



Barefoot in the Bronx

New
American
Memoirs

VOLUME II

Edited by
Justine Hope Blau

BAREFOOT IN THE BRONX

New American Memoirs, Volume II

Editor: Justine Hope Blau

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CONTENTS

Introduction ~ Justine Hope Blau

Identity

Alexa Downing 3

Lissy Dominguez 12

Abisola Fashakin 18

Ambar Dominguez 30

Adam Mobley 38

Entrepreneurship

Salif Tankoano 51

Abdu Bassett Audi 64

Resilience During the Pandemic

Cayenne Booth 73

Anonymous 79

Lucas Alcantara 84

It Takes Time, But Change Comes

Tony Haripersaud 89

Diana Navarro Lopez 96

Mahim Rahaman 101

Acknowledgments110

Introduction ~ Justine Hope Blau

The writers of the stories in this collection are immigrants or the children of immigrants who took my memoir-writing workshop at Lehman College (CUNY) in the Bronx. Their essays reflect how they have evolved intellectually and emotionally, how they came to connect with a familial spirit in New York City, and grew to belong to this city and in this country.

These are stories about finding the extraordinary within daily life. Abisola Fashakin and her family members find their groove shopping at Costco. Alexa Downing rides the subway, musing that people are “living their lives next to each other...like you’re roommates with everyone in the city.” And when Adam Mobley returns to the Far Rockaway church of his youth, anxious after years away, a dear friend invites him home for Sunday dinner -- goat curry, rice, peas and plantains, while Caribbean music videos play on the TV. These are intimate stories that reveal quintessential New York City moments.

I often tell my classes, quoting Philip Lopate, “The hallmark of the personal essay is intimacy.” When one of my students has bravely mined her memories to uncover humor or an illuminating insight hidden beneath an earlier draft of an essay, the outcome is joyous to the entire class. That shared spark forms the kinship, the esprit de corps that enables them to turn their everyday experiences into artful, distinctive stories.

Part One: Identity

Alexa Downing



Alexa Downing

Alexa Downing: "I wanted to live in New York since I was a kid....It's interesting for me to live in the Bronx because I'm half Japanese, and then my dad is white Jewish. So, I spend a lot of time thinking about how people look at me and who they see when they look at me, and sometimes they tell me, and usually they're wrong."

Cauc/Asian or, How Alexa Became a New Yorker

There are only a few things about myself that I am certain of, and one of them is that my appearance tends to make other people deeply *uncertain*. Most people I encounter are *certain* they know what my ethnic makeup is, and a hundred percent of the time they are incorrect.

“You Puerto Rican?”

“No.”

“Colombian?”

“No.”

“Middle Eastern?”

“Closer, but still no.”

Often when I give in and tell people what my actual ethnicity is, they become concerned and defensive. I once worked with a woman for five months before she figured out I wasn’t Puerto Rican.

“Not even a little bit?”

“No.”

“Really?”

“I’m positive.”

I haven’t always been certain of this. As a kid I drifted through my little multicultural life without much thought about how I looked and what that meant about me and my family. Of course, I was aware that I didn’t have my grandmother’s eyes (despite her attempts to scotch-tape them into

an epicanthic fold like I was Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*), but I also knew that I had her cheekbones, just like I knew I had my dad's teeth and my mom's terrible vision. I could so clearly see parts of myself in my family that it shook me to my core when I realized other people saw me as a stranger in my own life.

The ambiguity of my appearance still shows up in bright flashes such as when my friend looks at photos of my brother and me and jokes that we're different colors, or when my dad's friends think I'm his "cute Asian" date and not his daughter, and a thousand other small moments of people projecting their assumptions onto my life and my family.

It's hard not to be seen as who you are. On the other hand, if others can't see you for who you are, does it even matter?

~

[Alexa was filmed telling stories about her life for another (though related) project. She gave an inspired monologue and here is a slightly edited version.]

I love my mom very, very dearly. My mom has been through a lot. She was the eldest daughter of first-generation immigrants, which is its own thing. When she was growing up, she had to be right all the time. If you're the only one in the family who can read English, you have to fill out the taxes. You have to translate. So much was riding on my mother as a child, like, functioning and operating in the world and being correct. And I think as she got older, like, that's too much pressure to put on a child, and it kind of warped her brain in a way.

She doesn't understand why our relationship is so fraught, like she can only understand that she feels hurt and that she feels upset and other people don't understand her. And it's really hard for me to watch, because she is so smart and she works so hard and she's so good at what she does, but she can't maintain meaningful relationships, including with me, and that makes it hard to consider

her a role model. I guess she is a role model in that I am afraid I'm going to end up like that. I think as I've gotten older, I operate in my life kind of constantly afraid. Like, am I too much like my mom? Am I being like my mom? And sometimes that's a good thing, because she has a lot of strength, and she has a lot of persistence. There's a Japanese word, *gambatte*, which means, keep going, keep going. And she really personifies that word. She's a role model, but I have to be very careful, like, how I model myself off of her, because I feel like the trauma of her life and immigration and just sort of racism in the United States, especially where I grew up in Denver, has affected her ability to move through the world.

When I first came to the Bronx, I lived in the dorms, just because it felt like the easiest thing to do. I had no idea how to get an apartment. I still don't. New York is a jungle, but I lived in the dorms, which were half a mile down Bedford Park Boulevard, so they're not really on campus. The dorm was built in 1910 and it used to be a boarding house for sailors, and it's still kind of set up like that with shared bathrooms. Living in the dorm was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. I had a roommate, Juanita Jimenez, from East Harlem and she's wonderful. She's a born-and-raised New Yorker; Puerto Rican and Dominican.

And I was like, "Juanita, how do I be a New Yorker? How do I exist in this New York?" and she's like, "Okay, I got you. Let me tell you: Mind your business. Don't talk. Keep your eyes down. Walk fast." So, I got this taste of a life that I don't really live, where, you know, you party and you dance and you drink. I'm not that kind of person. I can't really drink because I have the Asian alcohol sensitivity. But living in that space and kind of integrating myself into the city was a good first step. I don't think I could have just moved into Williamsburg, as a freshman, having never been in New York, and been able to make my way around. But I'm really thankful because people in the dorms took care of each other.

I have a story kind of about that, also about my mother, when she dropped me off at college the first time. We were riding the #4 train up to Bedford Park, and she was going to get off a stop before mine. She had to catch a flight the next day. And we're both sobbing because, you know, I hadn't lived with my mom for a few years at this point, but it was still hard to say goodbye, because she's my mom. And we're both sitting on this train sobbing uncontrollably, and like, she gets up and leaves, and I could just feel my heart peeling out of my chest. And this guy sits down next to me, and he's like, "Hey, are you okay?" I said, "My Mom's leaving. I'm not gonna get to see her for a long time."

"Oh, that's hard. My family lives in the Dominican Republic, and I haven't been able to see them for 10 years." I said, "That's worse! I'm sorry."

And he's like, "No, no. You shouldn't feel bad. It's okay. I know how hard it is, but like you're gonna be okay. I'm okay. I haven't seen my family in so long, but you're gonna be okay." And I'm not sure I would have been without that guy.

And at the same time as my mom steps off the train, this woman, one of the women who sells roses, comes up to her, and says, "Hey, are you okay?" My mom's like, "No, I just let my daughter go." And the woman goes, "Well, take this flower. It's gonna be okay." And, you know-- on two sides of this train platform--

When I tell people that story, they're like, "Oh, he was just trying to hit on you." And I'm like, "Oh, I don't know. I feel like I have a little more faith in humanity than that. Maybe, if I keep living New York, that'll go away. But there is kind of a humanity here where it's like, you do get to feel safe in certain ways just because you're surrounded by so many people."

The Day Alexa Became a New Yorker.

There's also another story. This is the one where I walked barefoot across Manhattan.

I was cat-sitting in Washington Heights for one of my professors. So, I go out to take the trash, and her apartment door locks behind me. And I'm not wearing my shoes. I do not have my phone. The only thing I have in my wallet is a pen. And I was like, "Well, I know I have to go to rehearsal today. And someone there will have my professor's phone number." So, I go out of the building. I'm not wearing shoes. I'm wearing like a flannel dress, and I just walk across Washington Heights barefoot to the "A" train. I go to the station manager, and I'm like, "Hi, can I have a mask please?" And he gives me a mask. I was like, "Okay, so you may notice I'm not wearing shoes. I have locked myself out of the apartment that I'm house sitting at. I don't have my MetroCard. I don't have my phone. Can I please jump the turnstile? I have to go to school." And he's like, "It's Sunday. Why are you going to school?" And I was like, "The truth is often stranger than fiction, because I am a theater kid, and I do have rehearsal, and can you please?" And he's like, "Okay, just go." So, I jump the turnstile. I get on the subway, not wearing shoes, just trying really hard not to think about all of the HIVs and the HPVs. And I get on the train and I'm sitting there, tucking my feet under. I'm like, please, no one look at me. I'm so sorry." And this mom sits down next to me, this very like professional sort of like business lady, and she goes, "Hey, I have an extra pair of shoes in my bag." And I was like, "You do?" And she's like, "Do you want them?" And I was like, "Are you sure? Like, do you need them?" And she's like, "No, I have my heels on. I need a new pair anyway." And I was like, "Are you sure?" She's like, "No, no, take my shoes." So, I took her shoes, and I was like, "Please, let me give you my number—" and she's, "No, no, it's okay. Don't worry about it."

And I'm wearing these shoes that are, like, three sizes too big, and they're bright yellow, so I look like a duck, and I'm walking down Bedford Park Boulevard, and I get to the gate, and I was like, "Hey. So you may notice that I'm not dressed appropriately for this, and I don't have my ID, but I do need to get on campus." And the guard was like-- honestly, the most arduous part of this

journey was getting onto campus. So, I have to go through his phone and pull up my Lehman thing, and I finally get scanned in, and I pull up to rehearsal, and I'm an hour late. And I said, "Hi, sorry, I'm late." And my director, Stephanie, was like, "What are you wearing? Your pajamas? Like, what is happening?" And I was like, "So, so you see—" and then I tell her this story, and now she's like, "Well, no one can ever be late for rehearsal ever again. If you came here without shoes, no one else has an excuse. Zero excuses allowed."

So, I apologize to everyone in the theater department, because now no one has an excuse. But that was the day I think I can say I am a New Yorker, because every real New Yorker I've talked to was like, "That is the most insane thing I've ever heard in my entire life. What is wrong with you?" And honestly, yeah, they have a point, but I have a weird sense of pride about that story, because I was like, "No, I got to go to rehearsal. And I got there."

~

I was in a journalism class and we had an assignment to pick an ethnic media outlet. And I was like, I should be looking to more my Jewish side so I picked the Jewish News site. And I was reading an article about a rise in antisemitism in New York and the article ended with the rise in violence against Jewish New Yorkers is rivaled only by rising violence against Asian New Yorkers. And I was like, well, great, good thing I look Puerto Rican!

That year, the post COVID year, really affected how I moved through New York. I was afraid of being pushed onto the subway tracks because I'm tiny, I'm very small. You could just pick me up and throw me. So now I wait for the train up the stairs. I don't wait at the platform anymore. When I first moved to New York, before the pandemic, it felt different. I think this spike in violence in a place where Asian Americans have lived for so long and have thrived for so long, it's indicative of fear mongering. Yeah, it's indicative of the way media in recent years has warped people's

humanity in ways that I don't think we're gonna be able to fully comprehend until years and years later.

This wave of hate crimes feels new, and it feels foreign. And I think for a lot of Asian-American New Yorkers, there's a feeling of community that's that swelled up in the wake of this negative force. The community rises up to meet the threat. And that is very New York. The hate crimes are not New York. That is something else, that is some bug in humanity. But the rising up and you know, walking your elders home – in Chinatown, if you feel unsafe, you can call someone to escort you home -- that's really touching to me.

When my mom was in seventh grade, they had just learned about Pearl Harbor in their history class. And this was pretty recent, in the 70s. And after school that day, a bunch of girls from her class jumped her at the bus stop, and they beat her up so bad she had to go to the hospital. And my mom still talks about that, and thinks about that, because, how could you not? And, like, a few years ago, one of them reached out to her on Facebook and apologized, which is an interesting thing to do. My mom was kind of able to accept that and move on a little.

I wish my mom had a community to rise up and meet her. So, we can't stop these sorts of violences, but we can control how we as a community respond to them, and that is something that New York has always been good about. New York has always been primarily a community. Sometimes I'll be riding on the subway, and it feels like you're just sitting in the world's biggest living room, like everyone's just there living their lives next to each other, like you're roommates with everyone in the city. And I think that unwarps your brain. It brings you closer to your humanity, because you have to deal with other humans every single day in such close proximity. And it's really heartwarming to me that out of that proximity comes community. It's like, oh, these cities are these lascivious pits of sin, and everyone's stuffed together like sardines. And yeah, we're stuffed together like sardines, so we have to take care of each other. And it kind of reaffirms my faith in humanity.

Intermingling is generally a good thing. It's generally community, and it's support, and it's people having access to resources, like emotionally, that they didn't in the past, or they didn't in places that don't have that level of community. So I will always be so thankful that I got to live in New York.

*Alexa Downing graduated from Lehman College in 2024 with a BFA in Multimedia Performing Arts and a Theater concentration. She liked Lehman so much she stayed on, working for the Lehman Center for the Performing Arts as the Marketing and Development Coordinator.

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## Lisanny “Lissy” Dominguez



*Lissy Dominguez*

*In her engaging essay, Lissy Dominguez describes what it was like to be a passionate, rebellious literary girl in the Dominican Republic whose dream to move to the U.S. comes true—and what happens when a dream comes true. Lissy weaves fascinating history into her essay, providing context for why her family wanted to move to the U.S. She writes with authority, yet she is confident enough to articulate real vulnerability.*

# On The Devil's Tail

It is no secret that I've always struggled with being Dominican. I was never the most feminine girl growing up, nor did I want to be. Growing up in Santiago, in a culture that can be machista and dismissive, I was often scolded and told how to behave, from, "Don't answer back to a man when you're upset," to my personal favorite, "Be a lady." I found it difficult to find myself and accept who I am. It took a few years for me to realize that there's more to a Dominican woman than just how she dresses or acts.

Amid the origins of Dominican misogyny, lies the dictatorship of Trujillo. El Jefe, as they called him, was a man feared by many. He rose to power and believed that he could have any women he wanted. Everyone who crossed him ended up dead, but this didn't stop many individuals from defying him.

One day, while sitting with my Mamá Luisa in her front porch on the anniversary of Trujillo's death, I asked her how her life was during those years. She told me one time a soldier came to her place and said: "El Jefe wants you to donate your land to his cause." With a nonchalant look on her face and a smirk, she shared with me how she took a broomstick and threatened the soldier to leave at once.

The dictatorship ended many years ago, yet the feeling of my grandmother defying it was chilling. Mamá Luisa looked at me; she noticed I was about to ask her why she would do something so reckless. "You can't let the fear of evil control you," she said. "Sometimes, you have to step on the devil's tail and confront him so that he leaves you alone."

As I sat at home later that day, I imagined what it would have been like if I was born in that time, and what I would have done. I don't know what I would have done, but I figured out that

being a lady is not just about femininity, it's about respecting others, and respecting yourself enough to stand up for what you believe in.

~

From an early age, my family was always pushing me to become a lawyer or a doctor, careers they thought would give me high success. "Happiness always comes after you've made it," Papi used to say.

If there's anything that the Dominican Republic taught me while growing up is that life there becomes routine after a while; you can either accept it or move to the U.S.

For the first fifteen years of my life, my father lived in New York, and I envied him for it. Whenever we would speak on the phone, he always had new stories to share about things he had seen or places he had visited. All of these tales would always end with, "Don't worry, one day you'll live these things yourself." How I longed for that to be true.

By the time I was thirteen years old, I came to the realization that the chances of my family relocating to New York to be with my father were quite slim. It felt like time was running out for me; if it was meant to happen, we would have at least vacationed in the city. So, after some thinking, I bitterly decided that the U.S. was not for me after all. I told myself that I wasn't going to become an artist, or a journalist of some sorts. I was set to graduate from the same Catholic school I'd been going to since I was five, go to the same Catholic college everyone went to, and study one of the top four career choices: law, psychology, marketing, or medicine.

I didn't despise living there; in fact, I had some decent reasons to stay. I had a good group of friends, I lived in a house that, while not a mansion, was connected to my grandmother's backyard, and it had a gazebo where I spent most of my childhood and early teen years. What I truly hated was that everything seemed to be laid out for me, and yet I didn't seem to fit in. I was losing my sense of adventure. I had no major life experiences to write about and I was losing my sense of adventure.

