I didn't care for any of that, my main focus was to get the job done, and make sure she was safe both mentally and physically.

Maybe fate was on my side, as not one state trooper, or local law enforcement in the vicinity tried to stop me speeding in my vigilante style quest from New York to New Jersey, and I was free to rush to help the girl I loved.

I eventually located her and, without delay, I pulled over, flipping on my car hazards. I ran to the driver's side of her car, where her head rested against the steering wheel in a position of hopelessness and desperation. She would then turn ever so slightly and we made eye contact.

I never saw a car door swing open faster than that very moment. She jumped out like a trapped animal who has witnessed salvation for the first time. Her arms and lips wrapped around me almost immediately, to my surprise, as I was expecting a verbal onslaught. After a period of affection that led to her regained composure, I got to work on the flat. I rustled through the trunk of her car, pulling out heaps of items she had left in there like some sort of deranged hoarder. I finally hit the jackpot, the spare, combined with the tools to change it. Relieved that the solution had been found I pushed forward. It seemed some outer force was testing my patience as I laid eyes on the bolts only to find she had wheel locks. I asked her where the corresponding key was. She was clueless to my question, having no knowledge

of any automobile term.

A thought occurred to me; any normal person would put it in the glove compartment. Searching the glove box, stripping everything, my search was empty. I should have known, there was nothing normal about her, I laughed to myself. I again ventured back into the trunk and as I reached in to scavenge, my eyes caught a glint of a small metal item hiding in the deep dark inner workings of the trunk. Eureka, there it was, shrouded in darkness, I grabbed it and continued onward.

Moments later I dusted myself, successfully changing that problematic wheel. I then escorted her home, like a bootleg civilian police officer, directing traffic and blocking lanes to ensure she got home safely. I will forever remember the event as a collection of rashful thinking and actions that I would never normally take. It would continue to show and remind me till the dawn of time that those feelings I had for her were real.

Sadly, mutual feelings were not enough to keep the strings attached. External factors would break the chains that bind us. Her family was Muslim, who would not accept me, nor be willing to understand who I was. I would be forced to cut the ties to spare her from fighting with those she held dear. The importance of family is of no surprise to me and I wasn't about to let her battle it out. Fearing that her family would disown her, I exited stage left. "You'll find someone better, and most importantly, someone your parents will accept," I said sternly. Masquerading as a man with no emotion, I withheld the tears and disappeared from her life.

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\* Socheath Sur will begin studying at the Montefiore School of Nursing in fall 2020. Email: socheath.sur@gmail.com

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## J.G.



*J.G. grew up in the outskirts of Lima, Peru and immigrated with his family to New York when he was 18 years old. He was a disciplined student, determined to improve his writing and become a journalist. J.G. wrote for the Lehman College newspaper and was tremendously proud when he was accepted into the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. Now he has his master's and, while looking for a full-time journalism job, works as a teaching assistant for a non-profit that provides extracurricular classes for NYC schools. His essay reflects what his life was like one summer, while he was a college student.*

## Working at the A & P

When my brother and I would get out of work in Yonkers, we'd go to the bus stop to wait for the 52 bus. At that time, we worked as grocery clerks at an A&P supermarket. We worked almost every day and the job was hard but it made us feel useful. We were working bees.

Sometimes in the summer, we'd work in the morning and get off from work in the afternoon when the sun was still up. I didn't know what was home anymore. We had been living here and there like nomads all over the city since we came to New York. While sitting on the bench, I'd see some ants marching close to my foot, carrying a dead insect or a half-eaten candy, heading off to their colony where life was organized. At least they knew what to do with their life, I thought.

Other times we'd get off from work at 9 or 10 p.m., when almost nobody was around. Across the street, night wanderers entered and exited a CVS/Pharmacy and then took off in their cars. If we weren't there, we'd be in another bus stop close by. This other bus stop was surrounded by a parking lot, a few one-story houses, a hair salon, and a two-story Italian restaurant. Through the windows of the Italian restaurant, a murmur would come to my ears, a sound that might be the laughter of the waiters or the guests, celebrating a get-together or a going away party. They were celebrating life. And my brother and I were not invited.

Sometimes around that hour, some people would appear to wait for the bus and keep us company. Housekeepers, waiters, waitresses, dishwashers, and babysitters. They were the sort of people that had come to New York to have a better life. People who, as the years went by had forgotten who they were or why they came here in the first place.

When the bus didn't run, on a Sunday or a holiday, we'd go to the train station. It was far away, so we ran if we were late to catch the train. To get there, we had to cross through a neighborhood with colonial houses. A jungle seemed to be growing from inside the neighborhood. Grasshoppers chirped. At that hour, when it got so dark, it was hard to distinguish between the lights of the airplanes and the lights of the stars. The branches of the trees had grown so long we could touch them without jumping. It felt like we were back to our grandma's farm, the one we left behind in Latin America.

There were days when we wouldn't talk to each other. I'd attribute the problem to myself, to the fact that I hadn't been a good older brother. I had failed. And I'd feel miserable.

"Don't bother me. I don't want to talk to you because you think you know it all. I can do things by myself. I don't need you to tell me what to do. I'm not a child," he said. And before I could say anything to him, he would put his headphones on. And we'd just sit there, on the bench, to wait for the bus or for something else that would take us from that reality. At times, he'd talk to himself or laugh for no apparent reason, a behavior that I'd find odd but that I'd forget the next day. The shade of a big tree would cover us. The rays of the sun

would illuminate everything. We had started to hate our job and our lives. I feared for the future.

"I'm just trying to help you. None of what you say is true," I'd say to him trying to maintain my composure. But deep down I'd feel ashamed.

I would confront him in those days. And what would I hear from him sometimes?

Silence.

The bus stop would become some sort of confessional for us, as cars passed along the highway and I stared at the broken cigarettes on the ground.

Once, on a rainy day, when we were waiting for the bus, under our umbrellas, we were giving each other the silent treatment again.

Early that day, when we were packing up groceries in the store, he came running to me with blood on his hand. He had cut himself by mistake. Instead of helping him, my first reaction was to yell at him and tell him he was a fool. How many times had he come to me for help like a wounded pigeon when we were little kids? How many times had I sworn to protect him? Who was I becoming? I heard rain is good because it washes everything clean. But that day at the bus stop, the sky seemed to be crying. Drops of water were falling furiously through the drains.

A loud thunderclap resounded in the sky and dark clouds were forming.

Little did I know that my younger brother had a mental illness and that he was going to be locked up in a psychiatric hospital during the following months.

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\* J.G. holds a master's degree from the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. He teaches "a little bit of geography, language, cuisine, history, etc." to K-12 students in NYC. Email c/o: [jhb74@columbia.edu](mailto:jhb74@columbia.edu)

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**A.K.N\***

*A.K.N. was so articulate and compelling when she wrote about the dynamics of her family and the struggles they endured and transcended. She is doggedly stalwart in her life, but has a deft, light touch in her writing.*

**Bureks, Battle Scars and Bracelet**

I was five years old, staring at my worn-out Dora sneakers, as they swung back and forth, trying to catch the rhythm of the weird Canadian songs Uncle Sammy played for me. He was the unusual, irresponsible uncle that everyone talked about. But, boy did he make my week into fantasies every time he came down to visit. His broken down Nissan took us to a

new adventure every day, from the zoo, to the candy store, to the ice cream parlor. I would jump in the passenger seat, smirking, which translated to, “Mom won’t find out.”

We both knew I was his favorite even when he wouldn’t admit it. I knew that he was *my* favorite person ever because he comforted me, gave me attention, and made me feel special in just one week; something my parents couldn’t do for any of their five children their whole life. I didn’t blame my mother because she dedicated all her time to take care of the big baby of the house... my father.

I used to point out every car that I liked to Uncle Sammy. He would laugh and say, “You sure you weren’t supposed to be born a boy?”

“Ewwwww a boyyy? Noo blahhh!”

One day as we were driving, I gasped and pointed to a parked car. “Look! That’s like mama’s car.”

We drove by to see the resemblance and saw a lady hysterically crying with her hands over her face, her forehead against the steering wheel.

“That’s mama!”

My head slammed onto the side of the car as Uncle Sammy swerved and stopped, once he realized that the woman was his sister. He quickly got out of the car slamming the door behind him, forgetting he had a child with him. Quicker than I could get out of the car, my father was there, out of nowhere, as if he came out from underneath the car. There he was, screaming at my mom, making everything worse. My uncle, who was 26 at the time, pushed my father to the side and argued back. I cried next to the Nissan staring at the fight,

not knowing what was going on. All I could put together was that my father was the bad guy... he always was.

I didn't realize until that moment that Uncle Sammy wasn't here for my company, he was here to keep me away from seeing what happened between my mother and father. I wasn't taken out because I was his favorite, I was taken out to be distracted. I never saw Uncle Sammy again after the big fight with my father. My grandma took his place and lived with us to look after me and my brothers. Everything and everyone I lost was because of my father's actions.

Children think their parents are superheroes. They are unbreakable, strong and would never leave your side as they protect you. That's how I viewed my parents until my dad lost his mind and started to break the family apart, literally. Problems after problems seemed to never stop and he always treated other people better than his own kids and wife. The constant negativity and abuse drove me and the whole family insane. As I grew up that's how I thought I was supposed to be treated since that's how our "ideal figure" raised us, to believe that everyone was better than us. He raised us to be hella insecure.

School was my escape from home. I was able to play with my friends which helped me forget about my miserable family at home. I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade when my father's abuse escalated to the point where ACS had to knock on our door to investigate. My mother was getting me and my older brother, who was in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, ready for school, while my dad was making demands so early in the morning.

"Be useful and go get me water."

My brother quickly jumped and poured a glass. As my brother rushed with the water, he tripped and glass shattered on the ground.

“Are you shitting me! One thing I ask for! One thing and you can’t even get that! Stupid! Get up.” My father shook my brother and grabbed him by his mushroom haircut.

“Clean this shit up.” He let go of my brother and slapped the back of his head.

My brother held his tears back and picked up the big shards of glass. He couldn’t dare let out a squeal because he knew what would have happened if he did. My mother would cry and help my brother but my father would attack her as well.

“That’s why they are the way they are, because you baby them. Don’t let them come out like you.” He kept repeating as he lit up his cigarette.

My father really thought a nine-year-old would stay quiet after she witnessed all that before heading out to school. I held it in as much as I could but the minute my teacher asked me what was wrong, I spilled every detail as I sobbed in my chair. I got sent to the counselor’s office where I was fooled. The counselor told me no one is going to know and that I’m safe telling her anything. She began jotting down my siblings’ names and ages and that’s when everything went bad.

The day after, ACS showed up on our door step and I could feel the heat that built up in my father’s body when he opened the door. One of the ladies took me into my room, where she made me strip down to only my underwear as she began examining any bruises on my little-boy body. She examined all of my siblings as well. They couldn’t find anything that could be charged against my father.

“Mr. N\_\_\_, for you record, we will be observing you and your family for the next three months. Do you understand?”

“You don’t think I understand English? You come disrespect me in my home and accuse me of hitting my own kids? You don’t think kids over exaggerate?” My father was embarrassingly rude when he spoke.

