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IN DOUBLE EXILE: A MEMOIR

by

DEBORAH BECKWIN
B.A. University of Chicago, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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Major Professor: Obi Nwakanma

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ABSTRACT

In Double Exile: A Memoir examines the life of a family of Ghanaian immigrants and their journeys of acculturation, and the impact of the father's spiraling mental health issues on his family. Through the eyes of their daughter, this thesis briefly explores their lives on the right side of the Atlantic, as medical professionals, and then focuses on the life of their daughter born in America on the left side of the Atlantic. As novelist Georges Simenon has said, "I am at home everywhere, and nowhere. I am never a stranger and I never quite belong." This memoir explores this tension between alienation and connection, as a second-generation immigrant grows up navigating between various cultures: to dominant American culture, evangelical Christian/Southern culture, African-American culture, and Ghanaian culture. In an attempt to understand the present, this thesis is a *sankofa* journey back into the author's history. Spanning over four decades, the memoir uncovers various exilic configurations: exiled from family, from ethnic heritage, from home, and from one's self.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PROLOGUE.....	1
CHAPTER ONE: THIS LAND WAS YOUR LAND.....	14
CHAPTER TWO: OKLAHOMA CITY BLUES.....	24
CHAPTER THREE: NASHVILLE—MY WONDER YEARS.....	28
CHAPTER FOUR: A NEW “INSIDE” LIFE.....	40
CHAPTER FIVE: HALLELUJAH NIGHTS.....	49
CHAPTER SIX: FINALLY HOME?.....	54
CHAPTER SEVEN: OF BEING AND BLACKNESS.....	70
CHAPTER EIGHT: ESCAPE INTO BEAUTY.....	91
CHAPTER NINE: TRUE LOVE WAITING.....	96
CHAPTER TEN: FAMILY & FAITH.....	117
CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE INTERSTITIAL SPACES.....	133
CHAPTER TWELVE: SWEET HOME NOT YET.....	141
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: S.O.S. TO HOTEL SIERRA.....	153
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: WALKING ALONG THE EDGES.....	170
EPILOGUE.....	206

PROLOGUE

We have gotten used to you being gone. Some friend of a friend of yours saw you at a holiday party in Atlanta, so it seems you still live there. Mom says she doesn't think you want to be found. You burned your last bridge with Dr. K, your medical school classmate, and his wife. Dr. K cared about you. He bailed you out of jail many times, for offenses like riding your bike on the sidewalk, the repeated offenses that seem to follow those who are suffering from mental illness. Dr. K's wife was tired of the back and forth—so they cut you loose.

I wonder how being in and out of jail has been for you. Do the police know you by name and face now? Are you still getting arrested? Or are you in more dire straits? I worked with people just like you in Chicago, when I did social work. It's been a long, tortured fall from where you were when you first came to America from Ghana, over thirty years ago.

You can call this a *sankofa*, Dad, a word you didn't teach me, but is from your people, the Akan. I learned this word from the Covenant Church, a small Protestant denomination from Sweden. When I was in my 20s, I went on a trip through the South, paired with a white woman. The trip was organized through my church in Chicago. Its mission was for us to go back and understand the turbulent 1960s so that we could make sense of institutional racism forty years later. We rode through Birmingham and Mom offered to make me cookies. I declined. I didn't think it was time for cookies. This was a serious trip, and ginger crinkles from Mom would make it less serious, less severe. I wanted to experience that elusive racial reconciliation that I heard while sitting in many a church both in Birmingham and Chicago. I wanted to do my part to usher that in, to help some white people *get it* about what went down here, and how it impacts us in the present. As we sat in a circle in a low-lit room somewhere in Southern Georgia, my

overwhelmed white companion cried over the atrocities of racism and I wondered who this trip was really for. I wondered if I had become some human hanky for my friend to cry into. I thought about that one story of racism you told me in our living room, about living in Oklahoma, about how you had to use the restroom, but they didn't let you. I never asked what happened afterwards. I was too horrified that someone would do that to you in the late 1970s/early 1980s.

Sankofa. There are two *adinkra* symbols for *sankofa*. One is of a bird with an egg on its back, with its neck craning back. The egg symbolizes not only the treasure that the past can bring, but the gift of the future. The other symbol is of a heart with the top ends curled in on itself, its bottom ends curled out with three lines pointing out, as if sitting on a tripod. It means, "Go back and get it." For one to understand one's present and future, one must go back to the past and learn from it.

There were so many other *adinkra* symbols that you didn't tell me about. I only had the tiny gold earrings that Mom gave me and I lost them. The earrings were fashioned in the squiggly symbol for *gye nyame* "except for God." We should fear no one except God, who is omnipotent and omnipresent. I grew up seeing this more than any other for a reason—it is the most popular one in Ghana. I wonder why you, or anyone else, didn't teach me these symbols like how you sat down with me in the den and taught me the Bible. They are all over Ghana—on storefronts, on clothes, on pottery, on baskets. The ubiquity of Akan culture in Ghana makes me wonder why I had to learn about *sankofa* from elsewhere. As Americans, though, *sankofa* is from elsewhere. Maybe this was all due to our lack of connection to the land of Ghana. It could have been that you thought that those mores weren't important here in America. Or, it could have been that I was showing a deep lack of interest in our culture.

You may be right about that, my non-interest. When I was a kid, we sat in the den many times, with a lime green album of your childhood and young adulthood between us. I never asked you to do that—it was compulsory, a required family history class. And maybe that’s how *sankofa* was operating in you. Or at least to remember that you may live here but you come from another place. I saw a picture of you as a little boy, with a navy blue blazer, white button-up shirt, shorts, and sandals, dressed for school, shiny-eyed and smiling. You showed me pictures of your parents. You showed me pictures of your siblings and cousins. You showed me pictures of your friends. All the pictures are a blur now. I wish I had been paying more attention. I sat there, sometimes with a sulk, sometimes with eyes glazed over by boredom, as you repeated to me your stories of hardship.

“My cousins would steal from me a lot.” I couldn’t respond—how does one respond to that? I don’t have cousins here, blood cousins. I couldn’t relate to children my age, related to me, stealing from me. It sounded awful and unfair. Looking back, it explained why you didn’t like me borrowing things from you, like your pens. But while we sat together, we peered through these paper portals back into the past. Interestingly, I would have to ask Mom to see her pictures, and I only remember looking at hers only a few times. One particular evening, she and I sat together in the lowly lit den, and I came across a picture of her when she was my age, around sixteen. It was a light-skinned version of me. It was so eerie, to look into a mirror that was from the past. Up until that point, I didn’t see her in me. And now, I do. I see you both.

I don’t think we understood each other, you and me, being from two different cultures and two different generations, though we are of the same blood and of the same name. I was born in America, the land of the individual. With my extended family living back home in Ghana, I just

saw you as odd. There was no true frame of reference, to see where this uniqueness derived from. Like on Easter Sunday.

I didn't understand that wearing your "Sunday best" involved wearing *kente* cloth, woven with colors of blue, red, gold, black, and green. It smelled of the dyes, a musty, otherworldly scent. The black leather sandals you wore were flat. As a child, I tried them on—they felt like two flat, rigid boards. You wore a cream-colored shirt under the cloth. It was the one time you wore it each year, but I couldn't stand it. We went to church and we all stood together: we looked American. Mom and I wore pastel, floral dresses, and my brother Michael was dressed in a button-up shirt and a clip-on tie that he hated. You looked Ghanaian as you sang in your booming baritone voice. Your voice was as loud as your clothes to me, drawing attention to us. Everyone else *loved* your clothes. The pastor came up to you and grinned, shook your hand, and wished us a happy Easter. I wanted to crawl under the chairs and disappear.

Only now can I see that you were just being yourself. I know you and Mom feared that I would assimilate into American culture, and you had a right to be afraid. I fear that it's happened. When I was eighteen, Mom and I were downstairs in the rec room, with a suitcase open. She was going through all these Ghanaian clothes holding them up to me for my approval.

"Do you like any of them?" She sounded skeptical as she looked at me, slightly narrowing her eyes and tilting her head.

"Well..." I looked at the multi-colored prints, seemingly paired with their opposites on the color wheel—blue and orange, green and purple. I only saw one that I would have liked. It was blue, black, and white, with gold woven through it. In my head, I saw it as a wrap skirt. But I didn't say anything. "Not really, Mom."

“Hmmp, you don’t wear the clothes, you don’t like the food.” She zipped up the suitcase and I went back upstairs. *And I don’t speak either of your languages*, I thought.

What kind of Ghanaian am I?

Well, that was me, being a teenager, and I needed to individuate, to be my own person. But I didn’t see myself as anyone except *me*—and how American of me to do so. But it started before then. Maybe when I was ten years old, one of our family friends was visiting us. I was playing in my room and he came by to say hi.

“So who do you think you look like? Your mom or your dad?”

“No one, I look like me.” I shrugged and smiled. *They may be my parents*, I thought, *but why would you think I looked like anyone, Uncle?*

Uncle R. laughed and he left my room, astonished by my answer. Maybe I was borderline rude. I heard about it after everyone left.

“Why would you say something like that?” Mom asked, hand on her hip.

“Well, because that’s what I think. I don’t know.” I wasn’t trying to be rude, just honest. But now, Dad, I can see I have your cheeks and your laugh; Mom’s eyes and Mom’s sneeze; your sturdy feet and a broad constellation of lighter birthmarks that are the same color as Mom’s skin.

What type of Ghanaian am I? I’m not sure. You and Mom are from different ethnic groups and speak different languages. English is what bound you to each other—that and your spiritual beliefs. Is that why I never learned about *adinkra* symbols? I want to assume that they were important to you, but I can’t tell.

When I was growing up, I admired your spiritual fire. You believed that having faith in God would make everything good. I wonder how you latched onto this in Ghana. Mom said that she was attracted to you because of your passion about the Holy Spirit. That doesn't sound like the mainline Presbyterian life Mom grew up in. Were you attending revival meetings together? Did you have Bible studies together?

I know a bit of what your wedding was like—Christ-centered. You wore the same slim, slate blue sharkskin suit that you wore when you graduated from medical school. Mom wore a lacy empire waist dress with three-quarter sleeves. Her dark red hair was pulled back, with a veil pinned on the top of her head. You two were married in a chapel. I could be imagining this, or it could be your wedding pictures: the chapel was airy and full of light with white walls. Friends and family are standing together in dark wooden pews, holding white hymnals and singing. You declared that Jesus would be the center of your marriage. You had a picture of Jesus between pictures of the two of you. You were smiling, happy. It seems as if that happy man, frozen in 1976, is how your friends and Mom have chosen to remember you. I don't know if they really have accepted the man you have become here, on this side of the Atlantic. I had trouble conveying this change in you to them, especially with Auntie M.

I came back home for my 25th birthday and Mom, Michael, and I went to Auntie M.'s and Uncle J.'s house for a little Christmas birthday celebration for me. I was up getting some food in the kitchen when she came behind me and spoke to me *sotto voce*.

“I wish your dad was here with us. He was so different than he is now.”

“Hmmm, it's hard to see that.” I scooped sweet potatoes on my plate.

“I know, but I believe God can restore him to how he used to be.” She smiled and patted my back. I sighed. I thought back to 1996. Auntie M. was there with me, as I sat on my bed,

devastated that I couldn't go to college. She encouraged me to keep the faith and look at other schools. Seven years later, it was as if that had never happened. Maybe because she knew what happened, but not *why*. Maybe she was in denial about your illness. I nodded, smiled, and walked out of the kitchen and back to my seat on the couch in the living room.

I am sure she still believes you'll be OK; that you and Mom will get back to that happy wedding day. I'm not so sure. Even Mom isn't sure. But many people, including me, looked up to you spiritually, because you were so fervent in your faith.

I wonder if you understand how unwell you are. You sent me letters back when I lived in Chicago, long single-spaced letters, written in black and red lettering as if it were a kind of scream, like the words of Jesus in the New Testament. I wish I had kept them, but they were so long, so sad, so alarming. I sat on my bed and tried to read the letter. "You must tell Jesse Jackson about my case! Please contact him for me!" All these paranoid ramblings, these persistently oppressive thoughts, these desperate pleadings that I couldn't answer.

It's bipolar disorder. At least that's what Mom and I think. And that's why you went to prison later, sometime during my early 20s. The official crime was a narcotics charge. You prescribed medications like Oxycontin to patients you had not seen. But your incarceration was truly caused by your worsening mental health. It's no wonder that the prison system is the number one mental health provider in the United States. I remember you would say more and more as I grew older, "I've got to put bread on the table." You were compelled by this unrelenting drive to provide for us, but your mind failed you.

This barrier of bipolar disorder was most likely the stubborn hurdle that you couldn't clear as you chased the American Dream. You started at Howard University, as a first-year resident specializing in family medicine. Mom said that a family friend told her that you were busier

taking pictures of the nurses than doing your job as a resident. I remember a picture, with a bluish tint, of nurses in dark red scrubs, and maybe that was at Howard? Is that why you only lasted a year in the program? I can imagine how much pressure that was for you. I know that family practice is hard—you have to take care of *everybody*. And you were a newlywed, but Mom came to the States later. So you tried again, in Oklahoma, where Michael and I were born.

When you were working at an Air Force base, I'm guessing that you were there for another residency program. You and Mom rarely talked about our life in Oklahoma. I heard stories about the two of you from each other, but rarely your own stories about yourselves. In a moment of candor—or maybe desperation—you came into my room, wanting to talk. I was eighteen, waiting to go to college. You knocked, came in, and closed the door. Somehow, we got on the topic, but it came out of nowhere: Mom's post-partum depression after she had me. I had no idea that she had endured that, and you went on to say that she was homesick.

As I sat on my bed, I imagined what it would have been like for her. She came from the tropics. She left her career as a nurse and midwife, her large immediate family, and her mother who loved you both. She left all that for America and for you as your wife. Then she soon became pregnant with me. She didn't know many people. Maybe this is why she latched onto a Presbyterian church—one of the cultural touchstones that she knew she could rely on.

I said nothing. But I don't think you understood how the conversation turned even more awkward when you shared with me about the last time you and Mom had sex. I cut you off mid-sentence when you started to mention the year (it was 1990-something), yelped, and held up my hands in protest. I told you that as your daughter, I didn't need to know about your sex life. My room shared a wall with your bedroom, and it made me grateful that I couldn't hear everything going on in there. Your facial expression was a bit blank when I asked you if you wanted to talk

to a third party about this issue and you replied no. I said OK, but I can't keep talking to you about this. You gave me a slight nod of your head, left my room, and closed the door.

One afternoon, when I was in my teens, I was sitting in the den, talking with Mom about you. I learned that you had crashed a plane in Oklahoma. My eyes widened as I shook my head, dumfounded. I had never thought of you as human and fallible in that way, not yet—not so early in my known history of you. I never followed up and asked the obvious questions: how? why? when? *what?* As a small child, under the age of four, there was no way I could have known these earlier versions of you and Mom.

My nine pounds, two ounces newborn body was placed in a large red stocking with the fuzzy white top after as I was born. That's how I was presented to Mom, as a stocking stuffer. They did this to all the Christmas babies. I've since lost the stocking. When I was away at college, I asked Mom what it was like when I arrived and she replied that she didn't want to talk about it. It was an unexpected punch in the chest. Why wouldn't a mother talk about what seemed to be a joyous moment in her life? I gave it another try a few years later.

“What was the day of my birth like, Mom? Last time, you didn't want to talk to me about it.”

“Ho. I didn't say that.” She sucked her teeth. Mom always has this cool, dismissive voice.

“Yes, you did!” My hand holding the phone became hot and sweaty.

“I don't remember saying that. But I may have said that because labor was hard. The epidural went up too far and I started to have problems breathing and then felt faint. I kept telling the doctors, ‘Something is wrong!’ I was a nurse, I knew what was happening. It took some time to pay attention to me.”

“Wow, I had no idea. Was Dad there?”

“No, he had to work.”

And I couldn't believe that—not because I thought Mom was lying, but that you had to work when your wife was having your first kid. Did you try to trade a shift with someone? Did you want to be there? Who was there with Mom, then? I'm assuming my godparents, Irene and Mike. Mike was in the Air Force, too. I have no memories of them in Oklahoma, but they took care of me and Mom on New Year's Eve, a few days after my birth.

One of the few stories about me from Oklahoma concerns the two of you. When I was four, you and Mom were arguing about something. I stood between the two of you, held up my little arms, and yelled, “Stop fighting!” And you two listened and started to argue in private. Maybe you were arguing in the living room, with that bright blue carpet; or maybe in the bedroom, where I slept at the foot of your bed in a crib. I don't know. But I can only surmise that life in Oklahoma was hard for us.

Where I loved living the most was Nashville. Looking back, I feel that we as a family found our stride there. We moved there so you could attempt another family medicine residency, this time at Meharry College.

You took a picture of me and my best friend/next door neighbor, Jennifer on our porch. I imagine Jennifer as some actress or something involving fame, because she posed like an adult. She has tousled blonde hair, with one of her arms raised above her head, showing her pale belly and narrow navel, and her head tossed back. I was the tomboy, with my navy blue Converse shoes with Velcro straps, navy blue top, red pants, and the messiest hair. I gave a Mona Lisa smile because I didn't like smiling with my teeth yet. I held my hands behind my back. We were

opposites, and she let me know when she whispered to me one day about a bad name that people like me were called.

When we left Nashville, Jennifer wrote me a letter on a sheet of loose-leaf, wide-ruled paper. She taped a penny on it. I didn't write her back. When I was a few years older, I felt an intense regret after I saw the movie *Beaches*, starring Bette Midler, about life-long best friends. I had squelched my chance for that sort of friendship with her. But that whispered conversation on her porch that I never told you about, the one where she told me about the n-word, drew an indelible line between us. When I was around 12 years old, we visited Nashville and drove back to the old neighborhood to our old house. I sat in the back seat of the car. We stopped, parked across from her house.

You looked at me through the rear view mirror and asked if I wanted to see Jennifer. You drove us there just for that. I squirmed in the plush grey cloth seat, as we were parked across from her house.

"No," I replied in a small, swallowed voice. It felt so long ago, and I didn't know what to say to her. I had grown shy, but I had also grown up. So much had changed—could we be the same type of friends?

You said OK. You sounded disappointed. You put the car in gear and we drove away. I looked back through the window at her brown brick house, torn by my ambivalence between a lack of interest and curiosity. I've tried to look her up on Facebook, but I can't find her. And I don't want to anymore.

We started to see you less and less. You were a temp-for-hire doctor, and would get temporary gigs as far as Kentucky. I got so used to you not being there, just like how you're not

around now. Your returns felt like an intrusion to the natural rhythm of our family of three.