~

It was the last few days of December, 2011, and as some sort of belated Christmas present, my life took a turn. We went to an appointment at the American Consulate in Santo Domingo on a Tuesday, and that same day we got our U.S. permanent residency. The following Friday, by some unexplained miracle, we received our new passports weeks before we expected them. A small celebration and a few crying phone calls later, our flights were already booked for New York. January 2nd, 2012. It was early in the morning, and we were ready. In a matter of two days, we managed to strip our house of everything; all that remained was the holiday aftertaste and a strong feeling of excitement. I gave every single corner of the house a last look to engrave it in my memory. I stood on the balcony, watching as my dad loaded our suitcases into the taxi van. I looked above, and I saw the top part of the house, which had two circles side by side; one big and the other smaller. With the bars of the balcony, the whole area resembled a face, and that day I felt the face looked sad.

We went off to the airport, and I couldn't help but look back one last time ~~to~~ at my old house; and Mamá Luisa's house. I didn't know it then, but that was the last time I was going to be in that neighborhood.

After what seemed like hours, we arrived at the airport. "We've never been past the entrance," my sister said, confirming my thoughts. At the counter, I presented my passport for the first time. Papi was agitated, maybe anticipating the stress of all of us living together in America. At customs, I removed my shoes for the x-ray, scared of my new socks touching the dirty airport floor. Mami shared my feelings, as she held my brother by the hand.

As we boarded the plane, I grew more and more anxious. "No turning back now," I thought to myself. "This is what you wanted." We made our way to the very last row of the plane and, as I requested, I got the window seat. The plane took off and I saw the very edge of the Dominican

Republic stay behind, getting replaced by the Atlantic Ocean and clouds. I grew calmer. No turning back now.

Upon arrival at the John F. Kennedy airport, I was mesmerized by the signs, all written in English. As we exited the terminal, I saw Mamá Anny, my dad's mother, practically run to us. She carried coats, scarves, gloves, and jackets for all of us. "It's a cold one today, I came prepared for you guys." My coat, hat, and gloves were gray and heavy; did I really need all this just to walk outside? Unsure, I put on the coat and stored the rest of the winter ensemble in my bag. The second we stepped outside of the airport, the cold breeze smacked me in the face in such a way, it felt like an unwelcome greeting.

On the ride to our new home, we saw the New York City skyline from a distance, and I grew more excited. Once we arrived at our new apartment, the rest of my tíos, tías and little cousins were waiting for us. I was a little underwhelmed; my fantasies of a New York apartment weren't met instantly. In reality, the place was big for a New York apartment, but small for a Dominican house. The walls were bare, and the furniture looked straight out of an IKEA catalog. Starting that night, I was supposed to share the largest room of the apartment with Mamá Joaco, my great aunt that raised me, and my siblings. Our new space was carefully arranged in a way that resembled a college dorm. That first night in New York, no matter how great I felt about my family being together for good, I missed Santiago like I never imagined I would. Nevertheless, I knew it was time to move forward; it felt like I finally was going to have something to write about.

~

I always pictured that school in the U.S. would be just like in movies. I saw myself dissecting a frog in biology class, having a locker, and eating gringo food at an open lunchroom, laughing with my new gringo friends while talking about our classes. But moving to New York in the middle of

the school year was confusing. I came two weeks before the semester's final exams. My classes in the Dominican Republic were too focused on Dominican history and culture, so I didn't know a thing about general global and U.S. history topics. What's more, I didn't know what an essay was, or how to write one. My hand was shaky when I tried to write in English. More than once I got teary in class and it was hard to control my panic attacks.

Everyone was impressed by my English proficiency but at the same time my classmates mocked my accent. Most days I would eat lunch alone and avoided speaking in class at all costs. It was painful, but in time I decided to focus on the remaining years of high school, and through it, I met a group of people who suddenly made my burden feel lighter. My new friends, all from different countries, were my first ticket to exploring the rest of the world. By moving with my family to New York, I became someone I never thought I could become.

No matter how much I avoid these words, I have to convey that my story is an immigrant story, that the image of the Dominican woman is changing, and that writing about my experiences is valid.

As I reflect on my first years in New York, I've concluded that for Latinos, this city can become a constant reminder of what your country lacks, or it can be a chance to start over. I learned that starting over in a new place can mean revisiting old demons, only to later find a way to exorcise them and use them to become someone new. While going through a painful adjustment to New York City, I realized that the city is intimidating, but it's not evil. It gives more than it takes.

---

\* Lissy Dominguez, a 2019 Lehman College graduate, is an account supervisor at HavasCX.

## Abisola Fashakin



*Abisola Fashakin*

*Abisola Fashakin is a New York-based creative. In 2017, she published a poetry book, *The City Stops for No One*, detailing her love for the boroughs of New York City and the experiences that would go on to shape her art.*

## Not My Cross to Bear

There's this show, "*Preachers' Daughters*," which aired on Lifetime in 2013. A camera crew would follow around a pastor's daughters and document the girl's life existing under a Christian household while maintaining the title of being a PK or "pastor's kid". It showed the dynamics of a hyper-religious family, the limits that this title put on their experience of life, as well as the double lives some of them were living. There were secret parties where "not-so-Christian behavior would occur", paternity tests, begging to date, purity classes, rebellion, opposing family morals, arguments at church, and so much chaos that felt so familiar. I looked at them and thought, "They keep secrets and so do I. I am her and she is me."

At home, I spent most of my time in my room. Sitting within those four walls, cemented with the expectations of my parents and the watchful eye of God, I could only be one thing: the perfect pastor's daughter. I was pure. I was holy. I didn't curse. I didn't date. I learned to cook, clean, and train to be this perfect Christian wife and perfect obedient daughter.



*Photo of Abisola at a service in her father's church.*

For a good portion of my childhood, I existed comfortably under this umbrella. I got good grades, smiled when I needed to smile, performed at church, and took care of the younger kids. I listened and I learned. I was trusted and loved and I was everything that everyone wanted me to be. I was the golden child, the brightest trophy that my parents had on display.

And while that may sound like the defining chapter of my life, it wasn't. It was when I started questioning the constraints of that title "Pastors' Daughters" that I really began to grow into the person I am today. This change didn't happen overnight, as it would appear to others in my life, but the change happened with each new thing that I let myself experience freely: the ride to my first apartment as I sat in the back of a U-Haul with my brother's friends, the terrible first date in Bryant Park with a too touchy man, and the amazing first date at Governors island with a girl who would be first person to ever get me flowers.

The changes were getting into my dream college and having to leave it after a year. It was changing my major three times. It was drinking for the first time, smoking for the first time, and dancing sober until the sun came up at my first queer ball. It was learning how to make friends and learning how to keep them. It was crying into my brother's arms and telling him how suffocating living had become. It was the first time I got into a fight and won and the first time that I read my poems in public. It was my first flight alone to spend five weeks in Mexico with strangers. It was realizing that I was everything and more, that I was capable and that I was more than the girl who spent quiet years in her bedroom staring at her Bible.

These are the stories of my life outside of that room. The person I became when I wasn't constrained to that one identity. This is a discovery of my voice, my motivations, my limits, my passions, my sexuality, my faith, and my existence. These are the stories that make up who I am, rather than who I was expected to be.

## **Joyful Beginnings**

If there's one thing you need to know about my family, it's that we don't shop at Key-Food. No, we don't shop at C-Town either. We are a family of six which means that we shopped in bulk with a mother who believes that there is nothing that you can't find at Costco. Because we shop in bulk, grocery days were a family ordeal. We didn't show affection like typical families, so in many ways these Costco runs were a bonding experience.

Every third Sunday, after service, the grocery run would begin with me and my younger brothers fighting over who got the honor of pushing the cart. More often than not, I won. We would make our way into Costco and instantly everyone would split off to their home bases. Our silent motto was "divide and conquer." My dad would wander off to the flat screens and countertops, my older brother would somehow disappear without a word, and my younger brothers

ran in and out of the snack sections. Meanwhile I, list in hand, would go off with my mother on a mission to get the household essentials. We gathered dry foods and by the time we got to eggs, my youngest brother would appear, excited to run into the walk-in fridge and grab us a carton. Once every food item was acquired, we entered, what I call, the “begging phase.” This is when every member of the family pleaded their case on their non-essentials. My father would begin by saying how it’s *so* crazy that the TV’s are on sale again. Of course, my mother would tell him that our TV is just fine. My older brother would wordlessly reappear, dump something in the cart, and walk away. He always ended up being the only one who didn’t have to plead his case. I’d like to think that that was just first-born privilege. Often I tried to not-so-subtly mention how my coats didn’t fit the same anymore, but I would “make do.” I’d start to walk away with a deep sigh, counting 1,2,3 until eventually my mother would sharply say, “Abisola just go and find something quick.” That’s how I knew I had won.

After, my father and mother headed to checkout, all of us kids trailed behind them. We would fidget back and forth slightly clutching our stomachs, trying not to be too obvious, until my father would say, “Abisola, go place an order for cheese and veggie pizza. Get soda and order six frozen yogurts.” My brothers and I would silently cheer and try not to look so eager as we would run over to the food stalls. Yes, there was a mini food court because, like I mentioned, there was nothing you couldn’t find at Costco.

Eventually we got the food and brought it back out to our car. We would hop in and make our way home, smiling in anticipation of eating this pizza. My dad would make eye contact with us through the rear-view mirror, softly smiling, his eyes seemingly happy at our own joy. My family wasn’t one of many words, but our grocery runs, one of the few moments we shared together, were always intertwined with all the feelings of love and care that we never seemed to be able to say.

## Growing Up

### Liquid Courage and Growing Pains



Me and Cora

In my 22 years of living, I have experienced many moments of liberation. There was the time I moved out from an emotionally draining household at 19; and the day when I took my first international trip with internet strangers at the age of 15; and lesser moments like going high on a swing in the park swings and ROLLER skating down hills. But the moment that means the most to me it involves theatre, a kiss, friendship, God, and a few too many shots of Hennessey.

Growing up, I spent most of my life holding onto many labels: Black, Nigerian, dramatic, and funny, but the one that seemed to hold more sway over the others was “Pastor’s Daughter”. My father was a pastor who ran a church in New York and Nigeria, and as his daughter, it seemed that some of his burden, because of being a pastor, shifted onto me. This burden colored how I saw the world, the way I dressed, and the choices I made. And so, until I left for college, I never once bothered to think about who I was outside of these labels.

When I arrived at the University of Rochester, I found that within a few months I was able to make a name for myself in the fields where I felt the most at home: theatre and poetry. I took

part in open mics, auditioned for plays and musicals, and even performed in the African acapella group. I eventually received word that I had been cast as a lead in the school's fall musical: *Big Fish*. I remember the excitement and astonishment that I felt in that moment. To be cast in such a big role as a freshman, only a few months into my first semester, quieted all the doubts that I was not meant to be at this university. I told my friends the good news and we celebrated all night in my dorm room with dancing, shitty mess hall snacks, and amazing vibes.

Rehearsals eventually kicked off, and everything seemed to be smooth sailing. I met new people, encountered very different personalities, and even had to deal with my first on campus macro-aggression during our cold read of the script. But all of these were just small hurdles until I hit my first major roadblock: the kiss. In the script, I played Jenny Hill, the mistress of the leading man. As a mistress, this obviously meant that we were expected to have a long and passionate kiss. And I would soon find out that this was very different from high school theatre where we would push off the kiss until a few weeks before the show, and then nervously peck each other. No, this was college theatre, which meant that at the next rehearsal I was expected to run the scene with a passionate kiss without any nerves or delay.

I like to think that the main reason I began to panic was because the leading man's girlfriend was a part of the crew, and would have to watch us kiss on stage, but that didn't seem to matter much. No, I realized that up until this point I had lived a life so sheltered that something that felt so easy to others felt monumental to me.

So, after hearing the news of what was to happen at the next rehearsal, I decided to take my mind off things by going out drinking with some of my closest friends. The party was held at an off-campus theatre house, where I poured out my grievances. I was freaking out. It was just a stage kiss, something that I've done before, so why was I so panicked now? I let myself become distracted with

the games and drinks. We played Uno, board games, danced, sang (as theatre kids love to do), and enjoyed each other's company.

It was after the third UNO, when I found myself retreating to the kitchen with my closest friend, Cora, in tow. She was someone that I had quickly bonded with upon arriving to Rochester because we both shared the same label of "pastor's daughter". We stood side by side in the kitchen, with me once again venting about how panicked I was over the kiss. I remember that after I finished my rant, she just stared at me, until she broke the silence with three words: "Practice with me". I didn't know what to say or what to think, and so I did exactly what she said. I leaned into the liquid courage I had been downing all night and I kissed her.

We eventually broke apart, and with giddy smiles we returned to the group as if nothing had ever happened. After the party was over, we tipsily made our way back to campus both of us running in circles, with huge smiles on our faces, as our other friend recorded Cora singing, "She's gay! She's gay!" over and over. It was something that I never confirmed or denied at the time but simply smiled at.

In that moment, all I could think about was my changing feelings, confused mind, and the comfort of my friends. I didn't anticipate that one day I would go on to be Cora's maid of honor; that I would stand in the very front as they said their vows. What felt like a monumental moment in my life would become a passing memory in hers. But this is just a part of life. You live and you learn, as they say. These were my growing pains; the complicated stories that would shape my morals and character.

## **If Things Had Never Changed**

The summer of COVID was the beginning of my villain origin story. Maybe that's dramatic, but my teen life seemed like it came crumbling down in the matter of a few months. I had spent my first

year of college at the University of Rochester. It was a college that I fought to get into, both academically and with my parents. When I found out about my acceptance, I was on a school trip on the streets of London and I remember sobbing out of relief and excitement. Rightfully so; I cherished every moment at this University.

This was where I had some of my defining moments: 18th birthday, spoken word, and joining the Black Student Union. celebrated my 18th birthday the first week of orientation, when I joined the school church choir and many other organizations. I became the secretary of the Dean of Art and Sciences and within a few months I made a name for myself on campus. I performed poetry at countless events and developed a small following of people who looked forward to my work. I partied, cried, explored my sexuality, and felt every emotion that there was to feel. For the first time I was proud of myself. I planned out my courses for the next four years, envisioning my future and all the potential it held.

It was during a campus church mission trip in Mexico, that I received an email with the notice: “You have two weeks to vacate the campus”. I panicked, thinking back to what could cause a decision like this. That is, until I realized that everyone had received the same email. Students were calling home, booking flights, crying. International students were confused as to what their plan was, and I felt frozen. It felt like my time at this campus had only just begun, before it was cut short. But still, I found the silver lining. I told myself that of course it was temporary and that COVID would resolve itself. “I’ll be back on campus in a few months” is what I told myself. Only, one month turned into an entire semester online with a tentative alert that campus would resume in person in the fall. “This was it!” I thought. “All I have to do is wait out the summer”.

And that is exactly what I did. I spent my summer at home with my brothers, reading, and trying to get my appetite back that had severely decreased since the start of the semester. I spent hours on FaceTime with the new friends that I had made, reminiscing about our partying and

planning out our future outings when we would return to campus. I began to get excited as pieces of my life at Rochester started to fit together again: I got a lead for the fall play, I got into a Seniors only poetry class (despite being a freshman), and I got a featured position on my poetry team. Finally, August rolled around and the excitement came to a peak. I packed my things into boxes, talked about room decor with my campus roommate, and began to run lines for the play. It felt like a dream, and it was only a short while until I found out that it was just that: a dream.

It was a sunny afternoon, two days before I was set to be driven back to campus by my parents. I sat by the window, reading and looking out onto the porch, when my mother walked by. I stopped her. “Mom, what time do I have to be up when we go to campus? Are you driving me or is dad?” Silence. I sat there and waited. My mother said nothing until she finally turned around. “What do you mean”, she said. I stared at her in confusion. “I’m going to campus on Wednesday”. “No, you’re not,” was all she said. Those three words shattered all the hope I had built up over the summer. She went on to explain that she could no longer financially support me in college, despite me paying my share with every cent that I earned from my job. It was frustrating, but I understood. What broke me was when she told me that she and my father had known all summer that I would not be able to return to Rochester. She said that they simply had forgotten to tell me.

They forgot to tell me that I could no longer attend this place that felt like home, two days before I was set to return. This was the reality of living in this house. The following days were spent in a spiral. I spent my days crying, emailing my school and professor to decline my role, decline my spot in the poetry class, and place a permanent leave of absence from the school. And just like that, my four-year plan was shattered. I spent days in my room wallowing in regret wondering why they had not told me earlier so that I could have planned accordingly. I could’ve worked more part time jobs. I could’ve applied to be an RA and get free housing. I could’ve done anything with just a little bit of warning.

Eventually, a sort of numbness set in. The world was different with the changing climate caused by COVID. Isolation was the standard and so I spent my time alone trying to pick up the pieces of my scattered college life. I applied to Hunter and got in a week later but ultimately decided to take a semester off to reassess what I wanted to do.