“I’m afraid I don’t, Mr. N----. Have a nice day.” The lady looked at me and winked.

My body shook like an earthquake. I wanted to scream for the lady not to leave because I knew what was coming my way. She didn’t realize she just started a new world war in the house.

My father took me to the attic where he locked the door while my mother screamed.

“Shut up. I’m just going to talk to her.”

By talking he meant slapping me around and pulling my hair, leaving some of it on the ground. I knew exactly why my mother didn’t open her mouth when the investigators came. We needed my father. Although he didn’t provide much, we still had a place to stay instead of being Gypsies.

Every Sunday, when my father was off from work, my grandma would take me by my hand and walk me across the street in a pace slow enough for her little legs to handle. I was ten years old, old enough to understand the concept of being taken out of the house whenever my father was around. I was being protected from his raging screams and curses. Sitting in Side by Side Pizzeria, biting into the crunchy layers of bread and the feta cheese avalanching into my mouth was unforgettable. My taste buds dance while my mind travels back in time and plays its own movie right in front of me. I saw my five-year-old self sitting

in the same seat by the window with Uncle Sammy. This time I shared my experience with his mother, my beautiful grandma.

We always sat in the seat where you can look up and see my mother staring down at us through the apartment window, making sure we were all right. Uncle Sammy assigned me that seat and that is where I always sat. Right in front of me was my grandma, staring at me with thick glasses, which made her eyes look even more serious, making sure not one crumb of feta cheese was left on my plate.

She never seemed to eat with me, which I thought was because she only liked the *bureks* she made with her bare hands. It took me years to figure out that money was the reason why my grandma didn't order a *burek* for herself.

We would chit chat in those straight back chairs that my feet dangled from, as I listened to the amazing stories and life lessons my grandmas loved to tell. Story after story until we got a phone call to come back because my father had left out the house.

My father would abandon us whenever he felt the need to and came back expecting open doors when he felt like it. We didn't dare kick him out or else all hell would break loose. I feared my father rather than loved him. My father leaving was a financial crisis for us.

He left us with nothing. No money, which led to not paying the bills, which led to the water being cut off, and then less supply of food to feed seven people. But it was better to struggle without him around.

My whole world changed when he left. I became as independent as an adult and I finally was able to express myself without the fear of being howled at. I finally figured out

that I shouldn't be taken advantage of even though at times my mind replayed the irritating voice saying, "You are useless." That voice became my motivation and pushed me to strive harder. I graduated a year early from high school while working a full time job at Rite Aid, to provide for my mother since she deserved the world and I wanted to do everything in my power for her to have it.

~

The small, silver bracelet chained around my wrist might seem like just a piece of jewelry to people. However, for me it's a piece of my father's heart that he left for me. When I was born my father gave me this bracelet with my name engraved on the front, and "My precious daughter" on the back. I never took it off.

When my father abandoned the family, I realized who he really was and I refused to wear the bracelet. I stuck it in one of my old sweaters and hid it in my closet. I could not love anything about the bracelet anymore. It meant nothing to me, just like the three words engraved in the back of my bracelet meant nothing for my father. My wrist felt naked and missed the feeling of the cold metal dangling off it. I thought I was just being dramatic but days passed and I did not get used to its absence. I couldn't bear the feeling of losing both the bracelet and my father. I reached into my closet and felt the carving on the bracelet. I clipped it back on my wrist and my wrist felt relieved. Although I sometimes regret getting so attached to the bracelet, I realized that I value this small object and it will always be in my life.

Although my dad left some open wounds, I learned how to make them into scars and use them to my advantage. As scars are visible on skin, my wounds can show on me at times. I'll start slacking off and withdraw into myself. However, I'll still be able to see them and grow more than I ever thought I could. "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it." This is the quote I will forever hold on to since it helped me change how I viewed the world.

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\* A.K.N. To all 2020 graduates: we made it. With all hardship comes success! My parents are Palestinian/German but I was born and raised in the Bronx. My goal moving forward will be continuing to learn sign language and open an audiology clinic of my own. For correspondence, Email c/o: [jhb74@columbia.edu](mailto:jhb74@columbia.edu)

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## Nicole De La Cruz



*Nicole de la Cruz's compelling essay provides an intimate, clear-as-a-bell window into the daily life of her extended Dominican-American family in the Bronx. Her vivid description of life with her aunt and cousins evokes a much larger story. To give a student an assignment and get back such an artful essay is extremely rewarding. Nicole is now a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher.*

### **Dominican Runaway/Life in 5BW**

I called my Aunt Yraida on a Tuesday morning while on my way to school and told her that my mom had kicked me out of the house, and I was going to go stay in her house. This happened a lot. My mom would routinely kick me out when she was annoyed with me, when I didn't follow her erratic rules, or when she felt she couldn't control me.

Aunt Yaya would never ask me why I was coming over; she never lectured me. She would always just say "ajaaa" and right away, she'd give me responsibilities. You couldn't stay

at Yaya's and do nothing. She didn't care what your plans were, what your schedule was, or what life you led. If you stayed at her house, there was always something for you to do.

She would generally say, "The kids come out at 3:20." I knew that meant I had to go into big-sister mode, and pick up at least five of my younger cousins at school. They would always be excited to see me, and would go right into catching me up on their lives. So we would walk home telling stories, yelling like lunatics, and laughing. We'd stop by the store, or the *pastelito* stand, or the ice cream stand, and spend all of our money (usually mine) on snacks.

We'd get to the apartment building and greet our friends the drug dealers, who would stop the kids and ask them how their day went in exchange for a dollar, while flirting with my older cousin and me at the same time. To this day, they are the friendliest, most polite gangsters I've ever known. They would even help Yaya take up groceries to her fifth floor walk-up!

Once we got to the fifth floor, if no one forgot their key, we'd fight our way into the three-bedroom apartment for the only bathroom in the house. My older cousin and I would always let the younger ones win this race; but only because we didn't want to clean up after them if they had an accident while waiting.

Then, routine. We would all start our chores. My older cousin would start cooking, two would clean the bathroom, three would take the bedrooms, and one would sweep and mop. I would help the younger ones do their homework. To avoid the belt, certain things had to be done before Yaya got home at 6 p.m.

Once she arrived, she would inspect. If we got the seal of approval, we'd live. Then, off to eat. A typical meal would be rice with chicken and beans, salad, fried plantains, and

avocado. Since I hated most of these foods (I am the pickiest eater in America), my aunt would make me eggs or sausage with rice instead.

After dinner, it was often my job to do the dishes with one of my younger cousins. The rest would be picking out clothes and ironing them for the next day. After all of these routines, we would play Parcheesi, cards, Uno, or Blind Chicken until our telenovela started at 9. *Pasión de Gavilanes* was about three brothers who posed as laborers to win back the land that had been stolen from them. We would watch as a family in Yaya's room, and of course, have a detailed discussion after.

Finally, we'd go to our rooms and talk some. But after three bangs on the wall from my godfather who was in the room next door, we'd get ready for bed. Needless to say, we'd all wake up fighting for the bathroom in the morning.

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\* Nicole De La Cruz graduated from Lehman College with a degree in Psychology and a minor in Education. She is currently a 5th grade teacher in a Christian private school. For correspondence, email: [n.delacruz07@gmail.com](mailto:n.delacruz07@gmail.com)

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## Delilah Ortiz-Hassarath\*



*As a child, Delilah Ortiz Hassarath did most of the household chores, but she was beaten and neglected anyway. Delilah was valiant in her writing and turned those painful experiences into clear, artful stories. This essay describes how she often escaped up the fire escape to the roof where she would draw the life she wished she was living. Her story is compelling, not relentless.*

### Fearless from the Fourth-Floor Window

Summer in Brooklyn was like a movie. I watched the kids on my street clamor for their vanilla and chocolate swirl cones from the ice cream truck and play with each other in the heat, running, jumping and singing loudly through the splashing water spraying from the

hydrant. When night came, I gazed down from the fourth floor window at the children as they played with an everlasting energy, as if they were praying for the day not to end.

For me, I would pray for the night to come as fast as it could, because I couldn't enjoy what they could. Not even for a moment would I have the pleasure of being a normal kid. I was never allowed to be a part of anything that included a smile, instead, I had the joys of being a house slave and if I were to leave a speck of anything, I would see black, blue and red. Hours and days slowly drifted to emptiness. I felt as if years and centuries had passed before my eyes and I stood there, stuck staring at time in slow motion.

~

When I was ten years old, I loved adventure and hated being stuck in the house. I would climb out fearless as can be from the fourth-floor window stretching to the left onto the fire escape and on to the roof. I had no fear of falling, the thought never crossed my mind. I jumped from roof to roof, off to my own world to freedom, my little secret spot, where I would draw the places I could imagine, scenes I only saw on television. I watched the sunset, hoping no one would figure out I was not around. All my chores and cleaning were done, the floor was scrubbed completely so they had no reason to look for me. I loved my double-sun and moon drawings, which meant seeing life in a better way. I enjoyed my world with the angels above guiding my every move, the joy of feeling the sun and getting the love I craved filled my heart. At ten, I wasn't living a normal life, but I sure learned how to love and appreciate it a young age.

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\* Delilah Ortiz-Hassarath has been studying Healthcare Management at Lehman College while working two jobs and raising her children. She plans to graduate in 2023 and pursue a career as a Registered Nurse.  
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## Estefania Valencia



[Estefania, wearing overalls, and her siblings after they returned to New York.]

*Estefania took a rigorous approach to her academic work and her writing. Her classmate, Angel B., praised her writing in his online comments to her:*

*“I loved reading your memoir. Your introduction was rich and filled with fantastic cultural references and universal appeal. The story about your mother being deported was handled with grace and was heart breaking. That passage flowed wonderfully into your story about your father's motivations towards a better life, and tied into the struggle that you subsequently wrote about. Ultimately, you articulated the theme of loss with a powerful sense of emotion and used dialogue to tie it all together. Fantastic work.”*

## Listening to Los Bukis, Over and Over

In December of 2003, my family and I faced our biggest obstacles to date – my mother's deportation.

We were on our way back to New York from our first family road trip to Jalisco, Mexico. It was the first time I had vacationed in my parents' homeland. I met family members for the first time, made lifelong friends in my parents' village, El Quiringual, and traveled to my favorite place, Guadalajara.

I had the time of my life in Mexico, but sadly, it was time to go back to school. My parents packed all of our belongings, fixed everything in the trunk of my father's pickup truck, and set the alarm to go off at 3 a.m.

In the morning my father tugged on my shoulder. "Levantate mija, ya nos vamos." I was half asleep but somehow I managed to get out of my bed and walked to the truck with my plush blanket in my hand. I knew that the drive to the border would be long, so as soon as I put my seatbelt on, I laid my head on my mother's shoulder and went back to sleep.

The drive to the border took 11 hours. I fell in and out of sleep so often that my mom joked that I was practically dead and that I only woke up for food and to use the restroom.