When you returned from faraway, you walked through the front door and trudged up the stairs with your attaché and bags. Mom sat in the den, crocheting while watching the news. Michael listened to books on tape on the stereo in his room, and I sat in bed with a book or in the den with Mom watching television.

You mumbled a tired but formal hello to Mom. It was a perfunctory gesture between two people who used to know each other, maybe even liked each other's company at one time.

"Hi," Mom replied as she looked up briefly over her round reading glasses.

If I was there, I would say hi as well, but would feel that the party of peace was over. Now we had to readjust our circle to accommodate your unsettled presence. With those more and more infrequent adjustments, the links between you and me loosened. Like the time I gave you my report card in junior high. You didn't know what grade I was in and I had to remind you that I was in sixth grade. It was like talking to a grown-up who met me for the first time, not my father. In the line of As was an intolerable B. In Bible. Heaven forbid. Your voice became louder when you asked why this grade was there, if I had been studying it. Under the hot glare of your anger, so I could escape to my room, I said I didn't know. But it was also because I truly didn't know why I got that grade.

And this is where I want to stop, because it just gets worse from here, it being my life, *our lives*, and I need to understand the unraveling. I wrote a lot about how things got worse in my journals, and I fear looking back to see what happened, or what I recorded.

This will be my own *sankofa* now. I will go back and get those memories that I shoved up in the attic of my mind. I want to understand what happened to me, to you, to our family. Maybe I can find where all the promise and potential went. Did mental illness swallow it? Were you

made to be a dad? Is America the land of milk and honey that's become curdled and rancid for us? Maybe these are unanswerable questions. Although you didn't explicitly teach me these values, I feel the compulsion to look back burning in my blood.

With you not around, the question *What kind of Ghanaian am I?* hangs in the air like an insistent rhetorical question. I could try to look you up, drive up to Atlanta, and ask you a lot of questions about your life before America, and how it was for you here when you first started. I know you would answer those questions of heritage and meaning and legacy. But all this time, of being apart, of hurts created, healed and scarred over, there's a larger distance that I would have to drive first, the one where I see you not as just the bogeyman, the selfish, absent father. Maybe I can travel back to see how we became who we are now.

CHAPTER ONE: THIS LAND WAS YOUR LAND

Deborah Akosua Beckwin is not my original name. I was born with a different last name, Bekoe (pronounced beh-QUENH) which means “born in a time of war.” After hearing too many telemarketers call our house asking to speak to “Mister Bee-KOH,” my father decided one December day in 1987 to have his own Ellis Island moment. He went to the county courthouse and changed Bekoe to Beckwin. I returned to school the following January with a new name. Yet I didn’t know how to pronounce it, which means that no one else outside of our family did either. Americans like me pronounce the name *Beckwin*. Yet the spelling of Beckwin was intended to be the phonetic way of saying our original name.

As it is in the Akan tradition, my father named me and chose my Christian name to be Deborah. I had asked my mother why my father picked the name Deborah, which was not a common name in 1977. The most popular name that year was Jennifer. My name was more popular in the mid-1950s through the mid-1960s. By 1967, it fell out of the top 20. I grew up hearing from my classmates and friends, “My mom’s name is Deborah,” or “My aunt’s name is Deborah.”

I never thought to ask my father because I was too enamored with the story of Deborah, the judge and prophetess in the book of Judges in the Bible. For an Old Testament woman, she was tough and she was in charge. She ruled the nation of Israel while sitting under a palm tree, listening to the cases of the people. My favorite part of her story is that her sidekick, Jael, hammered a tent peg with a wooden mallet into the temple of the enemy army general while he slept. I wonder if my father wanted those traits in me. Not the murderous ones, but the tough and in-charge ones.

I only realized the intended pronunciation of my surname when my father popped up back on our radar during Christmastime 2013. None of my dad's friends had heard from him in over a year until a mutual friend had passed away earlier that year. My uncle from my mom's side and my father were on the same email message about the funeral, so my father emailed my uncle and gave him his phone number. I had no idea that they had been good friends and schoolmates from high school, besides being brothers-in-law. My aunt, my mom's younger sister Paulina, tried to call him. "May I speak to Dr. Beckwin?" she asked. My mom laughed on the phone as she imitated her. "Oh, it went wrong from there!" When my mom mimicked Auntie Paulie, I had never heard our last name pronounced in that way. In that moment, I realized that I had been saying my last name wrong ever since I received it almost three decades ago. What kind of person, an adult person that's closer to middle age than adolescence, doesn't know how to say their own name?

As my thoughts tumbled over themselves in confusion, I told my mom about how dumb I felt and how I pronounced my last name as *Beckwin*. She gave me a pass. "It's alright to say it that way." I still don't think so, since that wasn't the name creator's intention, but it's hard to break such an old habit. And there's my middle name.

Akosua (ah KO see UH) is a name meant for a girl born on a Sunday. It sounds like the Twi word for an egg (kosua). I've heard my mom say it differently, like as it's written (ah KO su WAH). Again, how did I get my name wrong? My father had called me this name over and over, in that bass-filled, stern voice. *I know my name!* Actually, my name has two pronunciations. The only people I have heard call me Akosua in the other way have not been Akan people but Ga people—my mom's ethnic group. Still, it threw me in a bit of a panic. It was more than just

about whether I knew something as basic as my name, as if I had some sort of processing disorder. I was shaken because I felt the realized fear that many immigrants have for their American-born children—that I had forgotten who I was and where we had come from. Or, where *my parents* had come from. Or, both. It's hard to know what you're missing unless you start to ask questions. But what are the right questions to ask? Where do I start? Lewis Carroll wrote in *Alice in Wonderland*: "Begin at the beginning." The beginning is before I was born, where my parents were born.

I haven't been to Ghana yet, but I have been able to learn more about my parents, our friends, and their immigrant experiences by traveling to Tallahassee to visit old family friends, Uncle Joe and Auntie Mabel. I hugged them and realized how tall I was at five feet, six inches. They were both a couple of inches shorter than me.

"Ohhhhh, Debbie, so good to see you," Auntie Mabel said as we hugged. I missed hearing the sing-song lilt of Ghanaian-drenched English.

I sat down with them on their couch in their open living room and talked about the past. I was nervous about seeing them again. I had changed so much and had some pointed views about how I grew up. I wasn't happy about it and I wanted the real answers as an adult, as an equal. Yet in Ghanaian culture, the child, even as an adult, is in a permanent subordinate role. Could I respect them while being honest about how I felt?

I hadn't seen Uncle Joe and Auntie Mabel since I was a teenager. Their children were favorite playmates of mine and my brother's when we lived in Nashville. I tried to absorb how much time had passed.

After some small talk about graduate school, their kids, and what they had been up to, I

asked them about their time in Ghana before they immigrated.

“Oh yes, we were doing well, Debbie. Mabel, she was a professor, and I was in business. We had a nice house. People came and mowed our lawns.”

“Wow. So why did you come? Did you come because of the coups?”

“No, we could have stayed. We were fine. We came to the States for the adventure.”

Uncle Joe’s brown eyes twinkled. This new adventure was fraught with financial and emotional upheaval. They discarded their statuses, and their emigration to America reshuffled them to the bottom of the deck. I knew the later part of their stories. I didn’t really know about their past lives, about their pre-American identities. But now I was welcome into these adult conversations, brought up from the kids’ table. Although my parents usually spoke to me like a peer, there were things that they hid from me, like the angst and the uncertainty of being far from home, of attempting to make this strange new world their home. And I don’t blame them—scary feelings for them, feelings that I didn’t need to know or experience.

I concluded that some did want that sense of adventure, of making this New World land their lasting home. Like all American immigrants, I viewed the United States as the proverbial land of milk and honey. It was an automatic reflex, to think and feel this way. Why would anyone want to live anywhere else? All must come because America is the best country. It’s a land of freedom and opportunity, open to all who come. All you have to do is work hard and success will find you, as easily as one can find a Starbucks in the suburbs. And if you’re already successful, then you can find even more success here. Leave your inferior country of origin behind. Adopt our creed. Become an American.

This story of promise is still being told. It has some unspoken, hidden caveats that are shown through the fractures of my family. The Statue of Liberty’s inscription reads:

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses, yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

My parents weren't exactly huddled masses. But they were homeless, tempest-tossed by the instability of their government. How does one get through the golden door, let alone unscathed?

My father's name is Joseph. His nickname is an acronym, Jabys (jah-bees), which stands for Joseph Ayeh Bekoe Yao Simon. Ayeh Bekoe was his father, who named him. My father grew up in the lush mountains near Koforidua, located 50 miles north of Accra, Ghana's capital. He attended the prestigious Presbyterian Boys' Secondary School, nicknamed PRESEC. Their symbol is of the baobab tree, a symbol of knowledge, resourcefulness and strength. This strange-looking tree, with its thick, wide trunk and smooth bark, stood in the middle of campus, carved up with the names of students. I wonder if Jabys is carved in there. Or Uncle David's name. The name of the tree, as well as an alumnus, is called an $\text{O}dade\epsilon$.

When I reflect on it, my father's story, although it is shrouded in some mystery, some forgetfulness, and the realization that I don't know if I ever will know him as a person with a whole history—it is really remarkable. It's the kind of story that we Americans love to tout as the fulfillment of the American dream. This boy from the mountains—"from the bush" as my dad would say—came down south to suburban Accra for boarding school and then squeaked his way

into medical school, receiving a chance at *really* making it. I knew he went to boarding school, but he never made PRESEC into what it actually was. If anything, my dad tended to downplay his smarts by telling me he graduated last in his class in medical school. That always reminded me of this joke: what do you call the medical student who graduated last in his class? Doctor.

Maybe his downplaying his intellect is why I always tend to brag on my mother's side of the family, the Quist-Thersons, for the brains in our family. For example, I have a great uncle who was a graduate of either Oxford or Cambridge. My mother's family emphasis on education that played out in simple ways, like when my mom would always refer me to the dictionary when I asked what a word meant. But my father, coming from very little, had his own brilliance, wrapped up in a quirky, eccentric coating that sometimes distracted and deflected. Little did he know, but Ghana held his glory days.

My father met my mom, Dorothy, during her midwifery schooling at the University of Ghana Teaching Hospital. It wasn't just their careers that brought them together (and maybe their smarts, too). It was their ardent love for God. My father was involved in a large Christian fellowship called ScriptureUnion in medical school. He was quite popular in the fellowship because he knew how to fix things, like broken watches or cars. ScriptureUnion was a part of a major evangelical movement that erupted in parts of West Africa during the 1950s-1970s. This movement had a charismatic flair that emphasized the baptism of the Holy Spirit—a spiritual baptism displayed by speaking in tongues and spontaneous healings.

My mom was on her own spiritual journey and found my dad's love for God and kindness towards people attractive. On their wedding day, my dad proclaimed that God would be at the center of their marriage. One of their wedding pictures was of three portrait shots: my father, my mother, and a picture of Jesus in between the two of them.

This spiritual movement grew in turbulent times, before my parents met each other. But maybe people like my parents were drawn to it because of the turbulent times. Ghana, formerly known as the Gold Coast and as a colony of the British Empire, in March 6, 1957 became the first African nation to gain independence. My mom was a little girl, having just turned nine years old, and was a part of the official state celebrations. The stable government didn't last long. While Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president, was visiting North Vietnam and China, Emanuel Kwasi Kotoka and the National Liberation Army staged the first coup in 1966. My mom and dad were eighteen and twenty-one years old respectively. They had been born into the colony, into the British Empire, saw the colony evolve into a nation-state as children, and then saw Ghana plunge into chaos as young adults and budding professionals.

But 1966 was the beginning of fifteen years of instability for the country, with coup after coup. By the time my parents married in January 1976, my father wanted to leave Ghana and move to the United States. My dad had been talking about this for some time, but my mom had heard that it took a year to get a visa. In Ghana, the increasing chaos created food lines, mismanagement in the hospital where they worked, and an unstable government. This was the beginning of a major brain drain for Ghana. Specifically, doctors couldn't further their education and specialize within Ghana's crumbling infrastructure. Other doctors and professionals began to leave for nearby places like Nigeria, but also to faraway places like America and the U.K. Recent data shows that there are less than four thousand doctors in Ghana, or one doctor for every 6,700 Ghanaians. In the 1990s, two-thirds of doctors trained in Ghana left the country for better paying jobs and working conditions.

A few months after their wedding, my father left Ghana and became a first-year family practice resident at Howard University. He lived with his cousin in Arlington before he lived

with my mom who came in the spring of 1977. Her green card waited for her at the airport. From what my mom tells me, she didn't know what my father was really doing between the time he came to the States and when she arrived. Maybe they wrote each other or talked on the phone, but I wonder how detailed the letters and phone calls were.

Growing up, I came across one washed out picture that my dad took of the nurses' station at the teaching hospital where he worked. The nurses wore cranberry scrubs. Their eyes looked annoyed, their skin washed out by the flash. A family friend told my mom that my dad spent his time taking pictures of the nurses rather than doing his job. Maybe the strain of immigration, plus a new job, and of being a newlywed, had already started to create cracks in my dad's well-being. It was not the life that my mom had signed up for. It was not the future that she had laid out for herself.

My mom, the middle child of seven children, was a good student. She graduated at the top of her class in nursing school and made great strides in her nursing career. As a young woman, she practiced nursing in the rural northern region of Ghana. It is about an eight hour drive or an hour's flight from her home in Accra to Tamale. Few of her colleagues wanted to be there, but she felt deeply committed to the region. Although not yet thirty years old, she was well on her way to becoming a regional director. My mom's family was economically comfortable and strongly valued education. Even though she grew up in the suburbs of Accra and saw poverty in more urban settings, the plight of the impoverished people who lived in the North moved my mother. The kindness that she saw in my father must have reflected her own kindness. Yet I wonder about those desires and dreams that my mom had for herself, that were buried when she left Ghana for America, and then she had me. I wonder if my career focus sprung from

her seeds of ambition.

What I didn't know was that the Quist-Thersons were a well-known, well-respected family in Ghana. They lived in Osu, a coastal neighborhood in Accra that was established due to the Danish fort of Christiansborg, now called Osu Castle, that was built in 1659 and a part of the slave trade. Over the next century, the fort was passed between the Portuguese, Swedish and Danish. As a child, I grew up believing that the Quist-Thersons were Danish, trying to connect myself to the only Danish thing I knew— those Royal Dansk butter cookies that came in a blue round tin that I ate as a kid. Yet according to one of my cousins who worked with a Quist, it's more likely that we have Swedish ancestry. Quist is Swedish for "tree." The Quists were adventurous traders and made it as far as Hawaii. I cannot imagine Scandinavians, leaving their alpine climes and choosing to swelter in the tropics.

It's also been rumored that there is also German and Scottish ancestry, due to missionaries intermarrying. The Scottish were responsible for founding many schools in Ghana, such as my father's high school, PRESEC.

My mother's grandfather was quite a proud man, proud of his privilege and status, and would not allow people to talk down to him. My mom told me that he made up the hyphenated Thersons part so that it would sound fancy. Yet her mother instilled humility in her and her six siblings. My mother was never the bragging type. I do wonder how one can talk about their family's accomplishments and status, like how another great uncle of mine was the first Speaker of the General Assembly, without sounding pompous or arrogant. These bits of information just slip out in conversation. Yet my mother's family status was a part of my family's history that I had to learn from someone else.

Even though I knew my parents as smart, devout people, I never really knew them as a

part of Ghana's elite, with recognizable names. And that elite status was how they made it to the States in the first place. It was a privilege that got them through the golden door, but they had to find their own way as American citizens.

CHAPTER TWO: OKLAHOMA CITY BLUES

My parents' move from Washington D.C. to Oklahoma City may have started the cracks in our family's foundation. Naturally, I don't remember much about the first few years of my life, and my parents rarely talked about Oklahoma. When I ask my mother about that time now in phone conversations, she says it was so long ago. I can almost see her wave the question off with her hand, as if to ward off old ghosts to haunt elsewhere. Yet I want to fill in the gaps and know more about how we were as a family back then.

One crack in the foundation may have been formed by my arrival and the subsequent stress of raising a child without one's family around. Without her large and supportive family around, my mom became homesick in Oklahoma where my dad was stationed as an Air Force captain. He was asked to leave the service after a year, but even my mother doesn't know why this occurred. It seemed, too, that the cracks had started to form between the two of them—why didn't she know the reason my father was dismissed?

My mom most likely suffered from postpartum depression, which I can surmise upset my father because he was the one who told me about it many years later. I can only imagine what it would have been like for both of them: to have been separated, then reunited, then having to move twice—from Accra, Ghana, to Washington DC, and then to the frozen flat fields of Oklahoma City. They barely knew each other as a married couple, and then I came along. She halted her nursing career and chose motherhood. She couldn't complete the one psychology class that would have allowed her to be an RN here because my father was on-call at the mental health hospital for three years. I wonder if daycare was an option for her. Yet I do have a memory of me in daycare as an older little kid, sitting under the table with tape on my mouth, with the lights off.

I told my mother and she never took me back. So yes, I believe she chose motherhood, although I don't think this was an easy choice for her. In one past conversation with her, she basically said that my birth halted her career. I understand the ambivalence, and I'm torn as how to feel about her choice. She gave up her career aspirations to raise me full-time. I'm grateful but dismayed. I don't know if she was a happy mom with me.

I have seen how my mom is with other babies, including when she went back home to bury her mom in 2011. My cousins had posted pictures from her visit and the funereal activities on Facebook since I couldn't afford to go. The baby girl was a second cousin of mine, and she kind of looked like me. She and my mother were in many pictures. As a former midwife, babies were her business before she had me.

My mom makes the goofy faces and silly voices, and babies love her. And my mom loves babies. I do wonder if she ever did that with me, enjoyed me as an infant. Or did we simultaneously reject each other because of the postpartum blues? But even now, I don't necessarily feel that mother-daughter bond as I should, that closeness. Maybe the fissures started because we never really bonded. I do hope that I was enjoyed, that we made each other smile and laugh, that it wasn't as cold and sterile as it feels now. The love between us is there—I can see its light. But I never remember feeling its warmth. I look back to Oklahoma, to where we as a family got our start and wonder if she and I ever had a chance to be close, in such a solitary place. I try to examine our love, but it's like poking at a piece of gleaming ice.

With my father though, I can at least imagine warmth, or recall some glimpses, especially when I became older. The way I remember myself in Oklahoma is through the many pictures my dad took of me. He loved photography and I was Daddy's little girl. The very idea of it feels

foreign to me now; even though I can see the connections and can see our similarities: the love of the arts, the compulsion to be creative, the curiosity and ability to fix things, the feelings of alienation and being misunderstood, and the intelligence. All of those similarities came from observation, not conversation. But at least the connection between us has been documented, in print: I was his primary focus.