Ultimately, after that semester, I applied to Lehman College and saved up enough money to leave my parents' house. I felt the loss of the community I had built at Rochester. I would be a liar if I said that I didn't become a bitter person from the start of COVID. It was the beginning of the end of my carefree self and while I am accepting of who I am now, I can't help but wonder who I might've been if things had never changed.

## Reflection

I've only just begun the process of trying to find ways to heal from everything I've experienced, and gain confidence to explore my identities. I often find myself doubting my past decisions as well as my current ones: *Should I have stayed at my father's church? Was it right to move out so young? Is this burden I'm feeling real?* I'd like to think that I never would have known how multi-faceted I was if I never dared to see a girl who was more than her father's daughter.

This burden that I have been carrying my whole life was a stupid burden to shoulder. I was never the pastor, I was just his daughter, simple as that. I don't have to live under the constraints of a life that I didn't choose. I don't have to feel the imaginary burn of hellfire as I'm kissing a girl for the first time. I don't have to hear the whispers of hymns and psalms as I take shots of Hennessey. I don't have to feel uneasy around my own friends, who are more family to me than my actual family, for fear that they "harbor evil spirits" as my father would say. I don't have to do any of that because...it's a choice. Labels have always been about choices. I might've born a pastor's kid, but weight of that title was never my cross to bear.

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\*Abisola's poetry has been shared across social media, through her page @abisola.writes. In 2019 she joined the Rochester-based spoken word group, "No Disclaimers". This shift prompted her to expand her work from poetry into other forms of creative writing and storytelling. She has gone on to explore theatre, starring in various plays and musicals, while pursuing a future as a nurse. You can reach out to her for any inquiries through email: [abif1314@gmail.com](mailto:abif1314@gmail.com)

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Adam Mobley



Adam Mobley as a child.

Adam Mobley spent a lot of time in libraries during his childhood. The words from the books must have seeped into his bones, because his writing here is elegiac and moving. His account of a recent trip to his boyhood church is a perfect example of how community love can sometimes sustain us if family love falls short.

Across The South Channel Bridge

It's not easy for me to admit when I miss someone, especially when I feel the effects of that loss every day. As time goes on, I've learned to appreciate the losses that occurred because without them I doubt I would've been able to make it this far. Yes, that's what I told myself for a while. In a way it's true because without my struggles I wouldn't think the way do, plan the way I do and I probably would lack the insatiable craving I have for security and stability that drives me every single day. However, I don't want to reduce everything I love about myself to just being the results of "trauma".

Growing up my mother and I had a strong relationship that faltered due to what seemed like growing pains but she may have just been defeated. I remember how much time my mom put into her work, even sneaking me into the office with her a few times. I watched her do the mysterious thing that kept the lights on in our house. She was always proud of what she produced but I'll never forget the day she mentioned getting a raise for \$0.10 and seeing the look of exhaustion on her face. I had a father who never really seemed to show up at the right times, with the exception of a few squandered moments. As for me? I was a kid who seemed to "wreak havoc" and create dysfunction everywhere I turned. I felt like I could never do the right thing.

Once I got to high school I didn't get into nearly as much trouble as I used to but trust me, as long as I'm breathing something is bound to go wrong. Maybe not that day, that week or even within that month but at some point, the universe will swoop in and stop every golden age, and that's exactly what happened a few years ago when I thought my life was finally starting to come together. I bit the bullet and switched from a Journalism major to Business Administration at Lehman College in the Bronx despite the math requirements that were enough to land me in the army recruitment office. I was going out with friends, went on a couple trips, and scored a full-time

job that was flexible enough to let me continue going to school and to top it all off one of my applications for the affordable housing lottery was being processed.

It finally felt like I was free.

I was excited to begin living the life that I dreamed about, to have the full autonomy to be the functioning adult I knew I could be. Unfortunately, being a “man of perspective” forced me to see the flip side of the situation, and to be prepared if the situation changed. So just like anyone else who believes in a higher power, naturally I prayed on it. Everyday. In the shower, before bed, on my way home from work, and yet still doubt found a way to creep into mind. Nothing unusual came from the thoughts, but it reminded me to consider going back to church.

I hadn’t been to church in nearly a decade, but when I was younger, I went almost every Sunday. I was in the junior choir, “The Sunshine Group”, and later sat with the regular choir during major services like church anniversaries or Easter service. It was a nice thing to be a part of. I knew most of the congregation so in a way they were my extended family. I would go to things like fellowship services or movie nights. I remember we once watched *Miracles From Heaven*, about this young girl who had an illness that no matter how many specialists her mother brought her to just couldn’t be healed and then after she fell into a tree the illness went away. The memory of that movie sticks with me because I couldn’t fathom that the cure for her illness came from falling into a tree; granted it was a little deeper than that but that is essentially what happened. Nonetheless, I enjoyed going to events like this. Every time I see a seagull I remember when we all went to Rockaway Beach and one came down and snatched someone’s lunch right off the sand. I do wonder if the bird ever got the sandwich open, or what would it do with the Capri Sun? But when I moved to Brooklyn, I stopped going to church.

As time went on, I tried to find small reasons to go to church but nothing I came up with gave me that real push. The latest reason before the housing lottery process was when I was trying

to convince myself to go back to pick up some new gospel songs. I love gospel music and my playlist was getting a little stale so it seemed fair enough but that still didn't give me the push I needed.

However, the uncertainty from the housing lottery application did the trick and just like that I decided to go.

When I woke up on the day I chose to go, my head filled with thoughts laced with the anxiety of facing the community I disappeared from years ago. I would likely need to explain what I've been up to or field a few questions about my mother who I also haven't spoken to in nearly a decade. The routine questions like, "How's your mom doing," or "When last you hear from Sandra?" or "You talk to your father?" always bothered me because the answers had never changed over the years. All they did was trigger the responses that let me dance around the topic, "I don't know", "not recently" or just "no".

I've always enjoyed the journey to Far Rockaway whether it was in a car, bus or train. Just passing by all these things that I used to be surrounded by everyday just felt so surreal. Riding over the South Channel Bridge and watching the boats that left the marinas for the day brought on a feeling of nostalgia that was later cemented by the train passing my old stop, "Beach 25th – Wavecrest". Seeing Cornaga Avenue and remembering when I used to go to Sorrentino Recreation Center near Beach 21st where I used to attend summer camp and actually played basketball on a team for the first time. I might not have remembered to pass the ball to the right team members, but I do remember that being the game my dad did show up to.

Seeing my old barber shop and the McDonalds on Beach Channel that outlived the White Castle, Food Dynasty and Thriftway that used to reside on Mott Ave. Now, they were all replaced by newer developments; The White Castle morphed into a Taco Bell but in one of the building's

previous lives it was also a Checkers and the lot that was home to Food Dynasty, Thriftway and the other shops had been replaced by a huge affordable housing complex.

As I got closer to the church the nostalgia wore off and was replaced by nerves that were trying to get me to second guess my decision. It felt like going to church was a mistake as but sometimes you have to do just that.

And thankfully I did.

Once I walked through the doors everything felt familiar. The layers of anxiety just fell off me and then it all got better from there. An usher recognized me at the door and seated me next to Mother Daley, a member of the church who I consider my third grandmother. She had always made an effort to check on me and make sure I was doing alright, even when I had disagreements with my mother. After nearly every service I would head over to her place where we would talk, watch the Caribbean International Network and eat whatever she cooked up that Sunday. I could never tell you why I gravitated towards her or vice versa, but I appreciated her and this week was no different. Coincidentally, the message for this service was about embracing the young people when they return to the house of God. So, while my appearance wasn't fully planned it did feel like I made the right decision to go. Dare I say it was meant to be?

When the service wrapped up, I was greeted by so many familiar faces and I was embraced by so many people who were happy to see me and it felt like I was surrounded by family and that's when it started to click to me. This is what I had been missing all these years.

My community, my village.

My mom was born in Jamaica so I was raised using a mixture of what she had to offer from her culture but with the American twist. So, there are certain things that only made sense at home, but at church many of the folks there also had some kind of Caribbean background and it helped enhance our interactions since we all understood the same context behind certain language.

The unwritten rules, certain social cues that I had learned at home were also valid in this place with all these people who I grew up with. The woman who ran the daycare that not only I went to but nearly a decade later my sister went to. Her grown daughter, whose children I was good friends with at the time, was also there. A few of my friends from school and their parents and even a few neighbors. It was all so familiar and evoked this sense of comfort. Being around people who were just happy to see me and were glad to know I was doing well.

It felt nice to be reminded that I still belonged somewhere.

Sticking to our Sunday routine, I went over to Mother Daley's after the service and of course, she cooked. The smell of the food kept me in a comfortable head space that tightened the grip of my own personal Pandora's box of thoughts. No internal micromanaging of my physical behaviors, no overthinking every part of my interactions and best of all no anxiety laced thoughts. Just the sound of my stomach growling and the sound of a song by Alkaline that was featured on the music portion of CIN, which had a vibe similar to when MTV featured music and then played music video's during the day.

Nothing but pure relief.

Once I started eating the nostalgia that took over me during my journey to the church engulfed me again but this time it was more intense. The intensity took me back to a time when I was constantly surrounded by members of a loving community. At the time it was annoying, but I never knew how much I appreciated it. I remembered a time when all the other Sundays would end just like this one. All the Sunday dinners and weekend cleanings that took place at my old house on Bay 30th St. The sounds of Wayne Wonders' "No Holding Back" album playing from the silver Bose radio my mom had bought from the Home Shopping Network (HSN). I remembered waking up from naps to the sweltering heat that took over the house because of the organized chaos taking place in the kitchen.

As I continued to eat the rice and peas, more memories came to me. Memories of the nights I rode my bike after school and went on personal expeditions that violated the verbal agreement I made with my mom about staying in the neighborhood. The times I stopped on Norton Drive to gaze into the distance and watch the waves crash into the shore, occasionally accompanied by a temporary acquaintance who also stopped on the rock to rest and take in the scenery. Staying there with the water and watching the moon rise made it seem easier to make friends, almost as if being a part of the same community somehow automatically connected us.

Coming to Brooklyn, I immediately noticed a difference. My dad always stressed the importance of being able to defend yourself and staying on guard, and while I don't agree with the execution, I still hold onto what he would tell me, especially seeing all the things happen on the subway nowadays.

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While I missed the community, I once had to remind myself that if I didn't end up moving on, there was, a chance I might not have been able to figure out what career path I wanted to go down or have the freedom I needed to explore my sexuality in the way I did and what I value in the world might've been heavily influenced by those around me. Which isn't necessarily a bad thing but being able to grow and figure these things out on my own has allowed me not only to appreciate what I have been through but also where I came from and everyone who was a part of it. Small or big, impact is impact.

Who would've thought a plate of plantains and curry goat with rice and peas would've dredged up all these memories?

The trip became more than just a better place to pray, but a reminder of what home was really like outside the trauma. The acceptance and warm embraces meant so much to me and was exactly what I needed.

*Adam Mobley graduated from Lehman College in 2026. In “Across The South Channel Bridge” he reflects on his experiences growing up in Far Rockaway, Queens and the effects of breaking away from that community. Writing about these memories reminded him of the people who helped shape him into the “man of perspective” that he has become. amobleyjr45@outlook.com

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# Ambar Dominguez



*Ambar Dominguez*

*Ambar Dominguez wrote about the central drama of her life. She and her mother faced off in an epic struggle; did Ambar have a right to love who she loved?*

*Two of the people she wrote about her referred to by an initial, to protect privacy.*

## I Love You Regardless

Ambar texting with a friend:

Y: Whatchu up to?  
Ambar: Nothing. Watching TV with my stepsister u?  
Y: Mikey is so cute don't u think?  
Ambar: I mean I guess.  
Y: Whateva muff muncher

Y was one of my closest friends in middle school and one of the first people that I came out to. She and I often called each other names in person, texts, and on the phone. Because of this I always kept my phone on me just in case my mother saw what we were saying. I didn't know how to put a password on my phone. I don't even think my phone had that option yet. When Y and I had this conversation, I had to run to the bathroom and I left my phone in the living room. I saw that my mother was standing near the front door, but I didn't think anything of it. When I came back to the living room I couldn't find my phone, even though I specifically remember leaving it on top of a pillow. On the Disney Channel they were playing High School Musical, so I forgot about my phone and enjoyed the movie. Later I went to my room because my stepsister was being annoying and being the annoying little brat that she was, she followed me into my room.

Five minutes later, my mother walked into my room with a serious expression. I thought about my day to see if I had done anything wrong. She asked my stepsister to leave the room and to shut the door behind her. When the door closed, my mother looked at me with pain and fury.

"Ambar, are you a lesbian?" I clenched my jaw. I could no longer make eye contact with her. We stood in silence for a minute and she reassured me that whatever I said would stay between her and me. I felt like a criminal in an interrogation, my mother being the detective trying to frame something on me. After a few minutes, with a warm tear coming down my face, swallowing the rest, I said, "Yeah mom. I'm a freaking lesbian."

As my fellow Dominicans would say, *pa que fue eso* (what was that for?). She sighed and rolled her eyes. "I can't believe this." Part of me felt relief, finally able to tell my mother. But when she

began to cry, I was confused and scared again. She reassured me that it was okay, that she just wanted to help. Then why was she crying? She told me that she read the text messages between “Y” and me. *“Doctrinas Y Convenios 93:40, Pero yo os he mandado criar a vuestros hijos en la luz y la verdad.”* (Doctrine & Covenants 93:40, Parents are commanded to bring up their children in light and truth.) This is the only Book of Mormon verse I remember her telling me because she said it so often. There were also a couple of Bible verses, but I began tuning out her words like a trumpet mute.

All I could think was, at what age am I going to be able to leave my mother’s house? Will she ever accept me? Will I someday be straight? My attention came back to her when she said that I am a piece of shit and won’t amount to anything. No one will ever love me or accept me and that I will rot in hell. She could not allow her daughter to be such an atrocity, a despicable dirty soul walking on earth.

This resulted in being forced into therapy. For starters I would like to thank Karen, Beatriz and Albert for helping me understand my sexuality and for putting up with my mother’s homophobia. Beatriz was the founder of Life Is Precious, a suicide outreach program for Latinas, housed in a large office space in the Bronx. Karen was one of the counselors who worked with Beatriz, and Albert was the therapist assigned to me.

The first time we went to the program, I was hesitant. In fact, my mother didn’t tell me what we were going for, just to come with her.

I wrote my name on the waiting list and sat in the waiting area. A person sitting three seats away had bright orange hair, bigger than their head could carry, leather skirt, ripped fishnets, long neon-yellow nails, and a butterfly painting covering their entire face. Fifteen minutes later, an older Caucasian woman came out from the back and invited my mother and me into her office. The plaque on her desk said “Psychiatrist”.

“So what brings you in today?” I didn’t make eye contact, shifting my eyes towards my mom because I had no clue. My mother told her that her daughter has homosexual tendencies and dresses like a boy. She brought me in to be evaluated to see if I could be helped to get rid of my “disease.” I shook my head. The psychiatrist asked me if I felt uncomfortable in my body. How long have I been feeling homosexual? Do I harm myself? For all the answers I looked down at my feet and responded no or shrugged. “Ambar, have you thought about committing suicide?” I looked up, stared at her, then looked away. She asked my mother to leave the room which she did. Then the psychiatrist continued to edge me on to talk more about suicidal ideation. I told her that I thought all the time about dying and never coming back, maybe to reincarnate into something or someone my mother could love.

She let out a loud sigh, leaned back into her chair and called out for my mother to come back in. She didn’t see a reason for me to take medication, but she highly recommended that I attend one of their programs, Life Is Precious.

Before we left she told my mom, “You know, there are plenty of gays and lesbians that become successful in life. Ellen De Generes, Neil Patrick Harris. There’s even speculation that Oprah might be a lesbian. Being homosexual doesn’t interfere with becoming successful. And if one day your daughter wants to work for a company that doesn’t accept her, for whatever reason, then she shouldn’t be there in the first place.” My mother asked me to step out. I’m not sure what was said, but when my mother came out of the office, she pointed her finger at the psychiatrist, like a parent scolding their child. “Don’t you ever tell my child that that lifestyle is okay. Ambar come on, let’s go!”