When we arrived at the border, I remember the clock read 5:18 p.m. We stopped and a border patrol agent asked my father to show him all of our passports. While that agent scanned our passports in the scanner, other agents inspected our car with large guns in their

hands. A few more agents arrived, this time with dogs, Belgian Malinois, who walked around the car, sniffing every inch.

The agent who held our passports came to our window and gave my father our passports but told my mother that she needed to go inside for questioning.

"I'll go with you to translate," said my oldest sister, Maria, as the agent opened the door for my mother. Maria was only ten and had been my parents' translator for pretty much anything – parent-teacher conferences, doctor appointments, phone calls, etc. The agent hesitated for a second but agreed to let Maria accompany my mother.

Soon after, one of the agents asked my father to open the trunk of his pickup truck. After noticing lots of items in the trunk they told my father to pull over to the side. While we waited for my mother, four border patrol agents removed everything from our car, inspected and opened our personal suitcases, while the dogs sniffed around our belongings. The agents immediately opened the leaking suitcase that contained the smelly Cotija cheese. They next opened the suitcases that had visible powdery debris. To their surprise, the powder came from Mexican bread called *Conchas*. My father was also importing Tequila, candy, chips, and cheese to sell -- no drugs or weapons or anything suspicious.

My father explained to us that he had experienced this before. It was a consequence of the 9/11 attacks. The States tightened up its border patrol to prevent future acts of terrorism.

It seemed like hours had gone by before Maria came out of the building crying. My father asked her what was wrong but she couldn't reply. An agent accompanied Maria to the

car, and turned to face my father, "Sir, we had to bring your daughter out. She isn't allowed inside. We have a translator on the phone for your wife."

"Where's my wife?" asked my father. He didn't give the agent enough time to reply because as soon as the agent started talking, my father was already running through the door.

While we waited for my parents, the agent tried to console Maria but she wouldn't stop crying.

"What happened Maria? What did they tell you? What did you see," asked my other sister, Cynthia.

"Mom. She was handcuffed. I couldn't go in the room with her but I could see through the little window. I think she did something bad," replied Maria with more tears. Maria was in fifth grade and was probably more aware of the situation than the rest of us kids.

A million thoughts raced through my head. *My mother was a good woman.* What could she have possibly done to be in the building for so long?

When my parents came out of the building, they thanked the agent for having watched us. They got in the truck, put on their seatbelts and didn't say a word. *Finally, we're going home* I thought, as my father turned on the car.

"Dad, I think you're going the wrong way," said Maria, as she unwrapped the Snickers bar the agent had given her. Out the window, I saw the sign, "Return to Nuevo Laredo." *Why was he driving back? He had just driven for 11 hours to get to the border.* This makes no sense, I thought.

"Did you forget something," I asked. "No," he replied and turned on the music to his Mexican rancheras. The music was loud, the kind of loud that made the body vibrate with every beat. "Can you lower the music? Junior is trying to sleep," said Cynthia as she rolled her eyes. My father ignored her. He didn't say a word.

The next few hours we spent listening to the same CD by my father's favorite band, Los Bukis, over and over – a CD that was probably older than me. Every song they sang was either about love or heartbreak. And after we listened to the album in its entirety the first two times, I memorized some of the lyrics. "Yo te necesito, a cada momento solo pienso en ti..." I hummed ("I need you. At all moments I only think of you"). But no matter how much I hummed the songs, the car ride was still boring.

I turned around and saw that Maria had her headphones on and was listening to her own CD player, Cynthia was writing in her diary, probably about how she was still mad that my father had not lowered the music, and my younger brother, Rafael, was sleeping soundly despite the loud music. Letting out a slight sigh, I adjusted myself in my seat and stared ahead. I saw nothing but the road in front of us – a road that seemed vast and endless. My father focused on driving and my mother stared out the window. I suddenly realized that my mother hadn't said a word since the border patrol agent brought her back to the car. She wasn't her usual self. She was expressionless, she was quiet, distant. It was as if being at the border had sucked the life out of her and left her empty. Empty like the road before us.

Every minute of that ride back to El Quiringual felt like an eternity. I couldn't listen to the same CD or sit still for one more second. Only five hours into the journey back and I was on the verge of losing my mind. I tapped my mother on the shoulder and asked her why

we were going back to Mexico. Her eyes became glossy and, I knew she was holding back tears. My mother didn't answer my question, but she grabbed my hand in hers. She squeezed my hand as a tiny drop fell from her eye and landed on her cheek. With my free hand, I wiped the tear away. She didn't answer my question. I laid my head on her shoulder and not long after, I finally fell asleep.



In the late '70s, my father left his homeland for a better future for his family. He left behind what he knew to discover a land completely unknown to him. All he knew was that America was full of opportunities, had a great education system and that he wanted the famous "American Dream."

My father's decision to immigrate to the United States wasn't just spontaneous; it was fueled by various factors and consisted of months of deliberation. Political turmoil in Mexico, mainly government corruption, increasing and the lack of a stable economy were main factors.

Jobs were scarce and only given to those who had some level of education or had learned a trade. Thus, it is no surprise that my father, along with other immigrants from Mexico, decided to embark on a treacherous journey to the United States in search of better opportunities.

My father was born on October 21st, 1964, in a small town known as Cotija de la Paz, Michoacán, Mexico. He grew up in a household of 15; he had 12 siblings and his two parents. His father, my grandfather, was never around. My grandfather traveled between the United States and Mexico, spending the majority of his time in the States. When my

grandfather returned to Mexico, he would impregnate my grandma and then returned to the United States to "work." My father's older siblings grew tired of their living situation; my grandfather sent them little to no money. From a young age, they had the responsibility of providing for a growing family, which caused some of my father's siblings to drop out of school to look for jobs. They had to find jobs in the neighboring fields, which proved to be a difficult task since no one wanted to hire minors; if they did hire children, they required the minors to have some sort of higher education or a special skill – both of which my family members did not have. My father's oldest siblings grew angry and frustrated. They were angry that my grandfather spent most of his money on his friends and other children that weren't his own. Slowly, my father's brothers began leaving Mexico and crossing over to the United States.

As each sibling crossed over, my father's responsibility to provide for his family increased. My father eventually dropped out of school in 6th grade to look for a job. He wanted to be able to buy his younger siblings toys (they didn't own any) so that they wouldn't have to ask other children to borrow theirs. My father tried for months but was unsuccessful at finding a job; he either lacked the education required or was too young to even be hired. One day, my father spoke to my Uncle Jose, who resided in California, and was convinced to relocate to the United States. My Uncle Jose explained to my father that there were plenty of jobs in California and that he could stay with him while my father settled in. Then, at the age of 14, my father's oldest brother, Juan Luis, sent my father enough money so that he could cross the border.

My father's first journey to California in the summer of 1978 lasted three days. My father has described his experience as "the worst days of his life." Along with ten complete strangers, he had to walk the "desert of death" as my father calls it. Before crossing the border, the group was advised that they could only bring a few items with them; most chose to only carry their gallon of water and leave their belongings behind.

Originally, the trip was only supposed to last a few hours, a day at most. However, the trip was interrupted when the group heard a helicopter overhead. My father recalls that that night they arrested three people who were in his group, one of these people had been the person crossing them. Scared, tired, and hungry, my father and the remaining few walked through the desert hoping to find the vehicles that were scheduled to pick them up. They walked and walked, sometimes in circles. No one had any idea where they were going. They continued like this for another day, unsuccessful. The third day came and most had given up. They were fatigued, hungry, dehydrated. My father encouraged the others, he told them that he believed that they were close. And they were. A few hours after walking west, my father came across another group of strangers. Luckily, these people knew where they were headed and took my father's group along. The cars picked them up and the individuals were taken to their final destination, California.

My father eventually brought my mother to the United States a year after they were married in December of 1991. My father, along with his siblings, was motivated to cross country lines in an attempt to provide for his family, for a better future, and a stable income. Since having immigrated, my parents have learned to assimilate to a new culture, a new language, and an entirely new life.



My siblings and I stayed with our mother while my father returned to New York and tried to fix my mother's immigration status.

Living in Mexico was hard on my siblings and me, especially my mother. My mother had been married to my father for 12 years and had never been apart from him for more than a few days.

I was confused when my father dropped us off at my grandmother's house in El Limon instead of our house in El Quiringual, Jalisco. It was about 9 a.m. when my father dropped off our suitcases, kissed us goodbye and drove off. We didn't see him for another eight months.

"Is he coming back, mom? Why didn't he drop off his suitcases too?" asked Cynthia. "Yes, he'll be back soon," replied my mother as she tried to keep her composure. My grandmother Esperanza escorted us inside her house and showed us where we would stay. My sisters and I shared one room, while my mother and brother shared another. My grandmother's house was enormous. It had six bedrooms, had two full bathrooms and a guesthouse. It was a sharp contrast from our small apartment in New York that had only one bathroom, and no space to play.

The first day at my grandmother's house was fun. I roamed the property, curious to see what I would find. I walked for about five minutes from the house and found a pig sty. My grandmother raised pigs in her backyard! A few yards away, I heard the chickens and roosters. I'm going to have so much fun feeding the animals, I thought. I ran back to the house to ask my grandmother if I could feed them but stopped before reaching the kitchen.

I heard my mother crying. She told my grandmother that she wasn't sure how long we would stay; that my father had to fix her legal issues before we could go back to New York. *What problems could she possibly have?*

For the next few weeks, my mother barely spoke. She waited by the phone for hours, waiting to see if my father would call with good news. He didn't. My mother's eyes would light up with a tinge of hope, but that would disappear just as fast as it appeared. Whenever he called it was just to let my mother know that he had sent us money, to ask how we were doing, and to tell us that he missed us. Every time my father called, I would hear my mom cry at night.

When my father called us, my siblings and I would run to the phone to see who would pick it up. I was always the slowest. My father asked us about school, he asked us how we liked Mexico, and he would tell us that we would be back in New York in no time. My father called every week. But after a few months of telling us the same thing, I began to question him. I felt as though my father had abandoned us. He continued to call religiously every week but I wouldn't speak to him. I resented him for leaving us in Mexico and for making my mother cry.

~

My father had to work extra hours in his landscaping business so that he could afford the immigration lawyer and also to send us money. My mother's case was hard to win, but with a good lawyer and five thousand dollars out of my father's pockets, my father accomplished it. In total, I lived in Mexico for eight months and even graduated from the first grade there.

After years of battling my mother's immigration status, she was granted residency in the United States on November 2008.

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\* Estefania Valencia graduated from Lehman College in 2019 with a BS in Chemistry. She currently works in a Virology lab at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, which focuses on understanding the entry mechanisms of several viruses. She plans to use pursue a career as a medical scientist. Email: ESTEFANIA285@gmail.com

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## A.P.

*A.P. soldiered through to write this essay – it is a triumph to write so clearly and artfully about such trauma. She's also a memorably warm person who helped create a cohesive atmosphere in the class by offering supportive comments to the other students and organizing a group bowling trip.*

## Because You Loved Me

There she was lying on the floor, back against the wall, legs straight out as she was ready to let go. My mom held a piece of glass to her neck. I cried, begging her to put it down.

"Momma, don't do it. Momma please don't do it." I thought to myself that day, if I lose my momma then my life would never be the same. My Dad has hurt her and now emotionally he has hurt me too.