One of my first pictures was as an infant, lying in a car seat, chunky, dressed in a white onesie. I had a lot of curly, black hair. My eyes bulged out from the light of the flash. My face was swollen with fat. I was a large newborn, weighing over nine pounds. I was so big that the doctors thought that I was twins.

I wasn't a pretty baby. I wasn't cherubic or small or delicate, like those Anne Geddes pictures of babies as flowers and plants. My baby chunkiness swelled when I was a few months older. I was seated in a high back, avocado green, vinyl swivel chair. I was adorned in gold stud earrings and a diaper. I looked blankly into the lens as my father snapped the picture.

I wasn't a smiling child. Maybe I was picking up on how tough things were. Maybe there wasn't a lot to smile about back then. My size concerned my mother, who thought I'd grow up with oversized breasts as an adult. But as a toddler, I was of normal weight. At around 18 months old, my father took a picture of me walking down the driveway of our house on a sunny spring day. My knees still had some baby fat. I still had that unemotional stare. My hair was styled in a low afro, parted on the right side. I receive this haircut unceremoniously. My father got tired of me yelling and screaming as my mom combed out and braided my hair. It's not the picture of Daddy's Little Girl that I would paint, but it was more true of how I felt to my parents—a barely tolerated irritant. I soon developed my own sense of self outside of my parents—and rather too quickly. Somehow I got the message that I needed to be on my own and take care of myself.

My brother Michael, who came two and a half years after me and a month too early, was the fattest preemie I have ever known, weighing in at seven pounds. He was also an easy, happy baby. He always raised his hands to have people hold him. Although my brother's developmental delays and ADHD were challenging, my parents seemed to *like* him better. He was a likable kid. I wriggled out of embraces. I chose my own clothes to wear and did not want help in putting them on.

There's one picture that gives me a brief feeling of warmth. It's part of the scant evidence of when it was good with my father and me. My dad is holding me, a toddler, and with his bristly beard, he is kissing my cheek. My body is contorted, leaning away from him, my eyes are looking away. I could have not been used to affection at this point. Or maybe I just didn't like his beard. Was the Old Spice aftershave that he wore too strong? I look at that picture and try to remember what that would feel like. Would I like it? Would it make sense to me? Would I crave it like other kids crave the love of their parents?

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

CHAPTER THREE: NASHVILLE—MY WONDER YEARS

I view our life in Nashville through a thick, rosy scrim of nostalgia. I was approximately ages four through eight when I started to individuate into a person who could remember and have a stronger sense of self outside of my parents, as I wobbled into the world as my own person. Panamint Drive created newfound independence, wonderment, and innocence. Seeing our old rented home on the street view of Google Maps brought me back to 1984 and a picture of me in my favorite, busted pink jellie shoes. I stood in the middle of our dead end street, with one leg in front of the other, in my pink shorts and peach polo shirt. There are two pictures: one of me far away, where the street engulfs me; and one of me closer to the camera. All that pent-up energy and heightened sensitivity to all that was around her—it was all encased in that little body. That was prototypical me.

On one wintry afternoon, I was inside the house and heard the screech of tires and a loud, metallic crash. I ran to the window to see what had happened. The road conditions were icy and a car had skidded down the steep hill into the guard rail. I couldn't see it. I craned my neck, pressing my face on the chilled window pane, straining to see. Our house was too far up to see the bottom of the hill. The following day, we drove past the grey guard rail, bent and misshapen by that invisible car I couldn't see from my house. Above the guard rail was a black and yellow striped sign, the stripes shaped like chevrons, pointing up. This was my first memory of rubbernecking. And it was definitely the first time I remember being faced with the possibility of someone dying. I didn't necessarily connect it to me and my own mortality. I rationalized it away as a consequence of driving fast down an icy hill. I don't remember talking to my parents about

it. My auditory witness and summation of the accident all occurred internally, something that would become a trend in my life.

My dad had this odd habit of applying old motor oil to weeds that grew in the cracks of our driveway and in the lawn. One night, when we were returning from somewhere, the street lights blasted their Creamsicle hue and contrasted everything into deep shadow and relief—our house, the electricity pole in front of our house with that tingly dark green slime, possibly creosote, and our mailbox, which had that motor oil around it. I peered into that dark, dark spot, about the size of a dessert plate, along with some other smaller spots. I was immobilized with fear: if I got too close, I would fall in, never to be seen again. Even though I didn't feel those warm, fuzzy feelings from my parents, I still didn't want to be away from them, or Michael, or my friends at school, or the life that I knew. That was my first existential crisis. Meanwhile, my father was going through a bit of an identity crisis.

For my father, his residency at Meharry College didn't go past the first year again. The residency program closed unexpectedly. My dad saw his fellow residents shipped off to other residency programs in the Nashville area while he was left behind, drowning under the waves of situational depression. As a child, I didn't notice because it would soon be contrasted with my favorite version of Dad—the one that had fun with me.

This version of my father lived outside. Inside, he was taciturn and scowling. Inside, I would hear my name bellowed, "Akosua!" and knew I was in trouble. But outside, the scowl disappeared. One of my best memories of fun "outside" Dad was of going to the park, just me and him. It was within walking distance of Jessie Drive, where we lived in a rented brown house. The park was a boundless green space. The sun shone and a breeze blew, soft and light. My dad

and I tossed a foam airplane glider back and forth to each other. I loved to watch it glide in the air, and I loved to watch my father run like a young man. He was the age that I am now, mid-30s. Dad was happy, smiling and yelling, “Go, go, go!” as I ran after the plane. It felt like we did this for hours, just watching the plane glide through the air. The air was filled with our glee and contentment. This memory is far too brief. It's more like a snapshot. Yet looking back, I can see that foam plane as a symbol of his love for aviation. I didn't really understand this almost all-consuming passion of my father's until we moved to Birmingham, Alabama a few years later.

After a year, we moved from Jessie Drive to Panamint Drive, a cul-de-sac where I learned how to ride my bike. It was an old rusty, yellow bike my dad found at a yard sale—a tetanus machine. A dead end is a perfect place to learn how to ride a bike—there's no traffic that you can't see, and little traffic to begin with. My dad ran behind me, with his hand on the back of my seat. He pushed me as I churned my legs and pedaled. This was one of the few times he was patient with me as I learned (learning how to drive ended up being more of a yelling affair). He was excited, saying “Go! Go! Go! Keep pedaling!” I didn't fully learn how to ride my bike on Panamint Drive. My mom wasn't pleased with the severe rust, so I didn't ride it for long. I was forbidden to ride it and I was relieved. I was a bit ashamed of the bike because of its decrepit condition. I wouldn't get a new bike until we moved to Birmingham.

In the meantime, I borrowed the more girly, lavender bike with white plastic basket of my best friend, Jennifer Tomlin, the blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl who had everything I didn't have. Jennifer and her parents, both heavy smokers, both older than my parents, lived next door to the right of our light colored brick split-level home. You could see on their faces how the smoke aged them—I remember mainly the deep wrinkles and tanned brown skin.

Jennifer had a much older brother named Gerald—at least high school aged if not college

aged. I wanted to be someone's little sister instead of being the big sister. I wanted someone to look up to, to borrow clothes from, to give me advice, to baby me. So I was jealous that Jennifer had Gerald. He was tall with brown hair and had a deep voice. I don't think we ever spoke. I may have listened to him pee once while Jennifer and I giggled outside the bathroom. He always intrigued me, like he was some sort of other species of human that was young, but still much too old to talk to. He didn't scare me, but he seemed forbidden; that I would never know him. Looking back, that could have been a slight sexual curiosity. But it could have also been me trying to figure out how to classify someone who was closer to my age than my parents' ages. He wasn't a grown-up, but he wasn't a kid. He was Gerald and he had his own room and I only saw him once or twice.

The Tomlins had a dog, a German Shepherd, who was always behind the gate. Michael was afraid of dogs so he rarely came over with me. I was not really an animal person, so that dog stayed behind the gate. I never petted it or played with it, which I now find strange. Maybe I was a bit afraid of dogs as well. Our family was not a dog family. My mother grew up with a guard dog that I always mistakenly call Jack and I picture him as an English bulldog. I know this story is wrong, because I've asked my mom about it before, but it's the image that's stuck in my head: a squat, white dog, panting in tropical heat, in front of my mom's childhood home.

Although Jennifer was younger than me, she had more grown-up things, like a picture of Prince on her wall. The movie *Purple Rain* came out during our kindergarten year, 1984, and the Purple One was giving us the eye from the poster. Jennifer also owned a herd of My Little Ponies, a Cabbage Patch doll, and the highly coveted, but rarely purchased, Barbie Dream House. Even at six years old, I knew my parents wouldn't dream of outfitting me with such extravagance. Jennifer was the best friend with everything I wanted, and I didn't have to get

those “it” toys because Jennifer had them. My mom gave me a knock-off Barbie, with its cheap hot pink tinsel dress. I was far from impressed so I rarely played with it. I enjoyed reading books, like the ones I could get from the annual book fair at school, more than having a Cabbage Patch doll. To my mom’s credit, she did attempt to get one for me, but she was flummoxed that grandmothers were fighting over the doll. So thank goodness for the spoiled neighbor next door and the vicarious playtime I could have with her.

Maybe she got all that stuff out of parental guilt. My mother told me later that Jennifer would be rushed to the hospital a lot for asthma-related issues, most likely because of her parents’ smoking. She was six years old, just like me.

Besides the best toys, Jennifer also had knowledge I didn’t need to know just yet, like the n-word. She only whispered it to me in secret, one afternoon after school on her porch. I never told my parents because it was a bad word. She felt bad for telling me. In retrospect, it makes me wonder what her parents thought of our family—which was more African than American, but black all the same. And then, what did Jennifer think of me? My racial education had abruptly commenced with that whisper. When we moved to Birmingham, the whisper grew into screams of recognition. But at that time, the whisper faded into the happy din of childhood.

Jennifer’s house isn’t the only memory I have of Panamint Drive. For the most part, I liked our neighbors. Next to Jennifer’s house was a friend of my mother’s, Barbara. I think Barbara was Italian. Matthew, like Gerald, was much older, but more in the teenager realm. I didn’t see him much, but he was cute, with your typical 80’s conservative white boy haircut, warm brown eyes, and a dimpled smile. I’m pretty sure I had a crush on him because I remember feeling too shy to say much whenever he would be around. My mom would visit with Barbara,

and sometimes I would come over with her. All I remember of her is poufy, big, brown hair and flared nostrils. I vaguely remember health issues—maybe there was a stroke. Sometimes in my memory, my mom’s friends all meld into one older person. Barbara was nice, a memorable nice, like she went out of her way to make me feel like I was there. Not like a teacher, but just by addressing me and asking me how I was doing. If I had to contrast this with my parents, I don’t remember many questions about how school was, or how were my friends.

Next door to Barbara was Tom-Tom’s aunt. Tom-Tom was in my Kindergarten class, and I believe he was of Thai descent. I thought it was random and cool that an aunt of my classmate’s lived right across the street from me. I saw her even less, but I liked her. Tom-Tom never came to visit. I’d always look for him, though, hoping one day that he would come over, and I’d catch him playing outside, and we’d play together for a little bit. It was like another connection from my favorite place, living right across the street from me.

Next door to her house was a house that stayed vacant or I didn’t know its occupants. That house was directly across the street from ours. But next door to that house was a big, loud family, with an innumerable amount of family members. Their home can be distilled to the brash sounds that I could hear all the way from inside my house—plates smashing and yelling. I asked my mom about what was going on there, but I knew something wasn’t right. A little girl named Olivia, who wore hearing aids, lived there. She had an earlobe torn through from her earring. She was quiet and due to her hearing disability, spoke with a sort of muffle, but Jennifer and I would play with her, and we both knew that we needed to be extra nice to her. I fear that Olivia became deaf from being abused, like someone smacked her around. I had that eerie feeling thirty years ago as a Kindergartener, and it hasn’t left. After a while, the family moved out. I didn’t miss them much and I’m sure neither did their neighbors. But I always wondered about Olivia. This

was maybe the first time that I knew of someone else's pain and suffering, that it was readily apparent on their body. Her big blue-green eyes always seemed so sad, too. And there was nothing that I could do. I couldn't protect her. I imagined what it must have felt like to have your earrings ripped through your earholes. I still wince inwardly at that perceived feeling. Who did that to her? Why? Olivia was sweet, kind, and quiet. I knew there was no way that she could deserve that, but at the same time, I knew that sometimes, bad things just happened, even if you didn't deserve it. And there was nothing that I could do. All I could do was be extra nice and while I was brimming full of unseen concern on the inside.

So this was my world, with my mom and dad, my little brother Michael, Jennifer my best friend, and verdant wonder. The color I remember of my little dead end street is green. My relationship with nature was one of curiosity and terror. We had a big fern-like tree—what I've finally discovered as a Persian silk tree. It grew in the front of the yard. Its leaves closed if you touched them and they would close at night and when it rained. Golf-ball sized pom-pom flowers of hot pink adorned the tree. I loved and feared that tree, and I was sad when I saw that it had been cut down.

Our front yard was small, and the backyard was small, too. I didn't play there much. There was a white clothesline that seemed to take up most of the room. But one time, there was a big, white, puffball fungus, as big as a soccer ball if not bigger. I might have kicked it once, as a myriad of spores flew into the air. Puffball fungi still make my skin itch with anxiety and dread.

One afternoon, Jennifer and I explored behind our block, in between Barbara's and Tom-Tom's aunt's house. Without fences, we easily traversed right through to the no-man's land. A big green hill stood before us and water flowed at the basin. We played pretend, but those alter

egos, and all those memories, were left in that stream. On the other side of those trees were more houses. Nashville can be quite hilly, and yet a six-year-old's hills are not the same as an adult's hills—everything seemed larger back then. This place was unknown, but not forbidden. Lush and wet, but not stinky and gross.

My life on Panamint Drive, more than the home I came to grow up in, sticks with me more than any other place I've lived. This place is my "happy" place, a place of idyllic fun and rest, of wonder and joy, even though I only stayed there for a couple of years. I barely remember all the activities outside, but I do remember the feeling of being outside. Outside was my domain, even more than when I would read books inside.

"Inside" was actually a smaller place, ruled and regulated by my mother, where I would have to eat whatever she cooked. This included ham sandwiches on white bread smeared with abhorrent mayonnaise. I was told not to hit my brother. I was told not to run inside. Inside was a place of structure and adult edicts: there was this coarse patterned lime green carpeting and me, practicing to write in my 1st grade journal. I held my shiny green "Husky" soft-lead pencil and copied an article from the newspaper about Charlton Heston and his movie career. "Outside" was largeness, expansion, deep breaths, giggles, bike riding, running, and acting out TV movies that were on the night before. "Outside" was purely a child's realm, with kids' rules, a kid's point of view, and kid ecstasy.

Since my life on Panamint Drive wasn't dramatic and almost quite idyllic, this persistent wistfulness could have somewhat to do with how moving at age eight can be profoundly traumatic, even if you've moved ten times since then. Even as an adult, whether I move across town or across the country, moving is a trauma that a bigger home and new furniture can't fully heal or soothe. I felt forever changed when I left Nashville, that I had lost something—something

that had to do with my original, spunky, free-spirited self. Maybe one of those existential black holes had finally found me, sucked me up, and spaghettified me. Even though my father was suffering, which may have dampened the life I lived while living in our house together, I cannot stop looking at this time as the best time of my life. I peaked at six years old. Why would I want to leave this life that we live on our dead end street, with my best friend next door, all her toys, the tamed wilderness to explore, the Persian silk tree, the older, mysterious boys, and my imagination—all right there, all outside?

In an attempt to get that old friendly feeling back, I searched for Jennifer Tomlin online, even on Facebook. Her name might as well be Jennifer Smith, it is so popular. I still haven't found her. What would I even say if I did? Would she remember like I have? Would she care as much as I still do? I lost more than Jennifer's toys and friendship; more than a tree and a forgotten stream. I lost other friendships with the Ghanaian kids I knew, the kids at school, and, maybe, a small but noticeable amount of innocence, along with a little bigger piece of myself and my identity. My name went from Debbie, what my family and friends all called me, to Deborah when I moved—an instant shot of maturity. Usually my mother introduced me as Debbie, but somehow Deborah was who I became when we left Nashville. I never insisted, "No, I would like to be called Debbie." I just went along with it. Now, if someone attempts to call me Debbie, I recoil because it makes me feel as if I'm eight again, or that I'm in trouble with my parents. It could be a feeble attempt to regain some agency that I lost when we moved. Maybe my tomboyish ways had to do with a sense of self-confidence that I also lost. I started to have closer friendships with girls after the move.

When I look back now at Google Maps, at how small that dead end street is now, I realize that growing up sometimes can narrow your vision. When people move away, staying in touch,

even for kids, can be so hard, and I'm grateful for Jennifer trying to stay in touch with me when we were little. And I should be a little more compassionate and forgiving towards myself that I failed at staying in touch with her, too; that I felt weird writing her back because she was far away. I was only three hours away by car or thirty minutes away by plane. Even in adult mileage, that's a little far for friendship. For a kid of the 1980s, moving away was like travelling to another planet in another solar system.

In Birmingham, I did make new friends, but none of them had the lifelong impact like Jennifer, Olivia, and my guy friends in first grade, Jerry and R.W.

In first grade, I became a tomboy. I had my friends Ryan, or R.W., a handsome boy with dirty blonde hair and blue eyes and Jerry, a husky kid with light brown hair and light blue eyes. We were a trio of close friends. Ms. Sykes, our teacher, introduced journaling to me, and I remember journaling a time when we were angry at each other. But the next page, we had made up. I drew us as crude stick figures with square bodies and large heads. She also introduced us to this aphorism:

Love is a circle, it knows no bounds.

The more you give, the more comes around.

I journaled about this and drew a big red heart. I carefully wrote those words in a 5-subject notebook that my brother ended up tearing up in one of his rages many years later. I loved hearing it, loved repeating it with the class. Love wasn't something that we talked about explicitly at home. Love made abstract sense—it's nice to have love, like how my teachers loved

me—but not concrete, everyday life sense. Not yet. I was still grappling with the concepts of life and death.