The following Monday I began to see Albert, a nice tall guy with curly hair. It was my first time being in a therapy session and I felt like I was being interviewed for a job. He asked me about school and how my grades were, and I told him I wasn’t doing so well. We came up with a plan that

before I could do any activities upstairs with Karen, Beatriz, and the other women I had to show them that all my homework was complete. I saw him once a week on Thursdays and we never mentioned anything about my sexuality. On one occasion he asked me if I would like my mother to come in, so we could have a talk, maybe open her mind up. But the thought of that gave me chills and filled my stomach with butterflies so he didn't bring it up anymore. His clothes always fit him big and his polo shirts would sometimes reach his thighs. Our sessions became more of a break for him. I would come in, he'd ask me about my day, we'd talk about that for about five minutes, then he'd ask me to pick out a board game. I usually picked Candy Land because he always beat me in Uno. After about 20 minutes of playing, he'd say, "Well kiddo, see you next week." I think he realized that the best cure for me was to do something that didn't involve my mom or made me think about my mom. My mother was the reason I was in the program; my mother was the reason I was depressed. If my mother accepted me, there's a possibility I wouldn't need the program or therapy.

Although Beatriz and Karen were co-workers, they were almost like best friends. I think that if Karen was younger, Beatriz would've been hitting the clubs with her. Beatriz was a strong, open-minded, Latina woman who had a lot of knowledge and love to share. Karen was like the sweet South African grandma none of the girls ever had. It was fun teaching Karen about new trends and talking to her about any crushes we would have.

Life is Precious is an after-school suicide prevention program, run by the nonprofit organization, Comunilife. The first time I went there, Beatriz introduced me, and all the girls said hi. We were in an office space with a TV, a sink, small refrigerator, art supplies, laptop, and a small room where we could talk or go into if we just needed some time alone. There were about ten of us, and four girls were two sets of sisters. One girl locked her eyes onto me. We gave each other a smirk and she continued doing her homework while I explored the office.

One of the girls, M, was fierce and a force to be reckoned with. The top of her head reached up to my collarbone, and she had dirty blonde curly hair, a gap in her teeth, and pupils so dark that if you stared too long it was like watching coffee swirl. Her story was that she liked to fight a lot and went through shit in her house. I never got to know exactly what that was, but she was in the program, so it had to be serious. She was 17, making her the second oldest in the program and I was 13 making me the youngest. One of the biggest rules of the program was that two participants could not date unless one of you were no longer in the program. But M was a rule breaker to say the least. I wouldn't say that we dated though, we just had intense flirting sessions. Since we knew we couldn't do a lot of flirting in front of Karen and Beatriz, we would meet up before going into the program and go to a park and lay on the grass. She smoked cigarettes and for some reason that made me more attracted to her. I would always watch her put one into her parted lips, light it, inhale and blow out. Every time she blew out she would look at me and smile. We would talk for about an hour about drama, shows, music, what we wanted for our future. She would always say, "I'm gonna be fucking rich baby!" and we would both laugh. I found it ironic that my mother sent me here to be "cured" yet, every moment I spent with M reassured me of my sexuality. Eventually M turned 18 and had to part ways with the program.

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On my twentieth birthday, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. I remember feeling scared, alone, and betrayed. I thought to myself, "I already deal with homophobia and sometimes even racism. Him being president, people will have the power now to treat me like this freely in the public sphere." My mother would always say, "*El es un maldito loco pero mira, el esata haciendo las cosas como deben de ser hecha*" (He's fucking crazy, but look, he is doing things the way that they should be done.)

During this time, I began dating (my now ex) Anna. We met in high school and although I wasn't much interested in her back then, fate allowed us to fall in love two years after I graduated high school. She slowly took some of my fear away by simply loving me. She was my first official relationship, ever, and with her I learned a lot about love and myself. I would have to say that because of her, my view of the world changed.

She encouraged me to stand up for myself, to love myself and to not be afraid of anything, especially my mother. Every day we would talk on the phone, and I'd always tell her about the torment I had to endure from my mother. Anna would tell me that I could go to her house just to escape for a bit which turned into sleeping over most days of the week. She was the first person, besides my aunts, at whose house I've ever slept over. My mother absolutely hated it and would leave me explicit voicemails, telling me she wished someone would kidnap me so that I can learn my lesson. One time she even wished death upon Anna. She didn't know that Anna was my girlfriend but I'm sure she had her suspicions.

After about two months of going to her house to sleep over, we grew to love each other. We figured out the best ways to cuddle, who usually escaped the cuddles because it was too hot, and what our morning breath smelled like. She asked me to move in and that rocked my world because I knew my mother wouldn't approve, even over her casket. Anna helped me come up with a way to explain to my mother that I could no longer live with her if she didn't accept me.

I told my mom sometime in February that I was going to move out of her house and into a friend's house so that I could see what the world was like. I felt ready to take on more responsibility, pay rent, buy supplies, save my money, etc. I was in school fulltime and I was working at Kingsbridge Heights Community Center as a teaching assistant. It paid well, and I would often get one to two hours of extra work. My mother didn't even look at me, she just said, "Yeah right" and

walked away. Two weeks after that conversation, on my way home, I decided I was going to move out.

My palms were sweating as I walked into my room with the garbage bag I used to fill with clothing. I didn't say a word to her, just threw everything into the bag as fast as I could. She came into my room and asked what I was doing. "You took me as a joke when I told you I was moving out," I said. "Now that it is happening. Don't try to stop me. It's not easy living with you. You don't let me be who I want to be and that sucks, so now I'm leaving." She rolled her eyes and walked away to the kitchen. I unhooked my TV, grabbed my PS4, and enough clothes to last a week. I would come back to finish packing when she wasn't home.

I told her that I was going to borrow the car to take everything because it was a lot. She told me, "ojala te tiren en la calle esa jente (I hope they throw you into the street). You have no reason to leave this house, I give you food, money, and an education. You are so ungrateful." I thought to myself she's partially correct, but above all that, I just wanted a mother with unconditional love, that no matter who I was, she would accept and love me. I wasn't getting that from her, so I knew I had to go.

Driving to Anna's house I felt different. I felt powerful and like I could stand up to my mother. From that day on I did. I went from the Ambar that would take insults and dirty looks, sit in my room and cry hoping for an escape, to the Ambar who didn't take shit from anyone. I walked with my head high and I finally felt like I could breathe. I will forever be grateful to Anna for allowing me to be myself and for holding me up on the days that I felt like the world was crushing me to the ground. She gave me the courage to stand up to my mother and to love myself regardless of what my mother had to say or thought about me.

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My mother endured a lot of things being with my father, from verbal abuse to spending a day in a jail cell because he filed a restraining order against her. She fell into a black hole and fell into an even deeper one with her boyfriend after my father. She kept all her tears and agony away from my brothers and me because she knew she had to be strong. She put three kids through college and all three have their bachelor's degrees (two of us have our masters). She would always tell us to worry about you first, then you second, and finally yourself. I think this taught her to only think about her emotions and not others. For example, me. My former therapist, Alison, helped me understand this when she had my mother and me sit down to chat during a session. I sat quietly the whole time and let Alison and my mom do the talking. Alison wanted to make it clear to my mother that she (Alison) was not the reason I was coming home late or sleeping out of the house. That I had another reason, but it was up to me to decide when I told her that. She told my mother that she knows who I'm with and even has the address if something were to happen, so she should not worry. Alison asked my mother if she had any concerns for me. My mother said she didn't understand my behavior. She does nothing but take me on trips, gives me the best education, teaches me lessons that not every mother can teach a child and that she loves me and wants the best for me. She looked at me and said, "Mama, talk to me. Why are you this way? Why are you depressed, what's going on?" I stared at the floor, breathing harder with each exhale.

"I'm fucking gay, ma and it's been so many years since I told you and you still haven't come around." I was crying hysterically now, trying to take back the words I just said and trying to gather myself, so I didn't make an emotional wreck of myself in front of my mother. She looked at me then out the window with a stern, emotionless face. Alison wasn't too sure what to do so she watched us both. Shortly after my mother said, "I will never ever accept it Ambar, entiendolo (understand that). You were sent to me by God to guide you on the right path and the one you are going down right now, I don't see how that can be any good for--"

“Yes ma! Guide, not to dictate! You can say to me anything you want, in terms of trying to help me be a better me. That’s fine, but what you can’t do is belittle your child for not wanting to be like you. You try to make me a mini you and I don’t want that. I am me. You are you.”

“No Ambar! You must understand me. How do you think I feel thinking about my daughter dique (lesbian) walking down the street with a woman? Stop that shit! Eso es algo muy feo y el mundo no entiende el tipo de vida que tu has tenido (that’s something very ugly and the world does not understand that type of life). I raised you in the church to follow the good not to conform to the customs of the mundane world.”

“You hide your insecurities and use the church to back up old school ways of thinking,” I said, “You should be proud of having a daughter who has made it this far. A daughter who tells the world, “I will love who I love, and I am not ashamed. You have raised me to be strong and I always thank you for that but ma, I am your daughter! You should love me!”

Alison interceded. “Ambar, would you like for me to tell your mother what you said to me the other day?” I stood still for a moment then nodded yes. “Ambar told me she has been contemplating suicide. Although she does not have the means of doing it (I told her I would prefer with a gun), it’s not something that should be taken lightly.”

My mother had tears in her eyes but refused to let them out. We went on different routes to get home. She took the #4 train and I walked to the west side to take the D train. When I got home I went into my room and locked the door. I cried for what felt like two hours. Suddenly I heard a knock at the door and someone trying to turn the doorknob. “Ambar. Ambeeyor (the nickname she uses for me. A combination of my name and Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh). I just want you to know that I am praying for you to get better. So that whatever demon is possessing you for your tendencies, God will be able to take out.” I shook my head in disbelief. I couldn’t believe that once again she dismissed my feelings and thought about hers. “Alison literally told you I was

contemplating suicide, and this is what you have to say to me! I can't believe you! I want to fucking die! I want to die!"

She walked away and walked out the front door. She went to the temple, I'm guessing, to pray the gay away. Alison told me in the follow up session, "That was the first time you've cried in the one year you've been having therapy with me. Something about your mother triggers you. You know, I think she just pushes everything away to deal with her own stuff. She puts her emotions first and doesn't care about what others say to her. What she thinks is right is what she feels must be right. You should maybe do the same."

## **Epilogue: Seven years later, 2026:**

Over the years, by trusting my gut and doing what was right for me (shoutout to Alison), my mother and I have completely transformed our relationship. We talk every day, spend time together and even go on vacations. Most importantly, I can be my authentic, masculine-presenting self around her.

In my mid-twenties, I returned to therapy, where I finally began to unpack the deep trauma surrounding my relationship with my mother. I came to terms with what our relationship looked like while I was growing up. I've also come to understand that my mom was navigating life for the first time, too. The dreams she had for herself as a young woman, and for the daughter she imagined raising, didn't match the reality unfolding before her. While she struggled to make sense of that, I was still just a little kid with dreams and aspirations of my own. I simply wanted to wear graphic T-shirts and play video games—not get acrylic nails or decorate my room in pink.

As I got older and established myself, she slowly became more accepting. One of her biggest fears was that the way I dressed would keep employers from hiring me. Instead, the opposite happened. In the past seven years, every interview I've had has resulted in a job offer because people

could see my character, my work ethic, and the way I carried myself. Eventually, my mom began to see those things, too.

She is still one of my greatest inspirations, and I love her deeply. Our relationship isn't perfect, but it is built on understanding, acceptance, and love. Today, she's someone I never imagined she'd become—a progressive feminist who continues to grow right alongside me.

If there's one thing I hope readers will take away from my story, it's this: Stay true to yourself. You will find your people. You will always have your voice. You will experience love, laughter and joy. Keep striving to become someone your younger self would be proud of.

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Part Two: Entrepreneurship

Salif Tankoano



Salif and his mother at his graduation from Lehman College.

When Salif started writing memoir essays, he had to strain a bit to write with clarity about his roller-coaster of a life. He started out middle-class in Burkina Faso, then moved Brussels, Paris and NYC. It was in NYC, when he was 18, that his family's circumstances plummeted. That first year was challenging but Salif was determined to hit his stride.

A Bigger Stride

One day when I was seven, and still living in Burkina Faso, I saw a plane flying overhead – a gigantic flying fish in the air off to someplace I didn't know. It was rare for a plane to fly over our sub-Saharan country, even though we lived close to the capital city, Ouagadougou. I watched it until it disappeared from my sight. Standing under the grueling West African heat, I felt deeply connected with the plane.

That same year my dad was hired to work overseas in Belgium due to his exceptional abilities as a driver. He had caught the attention of the newly appointed Belgian ambassador while he was a driver for Burkina Faso's presidential escort.

My dad flew to Brussels first and we joined him six months later.

When I was growing up in Ougadougou, schoolteachers were allowed to whoop students. If you had a test and received an eight out of ten, you knew you would get hit twice with a long, thin branch from a tree outside our classroom. Each point missed was equal to a substantial hit on the ass or your back. So, my classmates and I always had the same goal: escape getting hit. Some even resorted to cheating, but they couldn't escape our teacher's keen eye. You'd hear students outside the building crying when grades were given, but their pleas to be spared were always ignored. Deep down, I knew our teacher loved hitting children. Her face said it all. So whenever it was my turn, I stood there quietly without asking her forgiveness. But some little devils from other classes would come and watch this humiliating scene from the windows or the front door. We called the teacher "Madame Rouge à Lèvres" because she always wore red lipstick. The red on her lips represented anger to us students. She rode a black motorcycle to school. Normally, a female teacher riding a motorcycle to school would be cool, but in the case of Madame Rouge à Levres, it only added to her aura of a supervillain. I would've believed it if someone had told me she was a vampire. Seeing this

woman felt like having a tarantula crawling on my back. She had light brown hair extensions that hid her natural hair. To this day, women with hair extensions are a complete turn-off to me. You could not imagine how happy I was when my father announced that we would be moving to Belgium.

My mother, my older brother Aimé, and my two-month-old baby brother Ismael arrived at "La Gare du Midi," in the winter of 2007, and my dad picked us up with a van from the embassy. I stayed glued to the window, intrigued by the clean sidewalks, the white kids and their parents walking, the tall buildings, a train, and even the different kinds of trees.

We arrived at our new apartment and it was lovely, with elegant white walls and a light fixture in the ceiling where you couldn't even see the entire light bulb. In the living room I looked outside the enormous windows and saw that it had started snowing -- my first time seeing snow and it was beautiful. But trying to play with snow the next day was a different ball game. I was not too fond of it as my hands got cold in seconds. I had never touched anything this cold besides ice cubes. (We didn't know yet how to dress for cold weather.) Winter is the only season I hate with a passion. Everything around Brussels looked dead or tired.

We stayed five years in Brussels, during which I barely saw my dad. His work schedule was relentless. He often left home around four in the morning and would not return until eleven at night or even midnight on a good day. Sundays were usually his only day off. On the rare occasions I got to see him, I would watch him devour a plate of riz sauce arachide, a peanut-based sauce with vegetables that is a staple in Burkina Faso, and sometimes we would watch wrestling together on television.

I learned tremendously during that time when my parents were incredibly busy. My mom was studying for her nursing degree at the prestigious Nursing School of Saint Elizabeth of Nazareth. So, I could always go out and do whatever I wanted. I just had to follow one rule: get back to the apartment before sunset. My mom's parenting philosophy was "Freedom" and

"Experience." She never said no to me trying anything because I never asked for anything unreasonable. She just needed an excellent school report card, and the rest didn't matter much to her. I always did my homework right after school and asked her questions if I needed to. While she was cooking in the kitchen, I would take her computer to look up things I needed help understanding. During those five years in Belgium, I attended a private school called Institut Montjoie. The school provided an excellent education and exposed me to students from many different backgrounds. Looking back, it was one of the greatest gifts for my personal development. I vividly remember the day I went to the splendid beach of Ostend. The previous day on TV the weatherman warned to expect a grueling temperature 35 degrees Celsius, which is equivalent to 95° Fahrenheit. For a 12-year-old like myself from Sub-Saharan Africa, this was a chill and fantastic day compared to the dry and harsh heat I was accustomed to. My best friend Sebastian and his family, originally from Spain, invited me to tag along. Seated in a beautiful restaurant, his dad, an older man with gray hair and an unfriendly face, ran out of tissues to stop the deluge of sweat. We had already ordered mussels and fries and were waiting for our food. I could not help but feel grateful to be seated with them and to see the beach for the first time in my life. (Burkina Faso is a land-locked country.) How could they even be okay inviting some kid to a destination like this and pay out of their pocket for me to experience the bicycle rides, tasty food, and chase the birds on the sidewalks with Sebastian?

His parents often argued during our one-day trip, but the memories from that day stayed with me for years. I liked his mom because she always smiled and welcomed me when I came to see Sebastian. Her cooking skills were terrific, too, but she 'That a headache to her husband. I saw her try to shove a handful of fries in her husband's mouth at the table. He got pissed, of course, but she was laughing her ass off.

In retrospect, I think watching her influenced the kind of girls I was into later on, but not in a positive way. I enjoyed playful banter and a good sense of humor, but I often felt that the way she constantly teased her husband crossed the line into being disrespectful. As I got older, I realized I was more drawn to women who could be fun and playful while still showing mutual respect in their relationships.