I had been very close to my father. He was my best-friend and my teacher. But he turned from my best friend to my worst nightmare.

I remember having a beautiful struggle. Mom got back with Dad after his disappearing act when she gave birth to me. I was around six years old when we got a comfortable apartment and my mother adopted one of her family members, Coco. Coco's parents weren't stable enough to take care of her so Mom took her in. She was five years older than me, taller, lighter, and had really long Pocahontas hair that I enjoyed playing with.

I knew Coco very well even before she moved in. She lived upstairs from us with Auntie Sheryl. Coco and I were destined to be sisters before God ever made it official. She would watch me when Mom couldn't. We had experienced and witnessed so many things that were hard to see. Because Coco was always a part of my rough childhood, I never felt alone. She was there when I first fell off my bike down a steep hill and when a bully threw bleach in my eyes and the doctors thought I would never see again. But there was more drama when we caught Dad putting stacks of crispy 100 dollar bills wrapped in aluminum foil into the deep freezer.

I was young at the time and didn't know why he did it but I did know for sure he was hiding it from someone. My first thought was, "Oh My Gosh my Daddy's rich," I never said a word to Mom until one day she was cooking Sunday dinner for us and I heard her slam the pot on the stove saying, "Lord, why must he keep on doing this!!" Every time Momma talked to God it was either something really good or something really bad. And this time it was bad. Coco and I ran to see what mom was so angry about. She had opened up the aluminum foil and had a stack of \$100 crisp bills in her hand.

She stormed out of the house without a coat. It was cold that night and all Momma had on was a silk nighty that was short enough to see her panties. We screamed and begged for her to get back in before anyone saw her. Thankfully no one did. Mom threw the money into the garbage while Dad was hollering over the phone that it was fifty-grand. She informed him that she was throwing it away. Dad came quicker for that money then he would do for any of us.

When we moved to our new apartment, all of Dad's bad habits eventually had to end. Mom couldn't keep bailing him out of jail. So in order for the relationship to work again, she decided that it was best for her to get a job while Dad stayed home and watched over me and Coco.

Dad always made sure the house was cleaned, chores and homework were done, and my sister and I would get in the shower by 7:30 pm so we could get our butts to bed by 8. Mom sometimes worked day and night so we didn't get to see her much. The tables had now flipped. The more days we spent with Dad the closer we got to him. The fewer days we spent with mom the more distant we became.

Waking up felt like boot-camp. Not only on school days; we had to wake up at 7 a.m. Saturdays too. Mom was off on Sundays so Coco and I could sleep longer. Dad would cook his butt off and breakfast was his best. Dad sometimes would over fill us to the point that we couldn't eat anymore, but he refused to let us leave the table without finishing our plates. If we did, we would get a whooping.

One time Coco and I were eating dinner and she didn't finish her food so she shoved all her food onto my plate begging for me to eat it. I was at the kitchen table all alone with both, my food and hers, staring at the plate like it was going to eat itself. I couldn't even finish mine. How in the world would I be able to finish hers? As bad as I wanted to snatch her out, I didn't. My dad wasn't the nicest, he lacked sympathy, so when he said don't move he meant it. Dad was pacing back and forth through the kitchen to see if I was done, his

rolled up blunt in his hand. He took a pull and said in his strong Jamaican accent, "Yu betta finish yuh plate dem, if yuh don't den u affi stay deh." He was saying if I don't finish my plate then I will have to stay there.

"Wake up!!" Momma said. I noticed my mom as I picked my face up from the pile of food. She was confused and worried. I was also worried and didn't even know I had fallen asleep. She told me it was 1a.m. in the morning and that I needed to go into my bed. I remember crying because I was scared that if I moved from my seat I would get hit from my father. But she noticed the fear in my eyes and she would save me from the whooping.

A few months later mom got pregnant and Coco moved out. Mom later found out that she was having another girl. I was excited not because I was going to be a big sister but because mom would stay home with us more. Dad always wanted boys but God gave him girls.

Dad wasn't the nicest but he was very intelligent and loved money more than he ever loved himself, kids or his woman. Although Dad was the biggest dealer ever, he was also very skillful in other things. He was great in math, did carpentry, retailing, and is a great driver. He had the mind of an artist. He could draw a house and then build one from the ground up just like it. My Dad helped renovate houses for families. I remember going with him to work one day and a lady came up to me saying how lucky of a daughter I am to have a father like him.

He became great friends with someone who eventually helped him get a job with Bellevue Hospital in downtown Manhattan where he transported blood to other hospitals.

Dad was now the provider again and Mommy was the home parent. Things went so well although Coco moved out. I was Mommy's little worshipper and I enjoyed every little moment of it until one day we got an uninvited guest. Mom's feet were swollen and I had to get the door. I remember getting the foot stool so I could step on it to reach and look through the peep hole. As I looked into the peep hole there were three girls conversing loudly with rapid body movements. I opened the door and they asked, "Where is your Mom?" I pointed at the direction of the room that she was in and they barged in without even asking to come in. I was scared for my life and for mom's. I ran behind them. I realized from Mom's face that she didn't know them. They started cursing at her asking her questions.

"WHERE IS TONY? HE NEEDS TO COME SEE HIS DAUGHTER OR ELSE IM GOING TO PUT HIM ON CHILD SUPPORT!!"

"I don't know where he is. Please don't hurt my child or me; I'm pregnant." Mom continued to hold and protect her stomach.

"THIS BITCH IS PREGNANT AGAIN," one of the ladies said to the other one.

“YOU LUCKY YOUR ASS IS PREGNANT, BUT IF YOU SEE TONY MAKE SURE YOU GIVE HIM MY MESSAGE.”

I started to cry after they left. I knew I was in big trouble. In grief, I thought if I hadn't opened that door none of this would've happened. But because I did, truth had been revealed.

Dad had now become my enemy. I happened to have a sister I didn't even know about. Mom and Dad were together for as long as I could remember. How in the world did my Dad find time to make another child? Is this the reason why he'd been away for so long? To see the tears falling down my mother's face asking God how could he have done this to her, showed how hurt and disappointed she was. My mom had been nothing but good to this man and he just continued to hurt her pure soul.

She waited that night and somehow got out of the bed with her swollen feet for him. She paged him on the beeper but he never called right away. Hours later Dad buzzed the door from the lobby and less than a minute rang our apartment door bell. Mom stood there shaking not with fear but with anger. Her face was red; her hands were balled up into a fist. She opened the door pulled him in and started kicking and punching him. They always fought but with the advantage of her being pregnant, this time she won. He screamed begging for her to stop and so she did. Mom then walked to the living room and strained but successfully picked up the fish tank and threw it at him. I didn't know where any of this strength came from especially if she was supposed to be resting. But I guess when a woman

is fed up, she's fed up for real. I remember looking at the two fishes named after my parents, flopping on the floor. I was a child and although I saw what was happening between my mom and dad I thought about my fish too. So I filled a bag with water and picked those fishes up with my bare hands to save them.

Dad left and Mom was still there, on the wet floor. She screamed at me and told me to not come out into the hallway because of all the broken glass. I was hardheaded but smart at the same time. I didn't listen to her. I got some slippers out my room and still went anyways to help her.

Bang, bang!!! "OPEN UP!! It's water everywhere in my apartment."

Linda, from downstairs was at our front door. The door was already unlocked, but I knew if I had opened the door my mom probably would have slit her throat. Linda kept knocking then eventually turned the door knob. She instantly knew something was wrong and closed the door behind her. It almost looked as if mom gave birth that's how flooded the house was. Linda knelt down at my mom and said "WHATEVER IT IS, ISNT WORTH IT... Give me the glass" (*mom had it facing towards her neck*). Mom refused and held the broken glass so tightly in her hand; she started to bleed a little. Linda screamed and said "DO IT FOR YOUR DAUGHTER GOD DAMMIT!! SHE IS SCARED." Mom looked at me and dropped the broken piece. Linda called 911 and said that she needed help. After my mother had dropped the glass, Linda still called the cops. I didn't understand that what I was witnessing wasn't healthy. An ambulance came and took her. Linda asked me do I know any

family member that would come and get me, I quickly responded “Grandpa!” He would come for me in a heartbeat.

My grandfather was the ideal father in my eyes. I stayed with him and his wife while mom was still in the hospital. I got dressed one time because I was going to leave and find momma on my own. Grandpa gave me anything I asked for, but said “no” when it came to questions about my mom. I cried every night. He said she never called but I knew it was lies because I overheard them say on the phone that she couldn’t see me because she wasn’t well.

Being with my grandfather was great and all but it was nothing like being with my mother. One time I stayed by the front door of his house thinking she would walk in. But she never did come. Grandpa handed me his radio, explaining that it was a gift from his brother who had died from lung cancer. I remember only meeting my Great Uncle-Larry once. That was his favorite brother and he cherished that. Uncle Larry told him that if he was feeling down just play the radio it would make you feel a lot better.

I sat by the door with the radio in my hand that night in the same position my mother was in when she was ready to take her life. I played with the buttons trying to find a station that was clear until I got frustrated and put it down by my side. Then I heard a woman sing,

*“You were my strength when I was weak  
 You were my voice when I couldn’t speak  
 You were my eyes when I couldn’t see  
 You saw the best there was in me  
 Lifted me up when I couldn’t reach  
 You gave me faith ‘cause you believed  
 I’m everything I am  
 Because you loved me....”*

I cried because I understood. I ran to Grandpa's room. I knew it was late at night but I didn't care. I kissed him up. I begged and begged him to buy the CD for me that sang. I didn't know what her name was but good thing I remembered the words so I sang it to him and he told me her name was Celine Dion. I made a promise to myself that I would practice that very song over and over and sing it to my mother and unborn baby sister. He agreed and said he would get it first thing in the morning. I was so happy.

Riding in Grandpa's station wagon I felt a sense of ease. Moodies Record (cd store); had tons of cds everywhere, and posters on the wall. I followed Grandpa through the aisle and there she was, a beautiful white woman with gracious god given eyes. I couldn't wait to get back to Grandpa House so I could listen to it and sing along with it over and over. Grandpa had a cassette radio in his car so I couldn't even listen to it in there if I wanted to.

I noticed we drove in a different area. There the happiness just suddenly stopped it. Grandpa got out of the car and I saw my father. I was nervous as heck thinking was this Grandpa's nice way of throwing me off back to my Dad's (he bought the CD for me now he's dropping me off to a man who hurt my mom and who had another child. Oh no.) I just couldn't have gone back. I was prepared to fight. I wasn't going to let him leave me with ease.

I tried hard to not jump to conclusions so I rolled down the window just enough to see if I could hear. Dad said, "She's in labor right now. She's ready to give birth." I was confused because I knew that pregnancy was nine months and mom was only six

months. I'm like, how could this be? I was young so I thought the earlier the better. Dad didn't get in the car but he did wave goodbye.