On Saturday afternoons, Cole Elementary played movies on a reel-to-reel projector in the lunchroom. Mom and I would go on occasion. I would get popcorn and be enraptured. The only movie I remember watching was the Disney movie *Bambi*. I sat there, so confused if Bambi's mother had been killed. I remember tugging on my mom, asking, "What happened? Did she die?" I don't remember her response. I couldn't fathom that she had died. I feel like a part of me still can't fathom it. I didn't ask her anything about it later. I just swallowed that experience whole. Unlike other Disney movies, I haven't watched *Bambi* since. I have had no desire to. Maybe this affected me so much because, although I had my independent nature, developmentally as a child I still had my identity wrapped up in my mother. In my mind, without her existence, I would cease to exist.

There are parts of myself that stay frozen in time, for better and for worse, locked in an emotional cryogenic state, even into adulthood, where I know the truth of what happened, but my younger self stays in that frozen state of disbelief, where death and loss don't exist. I don't think I wanted to move, yet I don't have many attachments to my classmates in that grade, either in Nashville or in Birmingham. It was as if I was divided in two, over a three hour drive distance on the I-65, and I never was put back together again. There is always a part of me that wants to go back to the idyllic time of our Nashville years. And it had to do with our Ghanaian community.

We were close to two different families, Uncle Joe and Auntie Mabel, and their kids Pearl, Ruby, and Junior, and Uncle Kofi and Auntie Joyce, and their kids Afua, Amma, Afi, and Kofi Jr. I loved going to "Afua's house," a small red house on a steep hill. There may have been

a deck in the back but their large backyard was the steep hill. The grasses one year held grasshoppers—it must have been dry that summer. They were everywhere, their light green bodies hidden in the tall grasses, hopping around. I was repulsed by them. I didn't enjoy them like the rest of the kids did, laughing with glee as they leaped.

Whenever we all got together, all of our families, it was a loud affair with lots of laughter and yelps of delight. But we were all well-behaved. And although I don't remember many events, I just remember that these folks were my extended family here while my blood-related extended family lived overseas in Ghana, and that I hadn't met them. I remember how I felt—loved by my aunts, uncles, and cousins. I suffer from pangs of envy when I see Afua, a radiologist, married with two kids, and Ruby, a singer/songwriter, call each other *cousis*—cousin/sister.

For diasporic families that were separated from our blood relatives, we were family for each other. These families were more my aunts and uncles and cousins than my actual aunts, uncles, and cousins. It never occurred to me that what Jennifer whispered to me on her porch would apply to us; that we were really different, *less than*. When we were together, we were *more than* who we could be when we were apart. The adults helped each other adjust to American life and leaned on each other more than I knew. And yet, it was connected to the n-word that Jennifer exposed me to, the word that my parents never expected to be seen as or called, the word that was emblematic of how America would really see us. My parents were able to get in the golden door, but Lady Liberty made sure that kicked them down and locked the door. There was no going back home. Education and faith would be the threads that bound us together, threads that America readily approved of. Yet what we really needed was family. We just didn't know.

CHAPTER FOUR: A NEW “INSIDE” LIFE

School became a refuge for me. I don't know if I was picking up on my father's woes as a family practice resident, or the pain of miscarriage from my mother's third pregnancy. Maybe the “outside” life wasn't enough. The “inside” home life was harsh and unrelenting. Maybe I wasn't allowed to be my full self because as a gifted child, I was so loquacious that my brain went faster than my mouth. Bolstered by my precociousness, I challenged my parents without fear, which could have made me not the warmest child to parent.

Ghanaian parenting was focused on provision. If love was an alien concept in our home, then it was tacitly shown through how my mom would make my favorite meal of rice and eggs, or when she baked fruit cake during the holidays, or that we never went hungry at all. Ghanaian parenting was also focused on making sure you were doing the right thing and that you did it well. I'm not sure if I was born a perfectionist, or if this sort of strict adherence to excellence created that monster. Either way, I grew up thinking that I never did anything right. At school, I was perfect. I was seen. I was loved. I could just be myself, just like how I was when I played outside with Jennifer—well, except for that n-word that she knew about at such a young age.

In terms of my confidence as a person in the world, Kindergarten was the peak year of my life. I was “born late” so I went to Kindergarten at age six. I was very much ready to go. Michael and I would get excited when the school bus would come down our street. We peered through our bedroom windows and cheered. Our genetic make-up of being the children of two nerds maybe caused these spontaneous celebrations to erupt. But maybe we just wanted to get out of the house, too, and meet new kids to play with.

On the first day of school, I met my teacher, Mrs. Rebecca Hulse. She had shoulder-length, soft red hair and kind, brown eyes. She ran a battery of tests on me and my classmates. I sat at one of the little wooden tables with the blue little plastic and metal chairs.

“Write your first name, Debbie,” Mrs. Hulse cooed sweetly as she walked around the classroom.

“OK.” I replied. I was so eager to please. I knew I could do this since my mother had made me practice writing before I started school. I took the chubby red crayon and wrote my name in capital letters on the blank piece of paper: DEBBIE.

Mrs. Hulse came over to check on my work. “That’s good! But I need you to write it with uppercase D, and then the rest of your name in lowercase letters.”

“OK.” I was temporarily deflated. I hated getting things wrong. I quickly but steadily wrote D-e-b-b-i-e.

“Good! That’s right!” Mrs. Hulse patted me on the back and I smiled, basking in the glow of her praise.

After the first day of school and the testing, I found out that I was ranked number two in the class. I’m not sure why a six-year-old should and would know this, but I came home, breathless, and asked my mother what our phone number was and to show me how to tie my shoes. These were the two things I didn’t know and I felt embarrassed that I wasn’t shown how to do this before I got to school. It’s not that I only wanted to please Mrs. Hulse, but that I wanted to do my best. I felt unprepared.

In Kindergarten, I had the comfort of a structured day, but also the freedom of play and imagination that I reveled in when I played outside at home. I played house, played with blocks, and played with puppets that came with a little puppet theater—a yellow box with a blue curtain

that I loved to go into and play pretend with the plastic-headed puppets with soft bodies—that was my favorite. Sometimes I would put on shows with another classmate, even if no one was watching.

Mrs. Hulse would sit us down for storytime near the puppet theater, which was also my favorite. I'd sit with rapturous attention, not only to the story she was telling, but also to the words she was saying. There was one incident my mom told me about while Mrs. Hulse was reading us a story. I told the teacher that she wasn't reading the words on the page. I was reading along with the words in the book as she read aloud. Astonished, she told my mom and then had me tested for the gifted program. Kindergarten cemented my identity as a nerd and lover of school.

I loved school so much that one time in first grade, I felt ill—maybe it was a cold coming on. I had been doing my gifted work with Stephen at one of the small tables instead of at my desk.

“Debbie, do you want me to call your mom?” Mrs. Sykes asked.

“No, I just want to lie down.” So I lay down on a bright blue carpet, but I didn't get any better. I'm pretty sure I went home that afternoon. The idea of leaving school just because I didn't feel well wasn't usually an option. I argued with my mom when I was a bit older, around age 8 or 9, about going to school when I was sick.

“You have a 103 fever, Debbie. You are not going to school!” my mom said as she looked at the thermometer.

“But I feel *fine*, Mom!” I pouted as she sent me back to bed to rest.

I can see now that school was so important to me because I felt important and seen. I was smart and lauded for it. There were adults who were paying attention to me and giving me hugs,

like my favorite student teacher, Ms. Higgenbotham from second grade. She was a young, slim woman with soft, curly brown hair and warm brown eyes, and smelled like pure love—lightly floral and a hint of musk. I will always remember her most by her smell. She was the student teacher for Mrs. Clift, an older woman with salt-and-pepper hair that she wore pinned up.

I was only in second grade for the first semester in Nashville, so I don't remember much. My trio of friends had disbanded. I only remember one spelling test. We wrote on penmanship paper. The word I was trying to spell was visit. I sat in my chair, that hard beige, melamine and metal desk, pondering how to spell this word. I vacillated over including the second "i" or not. I was looking at the word in my mind, trying to conjure it up. If I had sounded it out, I would have gotten it correct, but after much erasing, I ended up with v-i-s-t. I *knew* I would get this word wrong.

This sort of competition with myself continued until about ninth grade. I hated that in Kindergarten, for our Field Day, that I had tried so hard at so many competitions and activities and didn't win anything except a silver ribbon in gold lettering—a participation award. Even at age six, getting a ribbon for just showing up only added to my feelings of being a loser. I hated that ribbon. I wouldn't be surprised if I cried that I didn't get anything except a consolation prize. At the time, I couldn't see where this self-critical spirit had sprung from. Why as a child was I so hard on myself? It was only when I grew older that I saw that my parents did have something to do with it.

Yet it didn't help alleviate my internal drive for perfection. For one thing, as medical professionals, my parents were very accomplished people. I believe we all took this for granted, that it was a part of our family culture. Also, as parents, their parenting style focused on blind obedience and always being in control. I could attribute this to Ghanaian culture, to the rigid

hierarchies of parent and child. Yet our roles were as rigid as I thought they were back then. They recognized that I was not an average child, so this gave me a bit of equal stature with them. On the one hand, I wanted to please adults, to not get into trouble, to be good. On the other hand, the same drive to be good went beyond who was in authority. If adults were wrong, then I had to tell them, including my parents, and I'm sure that my precociousness was, at the very least, very challenging to deal with on a daily basis.

My need to be right didn't stop with others. If I was wrong, then I had to correct myself, too. There was no room for failure. There was no “that’s OK, try again” from my parents or from me. Many times, there still isn't room for failure. It's an impossible rulebook to follow, like a metronome that keeps time; that marks when I am off the pace. Yet my teachers were not as harsh on me as my parents and I were on me.

What I loved about Kindergarten were the new experiences I was able to take part in, like tasting all sorts of vegetables. I remember cauliflower, the rough texture, the foreign, flat taste. It wasn't a vegetable that I was used to at home, with my hybrid diet of kid American foods like jelly sandwiches and the Ghanaian savory stews and rice that I ate on an almost daily basis for dinner. The other vegetable I remember eating was a radish, with its sharp, peppery bite—and I could only take one bite before I flailed my arms in a panic. During Thanksgiving time, we all took a turn at churning butter by hand with an old-fashioned churn, with a long pole that we would push up and down. Butter-churning was a serious business to me. I used all my strength and churned as much as I could. We made Native American corn cakes, lightly sweetened with sugar.

I grew up reading a lot, but arts and crafts didn't at first come naturally to me. And as a perfectionist, at first it wasn't fun to participate in those activities, like when we drew our commemoration plates for Kindergarten. Yet I remember the experience of creating this plate vividly. Maybe I remember it because I was outside of my comfort zone. I was perfectly fine coloring in coloring books, following what someone else had created. But here, I could create my own world, my own piece of art. I still have the plate and it's a color explosion. Mrs. Hulse wrote in her neatest script, "Kindergarten 1984" with a hot pink marker on this special paper on a round cutout—the texture of it was most like parchment. I was so excited to be able to draw, but that excitement was tempered with dread. This would be a permanent plate for my parents so I needed to do my best. The blank sheet was terrifying—so much potential was located in my head, my hands, and the markers that I used, waiting to be expressed.

We could draw whatever we wanted, so I drew a picture of my house, me, and my brother. There was a rainbow to the upper left in which I included the colors pink and brown, but not violet and a big yellow sun to the upper right. I wrote my name in black under Kindergarten 1984 Debbie Bekoe. I forgot my initial, A, and put that at the end. What came back was a melamine plate that one could hang on a wall. Even though I knew that wasn't my best, I still was amazed that a piece of paper that I drew on was transformed into a hard piece of plastic.

There would be more commemorative art past Kindergarten. In first grade during Christmastime, Mrs. Sykes gave us white plaster Christmas ornaments to paint. I got a Santa Claus and an angel. At our small tables, with pots of acrylic paints opened, I painted the Santa Claus in a classic red and white with black boots. I made the angel a blonde with a pink gown. I tried so hard to hold the brush well and paint with a grown-up delicacy that I didn't yet possessed. The ornaments looked sloppy, but appropriately first-grader sloppy. Still, despite my

internal disappointment in my artistic skills, I hoped that these would be hung on our tree.

Eventually, I hung up those two ornaments later on a small artificial tree we had downstairs in our Birmingham home.

Even though I was eventually very proud and fond of these ornaments, they seemed to fit in some other home, with some other family that was visibly excited about Christmas. We didn't have much of a Christmas celebration at our house, because in Ghana, Christmas was more about family get-togethers and food. Christmas trees and ornaments and Santa Claus were more American contraptions. Yet my parents didn't resist all of it. In Kindergarten, we went to a Christmas brunch and I took a picture with a young, blank-eyed Santa with the most unconvincing beard. I didn't look that happy either and it was the only time I sat on Santa's lap. I never believed, nor was I taught to believe, in Santa. I asked my mother directly for gifts. Christmas was also my birthday, so I was more concerned about celebrating another year of being alive and getting presents. Yet I still wish I could paint those ornaments over, that I had taken my time, that I didn't use so much black in painting Santa's boots, that the angel's yellow hair wasn't painted with such gloppy strokes. I also wish I could have them so I can hang them on a Christmas tree when I have my own family. I wish even more that I could see the beauty in the imperfect paint strokes of a seven-year-old.

Unlike me, my classmate and friend Ethan was a great artist. He was both in my kindergarten and first grade classes. He had light brown hair, blue eyes, and translucent skin, his blue veins visible in his arms and dark circles under his eyes. He looked like one of those kids who got sick a lot. Ethan drew so well, mainly G.I. Joe type figures, like maybe how a kid in fifth grade would draw. He had food in his lunchbox that was inexplicably weird. It looked like

vomit, like some ball of salmon-colored something. My lunch was more composed, with boring jelly sandwiches (no peanut butter) on wheat bread, a Little Debbie snack cake, a small package of Frito-Lay chips and my Hi-C drink. I don't think his mom made it—it looked like he did. Even though he was my friend, the only other memory of lunchtime was of him squeezing my orange Hi-C fruit drink as I was drinking it, flooding my mouth and throat with drink until I choked. Ethan was as weird as the food that he ate. He wasn't popular and yet I was intrigued by the weirdness and, more than anything, how he drew. I wanted to draw like that, but I didn't want to practice. I didn't even know where to start.

When it came to spending time with my less weird friends, my favorite time of the day was naptime, where I would sleep on my plastic reversible sleeping mat, next to my buddies: Jay, a boy with brown and dancing blue eyes and freckles that dusted his nose and cheeks, and Christopher, a cute little munchkin with brown hair in a bowl cut, brown eyes, and dimples. One afternoon, I was whispering to them, and we were all giggling. I couldn't help it. Stacy, the wake-up fairy for the day, chosen by Mrs. Hulse as an honor for good behavior, took her magic wand and woke everyone else up first. I saw her walk around, waking up children by lightly touching them with the sparkly magic wand. I pretended to be asleep. Maybe Mrs. Hulse was pointing to children to wake up.

One afternoon, Christopher was asleep, wedged inside the coat area. Jay and I pretended to sleep but chatted. He whispered to me, "I am the sun and you are the moon." And then we lightly kissed each other on the lips. In my mind, we were going together. In our class picture, I stood beside him, in a multi-colored striped vest and a white ruffled shirt. I stood tall and smiled with pride. But then a few days later, on the playground, I remember hearing, "Jay kissed Amy Hunter!" My heart sank but I shrugged it off. It was over between us but I still thought of him as

a friend. I may have shrugged it off, but my interest in boys was buried, to the point I never expressed interest in boys until college. Maybe I was more wounded by Jay's betrayal than I thought. Did I ever think he was mine, that I possessed him? He was just a friend, though. Yet I still haven't had a boy or man compare us to celestial bodies. And I never even thought to discuss this with my parents. This was *my* problem that I needed to take care of on my own, if it was even seen as a problem. It had nothing to do with academics or what kind of daughter and sister I was at home. All I knew was that the kiss and the words didn't really mean anything after all. I didn't hate Jay or Amy. I just let it all drop into a sea of confusion and walked away. Boys as just friends were a lot more reliable.

Although I giggled incessantly when we should have been asleep, I didn't like getting into trouble. But I was a tomboy, which meant I played with the boys and played *like* the boys. We played on the playground with this large expanse of space. It was that sense of "outside" that I experienced when I was home after school and on the weekends. And there was danger, with a green jungle gym that I saw a kid split his head open on, and a slide that I climbed up on. It's the only time I remember getting into trouble. I had to sit in a time out with my buddies off to the side. I felt ashamed. I should have known better. It was that same inner judge that sat in my heart, banging the gavel with her judgment of missing the mark of perfection. Soon, that judge took on the voice of God, as our involvement in the evangelical church increased.

CHAPTER FIVE: HALLELUJAH NIGHTS

Becoming a Christian was a tacit expectation in my household. I didn't have a spiritual life until I attended Vacation Bible School one summer, before Kindergarten or first grade. We played games, and I only remember being outside and the heat of the sun. I'm not sure how I was told to do this, but I have a distinct memory of my conversion. I knelt down beside my bed, bowed my head, with my hands clasped, and said, "Jesus I want you to come into my heart." It was a sincere, sweet moment. Because this conversion was expected, I told my parents much later, in passing, because that moment was a private and personal moment. Evangelicalism implicitly emphasizes "the personal relationship with Jesus Christ," which was probably another reason why I didn't tell them. This was *my* relationship with Jesus, not theirs. Yet another reason would be that somehow, I didn't feel close enough to them to share these deep feelings I felt for God. When I made that commitment to Christ, a golden warm feeling flooded my body, a deep comfort and peace. Somehow, I knew that sharing such an emotional experience would not be well-received. Maybe it was the cultural difference between being American and being Ghanaian. My parents weren't concerned about feelings. They were only concerned if I did well in school and obeyed them—that's it. Yet it was about God. Maybe they would have received it well. As an emotionally sensitive person, I found my feelings as things that made me vulnerable and were likely to betray me. Feelings made me feel unsafe, since my parents seemed to be such dispassionate people. For people who grew up in a very charismatic evangelical time in Ghana, my parents seemed to live more in the practical world of work and education than in the more uncertain world of even spiritual emotions.

But because I hadn't really spent time with other parents and only knew what I knew about American parenting from the sitcoms I watched and the books I read, I accepted them as they were. I didn't really know what I had been missing out on until I went to college and spent two weeks in New York City with my best friend's family. Until that happened, there were no fantasies of having American parents, but I still wanted the elusive praise. That feeling of closeness was something I looked for elsewhere—teachers, friends, youth pastors, our extended Ghanaian community. I would learn much later from my cousin that it was the extended family's job to give children that cuddly attention, not my parents'. But just like a lot of kids, American or otherwise, I would prefer my Ghanaian friends' parents than my own. My mom was seen as really nice by any of my friends, Ghanaian or American.