Despite the distracting disputes between Sebastian's parents, we enjoyed ourselves. That dinner and the overall trip significantly enhanced my ability to stay present and enjoy moments in my life. At that age, I spent a lot of time with my head in the clouds, imagining future possibilities and hypothetical situations. That day at Ostend forced me to slow down and enjoy what was directly in front of me. The beach, the food, the bicycle rides, and the company were enough. Looking back, it was one of the first times I truly understood the value of being present.

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That same year my father's contract with the embassy ended. He didn't want to continue anyway, because of the demanding work schedule of 60-70 hours a week. My parents decided to return to Burkina Faso and send me to Paris to live with my mother's aunt, Natacha, and study for my first year of middle school. So, I took a high-speed train from Brussels to Paris. During my ride, I sat next to an older man, holding a newspaper. I couldn't understand a word and asked, "Sir, what are you reading?"

"The New York Times. It's an American newspaper."

I was very impressed. How did he even get one of these?

"Could you let me read it, please?"

He nodded, smiling, and handed the newspaper to me. I spent a few minutes trying to make sense of the gibberish in front of my eyes and we talked a bit about where I was going and where he

was from. When we arrived in Paris, he told me, "Keep the newspaper as a gift." Little did I know that I would find myself living in New York shortly after I turned eighteen. Looking back, the newspaper encounter felt special, a sign of my future adventure.

I lived in Paris for a year and disliked it because I wasn't with my family. I barely knew my aunt so I felt like I was living in a stranger's house. My life in Paris was simple. I went to school, came home, completed my homework, and repeated the routine the next day. I rarely explored the city and spent most of my time indoors. To be honest, I was bored out of my mind. My aunt was very strict about schedules, especially bedtime, which was completely non-negotiable. With my mother, I could sometimes negotiate for a little extra time before bed, but not in Paris. The experience taught me discipline and independence, but more than anything, it made me appreciate being close to my immediate family. During the summer of 2013, I left for Burkina Faso.

It felt like doing the right thing, but no one else in my family saw it that way. My parents strongly encouraged me to remain in Paris because they thought living in Europe would afford me more opportunities than living in Burkina Faso. They were right about that, but returning home helped me ground myself more and understand the critical differences between the Western world and West Africa. It helped me mature and become capable of understanding nuances in cultures.

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The year 2016 was pivotal in my life; I call it my Golden year. I was 16 years old, living in Burkina Faso, and had just obtained my middle school diploma to be admitted to high school. I was on top of the world, and my parents bought me a motorcycle as a gift – a Yamaha model Force X, a black motorcycle with a few touches of blue on the left and right sides. The exhaust sound was cool enough to make me forget any bad grades I got in class; i was my baby. I made oil changes on time, and I washed every tricky corner to excess.

High schools in Burkina Faso's educational system offered the possibility to specialize in a specific field immediately. You could study carpentry, electronics, computers, and many other fields. And if you needed to figure out what you wanted to do, you could go for a general high school. Computer science caught my attention the most because I was always curious about how the internet even existed. How can I create an app, and why did people even make them in the first place? My mind was filled with tons of questions and curiosity. So, I told my parents I wanted to go for it, and the response was not what I expected. "You should go for general," my mom said. "You could become a great doctor." She was a nurse, and the fact that her father died from tuberculosis when she was young explained why she went for that. I found doctors interesting because of their extensive knowledge of the human body. I always thought of them as mechanics for humans. My dad's answer angled in a different direction. "I can train you to become one of the best drivers in this country," he said, "and help you get recruited to drive for the presidency." His proposition seemed very cool; I liked his job because it was mysterious and required tremendous skills. I could be the James Bond of drivers and have my dad mentor. But computers appealed to me. They were even more mysterious than my dad in my eyes. And everyone wanted or needed a computer.

My parents are hard-headed individuals like me, so they continued to preach their respective choices until we approached the beginning of the school year. I looked for a computer science school and gave them a brochure with the tuition rates. Finally, they capitulated. "We won't be on the job with you, so I guess you can do what you want." On the drive to the Institut Colbert, they were still talking, trying to convince me not to do it. "Driving presidents and VIPs is fun, and you meet a lot of powerful people, you know..."

"I know, but focus on the road, dad."

"Don't worry about that! I'm a professional; I've been doing this for over 20 years."

My mom sat in the front passenger seat, giving me the silent treatment. I knew what she was doing, so I just stayed quiet until we reached the school. We walked in, and my dad pulled a stack of bills from his pocket and handed me the money, one hundred and twenty-five thousand CFA, equivalent to about \$250 USD. "Now give it to the lady and take my receipt. He thanked the lady at the counter, and we walked out. The ride home was quiet.

That night, I stayed up until midnight staring at the ceiling. I told myself to regain my spirits, "I know what the heck I'm doing." After all, my dad couldn't even read except when he tediously attempted to interpret his horse racing magazines. And my mom didn't know anything about computers, so she thought going into medicine was a safer bet. I'm their first child, and I know they have a lot of hopes. That's real pressure, and I perform better when there is pressure in my life. If nothing is on the line, there is nothing to fight for. For some twisted reason, I liked that they thought they knew what was best for my future better than me. My ego was invested at that point. I sat on the edge of my bed and thought about everything I would need to do to perform to the best of ability during the school year. No TV, no wasted time talking to the other teenagers in my neighborhood in front of their houses. That year was made of absolute work and extreme focus. I refused to go to most school festivities and just focused on learning. When I got home from school, I closed the door to my room and reviewed everything I had learned that day and prepared for the next. Sometimes my mom would open my door. "I haven't seen you much lately. I just wanted to make sure you were good." After a while my dad started checking in on me too. At some point around the second month, they understood the message. And even my little brother would just come and sit in my room to watch me code and ask questions. Today he has the same interest and wants to study computer science once he graduates high school. I love it because it will give us another thing to compete and work together on.

Many of my classmates thought I was boring because I didn't do anything outside school. Honestly, I could care less about what they thought. My soul was at peace and guided by only one desire: becoming excellent. Life for me became very simple that year. Even the money my parents gave me served that purpose first, and then whatever was left could be used to buy snacks. It worked well for me, and I was top of my class that year. I proved to myself that I could do anything I wanted. I just needed to sacrifice and stay dedicated. Anytime I struggled after that at any endeavor, I just had to think back to the Golden year.

My Pandemic Tale

I arrived in New York City when I was 18, on August 31st, 2018, with my mother, my younger brother Ismael, and my Uncle Boukare. (My older brother Aimé has remained in Belgium since we left in 2012. He later got married there and started a family of his own.) From 2018 to 2020, I lived some of the most difficult years of my entire life! As newcomers, we had no friends, a language barrier to overcome daily, and we even had to acquire a place to live. The apartment we shared was a big step back compared to my lifestyle in Burkina Faso, a "poor country." Back home, I lived in a lovely house with a mango tree in the middle that I had planted myself when I was younger. We even had a maid who cleaned, washed, folded my clothes, and cooked delicious meals. I didn't have to worry about anything; all I had to do was to go to school and get the best grades, which I did. But I knew that being in the U.S. could lead me to a higher level if I worked diligently. So, I took all of this in stride. The first year, I went to school from seven a.m. to four p.m. and worked full-time as a dishwasher in Manhattan, from five p.m. to one in the morning. I would get home by two a.m., with body aches every day, and repeat.

March of 2020 was an extraordinary time in my life. I was in my senior year at the High School of World Cultures in the Bronx. My mornings started at 8 a.m. with AP Human Geography

and would end late around midnight, after an 8-hour shift in an industrial baking complex.

Exhaustion became a companion I knew too well. Every morning, the familiar body aches greeted me before anyone else did. Jumping in the shower reminded me that I was still alive and that the show must go on. What show? Well, the rat race.

Going to school allowed me to keep my morale high. As soon as I entered the building, I was greeted like a rock star; everyone knew me, teachers, staff, and students. My first steps inside were always followed by "What's up, big man?" from the security guards after I went through the metal detector. A couple more students would come up and shake my hand. And I always shook their hands back with the biggest smile.

Some students and I developed ritual handshakes; I could not remember them all simply because there were too many. But each handshake was always a mood checkup with each of them. I would notice through the contact of our hands whether it was energetic, lifeless, cold, or hot. The simple sound our hands made when they collided was uplifting my spirits and theirs in some mystical fashion. A handshake means a lot, and I always paid attention to how I delivered them — adjusting the strength and speed for each person, taking the time to stop for a moment to convey respect and care. In retrospect, I always gave handshakes to the guys followed with a "What's up, bro?" and sometimes hugs. Girls hugged me or simply waved with a smile when they saw me. The building was a parade of smiles, hugs, and "Yo bros" all day long.

But my favorite person to greet was Sharon, a 5'2" Asian girl who always had a brutally honest sense of humor; she also gave the best hugs. As soon as I saw her walking in the hallway, she would run towards me, screaming "Salif!" as if I had been lost for a year in a jungle, and she was the first to see me after all this time. Most hugs I gave or received lasted two to three seconds. But hers, at least nine seconds. Nothing she did was ever half-hearted. Being significantly taller than she was (I

was 6'1"), I would find her head resting in the middle of my stomach and her short arms firmly squeezing me like a lemon.

High school was this joyous bubble where I was not preoccupied with work or any future plans. Instead, it was just about being in the moment, learning new things, and creating relationships. Being such a reluctant news watcher or reader at that time, I didn't have a grasp of the COVID situation in China. But one day, after my usual round of hugs and handshakes, I sat in my AP Human Geography class, and one of my favorite teachers, Miss Lopez, said, "There is a virus that's spreading rapidly and we recently had our first cases in the U.S. So we'll have to potentially have classes online to prevent the spread."

She paused briefly to see how we were processing the info. The entire class was silent as a cemetery at midnight. A student in the back broke the silence in the room by saying, "Miss, so we are going to be on video calls or something?"

"Yes, exactly." The rest of the class, me included, didn't give any reaction, primarily because we were shocked. Everyone was also trying to envision what that would even look like.

The next day I received a call from the school telling me not to come in and that further instructions would be given. It felt strange to stay home that day, but my younger brother was thrilled by the news. I could not comprehend why he was happy about it until he said, "Look now, the only thing you have to do is go to work. And your classes are not difficult for you, so we can play 2K (a video game) together, eat and watch TV." I understood where he was coming from but I was still perplexed. "And you'll have more time to sleep," he added. The thought of having more time to sleep was indeed quite enticing.

My brother's optimism influenced my thoughts on the situation. I took it as a blessing. The next few weeks were less tiresome, just like he anticipated. Most of my classes didn't even have a Zoom meeting, so all I had to do was complete assignments posted on Google Classroom, which

were a piece of cake. I felt increasingly energetic as the days went on. My workplace remained open, but many employees who were much older than me felt it was risky to be at work because we stood so close together while baking. They stopped working and I had the opportunity to take on more shifts. I worked 60-70 hour weeks and loved to see the hefty amount I had in my bank account.

I spent my days watching personal finance videos. I loved watching those videos talking about money, creating a budget, learning about the stock market, and much more. I made investments that became profitable a couple of months later due to the hysteria in the markets at that time. I taught my mom about everything I was learning, and she also began investing in the stock market. The pandemic turned out to be a very beneficial time for my mental, physical and financial well-being. The social element I was missing from school was disappointing, but I got closer to my coworkers. And I spent more time with my brother and even helped him start a gaming channel.

Don't get it twisted. It wasn't all sunshine and rainbows because people were dying and the fear of being infected was always looming. Also, my workload increased significantly because we were understaffed. I barely watched the news and would only hear about essential topics through my coworkers. I could not stand the news because it was depressing to constantly hear about COVID spreading and people dying. The pandemic was scary for me because of the number of handshakes and hugs I was accustomed to. I feared being one of the first to catch it, but I never did. And my entire family also remained healthy. The dual experience of fear and catastrophe surrounding me paired with more time spent with my loved ones was very humbling and I grounded myself even more in prayers.

*Salif spends most of his time building things, specifically businesses and software. One example is his app, Roogo Burkina, a real-estate and property rental platform in Burkina Faso. "If something I wrote resonated with you or you just want to talk, feel free to reach out at tanksalif@gmail.com or on LinkedIn. Always happy to connect."

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## Abdu Bassett Audi



*Abdu Bassett Audi*

*Abdu provides a comprehensive window into his world, by telling three charming stories. He recounts how, as a boy, he turned a new skill learned from other boys into a business venture; absorbed love for the Quran from his grandfather, and fell in love over a bowl of Nigerian jollof.*

## Audi's Ride

*“Assurez-vous que les roues sont bien serrées!”* (Make sure the wheels are tight), shouted the eldest of the four young boys from Sokodé (in Northern Togo) as they worked diligently in the sand and occasionally ran off to gather supplies. The mention of wheels caught my attention but I didn't see any bikes or cars around, and these children were too young to be mechanics.

I walked towards them slowly and cautiously so as not to frighten them. The smallest one out of the group glanced up at me and said, “Come join us!”

It was the middle of July, and school was finished. My mom had announced to my three sisters and me that she was traveling to Sokodé to visit her mother. My sisters weren't keen on going, but I begged my mom to accompany her. At ten years old, I hadn't seen much of Togo, so I was eager to visit a new place and get away from my sisters, even if it was some little village. The bus trip from our home in Lomé (the capital city of Togo) to Sokodé in northern Togo was five hours and at my age it felt like a million light years. I kept sleeping and waking up, and we still weren't there.

Finally, we got off the bus at the edge of the village and waited for a commercial bike to pick us up. We found a bike man, but my mom haggled with him; he thought we should be able to afford his overcharged price since we were from the city. She was finally able to bring the price down to something reasonable. We began the second part of the journey, and as the bike man weaved in and out of the various streets, I fell in love with bikes. Twenty minutes later, we arrived at my grandmother's house.



After a few days of being in the village, I went exploring and became familiar with the neighborhood. That's when I came across the group of boys huddled in a circle working on something. They had collected Peak Milk (evaporated milk), bottle caps and spare metal pieces from broken old bicycles. When the boy invited me over, I asked what they were doing. Someone shouted, "We're making cars, dummy!"

I was eager to jump right in and learn everything I could so I could take it back to the city with me. They taught me how to make holes in bottle caps so that they could adequately be car "wheels." Who would have known that there is an exact measurement in which they are small enough to fit a skinny wire but large enough to allow the bottlecap to rotate and move the car freely? The next day I learned how to attach the wheels to the body of the Peak Milk can. That was the most challenging day for me since it was the most critical part of the structure. On the third day, I learned how to collect and adequately determine which supplies would make me the best car. For example, Peak Milk cans are better than Carnation Milk cans because they are smaller and denser, so they take more wear and tear than a regular Carnation milk can. During my last days there, I perfected my skills. By the time I left, I was so good and fast that I was better than the person who taught me.

On the five-hour trip back home, I wasn't bored because I had taken some supplies with me, and I made a few more cars. By the time we reached our village I had ten cars! The following day I invited all my friends over, showing them my creations. Even though I tried to teach, it wasn't an easy concept to grasp, so instead, the kids in the neighborhood just paid me for my services. That summer I became the youngest businessman in my area, selling each car for 200 francs (45 cents). Every kid in the community was begging their parents for the money to buy this little makeshift toy made from recyclables. By the end of the summer, I could save enough money to buy myself a good amount of masa (rice cakes) every day for the rest of the year.

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My grandfather was a person who could light up a room. He was my hero. He stood at a whopping 6 feet 4 inches tall, and you could see that he had been very fit in his youth. His hair, worn in an Afro, was magnificent; salt-and-pepper and his beard was woolly white, which gave the impression that he was older but not too old. Whenever he flashed a smile or laughed thunderously, it was as if time slowed down and he was the center of attention. I vividly remember him being one of the only elders in our community who still had all his teeth. He would roam the streets, hands crossed behind his back, head slightly turned downwards in a humble way, with his brown leather slippers, long faded green kaftan, dark green hat to match, a chewing stick in his chest pocket, with a long white tasbih (prayer beads) wrapped around his left hand and a leather pouch in his right hand. I sat at my grandfather's feet when he visited us, which was most nights. He would typically give advice, tell me stories of the past, and crack jokes. One of the jokes was, "Why did the photo go to jail? Because it was framed!" I used to be so happy when he came and so melancholy when we would say our goodbyes.

The last time I saw him was a cool night, and I remember that the moon was full and yellow. I sat in the sand at his feet while he reclined and narrated the story of Noah and the Ark. As he began to paint his wonderful images, I drew in the sand, with a stick, an outline of what I thought the ship would look like and drew tiny figures of all the animals I could think of. When it ended, he quizzed me on all the different parts of the narration. This was my favorite part of story time. If I got all the questions correct, he would give me my favorite snack; fried rice cakes called masa. I would save them in my pocket for later to make my sisters jealous when we wanted snacks late at night and my mom locked the kitchen.