Back at the house I took off my shoes and ran upstairs. At first I had trouble opening the cd, but with the help of my pointy, long, sharp nails I ripped the plastic open. I put it in Grandpa's wife's CD player and went to track # 2. It had a different start to it than when I listened to it the first time but I went along with the melody and played it over and over until I got the song. Grandpa came up the stairs and looked at me and started to laugh. I couldn't hear him because of the headphones I had on, but I knew he was laughing the way his belly shook. He walked to his room as I spun around like a ballerina. I sang and sang with my squeaky voice until I eventually fell asleep.

Next morning, I felt different. I almost forgot that the pain was still there. The phone rang and this time I ran for it. I knew I wasn't supposed to pick it up without my Grandfather's permission but I had a strange feeling that it was Momma calling. I was right. "Hi Mommy, is it true? Is it true? Is Peaches finally here?" I nagged. "Baby girl there's no Peaches." Then there was a steady dial tone. Momma hung up and I was confused. I couldn't call back. Grandpa was sitting on the recliner reading his newspaper he told me to come join him because he needed to speak to me.

"A---, sometimes bad things happen to good people, but what I'm about to tell you isn't going to be easy.....Peaches died, the doctors couldn't save both of them it was either your mom or her." My chest was pumping as I tried to suck up all the air in me. At six years old this wasn't something you wanted hear, but I heard it. I blamed my father after this one. His stupidity caused my mother's depression and therefore she lost my sister.

After the miscarriage, my mother was in the psychiatric facility for quite some time. She eventually got better and came home. I knew that she was suffering inside so I wanted to do something to make her feel better. I got her attention by putting the Celine Dion cd on and sang “Because You Loved Me.” As I was close to done, Mommy ran to the bathroom. She came out with a tissue in her hand and squeezed me tight saying, “Thank you, thank you. I haven’t felt like this in a long time.” I knew she meant “happy.” And I had given her that.

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## Omar E. Fajardo



[Omar with his niece and mother at Drew Gardens in the Bronx.]

*Omar wore a thick rope of colorful beads around his neck, but otherwise always dressed head to foot in white. He eventually told us that as part of his training to become a Lukumi priest he had to wear all white for a year and seven days. (Lukumi is an offshoot of the African-American Santeria religion.)*

*When I offered students extra credit if they visited the Leonard Cohen exhibit at the Jewish Museum, Omar was the only student who went. He waited on line for an hour, the only brown-skinned person, and he stayed two hours. I love thinking of Omar there, mesmerized by Leonard Cohen's music and spirituality.*

## Of Caterpillars, Churches and Cereal

As a child I was always at some kind of church, Catholic, Baptist, Protestant, among others. I went to Sunday school and served as an altar boy. I was very dedicated. My siblings were bored at church, but I was making a connection with God. The more I went, the stronger the connection. I learned the prayers and would recite them whenever I had some free time.

I even started praying every night before bed; if I forgot I would pray in the morning, as if my life depended on it.

Sometimes I would stay over at my grandma's, a devout Catholic. She had statues and candles all over the place and she prayed throughout the day. I learned a lot from her and loved staying over because I would pray and fall asleep to the candlelight flickering off the walls. The more I prayed the stronger I got. This set the tone for how I would connect with God for the rest of my life.

Growing up we had a full house. There were nine kids and one adult. Two kids were from my mother and seven from my aunt. There were bunk beds everywhere. In the building everyone knew each other and we kids were always in the hallways or in each other's apartments playing. Every now and then we would get in trouble for fighting or misbehaving but usually we were good.

On the first of the month the food stamps came and off to the supermarket we went. Going food shopping was my favorite family activity. My mom would take all nine of us on this excursion; must've drove her crazy. The supermarket was huge, the aisles went on forever, the ceiling was really high and there was food everywhere. I was a chubby kid who loved food. The supermarket was like the chocolate factory from Willy Wonka's, a smorgasburg. As soon as we got in there I make a beeline for the cereal aisle. There I would remain for the majority

of the trip. I would look at the cereal boxes one by one examining, evaluating and grading them. I'd put them on the floor and arrange the selected ones in order of importance from maybe to definitely yes. I loved cereal. Like Tony the Tiger, I wanted to be Great. Naively I thought cereal would help me get there.

Time passed and we got older. In my teens my mother would only take me with her shopping. Even though there were three older girls, I was the eldest boy and could help her with the heavier things. When we got home the others would be waiting for us and come down to help. That continued till I moved out. Nowadays when I go food shopping it reminds me of those good times that I spent with my family. I always go to the cereal aisle and reminisce. I still love cereal.

My father was a drug dealer and user, who would come around every once in a while. Everyone was scared of him. Whenever he came around he would beat on my mom, punching, kicking and dragging her through the apartment. One night they started arguing then fighting and he started hitting her. The house was full of frightened children. I couldn't take all the yelling and screaming so I went out onto the fire escape, climbed down the ladder, dangled off the last rung and jumped. I ran fast, as if death were chasing me, straight to the precinct which was one block away. I got there, winded, and told them what was happening. Within minutes we were back at the apartment. My father just stared at the cops and me, shocked. Of course my

father was on his best behavior, acting all nice with the cops. My mother didn't press charges so they didn't arrest him.

Another time, it was mom's birthday and the whole family was there. My father came in all high and started fighting with her. He grabbed a knife to stab her and she tried to grab it. All I remember is getting on top of the table, walking over the cake, grabbing three huge porcelain plates and smashing them on his head, one at a time. He fell over, blood spewing from his mouth. My mother tried to help him, collecting his blood and crying. Someone called the cops they came, and again mom didn't press charges.

My mom is named Milagros (Miracle) because she almost died at birth. She's short and has light brown skin and thin, straight dark brown hair. When I was about seven, my auntie started doing drugs and Child Protective Services took her kids away. My mother, to keep the family together, took in my seven cousins as foster children. They didn't move out until they were grown. So we went from a household of three to ten overnight and it was a struggle for us all, especially mom. I always wondered how she managed to raise us alone and we all turned out well. However, she had a temper on her, like a little jalapeno pepper, her mouth would be on fire sometimes.

One day I went to Woolworth's with my mom and wanted a toy. She didn't have the money for it so I asked how I could make money. "You're too young, my little man," she laughed.

But I wouldn't take no for an answer. Over the next couple of weeks I kept asking -- but didn't push too much so as not to upset her. Eventually she relented. "Fine, go pick some cans. But don't cross the streets."

I got showered and dressed then hit the streets, or street to be more exact. I would walk around the block several times collecting cans at seven years old. I was a working man-kid, an entrepreneur, I was making money. It may not have been much but as a kid walking around with some cash in my pocket, I felt like I was the man, well little man. This made me a very secure child and taught me the value of a dollar at a very young age. That Christmas, I bought my mom and all of my siblings presents.

Every so often we would act up and feel the wrath of hell, the belt, jump rope or plastic bat to our backside...walk by her with one eye open because a shoe can just fly from across the room. She was very stern and disciplined with us, and with just the look you would know. We were a handful.

When I was eight, we moved to a different part of Harlem. It was late in '89, around Christmas. I loved the apartment -- a bigger two-bedroom -- but I hated the neighborhood. The building was doo-doo brown and Big Bird yellow and smelled like dead rats inside. We didn't have any friends and hardly anyone spoke Spanish. At this time, I started having problems with school. I was misbehaving and getting into fights. Eventually I got kicked out and changed schools, from PS 125 to PS 161, and started doing much better.

By the time I was ten I was in the Boy Scouts and loved camping. One summer day I went to my grandma's and my aunt and cousins were there. As I walked in my cousin Jason ran over and said they were going to give me a present. I got really excited, wondering what it could be. I walked over to my aunt smiling. She smiled back suspiciously and took my hand. We walked to the end of the hallway next to the mailboxes and there under the stairs was my cousin's bike. She asked if I wanted it. I gleefully said yes and jump and hugged her. My cousin handed his bike down to me. We ran outside and my cousin went to the basement and came back up with a new bike his father had bought him. His bike was nice but I loved the one he had just given me. It was blue with red stripes, real shiny and fast and had amazing breaks. It was a beauty. I was the happiest kid in the world. I went home and was zooming up and down the streets. All the kids on the block were jealous and kept staring. I kept that bike until it was my turn to pass it down to my little cousin.

I have always loved the outdoors. Growing up in NYC it's hard really hard to find a good quiet place. There's always people, traffic, some kind of noise that doesn't allow you to escape. I have always biked everywhere and found little treasures in this city. I have found mountain tops in Washington Heights and lakes in Brooklyn and the Bronx. However the place I've fallen in love with lately is Drew Gardens, a slice of heaven on the Bronx River. I have found a lot of peace and tranquility since I started tending to this small garden.

One day, while volunteering at a clean-up event in Concrete Plant Park, I met this guy Joseph Sanchez. He worked for the Bronx River Alliance, an organization in charge of restoring and maintaining the river. We exchanged numbers and I began working with him to help beautify the river. During my first week we took a canoe and paddled down the river. We canoed past the Bronx Forest and as we approached the Botanical Garden I finally heard silence. It was so peaceful. We continued on through the Bronx Zoo. The sounds of nature were everywhere. We carried the canoe down the waterfall and passed the rapids before coming back to humanity. This has become my new favorite place. The Conservation Crew, five of us plus a manager, were responsible for cleaning up the southern eight of the twenty-four miles of river, parks and paths in the Bronx River watershed. Our area was vast, from Bronx Park, along the northern Bronx border with Mount Vernon and Yonkers in Wakefield on 242nd to its mouth along Soundview Park that empties into the Long Island Sound. The Conservation Crew also actively assists the Parks, Forestry and Recreation departments to create a more sustainable ecosystem.

Last week my seasonal position ended. I am truly going to miss this job, my coworkers and going out on the river. Hopefully next season they'll call back and rehire me. I love this job. The crew and most of the office staff were good, honest, hard-working people. They are real and woke; and care about making a difference.

In my early teens, I moved in with my grandma. It was so cool because I had my own room. She snored really loud, like a train crashing into a tractor trailer loud, but I loved it. There

was peace and quiet. I could finally hear myself think for once. I was able to focus on myself and concentrate on my schoolwork. I took care of my grandma when she came to the States. My grandma would only be in the States for three to six months out of the year, so I had a free crib for most of the year. I went to school and maintained good grades. I got a job stocking shelves in the bodega down the hill, across from my girlfriend's building. This sense of independence opened my eyes to different aspects of life. It made me mature and grow up. The responsibilities of adults, their struggles, and the reasons why they sometimes did what they did, seemed clearer to me.

My father sometimes worked for a taxi service and next to it was a small Pentacostal church which I attended -- when I couldn't make to the big Catholic church, the Church of the Ascension. Later the small church became a Botanica, a religious and spiritual artifact store. When I transferred to PS 161, I stayed in touch with my friend Carlos, from my old neighborhood. By Junior High, we both on the track team so we would practice and hang out sometimes. Carlos's family owned the Botanica. I would go there and feel weird but at peace. It reminded me of these strange gatherings that they would have in that building years prior, that momz would take me to. It would seem Christianish, but a lot more spiritual. Carlos' momz gave me a necklace with seven different colors. I liked the necklace and wore it for many years.