I'm still not sure if my parents saw me as an emotionally sensitive person, like my brother. He was just so nice and friendly. He freely gave hugs to everyone. He was fun to play with, as we rode our bikes and Big Wheels, read books together, and played with his Duplo blocks. This was before his developmental delays and ADHD began to frustrate him. From that same cistern of kindness, Michael could boil into a rage. But while we were young, Michael was the personification of innocence. He was so trusting. And I never really was. My focus was on survival. So when it came to my parents, I just tried my best to please them, to keep out of trouble, because the attention they usually gave me had to do with instruction and correction. I wanted that warm attention that they gave to Michael, but I wasn't him. So I had to scavenge for it elsewhere. Church became another refuge for me, starting with our time at a Presbyterian church.

While I was in Nashville, I felt tangible love from my youth pastor, Karen, a slender woman with a dark-haired pixie cut. I remember it, like when she and her husband took me home

from a youth event in their grey covered pick-up truck. I nestled in the back seat, under blankets. Even my mom seemed to like her a lot. She seemed to really respect her and trust her with me. I remember being at church at night for children's church, but not remembering seeing my mother afterward.

During children's church, on a rainy Wednesday night and I was crushing on this boy, Jeremy, who was suntanned bright pink with reddish hair. We were in some room or office and slow dancing. Although it was another experience of warmth, it's an odd memory to me, that kids were doing this. He had beads of sweat on his nose and in his hair. His face was flushed. He smelled like a little boy who had been playing outside. Maybe we were playing pretend and Karen wasn't there. Perhaps did have some sort of unspoken romantic connection. It didn't feel at all sexual. Yet I was fond of him, but I never told him so. Probably because of what had happened with Jay at school. Shyness became my cloak of protection. But in that moment, I liked the feeling of closeness, of safety.

Yet this church didn't make me feel safe all the time, like when I went to a haunted house. To this day, I find haunted houses within a church bizarre. If anything, now churches try to scare people into choosing Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. That is also bizarre, but I digress.

Maybe because my mother had not yet understood the American holiday of Halloween, when I was in Kindergarten, I went to Joy's house, a classmate of mine's, for a Halloween party. She lived right across the street from school. Joy had chubby cherubic pink cheeks, her reddish-brown hair in two long pigtails. I never really got to hang out with my classmates outside of school, so I was excited to go. I went as Bugs Bunny, dressed in plastic grey and white clothing

and a plastic mask. Joy's house was dark, but I wasn't scared. It had an appropriately spooky, but not too spooky, ambiance. This was the first place that I tried, and failed, to bob for apples. They were floating in water in a large tin basin. I held my arms behind my back, with my mask on my head, and I plunged my teeth to the elusive apples that kept slipping under the surface of the water.

That same Halloween season, I visited our church's haunted house. I walked up to this ghostly gatekeeper who sat at a table. He slowly stood up, opened the door, and let me inside. I found a shower scene where a man was singing, shaving himself and then cut himself horribly. Blood gushed everywhere. I ran outside, terrified. I didn't even finish the haunted house. My plastic Bugs Bunny mask sat on top of my head. My mom had brought me to the haunted house, but I don't remember who found me later. Most likely it was Karen. Either way, I was alone for some time. I was just so relieved to not be inside with the bleeding man. It was another encounter with death. Everything looked so real and I didn't feel like I could help him stop bleeding. I was immobilized with fear.

We didn't stay at the Presbyterian church for long. At the time, my father had not been attending this church with us. He found a non-denominational church, Victory Fellowship, and decided we should start to go to church as a family. I was sad to leave our Presbyterian church, to leave Karen, Jeremy, and the other friends I had made there, but at the same time, it made sense to me that we should go to church together. This was where my mother learned that Halloween was a demonic holiday. She didn't seem to care that it was originally a holy day to remember the dead, All Saints' Day Eve. When we lived in Birmingham, we had dimmed our lights and she put a small handwritten note on our door that said we didn't celebrate Halloween. Some trick-or-treaters decided to respond with egging our driveway. We saw them as ignorant of

the spiritual ramifications of their choices, that celebrating Satan would bring them certain spiritual doom and destruction. As Jesus said in the Gospels, we were in the world, but not of it. It was definitely a morally superior position that we held.

At this new church, instead of Halloween Night and a haunted house, it was Hallelujah Night, where we dressed up as Bible characters. I dressed up as Mary. I wore my blue and white robe that was covered in red cherries, and the other children wore long, robe-like, bedtime clothes, too.

The pastor and his wife looked similarly to Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, televangelists from Texas that my dad was fond of. He had a lot of their tapes and books, and I grew up listening to the Copelands, with their Texan twangs. When I looked them up online, our old pastor looked like a plastic-y Ken doll, with that helmet blond hair and his smiling blue eyes. His wife has curly brown hair that seems to be highlighted by blond or grey hair. It could be the way that Southern folks tend to dress more formally than in other regions of the country, but when I looked at their ageless pictures, I just got a sense of superficiality. Their church still exists. I probably don't remember anything because I didn't really connect like I did with Karen and others at our old church. The dogma had changed, but the connections had loosened.

This church was our first non-denominational church experience and it was a defining one. We never went back to mainline churches after that. I couldn't see how much evangelical culture had shaped us until much later, when we moved to Birmingham when I was newly eight years old.

CHAPTER SIX: FINALLY HOME?

Lately I keep using Google Maps to look at our old house in Birmingham, Alabama, the last place where all of us lived together under one roof. It doesn't look the same. The yellow and brown motif was replaced with tan and red. Those privacy bushes on both sides of the house have been cut down. Without them, the house looks naked. Yet their absence does allow more sunlight to filter through the oak trees. The picture was taken in October 2011 and the azalea bushes look thinned out. I keep looking at it as if I can conjure up how it was when we first arrived, and when I last saw it in 1998. It's a home, but not my home.

The move to Birmingham traumatized me, even though my mom said that Michael and I ran around the unfinished basement and filled it with happy screams. The interior was stuck in the unfashionable part of the 1970s, with lime green and orange floral wallpaper downstairs and beige floral wallpaper upstairs. The den's walls were adorned with splinter-filled, brown wood paneling. The brown mélange carpet was dirtier than it should have been, with strange matted areas. I wonder now why my parents never updated the house.

The back yard was so expansive that it took a couple of minutes to walk from the house to the end of the metal chain link fence. It's a piece of nature that I now miss terribly. I never appreciated how beautiful the flowers and trees were. Azaleas, wild roses, and holly bushes flanked the perimeter of the house, with a few oak trees, to which I am now highly allergic, on the right. A baby maple tree grew in the front yard. Between us and our Indian neighbors, the Chands, were tall red and green bushes. My mom told me how she wanted them cut down because our house was located on the part of a curve where it started to straighten out, and many people would cruise by. It made pulling out of our steep concrete driveway a bit dangerous. My

father didn't agree, but the later owners must have because they don't exist now. My father did chop down the plum tree, with its small, light pink blossoms. But I wanted actual plums from the tree. I didn't understand the concept of decorative fruit trees. Later, in the front of the house, my father planted Birmingham's official tree, two small crepe myrtles which had small clusters of hot pink flowers. A crabapple tree bloomed in the back, with honeysuckle vines on the other side of the fence. I always tried to get that little bit of nectar from the blossoms, but was also afraid of the competing bees that flew around there. Although I spent a lot of time outside as a child, later on I retreated inside, into books and television and music, and into myself. But in my mind's eye and memory, I'll hold our home's landscape as the favorite of all the places we lived.

Unfortunately, starting the new semester wasn't as idyllic as sucking on honeysuckle blossoms.

I had spent the first day of the new semester at Glen Oaks Elementary crying for seemingly no reason. This was something that even at age eight I don't remember being wont to do. Ms. Stricklin, my second grade teacher, had her arm around my chair in the back of the classroom as she quizzed me on my timetables.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know." I wiped my hands on my face as my trembling lips tried to hold back my whimpering.

This was not the most uplifting of school starts. And I loved school, especially the beginning of school with the back-to-school shopping frenzy for school supplies. It was my yellow pencil and crayon box crammed with pencils, preferably the soft wood ones, and pliable, pink erasers. I had a set of Crayola crayons and I never went past getting more than 24 at a time.

The 48 and 64 boxes were what the special kids got. When I got older, I had Crayola markers and then washable markers of all sorts. I loved getting the notebooks and the loose-leaf packs of paper and the Trapper Keeper binders, with my favorite having a picture of a blue sky, green grass, and multi-colored heart bubbles. To cap it off, I relished placing all of my new treasures in a new backpack. I wasn't picky about what that looked like, nor was I picky about new school clothes. It was the newness of school supplies that got me excited.

A few weeks into this new semester, on January 28th, the skies were leaden and flat, just like the first day of school at Glen Oaks. But this time, I was excited. This morning, we were going to go to the library to watch on the big TV the space shuttle, Challenger, take off from the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Florida.

Our school was courtyard style, so my fellow second graders and I all walked, jumped, hopped, skipped and danced outside, single file, to the library on the other side of the school. Other classes sat in there with us, some of us seated at tables, some of us on the floor. We were all so excited, watching the astronauts waving to the crowd and entering the shuttle.

Although the skies were the color of concrete in Alabama, the skies were spectacularly clear and bright blue at Cape Canaveral. We had had a low of twelve degrees the night before—Cape Canaveral had a low of eighteen degrees—both unusually low temperatures for the South.

I sat on the brown carpeted floor, watching the countdown to liftoff. The library erupted in cheers as Challenger's thrusters roared to life and Challenger lifted off, with the Atlantic Ocean as the backdrop. We chattered with each other, clapped and smiled, but our eyes stayed glued on the TV.

Then, as the Challenger rose into the sky, I saw that flash of orange under the external tank, caused by strong wind shears, coming from the right solid rocket booster. Those O-rings that I would hear so much about afterward had been replaced by a temporary oxide seal, which the wind shear had shattered, causing flames to rush through the joint. Had it held together, the Challenger seven would have made it safely up to space.

That image of the orange flame and the consequent explosion is burned into my memory. Then I saw the Mickey Mouse-shaped explosion of the shuttle and fuel tank, with the two solid rocket boosters flying off and looking like ears. This is where my memory tape slows. I looked at Ms. Stricklin and asked, “They made it out, right?” It was like when I was in Nashville, watching the cartoon *Bambi* with my mother, and realizing that Bambi’s mother had been killed. Over and over, I kept asking Ms. Stricklin, and myself, if they were alright. I hoped against hope that they safely plopped in the ocean; that we’d get to see Christa McAuliffe again. I don’t remember Ms. Stricklin’s response to my almost unanswerable question. I only remember her standing by the TV, looking up.

As I watched the explosion on TV in the library, Christa McAuliffe’s parents and her students had started to discover what happened. Recently I watched the raw footage of the Cape Canaveral crowd. I saw the crowd slowly learning the astronauts’ fates. Women collapsed in sudden grief over the disaster. The camera focused on McAuliffe’s parents and I couldn’t tell if they knew yet or not. Their faces look puzzled.

We must’ve stayed there in the library for a while, hushed. We whispered, waited to see that they were OK. I recently read that some of the astronauts were able to survive the initial explosion. I saw a picture of the crew cabin in one of the rays of smoke and fire. But they hurtled

towards the ocean at such a speed, approximately 207 mph, with over 200 g forces as they decelerated, they did not survive.

I could go on and on about the historic speech Reagan gave on the day he was supposed to be giving the State of the Union address; about the intensive, repetitive, possibly traumatizing, media coverage of the Challenger disaster; the many years of covering up about the O-rings in the joints of the solid rocket boosters that led up to this tragedy; about the engineers' ignored warnings, about how it was way too cold to fly that day; about the many delays for the mission launch, about how the shuttle program was on hiatus for almost three years; the Rogers Commission that investigated the disaster; about the Congressional hearings; about the redesign of the solid rocket boosters, the schools named after the Challenger and Christa McAuliffe, the tributes and memorials...

And then there's the street named Challenger Parkway that I drove on my way home from graduate school classes, not thinking about the name until I thought about where I live now: thirty minutes away from Space Coast, where it all happened.

But all I can think about is Christa—not even the other six astronauts. Is it because I love learning so much, that her death—unlike the ones who died upon re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere in the Columbia in 2003, or even her fellow crew members—hurts me so? She looked like another one of those adults in my life that I could latch onto for warmth. I had just moved to a new town and started at a new school. The hope of something new and good for my Birmingham may have exploded on that day, too. Here was someone trying to do something new, a teacher who studied to become an astronaut. Amid a flurry of pointing fingers, she and six other people died on their way to space. My heart and eyes found those buried rivers of saline as I saw the footage again, frozen under time and innocence.

Christa McAuliffe was only six months to the day younger than my mom. Was this like my mother dying? Maybe not *my* mother, but a mother or nurturer of the young minds in her classroom. She was one of us, someone who worked hard to become an astronaut through the Teachers in Space Project.

And she was so young.

It could also be that I tried to stubbornly hold onto some semblance of innocence that day, hurtling into an ocean of denial, until my grown-up self could reckon with the depth of the loss.

We go back to places of injury, to seek healing and some understanding. Like when I watched *Bambi*, this episode is frozen. With analysis and reflection as my ice pick, I want to crack open what's underneath, to rescue these raw, fleshy feelings that overwhelmed me as a child. Almost thirty years later, I still don't think that I am ready. I can't read any more analysis or watch anymore footage of the disaster—it hurts enough. I know enough. I know she and her other fellow astronauts won't return, and neither will my memories of the rest of my year in second grade. It could have been because of watching people die on television. It could have been the move. It could have been both, but the memories after that day until I start third grade have been wiped away.

During my time at Glen Oaks, the people who made the most lasting impression on me were my teachers. My teacher, Mrs. Rachel Payton, Chicago Bears footballer Walter Payton's aunt, was a graceful, older woman in her 60s. She epitomized class. She wore suit jackets and A-line swingy skirts, in colors like melon and lemon, maybe even a bright lime. Images of chiffon come to mind, too. She was a tall, lighter-skinned black woman, with big curly, dark-brown hair,

with long, pretty fingers. Her cursive handwriting was impeccable, the type of handwriting that one would see in handwriting books. I tried to emulate it the best way I could. And although doctors are notorious for poor handwriting, my father had the best penmanship—a beautiful flowing combination of cursive and script, and highly readable. It looked like he had practiced more meticulously than I had, but I soon got the accolades of great penmanship, too. That my father had lovely handwriting was another way his creativity exuded from his very being. Handwriting in the computer driven 21st century isn't as important, and it's something I am sad that I'm not as good at anymore. My father's handwriting was a way to show that he cared about the little things, but that he also cared about and valued beauty. It's something that I have inherited and valued, even though I don't believe I have inherited his carefulness that created such beauty. I couldn't see the beauty of his handwriting until I was much older and could appreciate the easy slanted flow

I find it strange that I don't really remember my Birmingham elementary school friends as much as I did my Nashville friends. The strongest memory I have is of a fight that I got into with a kid named James. He was short but strong, with a bald head, dark skin, and big ears that stuck out. It wasn't a fist-fight, and no one got in trouble because I wouldn't want to be seen to see Ms. McPherson, our school's principal. She was friendly but firm, a petite, black woman with large eyes, large poufy black hair, and great style. My brother was a big fan of hers and loved to repeat one of her favorite sayings: "When you point one finger, three fingers are pointing right back at you!"

I don't know how we didn't get in trouble, but James and I silently engaged in a desk fight on one side of the classroom. I didn't like how close he was to me. Our desks were arranged in an oval—not a perfect rectangle. We hammered our desks into each other's while our

faces silently grimaced in anger. This skirmish lasted for a few minutes. We somehow resolved it and stopped fighting, maybe because we figured out that there would be no end to it. The oddness of that situation predicated itself on my experience as a tomboy: fighting with boys usually meant that the bad feelings began and ended within the fight. Usually, there were no lingering feelings of resentment.

And although I loved my teachers as second mothers, in a sense I saw them as equals, just like how I saw my parents. That meant that I could question their authority. Not in a rebellious way, but in a curious way. That was and is how I learn. I did this with Mrs. Hulse in Kindergarten. And I was right that time. But this incident with Mrs. Payton, I was wrong, so very wrong. I still feel chagrined about it: not only was I wrong, I was publicly wrong. This happened during the math lesson on long division. Mrs. Payton chalked out the problem on the board and the class simultaneously worked the math problem in our notebooks. I raised my hand.

“Yes, Deborah?”

“Mrs. Payton, you did that wrong.”

She turned around and raised an eyebrow. “Oh? Did you check your work, dear?”

As I went on to explain how I arrived at my answer, I surmised that actually I was the one who was wrong. I felt my body get hot and my pencil became slippery in my hand. I slumped in my seat. “Oh, I see. I got this wrong.” It was a revelation that I could get anything wrong in school.

Being gifted made school easy for me academically, and this little moment of fallibility made a little fissure in my identity as the know-it-all. I liked school so much, I enjoyed standardized testing. It was another way for the adults in my life, including my parents, to show me positive attention. On the Stanford Achievement Test, my percentiles in all subjects were 90th

and above. I enjoyed being right, and school was my queendom of rightness. This was the one place that my parents couldn't criticize me for what I had done. Yet this realm didn't allow me to make mistakes. Its existence was reinforced by my parents who only wanted the best for me. But that reinforced insistence on perfection came at a price. All it did instead was create an almost inescapable prison of perfectionism, where I currently reside and berate myself over things that happened almost three decades ago. As a child, I internalized this fallacious thinking: if I am right, then I can be loved. If I am a failure, then love will be denied me. Would teachers have shown me as much attention if I was a C student? I never gave them the chance to find out. Too much of my identity, passed down from my high achieving parents, was tied up in being right. My parents let me know, over and over, that I wasn't allowed to be fully human. This was emblematic in my only foray into the National Spelling Bee system, when I was in fourth grade.

The spelling bee was held at Western Hills Mall, located a mile away from our house. I only remember the word that I got wrong.

“Spell anthem,” a woman's voice said.

I stood on a platform. I was so sure that I was going to go all the way to the national spelling bee. I was smart. I was always right. “Anthem. A-n-t-h-” I hesitated. I wasn't sure of this word. I'm not even sure that I, casual reader of the dictionary, had come across this word. I wracked my brain for the next letter. I started to feel sweat bead on my forehead and my body glowed with warmth. Like any grammar school student, I decided to sound it out in my head. It had an o sound in my head, so...“...o-m. Anthem.” I smiled confidently.