I got all the questions right this time, but there was no masa in sight. I sat there in disappointment, too shy to ask my grandfather about masa. When I looked up at him sadly, he said, “I have a gift for you worth more than all of the masa in the world.”

He then brought out from his leather pouch a green silk bag. Inside was a rectangular-shaped present wrapped in shiny paper. I thought to myself, “I hope it’s a bunch of chocolates.” He handed me the gift and I unwrapped it. Inside was a black book. I flipped through the pages, but it was written in a language I didn’t understand at the time. I hoped and prayed there were some pictures to help me decipher what this book was all about.

“Abdu Bassett, this is a Quran, the most important book in our religion. All the stories I’ve been telling you and advice I have been giving you come from this book.”

“Really? This book is mine?”

“Yes, my son! I want you to have this book and take care of it. Keep it close to your heart. Whenever you are confused, upset or afraid, refer to this book. Love this book. Live by this book. Die by this book.” Tears welled up in his eyes. “If you can do me this one favor, I will be the happiest man on earth.”

“What is it, Grandpa?”

“Promise me that no matter what you do in this life, no matter who you become, you’ll memorize this book and keep it in your heart, and it will always guide you. I may not be here forever to advise you, but with this book, you’ll never lose your way.” I gripped the 600-page book tightly between fingers and held it close to my heart. I was overwhelmed with many thoughts, but the one that stuck out to me the most was, “How am I going to memorize 600 pages of a book in which I can’t even read the language?”

Later that night, I heard my grandfather talking to my father about enrolling me in Quran classes. I started Quran classes that same week. My grandfather got busy traveling to different countries because of business and trade and he stopped visiting as often as he used to. Unfortunately, he passed away that same year, and I never saw him again. His death was very painful for me, given that we were so close, but that closeness motivated me to keep striving to memorize the entire Quran. This is a feat that most Muslims around the world embark on. Some people take a couple of years and others their entire lifetime to complete it. I am still on the journey, and I’m still using that same black leather Quran in the green silk pouch to fulfill my promise to him.

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If you told me that I would propose to someone over a bowl of Nigerian Jollof rice, I’d laugh and call you crazy. Migrating to this country as a 20-year-old and delving right into higher education left no real opportunities to create genuine friendships. On a quest for greener pastures, I joined an investment group, and on the first Zoom meeting, I saw an adorable girl with the chubbiest cheeks and the brightest smile. She spoke so eloquently, but I wasn’t paying much attention to what she said because her voice was smooth, like freshly churned butter. A couple of weeks went by, and as my mentor, she called to see how I was doing and checked my investment

history. We soon took a tangent, and we hit it off! I told her about my graduation and she immediately offered to help me take some photos. We continued to get closer, and eventually, the debate about which country makes the best jollof rice, Nigeria or Ghana, arose.

I grew up eating Ghanaian jollof, which is beautiful copper-colored, fluffy jasmine rice boiled with freshly roasted tomatoes and chicken stock, laced with aromatic spices to deliver a party in your mouth flavor. We decided to put our recipes to the test and set a date for our taste test competition. So, I set out to the nearest grocery store to defend my honor.

I raced down the aisles, grabbing shallots, scotch bonnet, chicken, cabbage, carrot, bell peppers, tomatoes, thyme, rosemary, bay leaf and beets for my salad. I secretly wanted to impress her. The day finally came, and I hopped in my car, put my jollof rice in the passenger seat, put the seat belt on the container for extra safety and sped down the Cross-Bronx Expressway to her house. When I got there and she entered the car, a beautiful aroma entered with her. You could smell the culmination of various spices, known and unknown, permeating throughout the car. We drove to the nearest park to watch the sunset and settle this matter once and for all. She tasted my rice first; I could tell that she didn't really like it, but instead of telling me the truth, she just smiled so wide, her chubby cheeks lifting so that they almost covered her eyes, and she said it tasted amazing. It was my turn to taste her rice, and when I opened the plastic container, I was greeted with a rich, deep red colored rice garnished with sauteed onions and fried plantains -- which was my favorite -- paired with fried meat tossed in a pepper sauce. I thought to myself, "How did she know that I loved eating plantain with my rice?" I took a deep breath, used my spoon like a shovel and took a big bite. It was as if the gates of heaven opened and shined a light through the sunroof of the car, and the angels were playing their trumpets. I could taste every spice, curry, thyme, bay leaf, rosemary, nutmeg, and other spices I couldn't recognize. As expected with Nigerian Jollof, it was spicy enough to burn your tongue off but flavorful enough to keep you coming back for more. I doubled down

and didn't leave a single grain of rice in that bowl. As I looked up at her, she asked, "So, how was the rice?" I paused for a moment and got shy. As she waited impatiently for my critique and asked again for a response, I blurted out, "I know we've only known each other for a couple of weeks, but will you marry me?" To be sincere, she is one of the most caring and loving human beings ever.

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\*Abdu Bassett Audi is a graduate of Lehman College with a Bachelor of Science in Health Services Administration. He is passionate about health, education, personal development, and community service. He enjoys using storytelling and writing to connect with diverse audiences and share meaningful perspectives. He is currently seeking opportunities to connect with experienced writers for guidance as he works on his first book, a collection of real-life stories.

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Part Three: Resilience During the Pandemic

Cayenne Booth



Cayenne Booth
Cayenne Booth

Cayenne Booth's account of her experience during the COVID pandemic, when she worked in a hospital, reads like a war story. The situation required that she step up, and she did.

Pandemic

I love the phrase, “If you find a job you love, then you will never work a day in your life,” but I know for a fact the author of that quote has never been an essential worker during a pandemic. During the COVID19 pandemic I tended to children in respiratory distress, comforted burnt-out parents, and cared for my own household. It’s one thing to love your job and another to feel like you have your whole community depending on you. In my position as medical assistant at Boston’s Children’s Hospital North Riverdale Pediatrics (in the Bronx), I worked the first two years straight with no days off. But none of this was the problem. The problem was that I thought I had seen it all, heard it all, and felt it all.

When I started working at the hospital in 2020, I was the luckiest girl in the world. I was fresh out of school, and I got to work during a world crisis. In fact, I was so lucky that my immune system decided to work too well.

In March 2020 God decided New York City needed to go through an extensive personal development course that would last a little under three years. It was the most transformative three years of my life.

In December of 2021, I was eating lunch in the Lab, (because the small office was not originally built to have eight employees), when the office door buzzed. I quickly put on my office gown and fitted an N95 mask and shield on my face. At the door was Dr. Hirshman’s daughter; she had come to drop off her mother’s COVID swab and get tested herself. His wife had become fragile from multiple health conditions and Dr. Hirschman took his marital vow of “in sickness and in health” seriously. I started the COVID machines and then swabbed his daughter. Then she went to sit with her father in his office, unmasked, as they ate lunch together with the doors closed. Exactly three minutes later the machines pinged.

I was standing in front of the machines in disbelief. These were molecular COVID tests that took exactly 15 minutes to run when you didn't have COVID, but if it stopped early, you were infected. I heard Dr. Brand's heavy footsteps as she came rushing through the lab door.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me! ALAN!" she yelled. Two minutes later Dr. Hirschman too walked into the lab, masked. Dr. Berger and Dr. Hirschman's daughter were right behind him.

"I'm sorry everyone. I really am." There was hurt in Dr. Hirschman's voice, because he had spent half the day possibly infecting everyone in the office and because his wife had it as well. He quickly packed his stuff and left with his daughter. Meanwhile Dr. Brand had rounded everyone in the office in full PPE and was COVID-swabbing us one by one in the backyard. By the end of the week our office of eight had become an office of three and stayed that way for the next two weeks. Those two weeks, Pediatrics of North Riverdale opened earlier and closed late. Dr. Berger, Diane the office manager, and I saw all the patients that normally took three doctors. We treated over 100 patients a day, with everyone claiming to be an emergency. We made sure that the children who could be helped avoided the ER at all costs. If we could prevent children from being stuck in the overflowing emergency rooms filled with diseases they did not need to be exposed to, then we did it. That meant taking blood, doing specialty tests, using our oxygen tanks, and even calling in favors to specialty children's hospitals outside of the city.

We survived those two weeks, but Diane nearly passed out from overexertion, my body was covered in stress hives and at the end of the two weeks, Dr. Berger caught COVID. I would like to say that was the worst of it, but honestly it only became normal for us to work like that. By 2023, I had traded in my stress hives for borderline diabetes because of my messed-up eating habits from all the work, but I felt like I was where I needed to be. The medical field was a fulfilling career choice, and I loved everything about it. Another reason why I loved my job was because it was my daughter

Lehlani's pediatrician's office. Not only was I the coolest mom ever being my child's nurse; it also made getting her asthma medication so much easier.

COVID ran through my household twice, courtesy of my stepfather. Thanks to my job I had access to free COVID testing, and I took a lot of precautions to not bring COVID home. I did all the household shopping, disinfected the house daily, and I even got undressed in the hallway. Every day my mother would leave a GLAD bag on the doorknob with my robe and slippers, just so I didn't bring COVID into the house. As soon as I came in the house I went straight into the shower. But I alone couldn't keep my asthmatic mother and daughter safe. The second time my mother and stepfather caught COVID I took my daughter straight to the job to get tested. That Monday morning, Dr. Brand met me in front of the office building to retrieve the COVID swab from me. I had a stash of COVID swabs in my house after the first time my stepfather had caught it. I had swabbed Lehlani in the house and put it in a Ziplock bag. We waited for the results outside. As I said, positives only took three minutes. It was the longest three minutes of my life; it was also the coldest because it was January 3rd. Then Dr. Brand facetimed me and told me that Lehlani was positive. My heart fell to the bottom of my stomach.

"Does she have any symptoms? How is her asthma?"

"No, nothing," I said. "She was just exposed," I was confused because I had seen hundreds of children horribly sick with COVID19, but she was fine. I took Lehlani home and explained that even though she felt okay, she had to stay in her room and wear a mask around the house for two weeks. As I closed the door, she was jumping up and down on her bed celebrating her two-week vacation.

In October of that year, I finally caught COVID from a premature newborn who was struggling to breathe; I too had no symptoms and had lost the fear of what COVID could do to my health.

Lehlani and I had no permanent side effects, but my mother did. Her asthma was progressively getting worse, so the doctor put my mother on injections and changed her inhalers. But on October 23, 2023, my mother passed away from an asthma attack while I was at work. The next night my grandparents came over so I could explain how everything had happened. “To tell you the truth, Cayenne I think she would still be alive if you had been at home,” my grandmother said. “I think you would have been able to help her.”

“I can’t stop God’s timing grandma, and I don't want to question Him.” You see my favorite Bible story is the book of Job. God allowed the devil to take everything from Job to prove that people will turn their backs on God when He stops blessing them. Job stood his ground and God replaced everything Job lost.

No, I did not blame God for making such choices; instead on January 4th I left my job to take care of Lehlani and myself. (I have yet to find another job that engages and teaches the way that office did.) I had lost my mother, and Lehlani had lost her best friend. Lehlani and I used to act more like sisters than mother and daughter but the pandemic changed all of that. Life after COVID19 was a new journey.



Cayenne and Leblani at work

*Cayenne Booth has two young children and works part time as a phlebotomist. She spent the last three years building a more enriched life while also expanding her knowledge in the medical and wellness fields. She is passionate about being “present” as a mother and creating lasting family memories. Guided by faith and strengthened by community, she strives to live a life of purpose and continued growth.

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## Anonymous



*This was the view from the author's window during COVID.*

*The author grew up having to navigate change from an early age. When the COVID-19 pandemic started she was a senior in high school. It was an unexpected shift for everyone, but she and her family had a singularly tough experience. She came through the pandemic strengthened and with a more mature perspective.*

# Catata

When I was born, my parents were already thinking about leaving. They were living in my grandparents' house in Santo Domingo—two daughters and a newborn, too many bodies for one space. So, they moved to a smaller town nearby, Santo Domingo Este, where the heat wrapped around you the second you stepped outside and the dust clung to your skin like it belonged there. My dad used to call me cacata—tarantula. He said it jokingly, but there was a reason behind it. The humidity made my hair expand in every direction, just like tarantulas, wild and untamed. During hurricane season, cacatas crawled up the walls like they owned the house. My mom would grab a machete and slice them in half without hesitation. The same with Dominican centipedes—long, fast, ancient-looking things that felt older than the house itself.

My dad built our house with his own hands: two bedrooms, one bathroom, a living room that spilled into the kitchen, and a patio filled with trees, chickens, and whatever else made its way inside. He loved his chickens and watched them carefully, like they were something fragile. Raising three kids in the D.R. during the early 2000s wasn't easy. The economy collapsed under Hipólito Mejía. The peso lost value, prices rose, and banks went bankrupt. My mom was a nurse manager, which should have meant stability, but it didn't. One paycheck barely covered groceries. My dad worked in administration at the same hospital, but his salary disappeared just as quickly. They stretched everything — food, money, and patience. They skipped meals, rationed portions, pawned a hair dryer just to afford my powdered milk.

When it rained, water slipped through the zinc roof. Drops fell onto my face at night, waking me up. I should have hated it, but I didn't. The steady tapping against the metal sounded like music. It was one of the few things that stayed consistent.

In 2008, my dad left for New York. He didn't speak English, but he went to see if there was something better for us there and a year later, he came back for me. Not my sisters — just me. At the airport, my mom held me longer than usual. My sisters cried quietly. I didn't cry because I thought I would be back soon.

New York felt unfamiliar. Everything moved fast, especially the language. Kids had things I had never seen before and lives that looked nothing like mine. For the first time, I noticed the differences—the way I spoke, the way I looked.

I lived with my grandparents but I never fully felt like I belonged. My aunt reminded me I wasn't one of her kids. My grandmother tried to fix my hair, to make it straighter, more “presentable”. I remember running from the smell of the chemicals and the burning feeling on my scalp. My dad didn't know what to do, so he called my mom.

“Bring her back,” she said.

Nine months later, I returned to the Dominican Republic. When my mom saw me, she cried. I had lost weight because my dad worked long hours and I ate what was there, not knowing it wasn't enough. My mom decided to keep me with her until I was older.

In 2015, when I was 12, I went back to New York. This time, I stayed in my aunt's apartment sharing a room with my cousins. Four years later, my little brother joined us, so my dad rented a shared room in the Bronx. It was the closest we had been to being a family in years, but the space was tight. Nine people plus a dog lived in a two-bedroom apartment. The kitchen was always full, so I stayed in the room (that I shared with my brother and sometimes my father) most of the time. That room had become my main space.

March 2020 brought the world to a halt. COVID-19 shut everything down, and our lives shrank to the single room. Our room was on Mount Eden Avenue in the Bronx, so close to the Cross Bronx Expressway that we could see and hear traffic. The elevated subway tracks ran right

outside my window. The #4 train had never looked so empty. I still heard the automated voice, “Stand clear of the closing doors, please,” but there was no one in the way. Before COVID, the subway cars were often full; people pressed against each other, heat and sweat making it hard to breathe. Sometimes I was pushed, barely able to move. But during COVID each train car held only one or two people. Sometimes none.

Montefiore Hospital was near our room and after a while refrigerated trucks lined the nearby streets, holding bodies that couldn’t fit inside the hospital. We kept the windows closed, afraid of the air, of what might come in.

Inside, it was just me and my brother most of the time. I helped him with his math homework, sitting next to him for hours as he tried to focus. Sometimes he would get frustrated, staring at the screen, not understanding. I tried to explain things the best I could, even when I wasn’t sure myself. There was no teacher walking around the classroom, no classmates to compete and cooperate with—just me, him, and our computers. We did what we could to figure things out together.

When I got tired of watching the train I would look down at the highway and count the cars. There were so few cars that I never made it to 20.

The window stayed covered most of the time, blocked with layers to keep out germs and noise from the subway and highway. But I still looked. I needed to. It was the only way to see the sky, the sunsets and to remind myself the world was still there. At the same time, out the window was everything I didn’t want to see—the trucks, the empty streets, the flashing lights from ambulances that never seemed to stop.

The owner of the room wanted us to move out. At some point mid-pandemic, my dad partially moved us into a shelter seeking housing assistance. It wasn’t permanent, but it was

different. Breakfast—boiled eggs, oatmeal, pancakes, sometimes juice—was simple but warm. Each meal made me feel cared and reminded me of home.

We moved between the shelter and the room for a while, never fully settled in either. But we followed whatever routine we could until it became our norm.

In 2021, my mom got her U.S. residency (her visa, allowing her to come to the U.S.) and she came to visit us from the Dominican Republic. Everything changed for the better, for a little while. She cooked, waited for us to eat together, filled the space in a way that made it feel less temporary. Even though we were still moving from the room to the shelter and back again, it didn't feel as tight or overwhelming. It felt warmer. My dad softened too. He spoke differently, acted differently, like we were a version of a family he still remembered how to be part of.