A couple of months after I moved into the building, in 2005, I met this guy Timothy, who lived on the second floor. We met entirely by accident, two drunken fools yelling "Yurp" in the hallway, over and over, until we met up....seriously. After hanging out with him, I realized

he was into the same religion that that Carlos was into. He was just beginning his spiritual journey in the religion, Yoruba. It came over from Africa, through the slave trade. The same way children grow up to be similar to their parents, yet are different, so did Yoruba adapt and evolve in the New World. The slaves that came over practiced Yoruba and many other religions, like Palo and Ifa. When they arrived in the Americas many had to change how they worshipped. It was illegal for slaves to worship, so they had to hide and commune secretly. Africans synchronized the African deities to the Catholic saints. From Yoruba one branches out to Lukumi in Cuba, Candomble in Brazil, Voodoo in Haiti, Shango Baptist in Trinidad and Tabago.

Timothy was practicing Ifa, traditional African worship. At first I paid it no mind, but my curiosity was peaked, and I started asking questions. He invited me to go their house meetings to learn, and I did on occasion. Soon after he started focusing more on Lukumi, because he appreciated their social structure better. About a year later he was getting crowned and becoming a priest in the religion. He is very smart, hard-working and a pleasure to be around. After I moved out that building I thought we would lose touch but we didn't; we build a very strong bond and nurtured our friendship through the years.

A couple years ago, in 2015, I decided that I wanted to embark on my journey. Again after some serious soul searching I realized that I would be honored to have Timothy be my godfather. I fought it for some time but it was only natural. I had seen Tim turn his life around right before my eyes. He went to BMCC and dropped out. He took some time off, and then

somehow he got it together and transferred to Hostos, then went to City College, Columbia, and now he's at Rutgers getting his PhD in anthropology. I witnessed his transformation.

I started working and saving my money for the ceremonies and studying their rituals. I would go to the drummings and love the people, their music and the ambience. My godfather never pressured me but I was hooked. I became part of their spiritual community. I struggled, saved my money and did my ceremonies. It was a bumpy road but my religious house had my back. This summer after over four years, I finally got crowned as a priest in the Lukumi religion. When you get crowned you get married to the Orisha of your head and make a pact to dress in white for one year and seven days. I am in that process now.

I have been on this spiritual journey for some time and I'm just beginning. As I sit here listening to Fernandito Villalona, my mom's favorite artist, my thoughts are scattered. Remembering the past, reliving the present and creating the future. Recognizing our ancestors whose shoulders we stand on. Trusting in faith and believing they will always lead me on the right path. Knowing that in my unwavering faith I'm trying hard not to falter.

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\* Omar E. Fajardo is a conservationist and will soon be ordained as a Lukumi priest. He plans to graduate from Lehman College in 2021 with a Bachelors degree in Environmental Sciences and Mathematics. Email: oefajardo@aol.com

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## Cavrille O'Garro



[Cavrille O'Garro in 2016, after earning her Associates degree in Human Services]

*Cavrille O'Garro worked long shifts at a hospital in Brooklyn, then came up to the Bronx for class, and still had the spirit to charm us with her stories. All of her essays were captivating, but the ones about her mother and grandmother were especially moving and vivid.*

## My Grandmother's Frying Pan

Many of my classmates idolized Mrs. T. L. Trench, the principal of the Walkerswood All Age School in the parish of St. Ann's, Jamaica. Mrs. Trench talked with a lot of authority and besides that, she was the pianist in the school and in the Methodist church that my mother and grandmother were members of.

My mother was the principal's housekeeper when I was in grade one. The principal's residence was on the same land as the school, so it made it easier for my mother to bring me to school and pick me up. I was subject to disciplinary actions all the time because my mother worked for the principal; I was not able to get away with anything.

During school sometimes I was able to see my mother as she hung clothes on the clothes line. I also smelled the lunch she cooked as I played tirelessly with my classmates during break time.

The summer before grade two, my mother came home from work with very exciting news; the principal asked her to be the school's cook. Of course she accepted the job because she would now get a better salary.

My mother cooked hot lunches, made the best fried dumplings, stew beef, chicken, and rice and peas for over three hundred students per day. Almost every student in the school purchased lunch. Parents realized that their children were bringing back home their lunches that they had prepared.

My mother was now one of the most prestigious cooks in my community. The residents who lived in the community also came to the school to purchase lunch because this was extra revenue for the school. All the meals were freshly cooked every day. My mother found ways to feed children who were not able to pay for lunch, because she believed that no one should ever learn on an empty stomach.

After 18 years, at age 58 my mother retired. After that, when there was a special event at the school or in the community, she was asked to prepare the meal. The principal never took no for an answer. My mother was later given an award for her excellent service in the community. Approximately two months after I had given her a medical card that I had received from purchasing medical insurance from Blue Cross Blue Shield, she told me that she needed to go to the doctor because she was feeling bloated. The next six months she was in and out of the hospital for days at a time. She entered the hospital for the last time on the first day of May, 1994; she died the last day of June.

The nursing staff at the hospital was very sympathetic to my family. They could not believe the magnitude of people who visited my mother daily. Sometimes there were so

many people, the hospital staff had to initiate schedule visiting times in small groups. She had cooked for the Walkerswood All Age School for eighteen years and although she died over twenty years after retiring, residents of the community still talked about her.

She was named the number one cook in the history of the school.

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My grandmother was a beautiful woman, filled with patience, love and pride. She was always ready to teach new things. Even though she is very traditional in her disciplinary style, I never refrained from going to her house because there was always something new for me to learn. Her house was just a happy home.

Going to her house was the meeting place for me to see my cousins. She babysat most of her grandchildren especially when we had days off from school.

As I walked the path up the hill to my grandmother's house with my brother and sisters I would smell the pastries that she baked. Entering the house through the kitchen, I saw her kneading the flour relentlessly, just to get the right kind of dough she wanted, perfect to make the coconut biscuits she didn't have enough hands to sell. While the biscuits baked, she waited patiently to remove the gizzards from the oven as she turned the small crispy sprat fish in the large frying pan. That pan held many memories to her childhood.

The frying pan that granny used to bake her pastries in was taken from her own mother's house, during the time she was sick, fearing that someone would take it without her knowledge. My grandmother used the pan for frying and baking cakes, coconut gizzadas, coconut drops, and greater cakes.

My grandmother was also a midwife. She was very clean and meticulous. Her bed was always so neatly made you wondered if she really slept in it. In her room was a white pleated dress hanging on the back of the door. I always thought that the dress was for special service although I had never see her wear it to church.

One day while she was frying fish, there was a loud knock on the door. She rushed to the door, as if she had been waiting, then she rushed to her room and came back in that

white pleated dress, white stockings and white shoes, carrying a small black satchel, similar to the one I saw my doctor with.

I was the youngest of the twelve children in the house. My older cousins, brothers, and two older sisters were now in charge of me. I asked them granny had gone; church was not in session but she left in her white church dress.

“Did you hear the airplane that just passed,” one of my cousins said. “That is the airplane granny is going to get the baby from.” Of course, I believed them because I was too young to know where babies came from.

When I was eight years old, and was able to read the family planning leaflet I found in my mother’s room, I realized that I was not told the truth about the birth of a baby. I could not be angry with the information that was given to me, because my cousins were not told the truth either.

My grandmother was a midwife without a college degree. She delivered most of the babies that were born in her community. My mother had eight children and six of them were delivered by my grandmother. I was the sixth and last one of my mother’s children that my grandmother delivered. Some of my classmates were also delivered by my grandmother. Let me proudly say this, “Granny never lost a baby.”

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## Raquel Torres



[Raquel is second from the right, with her parents and sisters at her uncle's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party.]

*Raquel Torres's detailed account of every-day life during the time her family was homeless reads like an adventure story. She conveys how her family's sense of humor helped them get through that tough time.*

## The Worst Teenage Experience

The worst part of eighth grade was hopping on the uptown six train, purposely missing my stop so my friends wouldn't discover the real me. I was known, from the

students to the teachers, to be one of smart yet distracted seniors in the school. How could my popularity not interfere with my studies?

I was too busy focused on my appearance to notice the things going on at home. Makeup always caught my attention and beauty was my thing. I'd apply mascara on my lashes and a touch of Milani lip gloss each morning prior to heading to school. I'd rush out before my mom could force me to wash it off. Consumed in my teenage world, I didn't pay attention to what was happening at home. My mom and step-dad hadn't been seeing eye to eye for the last six months. She always mentioned leaving him but I didn't see it happening. She loved that man like no other and this wasn't their first time down this road. Their relationship was like, *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. They'd get into a physical altercation to only make up the following morning. This was a norm which explains why I never worried.

Until one day, the second worst day of my life. My real dad rang the bell at Evelyn's apartment. I was confused as Daddy never showed up unannounced. The first thing he said was how good it smelled. The aroma of *sofrito* wafted through the air and it was impossible for anyone to leave without the scent attached to their clothes. Evelyn's mom immediately invited daddy to stay for dinner.

"No, I came to pick the girls up. We have to pack some clothes." I was in state of shock, all sounds dampened within seconds. I could only hear those words replay in my mind. I didn't know what was happening but I knew something was about to change. My mom would never have us pack clothes to stay with Daddy in the middle of the school week.

We made our way upstairs to my mom and step-dads' place. My dad already had the keys to the apartment which worried me some more. "Did something happen to Mami? Is she okay?"

"No, my love, no." He didn't want to say much. As I packed five pairs of Pepe jeans, shirts and five Timberland boots and underwear, my sister walked through the door. I asked if she knew what this was about but her stubborn ass ignored me. I proceeded to grab my tooth brush, hair brush and gel.

We walked up 169<sup>th</sup> Street in complete silence. When the 35 bus came we walked to the back as my dad preferred. Five minutes into our ride, my dad spilt the beans, saying that mom and Jose were splitting up. We were going to a shelter because no one would co-sign a lease for a new apartment and this was her last resort. I couldn't believe my ears. A shelter?

"Yes, and I'm sorry I couldn't do more." My dad made too much money to qualify for a low income apartment and none of my family members would loan my mom a stupid signature. The last thing I could think of is going through the system; my mom always made sure we were straight. I guess she really had it with my stepdad, but I loved him as a dad. I couldn't fathom the thought of mom leaving him for good.

My sister took it as a joke but I couldn't take it as lightly. We met up with my mom at the EAU (Emergency Assistance Unit) at 151st Street and Grand Concourse. We had to go through metal detectors just to get inside to the intake office; I could only imagine the type of place it was. When we crossed to the other side, there were people sitting on the floor and it smelled like bums lived in that place. I was so disgusted, I didn't even dare take a bite of food in case of germs.

For the next two weeks, we had to sit in the EAU from 4 pm until 8 or 9 pm. That was the time the big yellow school busses arrived to pick us up and drive us to crappy hotels in various parts of the city.

One hotel was more like a nasty, scary townhouse in Harlem across the street from a Kennedy Fried Chicken. The floors screeched as we walked over them and the stairs were so old you had to hold on to the railing in hopes not to lose your balance and bust your ass. I was already over it. I wanted my queen-size bed on Union Avenue. The bathroom was full of roaches and the toilet had shit smeared on the wall. I could barely brush my teeth without gagging. I couldn't believe we were going to live in these conditions until further notice.