“That is incorrect. The correct spelling of anthem is a-n-t-h-e-m. Thank you, you may leave the stage.” It was like a living version of the Speak and Spell voice. I couldn't hear the rest of what she was saying. My little nanosecond of fame had expired. I had tuned out her voice, just

so I could focus on the steps down from the platform and the walk to my mother in the audience. I came home, deflated. My dad, never into going into any of my school or extra-curricular functions, was at home in the den. In Ghanaian culture, children were a mother's priority. It could have been how it was in America in the 1980s, too. Fathers being involved in their children's lives seemed novel, unlike how it is now. Still, it was never expected for my father to show up at my events. Yet his comments stung even more because he wasn't there to see all the words that I spelled correctly. This was not the dad who taught me how to ride my bike and fly foam airplanes in the park. "Inside" dad was a terse, stern man.

"So, how did you do?" he asked.

"I misspelled anthem."

"How did you spell it?" My dad's eyes were a little intense on me.

"A-n-t-h-o-m." I held my hands behind my back and looked down.

"Oh! It's obviously *e-m*. Let's look at it in the dictionary." My dad got up and took one of the four bookcases and pulled down one of the three paperback dictionaries amongst the myriad of books. He excitedly flipped through the dictionary, the pages making crisp, flapping sounds. I stood there, internally rolling my eyes. Did we have to go over the spelling of this word now? I already knew how to spell it. He motioned for me to come closer and I shuffled my feet on the carpet towards him, already laden with shame. "Aha! See? This is how you spell it."

I sighed. "Yes, I know," I frowned, shuffled to my room, and flopped face first onto my bed as that inner judge banged her gavel again against me. I was condemned to watching the National Spelling Bee on TV. I have always spelled anthem correctly ever since.

Not all of my teachers at Glen Oaks were ones that I would want to remember. My first fifth grade teacher was Mrs. Hilley. She represented all the rule-keeping, icy ways of my parents. I liked school because I could escape all of that. And yet here she was, extending the long shadow of my parents. The first day of class was solemn as she was. She sat in a chair in front of me and my classmates, as she laid out the rules for the class. She clasped her hands on her very pregnant belly. She raked her fingers through her curly, light brown hair and slowly blinked her light blue eyes. She droned on and on in a Southern drawl about how we should behave. There was complete silence as thirty pairs of blank eyes stared off into thirty separate fantasies and daydreams to escape the agony of boredom. This was the first time that I received a lecture about behavior management during the first day of school. Mrs. Hilley only lasted a week—she was nine months pregnant—and we got a substitute teacher, Mrs. Swindoll, who became our permanent teacher.

Mrs. Swindoll was made of everything sweet and nice. She never said anything mean or harsh to us. I remember her smile the most. Her smile made my heart feel warm and safe. And it didn't have anything to do with how well I did in class. She loved us equally and always seemed happy to be with us. Mrs. Swindoll had an ease about her. One morning, she came to class with a coffee stain on her white button-down shirt. She decided to change out of her blouse and only wear her cornflower blue cardigan that had a lace collar. She told us that she spilled her coffee on herself on the way to school because of the automatic seatbelt that came over her shoulder. I still found that so resourceful, like a Mentos commercial resourceful. And I liked that she told us about this adult situation that she didn't have to tell us about. She was the happy antithesis to the cold Mrs. Hilley and also the antithesis to my parents. Out of the icy expanse of rules and perfection came Mrs. Swindoll.

My mom and dad weren't huggers. That wasn't their job, to be emotional. Their job was to bring us up in the way we should go, like the Bible said. That involved spanking us and disciplining us. Mrs. Swindoll seemed like the prototypical American mom, with her shoulder-length brown hair with soft waves, bright, blue eyes and a big smile. If I heard my Ghanaian name called, "Akosua!" by my father or "Debbie" by either my mom or my dad, it usually meant that I was in trouble—not that there was a pony out in the backyard to reward me for my straight-A report cards. Even my names reminded me that I wasn't good enough.

At the same time, it's apparent that as a kid I questioned everything and everyone. I can only imagine how it must have been to raise a child like me: possibly challenging and infuriating. Raising a gifted child can be exhausting. They seem to have inextinguishable amounts of energy, a litany of questions, and are fearless in asking those questions. I definitely was not an easy child. But I wasn't a bad child, either. This focus on perfecting me made all the good things that I was and did disappear under the microscope of my parents' gaze.

There was also the cultural gap between the more and more American me and my still quite Ghanaian parents. It's one of the reasons why I preferred my teachers over my parents. My teachers' way of showing love was something that I could feel in my body and was also reflected in American cultures, especially through television and film. My parents' love, although I never questioned its existence until puberty, came through provision—I was fed, clothed, and sheltered.

If there was a way to know that my mother loved me, it was through food. The food I ate at home was mostly Ghanaian and somehow fit within the Venn diagram of delicious food and my picky appetite. Most of the time, food consisted of white rice plus a particular stew. The

“gravy” is a staple for Ghanaian food. It looked and tasted more like a chunky red sauce of tomatoes and onions. My mom would combine that with other things like with eggs, my favorite dish, or corned beef, my second favorite dish. Rice and peanut butter soup had hunks of beef that simmered in a thick, savory sauce. My mom would make meat pies with the corned beef and gravy mixture in heavenly pockets of buttery pastry. Jollof, a rice dish with meat and vegetables, and fried plantains were also perennial favorites in our home. At the kitchen table with the bay windows filtering in sunlight through the oak trees, I sat and ate many a hearty meal made by my mom’s hands. She usually cooked on Saturday mornings and afternoons. Ghanaian food makes for great leftovers because the flavors deepen over time.

My mother doesn’t cook these meals as often anymore, but she still bakes. She makes cookies, cakes, pies, and other types of desserts. Baking seems to bring her joy. It brings joy to those who eat her food, too. When I was in my mid-20s, I had knee surgery and she sent me some of her ginger crinkles, crisp cookies made with molasses and spices. I was living in Chicago at the time with three girls that I knew from church. She made a few batches and I shared them with my roommates. One roommate, Yoonie, loved the cookies and made a ritual of eating them while having tea. Another roommate, Kim, had some. And then she had most of the cookies. Kim suffered from bulimia so most likely, she binged on the cookies and then vomited them. As much as I have compassion for her now, that it was her illness that drove her to that, there is still a big part of me that resents her for eating and then throwing up my mother’s love for me. It was wasted on someone who never had met my mother.

If my mother has baked goods as a sign of her love, then I’m not sure I knew if my father loved me. I can only say that via how my mom saw us when I was little. My father definitely

loved my mother, in the beginning. He loved, and still loves, my brother. He demonstrated it through all the time they spent together. But he also yelled at my mother, saying, “I don’t know how to love!”—and I believe him.

And maybe his growing obsession “to put bread on the table,” to be a provider for his family was some more evidence. Again, Ghanaian culture touted providing for one’s family as a way to show love. It also showed competency. If my father could not provide for us, then he was not really a man. Not that this is at all a novel approach. But this looming lack of competency may have fueled the unraveling of his mind, driving him to some dark places, like selling narcotic prescriptions to people he hadn’t seen. Beyond the *pro forma* masculine role of breadwinner, maybe there was love there—the sense of being a protector; of not seeing his family on the streets, or literally hungry.

But who were his role models growing up? The relationship with his parents was far from ideal, especially with his mother. It could be that by providing, which is a Ghanaian way of showing love, he could make up for how he wasn’t loved provisionally as a child. Through my brother and me, we would never have to want for anything. For the most part, provisionally, we never did want for anything. Yet the tension of growing up in America, with sitcoms and dramas on TV, but also from how I briefly observed my classmates with their families—there were American depictions of family that I held my parents to, in a way that they could never provide for me. I wonder if my father thought he did enough, even in provision.

It was a bit unfair, to all of us, to try to be Ghanaian in a country that didn’t really allow for multiple expressions of family—at least what was dictated by popular culture. For example, back in the 1980s, coming from a divorced home had some stigma with it. Now, American culture has definitely loosened up its definition of family, with about fifty percent of marriages

ending in divorce, and more mixed families as a result. Popular culture now reflects the diversity of families, with families headed by gay couples, interracial couples, non-white families, families that have been aided by surrogates, egg donors, and sperm donors. The white, happy nuclear family may still be the default, like nude pantyhose and the color of bandages, but our understanding of love and its various expressions continues to expand and to deepen.

It was also unfair to all of us that by not being in Ghana, our cultural roots started to dry up. If my parents weren't the ones to provide that warm environment, it was up to extended family to be that buffer. And we were, essentially, exiled from them, from who we are. And there would be no way to go back, because by being in America, my parents were forever transformed. They would never be Ghanaian enough. But America was what we had now, so my frame of reference for how to live and love was and is completely different from my parents'. Provision, for me, is baseline. It's what kept me from not being taken into protective custody. Provision is the main expression of love, really everything to my parents.

Ever since I can remember, though, the way that my parents treated me was more like an equal, a roommate that they would pull the parent card on when they wanted me to keep in line. The boundaries never were clear or permanent. And maybe this is why I found no problems questioning authority. At the same time, I was still a child. I needed their nurturing their care. My intelligence may have been in the way of seeing me as a child who needed her parents. On the surface, we were both OK with this arrangement, but looking back, maybe my parents gave up on being the prototypical parents. I wish they hadn't. They trusted my judgment too much at times, and not enough at other times. It seemed like they didn't really know me, let alone what to do with me.

This slippery system did have its perks. When it came to deciding where I wanted to go to junior high, I don't even know how the Assembly of God school came up, but I knew that I didn't want to go to the local junior high. I had heard stories—that it wasn't that academically strong, that it was rough. Even though I was a pretty tough tomboy, I didn't think I could withstand being at a tougher school.

Around this time, I began writing in a journal, January 1, 1990. I was newly twelve years old. I would learn years later in college that this precarious time of growth in my life would collide with my parents' mid-life adjustments. It would create, or maybe illuminate, a friction between us that has yet to subside.

CHAPTER SEVEN: OF BEING AND BLACKNESS

From my own college work in psychology studying identity, I know that identity formation in adolescence for a first-generation immigrant is fraught with layered emotions. Sometimes, children can deftly maneuver through both dominant and secondary cultures. Sometimes they remain fully immersed in their culture of origin. Yet some children are able to assimilate into the dominant culture, although I wonder how completely any person of color can do that.

For me, I never felt like I fit in quite enough with any one group. Later as a teen, I had family friends berate me for not being Ghanaian enough. I didn't speak either of my parents' languages, Ga and Twi. We had never been back to visit. I ate some of the food but not all of it. I never wore the clothes. Those are the surface, tangible ways that I wasn't Ghanaian. But then I was Ghanaian in how I viewed hospitality and taking care of people. Hospitality was everything and still is everything to me now. Specifically, making people feel welcomed when they enter my home or even my presence. I was raised to be a lot more other-oriented than the "me-centered" American culture.

I didn't feel "black" enough within the black community. As a pre-teen, being black meant that I should have shared the same history. My history was over on the right side of the Atlantic, although the slave trade meant that I did have some shared history on this side. I knew, for the most part, who my ancestors were. Yet I didn't have my extended family here, which most black families do. It's comparing apples to mangoes, but I do envy any American that can go see their grandmother or aunts and uncles, even if they live across the country.

Culturally speaking— literally speaking—I didn't use African-American Vernacular English, and I felt that I had to have felt the death grip of institutional racism on my life. I yet hadn't experienced that. Shared suffering was all that I saw, which was not a very deep look into American black culture. I could share it in a general sense. I hadn't yet learned that the black experience is varied and diasporic, from Chicago to Birmingham to Lagos to London and even in Papua, New Guinea. I listened to a lot of R & B and rap, but I still didn't feel like I was really, truly black in the American sense.

I may have sounded “white” while speaking, but I sure as hell was not. Assimilation made me feel like maybe my skin color didn't matter, but it did. Even though I grew up in the South, I was sheltered from personal experiences with racism. All those intersections were ones that I could never quite cross, but yet they crossed over me. I am more of an observer than a participant when it comes to culture. So I latched onto the other thread that my parents gave me. I tried to find my own culture through Christianity.

Ideally, I could live in this colorless utopia. I grew up trying not to make race an issue, in a city known for its bloody racial history. When we moved to Birmingham, I could feel the blood in the soil call out to me, screaming injustices. We had the *Eyes on the Prize* PBS series and I embraced Black History Month like I would my own ancestors—since they were one in the same. Christianity, and Christ's death and resurrection, could eradicate all injustice, and magically help us to love one another. Racism, and its heavy tolls and taxes on people of color, would sublimate into thin air. Because racism hadn't become personal to me yet, this was merely an intellectual exercise of justice.

Within the American evangelical church, still, is a deep racial divide, one that the movement tries to pretend doesn't exist. Yet American evangelicalism is white, suburban, and

middle class. My family and I definitely met two out of the three criteria, and the lack of whiteness was an invisible electric fence that kept us separated. Yet this divide was one I didn't notice until many years later in my early 30s. It was a divide that always kept me at an arm's length from my friends, with the space between us being differing experiences out within the world. Maybe in church we were all the same, and acted all the same. This racial divide solidified that I definitely was not white or a part of white culture.

In high school, I made a journal entry about how my friend Robyn's old church, an Assemblies of God church, was having a play. I wanted to go, but she told me that being the only black person there would cause trouble. I didn't remember this happening, but I wrote furiously about it. I was livid. She was protecting me, but at the same time I hated that she had to, and I hated them for their hatred—meta-hatred, if you will. This would come up later with my relationship with men—the clear yet somehow also invisible double standards of being black in America. It's something that I can barely stomach to think about: am I seen as a Jezebel stereotype? Am I just for a good time? Of course, I'm sure many men that I encountered and dated did see me that way, because I'm no different from other black women. Yet it's only been recently that I have had to think about this, because these were not things that my mother had to think about in Ghana, as part of a racial majority.

But there was, and still is, somewhat of an intra-division between American blacks and immigrated blacks from Africa and the Caribbean. Many immigrants believe the awful stereotypes about black people—that they are lazy, dumb, and promiscuous. Just like how I learned those American stereotypes about family, they learn them from television. Although my mother calls American black people, “our people,” I know that because my parents came as

elites, there's still a bit of elitism that I carry, even beyond race. It's an elitism that is melting into embracing who I am, as someone who is different. Not *better than*—just *different*.

And like most Americans, I didn't know yet how institutional racism affects everyone, that how I was seen as a black woman went back hundreds of years, that the people who went to Robyn's old church were working off of very flawed, hateful narratives, drenched in the belief that it was about Southern pride. It was just deep fried Southern hatred, smothered in tradition.

The church doors not only failed to shelter me from the effects of racism, but also instead made them more tangible and deeply entrenched. Back in junior high, none of this could be fully expressed or realized just yet, although my shift in the types of people I paid attention to was apparent, from white to black.

Junior high was a lot kinder of a life experience for me than high school—quite unusual for sure. Yet I don't remember how truly miserable I was when I was ages twelve through fourteen. My journal entries during this time churned with my dysthymic angst, harsh judgments, both on myself and others, infinite longing for love and friendship, and yet somehow, all sewn together with relentless threads of hope. Although I more recognize my grade-school self—her spunk, her fearlessness, her joy of learning and just *being*—this more withdrawn self... maybe it's someone I don't want to recognize, her intense introspection, her constant pursuit of spiritual perfection, her predilections for unrequited crushes. She seemed to have no boundaries or true sense of self, like she did when she was younger. Diffuse. This intensity had a name which eluded me for decades.

As someone who was found to be gifted in kindergarten, I didn't realize until I was in my 30s that there were different flavors of giftedness. Intellectual giftedness is the most recognizable

one, where school comes easily to a child. That's what my Kindergarten teacher saw in me. What are not as well-known are the other gifted types or overexcitabilities: psychomotor (Energizer bunnies that can never go to sleep or who talk ad infinitum); sensual (very sensitive to stimuli that affect the five senses); imaginational (reality and fiction end up in a confusing mish-mash at times because their imaginations are so rich); and emotional (sharp emotional response and affective expression). I've probably had all five at once at different times in my life, but I am also emotionally overexcitable. Generally speaking, overexcitabilities (OEs) can be explained as heightened sensitivities to stimuli. So for someone with an emotional OE, joy is ecstasy, rejection could create an existential crisis and sorrow could feel like death. The spectrum of emotion is more vivid—and that isn't really accepted by most of society. Even in the touchy-feely, 30-minute-sitcom land of America, those of us who have this OE can't be ourselves. We have to hide this flashier part of ourselves as protection, as a way of fitting in. When we hide this side of ourselves from others, we hide it from ourselves through numbing and disconnection. When we conform to how society wants us to be, we receive and internalize the recurring message that displaying our emotions in our intense way is not good, that our true selves are not good enough. In response to this tamping down of our truths, we become shy, lonely, depressed. And I have been all of those things.

There's a longer list of traits that I found online, explaining who we are and how we feel. The only good thing on the list is concern and empathy for others. The other traits, such as problems adjusting to change; feeling guilty and a sense of responsibility; a need for security; physical reactions to emotion—these are just responses to people's displeasure in our emotional expressions, the undigested emotions, figuratively and almost literally, fluttering around in our stomachs, captured and waiting for their release.

As my own feelings were too intense to reflect on as a child, I journaled all the things that happened to others. I wrote about the popular kids I envied in sixth grade, and my friends in seventh and eighth grade. My friends confided in me about who they loved and loathed, but I could never be out there, living life. I hadn't been taught to just yet—to be vulnerable and yet to be safe. And as someone with an emotional OE, I valued security more than vulnerability at the time. I needed safety more than ever in my adolescence. I tried to use Christianity as a way to focus my energies and emotions elsewhere, but what I really needed was someone to explain to me that there was nothing wrong with me; that I was fine just the way I was. It would have killed my inner judge dead and freed me to be myself. I thought instead that if I became as devout as my parents, I could be as emotionally controlled as they were.

As a pre-teen, Christianity started to take a more rooted place in my everyday life. I started to read the Bible daily. My dad had constructed a Bible reading system, where one could read a bit of the Old Testament, New Testament, and the Psalms in a year. Proverbs had thirty-one chapters so it was expected to be read through monthly. I have no idea how he did that, since it would be a tedious affair to evenly divide chapters. He typed this schedule out, grouped by month. Each row had a corresponding number day. There were already programs and Bibles that did this, but the way my father had orchestrated this, one was reading four parts of the Bible simultaneously, and you would read through the whole Bible twice in a year.

I tried my best to keep up with it, but like with every type of discipline in Christianity, I faltered and eventually found other ways to practice my faith. Daily quiet times with God consisted of reading the Bible and praying. I had a prayer book for teens that helped me pray for tests, for friends, for my parents, for the country, for a lost item—practically anything that I

needed help with, I could pray for. My mother would wake up at 5am for hers and pray for what seemed to be a couple of hours.