In the summer of 2021, we finally left the room and the shelter for good and moved into a two-bedroom apartment. For the first time, nothing had to be shared with strangers. The kitchen and the bathroom were ours and the space didn't feel borrowed. At last I didn't feel like I had to adjust. We had a home where I belonged.

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\*The author graduated from Lehman College in 2024 and is a nurse in New York City.

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Lucas Alcantara



Lucas Alcantara

Lucas's fond, nostalgic reminiscence of riding his bicycle with a "ginormous" group of friends through Harlem and Randall's Island is a perfect example of the familial spirit of New York.

Where Did Lucas Go?

I didn't learn how to ride a bike until I was 13. It's embarrassing but I guess I was a late bloomer. Not to mention that as a kid I would usually be home all day playing video games. Nonetheless, it was a formative summer, right before my freshman year of high school in August of 2017 at a small camping site in Cape May, NJ, just thirty minutes from Atlantic city. In the sand and gravel roads outside our cabin I tried over and over just to get on the seat of the bike. I kept falling, racking up a ton of cuts and bruises on my arms and legs. I finally asked for help from my uncle and he simply pushed me down the hill into a road that was regularly patrolled by family SUVs and said, "You'll figure it out." I was terrified but it worked. I felt free, riding in the breeze, smelling the lake while the wheels on my bike sounded like a fishing rod.

In the following years I would borrow old bikes from friends, ones clearly "loved" in their own ways, with scuffed stickers on them that you can just barely make out as *Supreme* and *Thrasher* logos. My friend Cam, a tall Dominican kid with big curly brown hair, and I would meet up at 116th Street and Lexington by the #6 train, our unofficial midpoint between all of our friends' apartments. We would go door to door gathering our friends, multiplying in numbers gradually until the final apartment by the FDR Drive. By then we were a ginormous group of adolescents biking in the heat of the summer in Harlem. We'd make our way towards Randall's Island and just loop around the island over and over until dark, stopping for plenty of pictures along the way of course. In hindsight, I didn't realize how good we had it. We consistently lived out scenes from *The Goonies*. We raised hell. I remember all the objectively stupid things we did because we were kids. We stole from stores, we biked on the wrong side of the road, and we yelled things like "PENIS" in the streets. Maybe the stupidest of these activities was trusting one another to hold our legs while we hung our bodies off the edge of bridges with nasty New York City river water at the bottom. We went places where you

shouldn't, with people we didn't know, out at the time of night when you have ten missed calls from your mom and you and all your friends make the same face, saying "Oh shit" in unison. Followed by texts in the family group chat, "Where Did Lucas Go?"

I'll always remember those nights, but relationships change and people grow apart. No matter what, I'll always know that at one point in my youth we all trusted each other with our lives, and I know that when we see each other in the neighborhood, we'll share a look acknowledging our past life. We'll nod and smile at each other through the sea of unknown faces in the sea of Harlem and go on with our lives.

~

Finding Lucas Again

I lost a little bit of Lucas during the COVID quarantine. In high school, before the world started to end [the pandemic], I would always talk to strangers in the street with my friends. If I had an opportunity to catch someone off guard, especially in New York where everyone is too busy to have a brief conversation, and possibly make their day, I wouldn't hesitate to do so. You can imagine that over quarantine I didn't get much of that classic New York interaction that I loved so much. Being alone in a room all day, not having physical contact with any of my friends drained all the Lucas out of me. To cheer myself up after a failed attempt at a social interaction I cut through Central Park, specifically a path near the Harlem Meer. I found solace sitting on that bench that had the perfect view of the lake and the skyline of the neighborhood I've lived in all my life. I was mesmerized by the soothing noise of the ducks in the water coupled with the honking of cars close by. But I was also saddened by the emptiness everyone carried with themselves. This is when I met the lady on the bench. She introduced herself as Layla and told me she was visiting from Canada. I was thrilled to

have an actual conversation with someone after so many months of virtual blandness. We instantly hit it off. She talked about her career as a photographer and how much she was loving New York. I talked about my love for film and the deeper meanings behind them. What surprised me was that even though we come from completely different backgrounds we shared a lot of the same interests and thoughts. Through this we shared an assortment of advice and one that stood out the most was not finding happiness through others. Layla told me a story of her past relationship in which she dated a girl who didn't share the same level of love that she had. When they eventually broke up she kind of broke down, considering that all her joy in life came from that one person instead of her own accomplishments and goals. Although at the time I had not been in a situation like that, it did help me months later when I started to realize I was following that path.

It's funny thinking back that just in the first two hours of knowing each other we gave each other life advice, shared stories of our childhood, and talked about our aspirations. But the thing that will stick with me the most is the fact that I went for it. As soon as I saw the opportunity I took it, because I knew that the moment I hesitated I would've lost hope in my social skills. Every day I am so grateful for that conversation because if I didn't have it, I would have completely lost that last bit of Lucas inside of myself. The bravery I had from talking to this lady on the bench saved me from a very dark place. I am a strong believer that the best moments in life come from complete uncertainty of the future.

* Lucas Alcantara graduated from Lehman College with a degree in marketing in 2025. He is working as a paraprofessional in the Bronx. Lucasa4422@gmail.com

Part Four:

It Takes Time, But Change Comes

Tony Haripersaud



Tony running for the Lehman Lightning Track Team at a Vassar College invitational meet in 2022.

In 2023, when Tony was completing the memoir-writing class, he wrote in the introduction to his collection, “Writing my [memoir] stories reminded me that I always moved forward even when I was grasping for air.” This spirit, aspiring not just for a better life, but for who he could make a better life, for himself and his brother, permeated much of his writing.

A Memorable Meal on a Hot Summer Day in the Bronx

The summer of 2021 in New York City was hot and the air conditioner in our apartment didn't work because my grandpa wasn't concerned with fixing it. He always said, "You kids have all this technology." When he was growing up in Guyana his family was poor, and he slept on the floor. In America, my parents weren't earning much, and he didn't want them to be burdened by a high electricity bill. He was used to the heat and expected us to get used to it as well.

One morning, my brother and I came into the kitchen and were alarmed to find no breakfast and no \$5 bill left on the counter to buy breakfast. My mother had gone to work without leaving anything for us. The mornings when she left us \$5, we'd go to the bodega to buy a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich and share it. This morning, Kevin rushed to the fridge, praying we didn't have to fall back on our last resort: eating ramen. He hated ramen. Sadly, there was nothing but a bottle of milk and a slice of American cheese.

On weekend mornings when my father was around, he would give us money to get food because he couldn't cook anything but rice or toast. In Guyana, the mother of the household did the cooking, so my father didn't learn to cook. He usually gave us five dollars, like my mom. But on weekdays, he went to work at 5 a.m., where he worked in a warehouse and didn't know my mom was going to leave us with no food or money. There were times I was upset, but I understood my mom wouldn't want us to struggle. Most days, she was tired from working as a Home Health Aid. Kevin and I drank water and hung around until we headed to the basketball park. The court was only two blocks away, and we loved playing basketball there. It distracted us from hunger.

The air was hot and humid as we walked. “I wish I had a slice of pizza and a cold iced tea right now,” I said. Kevin nodded. When we arrived at the park, we were happy to see our friends, twins, and they were already in a game. “We got next!” Kevin said. It is usually a long wait to play next, so we were glad that it was just us at the park. We started playing three-on-three. My brother and I were on opposite teams, plus the twins and two other players. After the first game, when I checked the ball up to my brother at the free-throw line, I saw sweat dripping down his face. His eyes were glued to the ground, trying to hide from the fierce sun. We could often predict each other's moves, but at that moment, I wasn't sure. Kevin was smaller than me, but he never saw it as a disadvantage. His competitive drive made him want to win with either his shot or his speed, but I was always ready. “You got lucky on the last one, that's not happening again,” I said. Hours passed as we played six more games. I began to get cramps from dehydration. While walking home slowly I licked the salt on my arms, hoping not to catch a “charley horse.”

We got home at 7:10 p.m., 50 minutes before our curfew. Our curfew was 8 o'clock because the area we lived in, Wakefield, was too dangerous to be outside after dark. That's when the park usually filled up with gang members and/or people using drugs on the benches. As I opened the door I smelled curry. Our mom was standing at the hot stove, dripping in sweat in her home-aid uniform. My father was home and had cooked the rice.

My mother was making my favorite food, duck curry and roti. She usually made roti on the weekends, but she went out of her way to make it that day, a weekday. My mother felt sad about not leaving us any money for breakfast and wanted to make it up to us.

The scent of the curry made my mouth watery, and I couldn't wait to eat. I forgot it was piping hot. The curry was spicy, but the soft potatoes and tender duck meat, combined with the roti, balanced it out.

“How was your day,” Mom asked. I was so mad at her, but I didn’t want to tell her. She struggled with being a mother because she was always working to provide for us financially. I knew my mother always made an effort to take care of us. “It was hot, ma,” I said. She smiled and that made me happy. Kevin and I ate so much we couldn’t talk; it felt like we were talking by eating. “Your rice tastes good too, pa,” I said to my dad, and he nodded. My father was quiet and didn’t say much, but he also appreciated his wife’s hard work to take care of us.

This meal is my most memorable. We felt what it’s like to be hungry and have nothing to eat, so we were grateful for this food and for our mother.

~

Chasing Tony Was My Goal

My love for running started when I was in Tain Primary School in Berbice, Guyana. I ran during recess with my friends because it freed my mind from the mental prison of school and let me feel like a kid. But my passion for running flourished when I came to America.

My experience in America was not easy at first. Classmates at my high school, in Wakefield, a neighborhood in the Bronx, often asked, “Why is your skin brown but your hair straight?” I was one of two Guyanese kids in the school which was mostly filled with Hispanic and Black kids. I was reluctant to speak because everyone laughed at my Creole English. But when I ran, I didn’t worry about anything else. There was no thought about what kids would think about me, what I wore, or what I sounded like. Plus, I was good at it.

My high school didn’t have a track team, but luckily, I found Coach C. He coached a track club team at Van Cortlandt Park. It was a nonprofit club where he coached neighborhood kids, and

they competed against each other. The first time I saw Coach C he was yelling at his runner to pick up the pace; I was intrigued.

“What high school are you coaching?” I asked him nervously. He told me it was a club and wondered if I ran long distances because of my slim body. At first, I wasn’t sure what he meant, but he asked me to come to the practice the following day. I was excited that he gave me an opportunity to run with his team.

I brought home countless medals. My favorite medal was in the 800-meter race because it was my first-ever medal with a time of 1:59. The 800 was my favorite race because it was a race for the strongest mind. I was always anxious but mixed with excitement whenever I walked to the line, waiting for the sound of the starter pistol, because the race always pushed my aerobic capacity and took me out of my comfort zone. During the entire race, my mind was saying, “Slow down,” but my passion for running overcame the pain.

My family members couldn’t attend the track meets because of work, but I felt like I had another family in my track club. We would push each other to our fullest instead of bashing each other. Whenever I had my head down, a teammate would talk my energy up. We trained three times a week, rested on Monday and meet days were Wednesday and Saturday or Sunday. I enjoyed heading to practice at Van Cortlandt after school at 3 p.m. or waking up at 6 a.m. for meets on Saturdays or Sundays. “I think you have a shot at a really good college,” Coach C said. His words brought joy to my heart, but the words didn’t prepare me for what was to come.

The disaster all started with the pandemic in 2020 when I had to stop training. The pandemic took away many things from my life, and running was one of them. When the announcement of quarantine happened, I didn’t dare step outside to risk catching and spreading the virus to my family. It was painful to give up running. All my endless hours of working to be in shape went to waste. I remember sitting sobbing when my mom walked in and said, “You will run again

soon Tony.” It brought me reassurance, but I knew I was never going to be the same. I lost contact with Coach C and many of my track club friends.

A year and a half years later, when I was a student at Lehman College, I was running on a treadmill one day when Coach Hugh saw me. He asked me to come to practice with the track team. At first, I was hesitant, but I thought this could be the chance to get back to my old self.

I wanted nothing more than to be in shape like I once was and I knew I would do anything to achieve that goal. At my first practice with my new team, we were hitting four 1000-meter repeats. I pushed my body to the point that my eyes were blurry and leaking tears from the wind rushing at me. My knees burned, while I swallowed my saliva to hydrate myself.

“Your heart rate is 200,” Coach Hugh said. I was a college freshman, but I felt like a race horse. I had to keep running, even though the voice in my head wanted me to stop. I was chasing the time I ran in high school.

“One more coach. I got one more in me.” I took off at the start of the watch and passed out 20 meters later, on the track.

When I came to, I was lightheaded and dizzy yet fighting with myself to get up off the track and keep my eyes open. At that moment, I knew my passion for running was fading. The feeling of not caring came back, and I was in a prison of my mind. I was no longer running for the freedom to be happy. I only wanted to beat my 16-year-old self and regain everything I once was.

Coach Hugh ran to me, reassuring me that I was okay. “Why are you pushing so hard?” I replied because I wanted to run fast like I used to. “That will come later. For right now take it one step at a time.” While lying on the ground, I didn’t want to listen to that bullshit. I wanted to hear how I could get fast, until he asked me what was the first thing I liked about running. The thoughts flashed in my head, as I pictured my young self in primary school, having fun with my good friend, Rossana. I remembered the freedom that I had when I didn’t look at the time that I ran, but rather the chance

to run. There was never any weight on my shoulders that slowed me down, and there was never a moment when I compared myself to anybody. I was free to run slow or fast, wherever I wanted.

Those memories made me realize I didn't want to race myself anymore. I wanted to run to be happy.

*Tony Haripersaud graduated from Lehman College with a B.A. in 2025. "Growing up, I benefited from the support and assistance from friends, parents, teachers and family, and it inspired me to do the same. I am still on the journey to support and help others." Email: Tonyharipersaud@gmail.com

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Tony Haripersaud (right) and his family.

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## Diana Navarro Lopez



*Diana Lopez Navarro (middle) and her family.*

*Diana Lopez Navarro: "The market crash of 2008 detrimentally altered the lives of working-class folk. For my family, it took our house and directly defined what home meant and what life looked like for the next 10 years.*

# The Blue House on Harding Avenue

Moving into the blue house on Harding Avenue in the Bronx when I was 13 was a liberating moment for me and my parents. It meant that we could finally unpack our things from the moving boxes we'd had them in for the previous five years and relax. This was our new home, but funny enough, we had lived in this house before.

The childhood home that I remember -- we lived in it from when I was three until I was eight -- was a two-story, two-family home on Wayne Avenue in Battle Hill, just far enough away from the busy downtown streets to be considered "kid-friendly," but close enough to a Bee-Line bus stop so my mom could get to her housecleaning job.

This home was unremarkable, but extravagance was not on the list of essentials when my parents went house-hunting. My parents were both raised in Guatemala in homes that were filled to the brim with children. My mom was one of eight kids, and my dad was one of 10. They both were raised by their older siblings, who taught them to raise the siblings who were born after them. As they were both forced to work on their own family farms, their own education was an afterthought. Impoverished and often hungry, they moved to New York with the same goals in mind. They were just looking for a place to settle down after a long day of work and a safe place that ensured their child would be able to enjoy "la niñez" (their childhood). This house provided them with that comfort.

In the Wayne Avenue house I had a bicycle in the backyard and a small bookshelf for my school materials. I was able to walk down the block to visit my friend Dakota after school. We would draw with chalk and jump rope on the sidewalk, knowing our parents were just upstairs watching us through the windows. This was the kind of freedom my parents worked for every day.

They wanted to see me grow up in a place where I was free to run around outside without constant chaos endangering me.

It seemed like everything around us was solid, but we were wrong. In 2011, when I was eight years old, after months of ongoing struggle to pay the mortgage, the bank foreclosed on the house, and we only had 40 days to move out. This was the beginning of the next five years living without unpacking our boxes.

Our first apartment after we moved out was a particularly difficult adjustment. The old brick building was across town and was always either unbearably hot or, in the winter, ridiculously cold. The corridor lights gave off a dim, eerie feeling that made me want to run to my second-floor apartment as fast as possible. Even when I got inside, the unfamiliar walls did not comfort me. It was hard not to become hyperaware of the strangers outside of my locked door. My parents both worked two jobs during the week, so most days when I came back from school, I was only met with the strange sounds around me. While I was alone, I could hear all the arguments from the neighbors through our shared wall. I heard neighbors talking on their cell phones in the small corridor, and I heard their keys jingling as they came and went. There was not a familiar face in this entire building or the entire block that I could go to if I needed something. That single thought terrified me.