Every morning, we had personal alarms, knocking our doors from five to six in the morning. "Uggh!" I've never been a morning person and now even less. I didn't want to awake to my misery. My mom rushed us to get ready before the bus left without us. We got ready within ten minutes, grabbed all our belongings, and rushed down to the yellow school bus. That was only the beginning of our day. From the hotel, the bus took us back to the EAU to check in, and then we could go about our lives. My sister and I walked to the 149<sup>th</sup> Street train station together every morning. She kind of made my morning with her jokes about how she loved being in the shelter. I'd laugh but as soon as we parted ways my misery would sink back into my soul.

Two weeks in and out of shitty hotels, my mom's case worker finally told her she had a permanent hotel for us to stay in while our application was processed. That same day, after school we moved into a hotel on 101<sup>ST</sup> street and Broadway. She said it was like a studio

apartment, we had our own kitchen bathroom and room. I wasn't too excited but I was sure it was cleaner and safer than the places we've slept in.

Going to school was the easy part, leaving was the hard part. I used to ride the train with about three close friends who also lived in the Bronx. Although I no longer had to ride the train to the Bronx, I did so anyway. I didn't want my friends to notice any changes in me. I took the train to my regular stop and headed to my cousins' house to wait for my mom to pick me up. She hated that my sister and I did this. She complained about our school being closer to the hotel than our cousins' house. I didn't know my sisters' reason for going there but sure knew mine.

Three weeks later, I became familiar with the area and got used to living in that big hotel with hundreds of mini studio apartments. It was starting to feel like home. One day I walked in to notice Mami bought new blankets and quilts, curtains, a shower-curtain set with matching purple rugs. She brought my TV and Playstation and my sister's 3-way pager. I knew she was trying to make it feel like a home for my sister and me. That was the first day I felt at ease, the first day I felt comfortable calling this place my home. I remember taking a shower, getting into bed and playing The Sims before going to sleep.

The next day after school, my sister and I went to Evelyn's house. The doorbell rang and once again it was my father. This time he wasn't as quiet as the first time; I guess he thought we were over the whole shelter thing. He informed us about returning to the EAU. I was pissed off. "But why!!!" Those were the only words I could utter. My face immediately filled with tears. My dad hugged my sister and me as he said he was sorry but things would

be just fine. I didn't want to go back to that stank place or to the shitty hotels. I wanted this nightmare to be over but it was only the beginning.

Raymond and Samy, my two older brothers, decided to get off the streets and into the system with us. My mom told us that was the reason we had to leave our studio apartment on Broadway. I hated them for this.

“Why did they decide to come now? You offered before we got in the first time and they said they would be just fine!” I was furious. I couldn't stand to see any of their faces. I wanted to run away, far but how far could I've really gone before the cops found me and returned me to my misery.

We went through the school bus process, back and forth to stinky hotels but for only a week. I guess they found us a place in a hurry due to our family size.

A bus had transported us to the Lower East Side. On our way down the FDR Drive, I was imagining how the place would look. I asked myself, “Would it be like the studio apartment on 101<sup>st</sup> or ghetto like the EAU?” As we arrived in the neighborhood, the van took a turn into the projects. I was scared as fuck. We pulled up to a huge building which looked like a school. When we got in, there was a line of people checking in. The security guard told us we could step out to grab a bite if we'd like. My brother Sammy insisted on getting Chinese food. We bought the food and returned to the place. The guard immediately directed us to the cafeteria. It literally looked like a school cafeteria, a huge open space with tables, six microwaves, no stoves, four sinks and a television. I could barely eat the fried rice after noticing I'd be eating in this cafeteria for God knows how long. I didn't see myself

living in this place. My mother didn't like that part but she didn't say anything until later that night.

We returned to the lobby where my mom was to check us in. She spoke to the guard while the social worker finished with the family in front of us. It only took for the guard to tell my mom my sister and I were too beautiful young ladies, to get us out of there, not to spend one night there, he insisted this wasn't the place for good girls like ourselves. My mom didn't play when it came to her girls. My brothers could defend themselves, but my sister and I were her precious babies. The social worker called out, "Ms. Nieves, you're next". My mom wasted no time in telling her she was not spending the night. She gave the excuse of there being no elevator in the building and showed her doctor's papers to prove she is medically ill. Thankfully the social worker took it well and asked the driver to escort us back to the EAU. At that point I wasn't upset as I heard the conversation between the guard and my mother. I even noticed how the people who lived there looked at us as if we were fresh meat. I was happy to return to the EAU. Before we left, my mom showed her appreciation to the guard by giving him a hug and about ten dollars to buy dinner.

On our way back, all I could hear my mom say was, "Thank God I didn't stay. Thank you for that guard, Lord, and my girls, Lord." My lady would do anything to make sure we were safe and I couldn't be upset with her because of that. Back at the EAU, we made jokes on how bad our day had gone. We didn't know what was worse, the Chinese food or that cafeteria. We embraced everything about the EAU and I was okay with sleeping in another shitty hotel for the night. My mom's case worker told her there was a place in Spanish Harlem but it wasn't ready for another day. She looked at us and we smiled then she

proceeded by telling the lady she will take it. That night we ended up in a hotel on Central Park West. It was one of the cleanest we've ever slept in. I thanked the lord because I knew he made that possible. We fooled around the entire night, we made the best of our situation and for once I was okay.

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## Monroe Anderson



*Monroe Anderson had been a rapper who'd achieved some success, so when he wrote about that, he instantly gained status in the class. He maintained our admiration though, because his gift for storytelling extended to his prose. He also listened keenly to the other students and provided astute insights.*

## Everyone Calls Me Melvin

There I stood, nothing much more than a needle in a haystack. At least that's how I felt as a 26-year-old man among nearly 30 other men who were older and presumably far more experienced in life than I. However, I was named to be in charge of their well-being for one full night that I'll remember for eternity.

My mother introduced me to Gracepoint Gospel Fellowship Church during one of the roughest periods of my life. Eventually I was baptized there and we both became members.

She was heavily involved in the media ministry where she videotaped Sunday services. During one of the tapings she'd heard that there was a ministry to serve homeless people being held at Gracepoint so she volunteered to serve food. The president of this operation, Jenny, informed my mother that they also needed men to stay overnight as chaperones. I decided to help out.

I grew up basically middle class, and shunned homeless people and viewed them as drug addicts. I've seen people sleeping on sidewalks plenty of times but I had never spent significant time or had an impactful conversation with one. I didn't know what to expect of this night. I truly believed that I'd signed up to watch over a bunch of limping hunchbacks who spoke in slurs and smelled like an alleyway. I thought that somehow it would be just my luck that I would have to break up a fight or stop someone from kneading through someone else's bag.

When I arrived it was nothing like I expected. I walked into the gymnasium where Sunday services were held, and where on Wednesday evenings some members played basketball. This is where the homeless men would be staying overnight. My mother was smiling, and standing behind a long gray folding table, serving food alongside a few other church ladies. The lights were bright and nothing smelled funny. "Am I in the right place?" I thought to myself.

Several men were sitting at different tables eating their food quietly. Some of the men had already begun to lay down their belongings so they could rest. Another simple-minded idea came to mind: "Wait, you guys have belongings," I thought.

One of the church's staff approached me and gave a the rundown of what the night should be like. "Just be present and supportive if they need anything. This is a good group and shouldn't cause any trouble." I decided to sit in a chair and observe as much as I could.

A sense of serenity circled throughout the atmosphere of the gym. Some of the men were quiet and stayed off to themselves, laying in a sleeping bag as if it were the most comfortable of mattresses. Some of the men were reading or listening to music with headphones. Some joked with each other with a six-inch voice in their native language, and others went to the bathroom from time to time. I selfishly thought to myself -- what's the point of being here? I'm not doing anything; this is a waste of time. But, I said I'd stay for the night so I just sat.

As I stared into the reality of my surroundings empathy started to fill my spirit. The fact that by this time I was the only person sitting in a chair while so many others were sitting or lying on the floor bothered me. I became more disheartened when I noticed many of the men were preparing sleeping bags or a cushion of clothes and towels to sleep on the floor.

Meanwhile, I had a comfortable bed with pillows and sheets at home.

One man was still awake and sitting on a set of stairs near the church's altar. He was thin and dark-skinned with cornrows, and looked to be in his 50s. His hands were veiny but his face looked strong like a flexed muscle. I thought it would be a nice gesture to at least acknowledge him.

“Hey, how are you?” I said.

“God is Good young man.”

I expected him to say, “I’m fine,” or maybe something to the effects of, “I’m trying to maintain.” His response didn’t seem to mirror his circumstances.

He said that he’d run into financial difficulties after losing his job and so many other people experience the same. He would usually stay at his sister's house but she was out of town during that specific weekend. He had the Holy Bible in his hand filled with pen marks as if he’d been studying for a midterm exam. He eagerly spoke to me about what he was reading and how important it was for people to study the bible and understand what God wants from us. He was extremely knowledgeable and spoke with deep passion. I asked him about his take on the end times and what signs he thinks we will see before Jesus returns. “The signs are here, the stage is already set, fire from the sun will breach the Earth when he returns,” he said. His words scared me but they also enlightened me. We talked for over two hours before I asked him his name. He said with pride, “Everyone calls me Melvin.”

Then and there I realized I was in the right place at the right time. In no more than a couple of hours my gratitude and view of the world changed. My chaperone-experience and conversation with Melvin was filled with valuable lessons that would somehow come to be beneficial in my future. It was clear that I was so naïve and oblivious to the world around me for thinking homeless people had no family or were alcoholics, crackheads or drug addicts who would probably live out their life in whatever condition that caused them to fall short of their goals. How ignorant of me to attach the label of drug addict to the homeless as if the two are a pencil and eraser.

I learned that peace of mind shouldn't be governed by the comfort of being able to lock my bedroom door. I was thankful and proud of what my parents were able to provide for my sister and me. I understood that many people, including my parents, were a few misplaced paychecks away from being homeless as well. I returned home to my mother grateful that she invited me to volunteer for the homeless ministry.

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## Eric Agyenim-Boateng



[Eric is at left with his wife and children.]

*Eric Agyenim-Boateng's generous spirit and storytelling panache enriched our class in the summer of 2017. This essay reflects his daily life in New York City as an émigré from Ghana, a husband, a father of three, a taxi-driver, and a student working towards his bachelor's degree. Eric is now a middle school math teacher and he also tutors math and runs annual workshops for prospective math teachers at Lehman College.*

### Chaos on the Grand Concourse

By the time my alarm went off at 6:00 a.m., my son Kaikle was already dressed and almost ready to leave for LaGuardia Airport. His flight was not until 8:45 a.m. and I had informed him the previous night that we would set off from the Bronx at 7:00 am. He would be traveling alone for the first time to the Rocky Mountain High School on a scholarship trip for the next six weeks. He'd never been away from the family for that long.

LaGuardia Airport was currently under major construction, so I could not park the car and spend the last few moments with Kaikle before he got on the flight -- but I was on standby until he finally sent me a text message when he boarded the flight. It was a privilege to have him in the "High School Squared Summer Program" through the recommendation of his academic advisor.