With this increased spiritual activity in my life, I attended Garywood Christian School, associated with the Assemblies of God (an offshoot of the Pentecostal Church) for my junior high years. Unlike my experience with my youth group friend Robyn years later, I didn't feel any racial hatred there, but there was racial tension that bubbled up between black students and white teachers. Yet it was nothing like being told to not attend a church. Garywood, for the most part, was a safe space for all kids.

While I was in fifth grade, I received a very nice Precious Moments bible, with a pale lavender leather cover and my name stamped in gold-leaf, capital letters, DEBORAH A. BECKWIN. A Greek couple who were friends of my parents gave that to me, along with a large portrait with a gilded frame, a figure I call Swedish Jesus. He lived in front of our brick fireplace lined with colorful mats that my dad loomed and amongst the religious books my mom read in her red cloth chair. Swedish Jesus was robed in white, with gold and orange light glowing behind him. His arms were open to receive us, with his smooth, flaxen hair parted in the middle, resting on his shoulders, his blue eyes open with holy love, his beard nicely trimmed. You could say he was the Beckwin mascot, because his image was all over our house—in my bathroom and the half bathroom downstairs, and in other parts of the house.

Garywood wasn't that far from my house, five miles, about twelve minutes, in the neighboring town of Hueytown. The west side of the Birmingham metro area wasn't as affluent as the southern and eastern parts. My neighborhood was full of black middle-class families, and Hueytown was more white with a bit of a more rural vibe than, say, Mountain Brook. Mountain Brook was, and still is, the richest town in the state, mainly made nationally famous for at least

three reasons. First, it's the hometown of actress Courteney Cox. Second was the disappearance and murder of a Mountain Brook High School graduate, Natalee Holloway, while she was on a class trip to Aruba. The last was the movie *Borat*. The character Borat insulted the Mountain Brook Presbyterian Church pastor's wife while they were having this Southern society party at a former plantation house, Magnolia Springs Manor, which is located on Secession Drive in Helena, located in the southeast region of the metro area of Birmingham. I watched that scene and felt a bit of odd redemption as Borat held his own excrement in a bag and invited a prostitute over to join the party. It flew in the face of how the over-the-mountain side of town carried themselves, in that old Southern money sort of way.

All to say, Mountain Brook, and its residents that we unaffectionately call "Brookies," is located on the other side of Red Mountain, which is full of iron ore that brought many people to Birmingham to mine from 1881 through 1920. That population boom is what caused Birmingham to get its nickname, "The Magic City." But on our side of town, the U.S. Steel plant that we would pass by on the way to school every morning was no longer operating. The iron magic had vanished.

With Garywood being a Christian school, we had a deep divide in the type of kids who were students. There were the sheltered children steeped in Christian culture, like, I dare say, me, and a girl who lived up to her cherubic name, a rosy-cheeked girl with curly blond hair, Angela. Anytime conflict came up, her way to diffuse the situation would be to say, in the drawliest of Southern vernacular and a tilt of her head, smiling through her braced teeth, "Act Christian-like!" And then there were kids who would be labeled as problem children, like Tavares who wore a high-top fade and a scowl. I'm embarrassed that these two people are so stereotypically and unfairly the opposites of each other—sweet white girl, angry black boy. Maybe Angela's

preternatural niceness was covering up horrors at home. Maybe Tavares was sent there to be “straightened out” and resented it. Of course, it’s adolescence—there’s plenty to scowl over. Life is always unfair.

But truly, most children were in that that middling grey of normal pre-pubescent kids—trying to push boundaries and trying to push the limits of who they were in a strict space. Like Leslie, who had handwriting that I imitated, with her curvy capital L’s and who always dressed well. She always wore the cutest things, pegged her jeans, and had big, poufed-up brown hair and squinty brown eyes. She was also always sick with some sort of respiratory issue, so we rarely saw her in class. Or my best friend, Adrienne—a black girl with big, soft ponytails who had a twin brother, Michael, who also attended our school.

At Garywood, we were taught with an “accelerated” Christian curriculum, called A Beka Book. The claim was that academically, we were learning subjects at a level higher than our grade. I couldn’t really tell. Our parents bought our textbooks. Most of them were plastic-coated, thin paperbacks that would unravel and peel by the end of the year. Out of boredom, sometimes we would hasten the peeling and create random abstract designs on our books.

In terms of the history that I was taught, it was through the filtering of a Christian perspective—specifically a white, evangelical, highly revisionist perspective. According to their website, sixth grade history was about the Western Hemisphere. I can’t remember how they handled issues like slavery, colonialism, and the Conquistadors. I mainly remember Church history, like how the biblical canon was chosen. I was too naïve to know that history is usually written by the conquerors, not the conquered. I saw this as another version of history, but not the complete version of history. I was most fascinated by church history, like how the King James Version of the Bible came together. At the time, I loved learning how God worked through a

myriad of people to compile these books and letters that had been handwritten over and over, passed down through the generations. Now I'm surprised that humans get anything done, their egos looming over everything like huffy micromanagers.

My inner judge made an ugly, unexpected appearance when I took a history test. I sat in a slightly crowded row at my grey-white plastic desk in our tiny trailer. The younger kids had classes in the building, but as the school grew, we first met in cramped trailers, lined with thin brown wooden paneling. My brow was furrowed. I tapped my pen on my desk as I looked at the multiple-choice test. My teacher, Mrs. Judy Lee, whose 1960s-flipped, frosted blond hair always stayed perfectly frozen, got up from her wooden desk that sat perpendicular to our desks, under a wide window. She smiled with her pearlescent pink smile, gathered our tests, graded them with her black pen, and then handed them back to us. On the top of my page, I saw a 70-something—a C! I burst into tears at my desk. It may have been my first C ever. Angela and others stood next to me and comforted me, patting me on the back, saying, "It's OK, you'll do better next time."

I was inconsolable for a few minutes. It was like I was trapped in that grade. I was used to A's coming easily to me, which also meant that sometimes I would barely study. This may have been one of those times, and I'm not sure if I was completely honest with myself when I was sobbing. Yet I could have truly studied and still not done well. If so, that was a new feeling—doing my best and yet coming up with a middling result. I don't recall ever crying over a grade again, mainly because it was doubly mortifying—to cry in public as someone who was seen to have it all together, and to cry over a test.

The inner judge didn't stop at academics. In these perilous, pubescent times, I dared to make a fashion faux pas. Now I was and still am a preppy girl. Being preppy was also a part of Southern culture, with those over-the-mountain Brookies as paragons of preppiness. I wore

Oxford shirts and matching sweater vests, black patent Oxford shoes and slacks. I took a foray from this and took a dip in the trendy side of the pool during the fall. My mom bought me an outfit of “Hammer pants”—pants with a dropped crotch (now called harem pants) and a matching top with three-quarter sleeves. It was a poly-cotton blend which felt thin and scratchy. Both pieces were covered in yellow and orange flowers on a navy blue background. While playing foursquare, one of our favorite games during recess, smacking that red ball on the asphalt, one of my friends—I think it was some boy—yelled, “You look like a gay MC Hammer!” I glowered in embarrassment as everyone’s laughter bounced between the two trailers. When I got home, I buried that outfit under my other clothes in the chest of drawers and never wore it again. It should have been a sign that my mother didn’t quite understand my personal style, and another sign that I did not yet have my own personal style. The wedge of individuation started to crack through our already porous mother-daughter bond. In retrospect, I do need to give my mom an “E” for effort for attempting to tune into my style and for doing her parental duty of clothing me. Obviously, she meant no harm, but kids can be cruel. I can laugh at this now, but in that tenuous time of being in middle school, I never thought I would get over it. The internal pressure of trying to fit in multiplied because of all those intersections of culture that I had been trying to navigate. Being in a Christian school wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be.

I wasn’t the best daughter during this time. All this intense focus on myself made me into a selfish jerk to my mother. For Mothers’ Day, Mrs. Lee had us create these coupons for our moms, like “Good for One Massage” or something endearing and practical like that. I used purple construction paper. In a fit of rage over some slight that I can’t even remember, I wrote in black marker, VOID, over all the coupons. The most likely reason was that she didn’t allow me

to do something fun with my friends—a theme for me in my adolescence. I rarely saw my friends outside of school. The idea of friends being very important to teens, almost more than their family, was a foreign idea to my parents. It felt like being held by my suspenders and running in the air, but trying to run away to the freedom of being with my friends and trying to not be like my parents, to try to not at all associate with them. I stayed at home a lot or hung out with our Ghanaian friends. It was a form of overprotectiveness. Even though most of these families were Christian, my mother didn't really *know* them.

My mother was sitting in her bedroom, with fluorescent lighting emanating from behind her. It must have been evening time. I had previously given the vouchers to her, somehow got them back from her, and then voided them. My mom isn't really an outwardly emotive person, except when she's angry. She just sat there, looking down. I felt that she was slightly irritated, by the slight frown and her steely silence. Yet I was resolute with my edict—no favors for a mother who never let me do anything fun. Soon, maybe like a day later, my father found out about it. He came and knocked on my bedroom door. He entered my room while I was reading, with the voided coupons in hand.

“Akosua, what is this?” His low voice commanded attention and fear in me. It also caused me to slowly start to oppose him. I shrugged. “Come here,” he bellowed. I got up from my bed and saw him walk to get the black rubber hose from the top of one of the many bookcases in the den. The rubber hose was about two inches in diameter, maybe a foot long. This may have been my first experience with the rubber hose, used for obstinate disobedience like mine, but only for rare occasions. Usually, my mom handled most of the corporal punishment in my house when I was a kid in the form of the wooden spoon, which was actually made of hard plastic.

Being whipped at twelve seemed to be pushing the reasonable age limit and I thought that this whole affair was stupid. My father didn't seem that involved in my life and only was brought in as the heavy to handle me. Again, though, maybe he did this as a way to stand up and defend his wife's honor. I don't know if he really thought of my mom as one to defend. "Outside" fun dad seemed to have vanished. He was starting to work gigs as a doctor in ERs across the Southeast, so I started to see him less and less. The reason why we had moved to Birmingham—a job at an ER in a community hospital—had evaporated within a year.

My dad walked back to my room and asked me to turn around. I stood perpendicular to him as he whipped me five times. It was the first time I received those raised, red welts on the back of my thighs and butt. He walked out and I continued to sulk. I didn't cry. I felt no remorse or penitence for my ostensibly rude behavior. Even now, there's still some sulky teenager inside of me, reading books in her bed, shutting out the growing chaos in my house. I can imagine now how hurt and insulted my mom was, although she wasn't emotive. Maybe in her head she screamed, "After all I've done for you!"

Sometime later, I exacted my revenge on her red Oriental jewelry box that she had in our bathroom. My father, being a doctor, had samples of many meds. We thought I had ringworm at the back of my neck and so he gave me some clear drops to use. When the ringworm or skin irritation had cleared up, I went in there and squirted the medicine, acrid drops of my revenge, into my mom's jewelry box, ruining a lot of her jewelry. Her turquoise and silver earrings started to run, bleeding white. The red jewelry box's felt interior turned darker, soaking up my medicine and my hatred. This was never discussed.

Part of me never felt bad about that incident, yet all of me definitely feels bad about it now. That hardened, almost soulless part of me is probably the same part of me that is an

incredibly cruel, vicious judge that punishes me for every little slight. Maybe it's because it was something tangible and wasn't mine. Maybe it was because the coupons were things that I would never want to give her, things I didn't feel she deserved just because she gave birth to me. But again, we were working with different narratives on how families should function and show their love to each other. I needed to hear that I was loved and words like that did not come naturally to either of my parents. As long as I did what I was told, then there was very little interaction. I'm grateful that I didn't become a child that acted out so that she could get the attention and concern that she needed. I decided that it wasn't worth jumping those hoops just to be noticed. My brother, whose ADHD had been diagnosed, was more of my parents' concern. I wasn't really a problem. I was a good kid, made good grades. Parental attention was only needed if something was wrong. Yet I enjoyed not being wrong more than my parents' attention.

This was a typical weekday for me as a teenager. My mom drove me to school, then brought me home, I went to my room to do homework, came out to eat dinner which I usually ate with Michael or by myself. I went back to my room to do homework. Sometimes I watched TV with my mother and brother or by myself downstairs. My father would be downstairs on his computer, or away on one of his gigs or tinkering on one of his cars. We rarely did things together a family besides go to church.

Because of this lack of emotional, tangible love, and the way my parents carried themselves as primarily disciplinarians and providers, I didn't feel much love for my mom while we lived together. I wanted the Mrs. Swindoll love, even the Mrs. Lee-perfect-as-can-be love. I wondered how I could be related to her, since we were so different. I wonder now if she saw herself in me, any traits that she loved or hated about herself. I would and could ask her, but these are the type of deep feelings of which I have trouble plumbing the depths with her. Would

she wonder why I was asking this, all of a sudden? Would she grow suspicious? Would she dismiss me, as she has with similar deep questions? I feel like I could only ask her in some certain context, like if I had my own child—not just out of the blue.

When I was older and I saw a picture of her as a teenager and how I eerily looked like her, I knew we had some genetic bond, at least. I think of the lighter birthmarks on my body, the freckles that seem to appear, one by one, as I get older; and the thick, pointed eyebrows that classmates teased me about, calling me Batman. Her genes still want to leave some mark on me, claiming their fifty percent. Beyond the threads of education and faith, we didn't have too much in common. She and Michael are more alike, concerned most about their relationships with others. They are very personable people while my father and I can be charming when we want to be, but are happy to be introverts and spend hours by ourselves, doing what we want to do.

Those coupons that I made for Mother's Day meant that we had some semblance of love that I could put into action. One stubborn trait I have is honesty—if I'm not feeling the love, I can't fake it, not even when it's socially acceptable to do so, not even with the first two people I allegedly fell in love with. While I raged in my journal, I didn't ever think of her as a place of solace or understanding. I had to grind through the insane obstacle course of adolescence on my own, even though she had been through it before.

And sure—this is the classic case of needing to be my own person, but I always needed to be my own person, and that troubles me. How come there is no person to truly individuate from? Instead, she was another part of the obstacle course, blocking me from my true self and its freedom of self-expression. Christianity was used as a cudgel, not as a warm fleece of protection. "Obedience is better than sacrifice." "Honor your father and mother," not "Do not provoke your children to anger." Those two Bible verses sum up my parents' obsession with obedience. It's

also culturally how they were raised. As long as I obeyed them and didn't question their judgment, then I was OK. The conversations in our house had to do with me doing what I was told or to do it better. "Don't hit your brother." (Yes, that's a good policy—unless I thought he deserved it.) "Do your chores." "Read your Bible." "No, you may not go out with your friends." "You're vacuuming the stairs haphazardly." (Haphazardly being not one of those common parental words, unless you had my nerdy parents.) "You're being intellectually dishonest." "Don't be stupid." And on and on it went. I actually called my mother out on that last quote. As part of my chores, I had to vacuum the carpeted stairs with the handheld Dirt Devil. I was making my way back up where she was at the top of the stairs, spouting the line about being stupid. She reframed it as that I was doing my chores stupidly, not that I was stupid. I was glad for the reframe, but the word stupid from my mother's mouth has a special tinge of venom on it.

It wasn't that most of those edicts were bad or harmful. It was just the extent of our connections and interactions with each other. Being a first-born child didn't help. This transactional relationship—orders for actions—also meant that they weren't really involved in my life otherwise. It also meant that the relationship was time-bound. When I would become an adult and they couldn't boss me around anymore, would I be independent enough for the real world? Even though I had been playing the role of an adult at home, the myopic focus on obedience left me reeling when I had to make choices on my own. Yet I didn't turn to them for advice since I rarely asked for it. Like it always had been, I had to figure this out on my own. I just wasn't sure they had given me the right tools to make those wise, thoughtful, adult decisions.

It could be that my prickly memory has frozen out those warm moments between us. It's much easier to remember the hurts than the warmth. And it's not just me. I'm not one of the lucky ones who had a generally positive disposition. Psychology researchers have repeatedly shown

that humans are more prone to remember bad events than good ones. They leave more of an impact on the psyche. Evolutionarily, though, it served its purpose—our ancestors needed to remember where the dangers were in order to survive. If I put this context in the realm of parenting, especially of what I've anecdotally heard from children of immigrant families, maybe I can acquiesce that my parents wanted me to be safe. Even though we all know the pain of relentless criticism, it can be hard to stop giving it, especially if that was how you were raised. In American culture, the bent for parents may have been to excessively praise children, like when I received the participation ribbon for Field Day in Kindergarten.

Yet the one warm moment that persists in my mind, even though it took me some time to retrieve it, has nothing to do with obedience or being good. It's a series of repeated moments—playing Monopoly with my mom and my brother. I always had to be the car or the top hat. My mom chose the iron and was also the banker. My brother chose the dog. We would sit on the floor in our den and play for hours, even with my brother's ADHD. My mother was always the banker. I never remembered who won, but I did enjoy spending time with my family when it didn't involve something that I was doing wrong. Sometimes my brother would get frustrated and leave, and then my mom and I would play for a while. It was never brutally competitive, but both of us did play to win. So even though I associated "inside" life with the misery of rules, sometimes we could be kids enjoying a board game with their mother. My mother and I would also play Scrabble, which was a hard game for me. I never seemed to have the right letters. And not that I didn't think my mother was smart, but I sat in amazement as she came up with words as I continued to trade in new tiles and create new words. My mother was definitely more book smart, but didn't really show it until she used words like haphazardly. And maybe that's why she

chose the iron in Monopoly—this role of being a housewife when she had been a career woman on her way up was not necessarily what she wanted, but what she did. What she had to do.

In Ghanaian culture, traditionally women had been seen as child-bearers. Girls and women receiving education while my mother was a child in the 1960s were rarer for families located in more rural parts of Ghana. They were kept at home to help with family farms. Most girls who did go to school did not complete their studies. Although literacy rates for women have risen significantly since the 1980s, the disparities are caused mainly by socioeconomic status. In comparison to American women living in a post-WWII world, where at least half of women were working outside of the home, my mother being educated and working in the 1970s seems to me a lot more unusual, and most likely due to her family lineage of privilege.

Before the role of being a stay-at-home mom, she was a nurse making her way up the ranks. I wonder if she ever had dreamed this life for herself, with two exceptional children on opposite ends of the I.Q. scale, in suburban Birmingham, playing Monopoly and Scrabble with her children.

Walls were being built around my curiosity and inquisitiveness through the filtered lens of Christianity. Everything I thought, did, or said needed to be within the realm of Christian culture. My mother wanted a less worldly or secular influence in my life. It worsened in adolescence, but during junior high, it was anathema to listen to non-Christian music, although I could watch TV. Popular music was full of unsavory messages about sex and violence. The best music focused on holier things, like on God and what he could do for us and what we could do for him. Every action had to reflect this intense focus on God. This was endemic of evangelical

culture—to be in the world, but not of it. Instead, Christian music could have the same stylings of popular music, but have a holier message. Anything that you could want in terms of genre would eventually be mimicked by Christian culture, usually to hilariously awful effects. But sometimes, it was really good. I would sidestep this by ordering CDs from Columbia House and BMG. I bought both Christian and non-Christian music.