My parents would eventually come home and remind me that this move was temporary. I felt better knowing there was no need to get comfortable with the dim lights and weird noises. After the one-year lease agreement was over, we would be moving into a better place. But the better place didn't come, and after the fourth move in 2015, my frustration began to turn into hopelessness. I would unpack with the one-year timer directing my actions. My books resided in a cardboard box under my bed. My winter coats weren't taken out because we all knew we wouldn't be here next winter. Trying to get comfortable in the new spaces felt pointless because this was not our home.

My mom and dad grew more tired with every move, and we all grew frustrated thinking a permanent home would never come.

Then, one night, my mom got a call from an old friend about a house on Harding Ave. My mom was making dinner in the kitchen as I watched TV in the living room. The apartment was small, so I was able to listen to her responses without her noticing. I knew she had mentioned to her friends that we were looking to move, so at first I didn't pay attention to her conversation. It wasn't until she was silent that I realized that this news was different. She got off the phone with her friend and called my dad at work, this time taking the call in the bedroom.

Months went by without hearing about the house on Harding Avenue. It was not until April of 2016 that I was told that our next move was hopefully our last.

I found out much later that my mom's old friend, who had mentioned the listing, was the realtor who rented the blue house to my parents before I was born. When my parents lost the blue house in 2011, my mom called her to ask about any potential listings in the area. The friend stayed on the lookout. I didn't remember the blue house, but it was the first home my parents had together. It was the house that held my mom's baby shower for me, and where we lived when I was born. My parents told me stories of when they lived there, and how coincidental it was for the owners to sell the house after we had contacted the realtor again. It was a true full circle for us to be given our second chance at owning a home in the place they began.

It obviously was not all smooth sailing from there, and we did not expect that at all. My parents recognized quickly after the call that the cost of the mortgage was too expensive for them to meet alone, but thanks to a close family friend who was also searching for a new place, my parents were able to accept the offer. The phone call we got that day drove us to get through the rest of the year with a different attitude. The tension had eased, and before the end of the year, we were all packed for our last move.

As we walked towards the front door, the over-grown weeds and bushes on the lawn poked at our clothes. The porch creaked from beneath my feet, causing me to examine the uneven wooden boards. The painted wood was chipped and swollen. It was obvious the house was old and was going to need some serious renovations. It could not have mattered less to me. All I saw while walking through the house that day were the pictures of my mom's baby shower being held in the living room. The second bedroom was where my favorite picture of my godmother was taken. It was my third birthday party, and we were surrounded by the same dark, wooden walls. I don't remember much of the blue house on Harding Avenue before 2016, but moving back here was freeing because it was my home, even before I knew it by that name.

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In writing this piece, I had several conversations with my parents. Our conversations required all three of us to show up in the face of discomfort and make the choice to do so every time. So, when I told my parents about the possibility of my piece being published in the anthology, my dad's first response to the news began with, "Diana, you have my permission to publish that." As much as this story is mine, it is theirs. *Esto es para ti ma y pa. Gracias para su apoyo.*

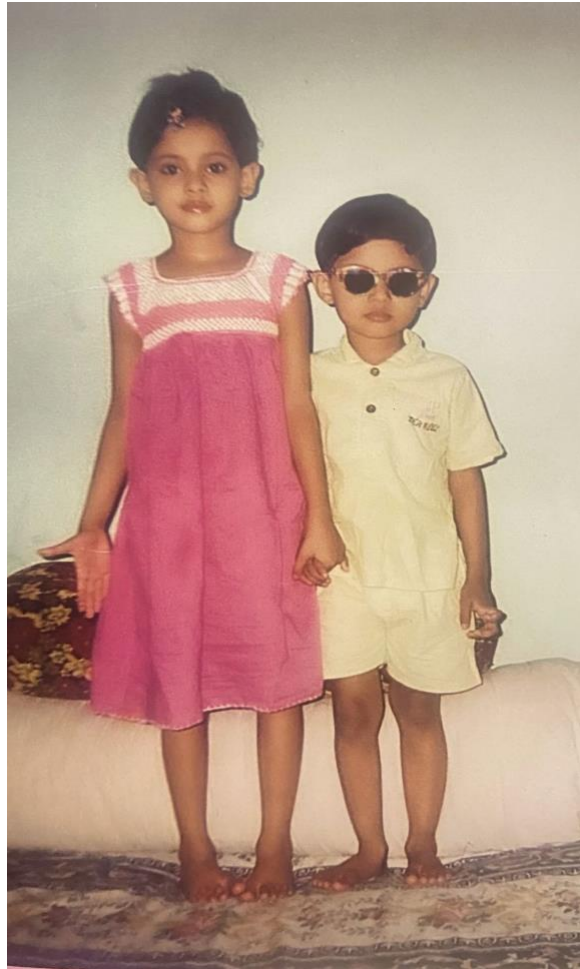
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Mahim Rahaman



Mithila and Mahim in 2004

Mahim Rahaman has spent his life learning how to adapt, moving from a bright childhood in Singapore to the sudden challenges of Bangladesh before finally landing in the Bronx. With his roots constantly shifting due to absent parents and new countries, his story is about navigating unfamiliar systems and making the most of the chance that his mother risked everything to give him and his sister.

Journey from Bangladesh to the Bronx

Writing my memoir essays has made me realize, despite my initial resistance, the importance of reflection. I am a logical person, and reflection didn't come easily. I found it time consuming and thought it didn't provide concrete answers to questions.

This mindset changed when I enrolled in a memoir writing workshop at Lehman College in 2023 as a junior. From the beginning of the semester, my peers shared stories from their life experiences that were strong and compelling. But I struggled to recall any of mine. The stories that they shared were so heartfelt and emotional that I couldn't imagine myself coming up with anything remotely close to theirs. The grade on my first essay mirrored my efforts so I convinced myself that if I continued to get terrible grades, I might as well just write what I recall and truly feel about my experiences. When I started writing more, I found myself enjoying thinking about the past. All of a sudden, reflecting made sense. I dealt with emotions that I have been avoiding for years, and I started getting more clarity about who I am and what my story is. I adjusted and improved. When I think about Block 111 Woodlawn in Singapore, I am flooded with feelings of fondness and nostalgia. This was the place where I spent most of my childhood. My parents migrated from Bangladesh when I was three, in hopes for a better life. They started a convenience store which became a vital part of our lives. In front of the store was a public space, 1000 X 300 square feet, where my sister, Mithila and I would spend hours playing, studying, eating meals and learning how to bike. Our family lived in the apartment above the store. We had to stay in the apartment or the public space until closing time. That way, our parents could watch us. Over time, that 1000 X 300 space and the surrounding blocks became my sanctuary where I found joy, companionship, and growth.

One of my fondest memories of this place is playing Carrom with my family and regular customers. Most of the customers came from the South Asian part of the continent, so communicating with them wasn't hard since our languages were very similar. Carrom is a popular board game in South Asia, similar to pool, but played with wooden discs instead of balls. Mithila and I learned to play Carrom from one of my uncles and we grew interested in playing it after learning that our parents loved playing the game when they were back in Bangladesh. My parents, with their busy schedules never got the chance to introduce us to such traditions and games.

One weekend day my dad casually walked up to the board wanting to join. I couldn't stop myself from smiling, feeling hyped to show the skills that I learned. I knew it was my only opportunity to gather my full family for a couple of rounds, so I rushed into the store and begged my mom to join us for one game. My mom wasn't willing to leave the one store register and kept doing her work. Suddenly my dad yelled, "Leave her alone, she doesn't know how to play! And even if she knew, she doesn't like losing." That sparked a fire in my mom and she joined us at the board, leaving one of the workers to take care of the store. This was one of the most exciting moments of my childhood, gathering the family like this was rare and, for a game of Carrom, was unthinkable.

As my dad set up the board, we split up into two teams; my dad and me versus my mom and Mithila. Seeing the owners of the store outside playing, the regular customers became curious and gathered around. The competitive energy between the two teams was palpable, and I was determined to win. Our men's team had a bad start; my mom with her positional understanding and Mithila with her great accuracy, kept us on our toes. Customers yelled suggestions left and right. Despite being down by significant points, my dad looked confident. On the other hand I couldn't balance my focus and my excitement. The pressure of being watched and fear of disappointment was crushing my confidence. My dad kept encouraging me and led with examples. Slowly we made a comeback and then the game was even. It was a 15-minute game, and it was coming to an end. I had

the last strike and my nerves were at their peak. My dad told me to take the strike and not to be worried about the result. I went for the stroke and missed completely. I was ashamed and humiliated. My dad laughed it off and went about his day. I knew I was a better player than that; all I wanted was to show my parents how skillful I was at the game. From that day on, I practiced every day and kept on asking my parents to play again. But they were weighed down by responsibilities, so we never got to recreate that moment.

Growing up, Mithila and I were always competing with each other, and every sport we played became a battlefield. However, the one place where we both found solace and peace was Block 111 Woodlawn. We played badminton regularly there and often customers would join as well. Most of them were workers, who were away from their country and family for long periods of time. Seeing us play these traditional games was fun for them.

Despite our constant bickering, Mithila and I formed an unbreakable bond that remains to this day. My parents worked tirelessly to provide for us, and the convenience store was our lifeline. They woke up early to help us prepare for school and went to bed late at night after closing the store. During the day, after returning from school, it was Mithila and I alone. We would carefully put away our clothes, shower, do laundry when necessary, fetch our own food and do our homework. Only when we were done, were we allowed to go to our store front. We would often create our own adventures, from playing tag to exploring the neighborhood, learning how to ride a bike, and using leftover boxes from the store to build our makeshift tent.

The day we played Carrom with my family and the customers was a pivotal moment for me. It was the first time I saw my parents in a different light, as competitive and playful individuals. It was also the day I realized the power of community, of bringing people together through a simple board game. It was a moment of vulnerability for me, as I learned to accept defeat graciously and

appreciate the joy of playing the game. We didn't know it then, but that was our final game of Carrom.

Before my formative years, I was uprooted from my birthplace in Bangladesh and raised in the orderly streets of Singapore. One day, my world was suddenly turned upside down as I was forced to return to the chaotic and unfamiliar land I had left behind. I was pushed into a world of uncertainty and found myself learning to navigate the rough waters of Bangladesh's society, culture, and language. I faced personal struggles that would forever shape my character.

My family had left Bangladesh in 2004, when Bangladesh was wrapped up in an unsettling storm of uncertainty and political crisis. With a caretaker government at the helm, chaos consumed the nation, and violent strikes created a menacing shadow over daily life.

Through my father's eyes, I came to understand the relentless struggles he faced trying to navigate the dangerous streets on his way to work. We were a middle-class family, and the rickshaw, a common and quick way to get around, was our lifeline. These three-wheeled carts, expertly navigated by their pedaling drivers, zipped through the narrow streets like agile dragonflies, offering an affordable way to ride around one of the busiest cities in the world. But even the simple rickshaw couldn't avoid the troubles that affected the nation. With emotions running high and tensions boiling over, rickshaw passengers were sometimes yanked from their seats and brutally beaten for not joining the strikers or bowing to their demands. These terrifying encounters motivated my parents to move to Singapore, where we hoped to find safety in a more stable place.

Growing up in Singapore, the stories my parents shared about Bangladesh seemed like a distant reality. Singapore was a strict and orderly country, where even spitting could result in a \$100 Singapore dollar fine. Throughout our seven-year stay, I was so disconnected from my roots that the idea of visiting Bangladesh never crossed my mind. At times, I was ashamed about my Bangladeshi

heritage when my school friends identified me as Indian due to my skin color and mocked me for the curry scent that lingered on me.

I hesitated to speak on the phone to my family in Bangladesh because they seemed like strangers to me. My mother would push me to talk to them, but I never felt compelled. Back then, without internet access and relying on old Nokia phones, communication was challenging due to frequent network outages, expensive call charges, and the tendency of elderly people to speak loudly. I didn't grasp the emotional connection, so I couldn't understand why my parents went to such lengths to keep in touch with them. Looking back, I can't help but wonder if today's technology, with its video calling capabilities, could have helped me establish a bond with them.

Aside from my struggles with my identity, I was living a secure and innocent life in Singapore, with a bright future ahead. The moment I set foot in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, I knew it would be a huge change in my life.

In April of 2011, I woke up at 7 a.m. expecting a normal school day. Instead, my parents dropped a bomb on Mithila and me: we were leaving for Bangladesh, and we might never come back. Mithila and I were shocked. I kept asking my mom, "Why do we have to leave?" Her eyes welled up with tears as she tried to hold back her emotions, and with a trembling voice, she replied, "Because we have to, son". Both Mithila and I shared the same feelings of frustration and confusion. Only as adults could we finally comprehend the cruelty of what happened. My mom confessed that our sudden departure was triggered by my uncle, their own business partner, who had turned against them, using the store's legal documents to destroy everything. Even years later, it was incredibly difficult to come to terms with this news, especially since he had been such a close member of our family. Since our stay in Singapore depended on our business visa, we were no longer eligible to remain. One week after receiving this news, we were on our way back to Bangladesh. During that week, the mood was somber. My mom talked tearfully with her family on the phone about the

situation, her voice often trembling. In those final days, my dad kept himself busy with paperwork and getting the store ready for its next owner. We packed our belongings and had to let go of everything we had built over the past seven years.

When I first arrived in Bangladesh, the chaos outside the airport was overwhelming. The city was packed with people, loud noises, and the smell of local food mixed with the stench of open garbage piles along the roads. The air was thick with heat, humidity, and dust. The journey to my grandparents' house was a sensory shock; Dhaka's infamous traffic and relentless noise quickly left me with a pounding headache. My first day in Bangladesh, and it was nothing like I had imagined. Over time, I adapted to everything Bangladesh had to offer. The four years I spent there felt like an adventure. Looking back, it seems like a separate life, with a different character and personality. Adjusting was tough, finding a school, adapting to the culture, and learning a new language were just some of the challenges. On top of that, I faced bullying at school for not fitting in. My classmates often picked on me, trying to assert their dominance over the newcomer. But I tried not to let anything bring me down because I didn't want my parents to see me struggle.

One of the amusing stories my mom loves to share about my time in Bangladesh involves a gift from my grandma. One day, she rewarded me with money for my efforts in adjusting to our new life. She handed me a 10-taka note (Bangladeshi currency), and I stared at it in disbelief, asking, "Why are you giving me so much money?" My grandma, mom and other relatives burst into laughter. In Singapore, a 10-dollar bill would take care of five days' worth of full school lunch. That was the moment everyone made me realize that different currencies have different values in their respective countries. While 10 takas wouldn't buy anything extravagant, it was enough for a simple candy treat.

Living in Bangladesh taught me tough lessons. It wasn't all fun and games when I went out to play with other kids on the streets. Sometimes I was robbed by older kids who would take my

pocket money, even the ten-taka gift my grandma gave me. It was frustrating, but I didn't want to tell my family about it, fearing they might not let me go out to play anymore. Luckily, I started being friends with classmates who lived close by, and we began to play cricket after school in our block. Playing outside was a way for me to adjust to life in Bangladesh and forget about the bad things happening around me. Eventually, the kids who were picking on me realized that I had friends who cared for me, and they stopped bothering me. It was a relief, their kindness made me feel like I was really a part of the community.

As I look back on my time in Bangladesh, I realize just how much it taught me about perseverance, growth and about Bangladeshis itself. At first, it was tough for me to adjust to a new place, but it was even harder for my parents, who struggled to keep their relationship intact while also enduring the stress of setting up a new life. One of the biggest challenges I faced was when my parents separated. The problems that they had been able to ignore in Singapore started to resurface in Bangladesh, and things got to a point where there was even violence involved. Due to several personal reasons, I had to cut contact with my dad.

It was a deeply traumatic experience that took a toll on both my mental and physical health. Before the separation, I had been a healthy child, but afterward I started to lose weight and never fully regained my previous state of wellbeing. It was a struggle to adjust to a society where parents weren't supposed to separate, and I found myself becoming the target of ridicule from people who didn't understand what I was going through. It was a heavy burden to bear, and I had to rely on my close friends to get me through the tough times. Despite the difficulties, I refused to let the stigma and shame of my parents' separation define me. It took years, but eventually, I learned to let go of the negative emotions and focus on the positive.

In 2016, my mom once again had to make a tough call. She wasn't satisfied with the education system in Bangladesh, which was riddled with corruption and lacking in quality. She

decided to pack us up and move us to the USA in search of the American dream. My mother grew up in a traditional way of life, in the village, with minimal education. The goal of every girl was to grow up to be a perfect wife. It is remarkable that she had the vision and guts to start over again in a new country. Once again, we found ourselves needing to adjust to a new way of life. The strength I gained during those tough years was invaluable, and I found myself using those same coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of our new life in America.

There were times when I felt overwhelmed and uncertain, when I missed the familiarity of home and the people I had left behind. But I also felt a sense of hope and excitement for what the future might hold. I was eager to learn new things and experience all that America had to offer.

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