After monitoring Kaikle's flight I started my work day. I needed to work very hard to catch up on rent that week. The city was quiet for a Friday, a getaway weekend because of Independence. It was also when you see the most tourists in New York City. My working day usually starts at 7:00 a.m. and by 1:00 p.m. I expect to make close to \$150. But that day I had been driving for two hours without a ride request. My car--a black Mercedes Benz GL 450, 4.6 liter--is not very friendly on gas in such a situation.

I personally do not like the summer, especially in the New York City because I feel very uncomfortable with the way some people dress, the garbage left on the sidewalk tends to smell very bad and I spend more money on gas in business. Meanwhile, more and more people tend to walk and use Citi Bike ride share -- which also means a plummeting in income.

I found a great parking spot at Central Park West by 72nd Street so I took a break. For the next hour or so, I walked around and occasionally leaned on the four-foot wall around the park, watching joggers, cyclists, couples kissing, parents and children running around amid the trees and grass. As I stood by the Children's Zoo, I thought, why not go home and take Chacha to a park on this beautiful day? Chacha is my baby girl. She turned seven last April and is getting ready for second grade.

As I walked towards my car, my cell phone signaled an Uber SUV ride request and I accepted. Then my wife called.

"Hello sweetheart," I said,

"There is chaos on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, so please avoid it if you can," she told me. "A doctor has been shot and many others are injured."

While I was on the phone with her, I heard a big bang at the apartment door. It was so loud it seemed like someone was trying to break into our apartment. She was quiet for a

moment and my daughter ran to her in the kitchen, terrified. My wife decided not to answer the door but as she peeped through the hole, she saw about eight NYPD officers, some in plain clothes. I told her not to open the door until I got home.

I canceled the ride request and was home in the next twenty minutes. I don't how I made it in that short window but I did. I hope I didn't break any of Bill De Blasio's "Vision Zero" rules and regulation. I walked into the building and was astonished to see the police commissioner, James P. O'Neil, descending the last set of stairs in my apartment building. One of the officers that was with him asked me if I lived in the building.

"Yes sir," I responded.

"Which apartment?" he asked again. After I responded 5H, I asked him if we were safe in the building. He then asked if I knew the African that lives in apartment 6J; Bello is his name. I stood there and thought for a moment. I knew there was an African in apartment 4K but not 6J. The officer asked me how long I had lived in the building and I answered fifteen years. He showed me a picture, which I later saw on the news that evening, and asked if I had ever met that gentleman. I never recalled meeting him. We might have taken the same elevator once but I didn't recognize him.

Dr. Bello, a former employee at the Bronx Lebanon Hospital, allegedly shot and killed a fellow doctor and injured many other hospital employees on June 30th, 2017, had been living one flight above my apartment floor for two years. The apartment was under police surveillance for about two days.

Chacha was terrified by the whole incident and the police presence thereafter and kept asking questions like, "Why did the police knock so hard at the door? Didn't they see the doorbell? Why are the police still here? What are they looking for?"

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\* Eric Agyenim-Boateng earned his MS in Mathematics Education from Lehman College in 2019 is now a New York City Department of Education middle and high school mathematics teacher as well as an embedded tutor at the annual Lehman College Math CST Workshop. Eric is originally from Ghana and is married with three children.

## Amanda Lopez



[This is the little coqui pin that Amanda Lopez bought at San Juan Airport.]

*Amanda Lopez's essay about a small gold pin in the shape of a frog tells the story of what it was like to live through Hurricane Maria and what life was like in Puerto Rico in the aftermath of the storm. She brought us into that storm and showed us how hard it was for her family to wrench away from their island home, but also why it was necessary. I knew her story belonged in this anthology.*

## Although the Storm Blows

Tiny, gold, cheap, and probably made in China. That would be the physical description of a little coqui pin I wear when I can bear to look at it. I bought it on the morning of November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017, in San Juan International Airport. A cheap trinket for

tourists to give to someone as a last minute gift from their trip to sunny Puerto Rico. I found it while wandering around aimlessly that morning in the airport terminal with my mother, trying to keep ourselves occupied during the long wait for our flight to New York. We were finally escaping the hell that was breaking out on the island after Hurricane Maria left my homeland destroyed and dangerous to stay in.

A duty-free shop was our first stop that morning, my mother looking for some rum to take to her sisters as a gift. The shop attendant was a tiny, nerdy looking girl with thick glasses and pigtails, which made me wonder if she was even old enough to sell liquor. My mother didn't think twice to ask her for a recommendation, and this girl started to whip out bottles of everything she had for us to try. She told us all about her favorite cocktails and I realized she was a bit of a party animal as she got us drunk with shots of Bacardi and DonQ. We were more than happy to accept this, as my mother and I were nervous about the trip ahead (and neither of us would dare say no to free booze). We did leave once she started bringing out bottles of expensive scotch, still sober enough to know that flying while completely wasted wasn't a great idea.

The next stop (that I can remember with the alcohol in my system) was the gift shop. Among the flags, mugs and t-shirts was a bowl filled with different pins. Among them I found this little gold one in the shape of a coqui, a tiny frog native to Puerto Rico, that is famous for its singing at night. The thing was tacky and I wouldn't have looked twice at it before, but I was sentimental and still drunk, so I took it as a reminder of my home. I really wanted a plushy of a coqui instead, but I didn't have enough cash on me and bank card readers were still not working, so my debit card was as good as useless. We got our things

and boarded that plane to what we thought was salvation. I can still remember being completely silent as the plane made its ascent, but screaming like hell inside my head. I didn't want to leave.

When I look at it now, one scene in particular comes to mind. A few days after the hurricane hit, and after we were forced by the government and US military to evacuate our homes, when we were staying in the gym of a Boys and Girls Club, I went looking for my mom outside. It wasn't too late into the night, but it was so dark that if you wandered away far enough from the diesel-powered generators you wouldn't be able to see your own nose on your face. I was hoping to find her and get a few puffs of one of her awful tasting Ashford cigarettes before she finished it. I found her by following a tiny orange light that hovered at about her height. She was looking at her cellphone when I got to her, which was odd. There was no phone service or any other kind of communication in any part of the island. We were completely cut off from the rest of the world, and at this point any hope for a cellphone being useful was foolish. I asked her what she was doing, and she said recording the sounds. She told me to listen very carefully. I did, but besides the generators, there was nothing. She again told me to listen for something that I hadn't heard in a long time.

When I concentrated, I heard it. Coquis, a lot of them. It was almost deafening, but I didn't notice it at first because this was something I grew up with. For years, their numbers had declined, causing fears that they were in danger of being wiped out. This night, though, you would never be able to guess they had any trouble. I felt wrapped in a blanket of their calls, a feeling that took me back to when I was a little girl. My mom just looked at me and said, "See? They're alive. We're alive. We're still here." I didn't know what to say, tears

starting to fill my eyes but I willed myself not to let them spill. There was no time to cry right now, our only option was to stay strong and carry on. It would be a lie to say that her words didn't have an effect on me, though. By then we realized how bad things were, and no one knew how we would get out of this situation, but she was right. We're here. We're alive.

For weeks after that I would see and feel how bad things were, and how good things could be, but the constant would be the sounds at night. These little frogs thriving in the destruction of everything, coming back from the brink after what felt like the end of the world. They were small, but loud and determined to keep living, and it felt like that was the Puerto Rican spirit then. We are so small, we were so hurt, but we would get out of this somehow, we would live! I was never one to give much thought to feeling pride in where I came from, but in those moments, I learned what it felt like to love a place and people more than words can every say.

It's been two years since those days, and I can't always look at this pin. There are months at a time where I keep it tucked away somewhere in my jewelry box, because I know I'll want to throw it against a wall. There's a lot of pain associated with those memories of life after Hurricane Maria. There are other times when I get nostalgic for those times in the dark, reminiscing with my parents about our lives because we had nothing but each other's company, listening to the night's creatures sing and dream of better times and the future. It's a strange feeling to miss such a horrible time, but there are so many moments I'm fond of in those horrible months.

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## Shanique Bowden



*I'm only including this short piece that Shanique Bowden wrote about a classmate because, while praising her classmate, Shanique was articulating what we all want for ourselves, and hope to achieve through our writing. (The rest of Shanique's fascinating story could be a book on its own.)*

### Inspired by Trishna

I was deeply inspired by my classmate Trishna Ramsamooj to write as fiercely and unapologetically as possible. Her personality is so strong and exuberant that whenever she spoke she made you want to stop and really listen...and not just in person but more importantly in her writing as well. She is honest and bold and there is no better way to live life. So, I try to write in a way that is similar to playing darts; a way that is blunt, forceful and daring. I was also inspired by Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird* because every time I would start to feel ashamed of my past or get depressed all over again, I remember Lamott's words, "We write to expose the unexposed...truth seems to want expression." I find solace in these

words. I needed the truth for me, and hopefully others will find my truth to be relatable and know they are not alone in their struggles.

Writing throughout this course has been therapeutic for me. Most essays represent me at my most vulnerable; I genuinely feel like I have turned myself inside out so that the truth could come out. After writing some essays, I was haunted by painful memories. It took me days to recuperate after writing them; I would be on the bus or walking to school and memories would come back that would make me take a minute to let out a good cry.

Writing encourages me to draw on memories I have hidden in my unconscious and helps me to figure out why they were buried there in the first place. My writing represents healing...and while I know I will struggle with forgiveness for some time, I can confidently say I am no longer angry. Lamott says, “When you open the closet door and let what was inside out, you get a rush of liberation and even joy” ...through my writing, I was  
**LIBERATED.**

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\* Shanique Bowden graduated *summa cum laude* from Lehman College in 2019 with a bachelor’s degree in Biology. While in college she was employed by the Wellness Center as a dental awareness advocate. Shanique is now working as dental assistant while she waits to matriculate into a dental program in New York. Email: shanique.bowden@lc.cuny.edu

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## Nabeela Van

*This is an excerpt of a poem that Nabeela wrote at the end of the semester, spring 2015 as a gift for the whole class.*

### A Single Book

Where paradise is defined as the first sublime bite of breakfast.

Soon no more was I

an identity ashamed of its existence.

If in this country, people like them

fuel their pens with emotions instead of ink,

Then no more will a story like mine or a million others

not feel a part of America,

Instead

A single book.

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\* Nabeela Van is a chemist by day and poet by night. She is also a court-appointed special advocate, providing emotional and administrative support to youth in, and aging out, of foster care. Email: [Nabeela.van@lc.cuny.edu](mailto:Nabeela.van@lc.cuny.edu)

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[Photo: Barbara Ehlers]

Justine Hope Blau is the author of the memoir *Scattered* (Hand Whistle Press, 2012) and has written for *Rolling Stone*, *Oprah Magazine*, CBSNews.com and The Huffington Post. She teaches memoir at Lehman College in the Bronx and holds an MFA in screenwriting from Columbia University School of the Arts.

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Douglas K. Schoenberg, I am lucky to have you by my side.

Deep gratitude to all of my former students. You are writers. Please remember what Anne Lamott said, “*You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories.*”

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