We didn't go to the movies that much, so a lot of pop culture references were lost on me. It's hard to describe a pervasive feeling or attitude when that's all you knew. What can I compare it to when all the other families are like yours, Christian and Ghanaian, and you hardly have access to see how other families live? I didn't really get to do this until I left home for college.

At the time, with so much adult information on lockdown, Christianity now seems like it was about blocking my access to knowing the truth about things; that all things that were not of God were unholy, and sex outside of marriage would be the highest of the unholyest of things. Instead of trying to find out about sex through personal experience, I found other ways to find out about the American culture that I was living in.

At Garywood, since it held those extremes of saints and sinners, I befriended one alleged sinner, Tavares. I was scared of Tavares, with his deep scowling face and his alleged delinquent ways. He taught me curse words, like the s-word and the f-word. But one curse, the c-word, was one he didn't even know.

I came across that word while reading *Cosmopolitan* in a waiting room. My brother, Michael, started to get tutoring from a woman who was the ex-wife of the local weatherman. She

was a miracle worker with my brother. She helped him focus and do well in school. We would go in the evenings and I had to come along for some reason—it could have been because we went straight after school. On a dark, wintry evening, under harsh fluorescent lights, I sat in a comfy chair and read some saucy, salacious story, as *Cosmo* was wont to print. My mom didn't really pay attention to what I was reading—otherwise, she would have snatched that magazine away and made me bring my homework every time.

The next day, I went up to Tavares during recess after a game of foursquare. “So, I was reading this story last night and it had this bad word, c, with three hyphens. What is that?” I was so excited that I'd finally found a new curse word and was going to have my knowledge be expanded by him. My icy breath rose up into the overcast sky.

“What now?” Tavares' scowl softened into a quizzical look.

“The c-word!”

“I don't know any c-word.”

“Whoa...” I was puzzled that Tavares, knower of all naughty things, did not know the c-word. I obsessed over that word for years. I can't remember when I found out, but I'm sure that I laughed over it. We were still kids, and we didn't yet know how much we didn't know.

My journal began to be a repository of gossip. The popular people in the higher grades—Brandi, Misty, John, Bobby, David, Lorie, Chris—were a clique of white kids that were definitely more on the rural side of Southern whiteness. I didn't know them, like even as distant friends, yet I wrote about them all the time. It was like my own live teen soap opera, a living escape from my own boring life. And Chris was pretty to look at, with his pretty blue eyes and his pretty smile—so *pretty*. I remember an eagerness to always talk to him, but I'm not sure what

we ever said, if anything. I wrote about my other friends' love lives, too. I knew so many secrets, and yet when I look back to remember, I don't remember being so involved in other people's lives. Instead, I remember a sense of isolation that would grow and blossom into a sturdy, solitary tree in high school. "No one wants to understand me. NO ONE! I hate myself. I'm a dork & a nerd! Why do I have a bad family like this? Why isn't it normal? God, I don't like this! Do something! Nothing is going right! Mom treats me like I'm stupid."—September 28, 1990. A few days later, I wrote, "I think about suicide a lot. No boy, friend, or anyone who understands me." And then off I went into what I'd do with my perfect best friend. I'd come down with, "But that's not how it is. Life for me, right now, has betrayed, lied & hurt me." Then I riffed about how I wished I had the perfect boyfriend and best friend. It's easy to dismiss this as the melodramatics of puberty, but the suicidal ideation caught me off guard. I don't remember that sort of existential grief, but it seems that's why I needed to journal. I can only surmise that being in such a strict household and being some sort of creative person who had no outlet was starting to wear on me. The American adolescent needs to be with her people, away from her parents' eyes and rules. There was very little wiggle room to rebel. Those black holes that I feared in Nashville had morphed into black holes of depression, just waiting for me to fall in as I tripped on despair. Thankfully, I did find a creative outlet, albeit briefly.

CHAPTER EIGHT: ESCAPE INTO BEAUTY

As puberty waged its emotional war through my body and mind, I did have another outlet for soothing my pubescent problems—playing piano. I had been asking my parents since I was eight years old to play piano. At least two families that we were close to—med schoolmates of my father’s—had their children, my friends, playing piano. Eventually, my constant cries were placated and I started playing piano at age twelve. I was enrolled in a non-credit course called TOP, Teaching Outstanding Performers. Every Saturday morning, my mom drove me downtown to the University of Alabama at Birmingham and I’d take three courses from 9am-12pm. The first was music history, and I sat with about ten to fifteen other students in their tweens in a chalk dusty classroom with a black grand piano as one of the music teachers taught us about composers. I remember nothing that was told to me—maybe because I have never been a morning person. Just being in that classroom, with the brown/wine colored chalkboards that slid, uncovering another blackboard—there seemed to be so many of them, unlike junior high where we had just one. We next went to keyboarding. We sat in a room with small electric keyboards, learning about the circle of fifths and how to augment and diminish chords. Next, I would go to my actual lesson in one of the practice room, with my teacher, Anitra. She taught two of my friends. She was a gentle woman, pear-shaped, with tinted glasses, straight brown hair and bangs that fell in her small, brown-green eyes. Sometimes instead, I would go to computer class, but my private lessons were straightforward. I had a tick of hearing a piece in my head a certain way and using the sheet music as a back-up. If I heard it wrong, the right way would never work. It was how playing by ear worked against me.

The highlight of the TOP program was performing our mock recitals. We went into the dark and cavernous theater, with an old Steinway lit under warm light. For example, if we wanted to prepare for a competition, we could prepare a piece for the mock recital. All the kids, the little kids up to the intimidating teenagers, gathered in the concert hall, sheet music in hand, to be scrutinized by Sam Howard, a world-renowned pianist, who went on tours all over the globe with his wife, Delores (she sometimes joined us), back in the day, as the duo Hodgens and Howard. Looking at their UAB website picture from the height of their careers, they had this New York air of cosmopolitan sophistication. That may have been their Julliard training as well as from their extensive touring.

In this picture, Delores is dressed with a crisp, white ruffled shirt, her blonde hair in a loose bun on her head, her hands on her hip, and Sam seated behind her, with his salt-and-pepper hair brushed back, dressed in a tux, both of them smiling. While I was enrolled in the program, I saw old posters of their concerts that let me know that they were a big deal before they founded the TOP program. I couldn't find much else about the Howards online, but it seems like they would be in their 70s now, which would put them in their 50s when I met them.

Mr. Howard—we never called them by their first names except for the other teachers—sat front row, with a sports coat and pocket square, button-up shirt with the two top-buttons opened, and a permanent scowl with his intense, narrowed blue eyes. Because of Mr. Howard's presence, the mock recital was something I always dreaded as a performer, but also enjoyed as a listener. As a performer, Mr. Howard could get quite interactive with you. This only happened to me one time. As I played, he strolled up to the shiny wooden concert floor, stood next to me and pushed my back like he was my personal metronome, yelling syllables that filled the hall, "Ya, ya, ya, YA, hee, hee, hee, HEE!" He might even sing along with the melody, with a nasal tenor

voice that filled the room. Even though it was scary for Mr. Howard to come up, I saw it as a high compliment.

We had our recitals at the end of the fall and spring terms. There was one particular recital where I had taken some Dentyne gum from my mom right before I was to go up. I was playing a Haydn piece, in the key of D. I came to the front of the piano, put my hand on the edge of the piano and bowed at the waist as the audience clapped. I sat on the tufted leather bench, scooted up to the piano, placed my right foot on the brass sustain pedal and my left foot near the damper pedal, placed my hands in the proper position, lightly on the keys, as if I were holding a ball, just like the Alfred beginner's piano books had taught me, and began to play.

But the gum was still in my mouth.

The room was packed with parents and students. Under those hot, glaring concert hall lights, I could only see Mr. Howard, sitting in the front row; his hands clasped together, his legs crossed. His glare made me feel even hotter. I played my piece perfectly—it was a perky minuet or dance that involved a bouncy bass line under a staccato melody. The stress of Mr. Howard's gaze made me chomp my gum so hard, so furiously, I'm sure everyone could see the tendons flexing in my jaw because the room was dark except for those large overhead lights at the piano. When I finished, I looked at Mr. Howard, who nodded slowly sternly, which was his sign of approval. I stood up and bowed again to the applause and made my weak-kneed way to my seat. I don't remember who told me later about the gum chewing—it could have been my friends or my mother. I remembered midway through the piece that I had been chewing the gum but I felt like I couldn't stop. Knowing Mr. Howard saw me chomp my way through the piece made me wish my body could be raptured right up through the ceiling.

My father never came to those recitals, even though it was his exposure to classical music that got me interested, through listening to NPR's classical stations that played ad infinitum in the car. This could be a cultural and generational phenomenon, that fathers didn't attend their children's activities. My mom always did, since she was also always my ride. But I never remember her saying, "Good job!" or any sort of praise. If there was, it was reserved. Other parents would come up to me and give me praise, like when I had a winter recital at Anitra's piano shop. I played my piece at another grand piano, my leg shaking the damper pedal. I was incredibly nervous, with no gum chomping to calm my nerves. It was one of those flowery pieces that had a strong melodic center and moved around a lot like water. Not a show-stopper, but definitely a crowd pleaser. The mom of another student loved my playing and was impressed. I intimated to her how nervous I was.

"Oh, I didn't notice a thing! You were so poised!" he exclaimed. Somewhere in the middle of her loud acclamations and my mom's reserved nature was me just wanting a pat on the back and maybe some treat later. My mom also only saw music as something to worship the Lord with. She could carry a tune. But when I was more toddler-sized, she listened to a lot of country and western when we lived in Oklahoma. One of my first musical memories was listening to oldies in the kitchen in Nashville, so "Mr. Sandman" will always be one of my favorite songs. My mom also mentioned liking Blondie, mentioning Debbie Harry by name. I couldn't see my mom into New Wave. Yet this was because she got so entrenched in evangelical culture and saw all music that was not Christian as "secular" and ungodly. But that's the Mom I still want to know, still, the one who loved *Hee Haw* and the Mandrell Sisters and maybe did a hustle to "Rapture."

Despite the pressure of the mock recitals and real recitals, the piano was my refuge. Because I played by ear, I improvised a bit here and there. My mom would make mention of it, “Oh that sounded nice—is that a piece?” And I would reply no. My dad bought a weighted key keyboard for me and moved the bulky organ downstairs. Anitra, who conveniently also owned a piano store with her father in Mountain Brook, convinced my parents to buy me an actual piano, with a full, eighty-eight-key keyboard. It was a studio upright, a lacquered, black Weber. My search for an identity had been partially resolved—I was a musician, and a good one, too.

Anitra’s brother came to tune the piano after it had been delivered, which was now downstairs in the rec room. We were upstairs and eventually, we heard him play some romantic piece, sweetly rolling up the stairs. Anitra’s brother was handsome—tall, slender, with red hair and a beard—or was it 5 o’clock shadow? Maybe scruff? Maybe he wasn’t a ginger at all. What I do remember is that he definitely had this air of not being from Alabama, like he was from New York. I don’t remember anything he said, but I remember his aura—he had this sort of *ease*, like how he held his limbs loosely. It was disarming and enviable, and I hid most of the time he was in our house. He was dressed in a shabby button up shirt and pants, but in that stylishly shabby sort of way. However, as he made that piano sing all those beautiful, sonorous notes, I knew that one day that I wanted to make music just like that, and make people feel like I felt. And, definitely maybe, I would want to date and marry someone who was like him. The mold had unwittingly been cast in my dating life, but I would have many years before I would try it out.

CHAPTER NINE: TRUE LOVE WAITING

In junior high, I was the patron saint of the friend zone. Maybe I felt safe there because then, I wouldn't have to take any risks in getting rejected, or even making any sort of relationship mistakes. I can look back at my first experience with Jay in Kindergarten and link them to how I felt as a teenager—mortified of rejection. From the safety of the friend zone, I could observe and advise, and as a (journal) writer, I could feel as if I had gone through the experience without any of the actual nicks, cuts, or bloodshed that came from the darker arts of love and lust. It's funny because I never even thought of the possibility of dating. When would that poor schmuck have to meet my scary-to-me-but-lovely-to-everyone-else parents? Would I even be allowed to date? My parents courted, meaning families were involved in their relationship. Dating was much more casual here in the States. Did they understand that? Could I keep the relationship a secret if I wasn't allowed to date? What would dating be like? What would kissing be like? I never thought of the positive happening, only the negative. It'd be yet another cultural chasm for which I would be the bridge.

So while I was in the friend zone, I had a crush on my friend Greg. He was a tall and skinny, golden-skinned kid with hazel eyes and long eyelashes. He was a goof. My journal writings detailed his relationship foibles, just as I did in 6th grade, but I had a closer view of the action. I was afraid of my feelings, of what they meant and what they could do to our relationship. They were intense and I felt ashamed of them because I was not the type of girl that Greg liked. Greg liked really outgoing, pretty girls. I was his nerdy confidant. Growing up in an evangelical household meant no real talk about sex, even with two medical professionals. Sex was for married adults, period. Otherwise, it was sinful. I wasn't having sexual thoughts about

Greg—I just thought he was cute. But this was my crush, mine to continue or to cancel. Talking to my mom about this was a no-no. Having feelings meant that I was out of control, that I was not using my head.

When I got my period at age thirteen, I decided to be the adult and ask my mom about sex. I had been looking at the tampon insert, where they show you how to insert a tampon, and maybe that triggered the thought. But the conversation was short. We were standing by the large fish tank in the den and I randomly and not quite deftly brought it up.

“So, can you talk to me about sex?” I thought we were going to have this clinical, dry conversation, and then I would be fully ushered into womanhood.

“No. All you need to know is about your period.” We stood there for a moment near the bathroom, right next to our large goldfish tank, and I tried to form more words of protest, but nothing made it to my mouth. I was just dumbfounded that a mother turned away her child who came to her to talk to her about sex. But just like me, maybe it was safer for her to not think that her daughter would ever become sexual; that her daughter could have a child of her own; that her daughter was becoming a woman. Unlike on *The Cosby Show*, where the mother takes her daughter out to tea when her period comes, my mom clammed up and only provided the barest of details about my own anatomy.

And again, the evangelical church was working its way into our lives. Or maybe it was Ghanaian culture, too. It’s hard to delineate the two at times. Either way, I have no idea what my mother had been learning as a parent about sex and teens, but I’m sure she didn’t want me to become a teen pregnancy statistic (I can only intuit that from her experiences as a midwife). It’s not like my parents told me outright that they would abandon me if I got pregnant, but that was the fear that was instilled in me. I literally could not fuck my life up by having sex. There’s also

the sense of shame that an out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy would have brought on my family; a collective shame that seems to come when you're in an immigrant family. That could be due to how we see ourselves as more of a unit —ideally speaking, not necessarily in my house. But it could also be that as immigrants, and as people of color, the tightrope of perfection we daily walk and perform on, just so we can be as good as someone who is white and has the freedom to lead a mediocre life. My parents worked hard to come to the United States and gave me this upper-middle-class life. Any sort of aberration of that would be lethal to how we were perceived and quasi-accepted. Sex equaled shame, a communal shame. Yet I wanted to know at least how to do it, how to do it right, and to be armed with education. But like parents who shudder at their teens having access to condoms at school because they liken it to giving their children a loaded gun instead of a bullet-proof vest, this was unlawful carnal knowledge. I was becoming a sexual being whether any of us liked it or not. In our house, there was no arguing with my parents, unless you had some convincing argument depending on the circumstances. But a young woman growing into her own, who had possession of her own body—it's one of the hallmarks of growing up.

Even though puberty had its proverbial pitfalls, a blissful anticipation and joy came with maturation. Like in fifth grade, when I got my first bra, white with a lacy flower pattern and thin straps. Back at Glen Oaks in the gifted trailer, I showed my best friend, Brandye, my bra. We flashed each other in the dark trailer and found out we were wearing the same bra. We squealed with glee. My mom either purchased the bra for me or we went together to buy it, but it wasn't a memorable moment for me. Showing it to my best friend was. We were on our way to becoming real women. Near the end of sixth grade, I went to the bathroom in the main school building,

pulled down my panties, and saw that faint, red carpet rolled out, welcoming me into the mysterious misery that would be my period.

I was a bit disappointed that this trifecta of maturity—bra, period, and the knowledge of sex—wouldn't be completed with my mom by my side. She'd only participate in the first two legs of the trip. Thankfully, we were a PBS household, and my dad had purchased *The Miracle of Life*—the dry and clinical explanation of sex, with video! Maybe my dad bought the tape hoping I would find it, and then they wouldn't have to explain sex to me. If so, then well played, Mom and Dad, well played.

I did watch the movie on my own, sometime before I went to high school. One weekend afternoon, I sat alone downstairs in the rec room with the big screen TV. It wasn't an arousing show—this was NOVA after all. I found the mating ritual part for humans laughable, as if synth music, fuzzy lights, and interpretative dance would be played anytime anyone would have sex. Of course, it was meant to be representative of pheromones and attraction. Yet these almost ethereal scenes of music/lights/dance part (did sex only occur at a dance club?) i.e. how partners initially got together—this aspect of sex would remain a mystery to me and cause a lot more confusion than any of what followed after.

The movie was what I was hoping my parents would have shared with me, the mechanics of sex. Yet I wasn't even aware of the emotions that came with it until I was older, but I would have liked the occasional equality that I experienced with them to have shown up when it came to sex. Yet I know that would have meant facing that I wouldn't be a child anymore, that I could have children of my own while I was still a child myself.

When I was a teenager, I saw my parents' 1970s how-to guide on sex in the trashcan, in their bedroom. It had a black and white cover with blue and red lettering. I assumed my dad

threw it away. I wanted to pilfer it so badly but it was the only item in the trash. Forlorn unlawful carnal knowledge, left alone in a small pink trash can. I had leafed through the book before, though, and it was tragic that I didn't have a photographic memory since my sheltered mind had been protected from what all those positions were meant to do. There were drawings and color photographs, but also lots of words. Well, I hope someone got some pleasure out of it.

Truly, though, the gap in sex ed in our house was most likely due to our evangelical faith. Sex was seen as only to occur between married people. Any other occurrences were deemed sinful. So what else was there to discuss? As I learned in church, sex outside of marriage was as impure, making those involved in it impure. Sin separates us from God, which is the ultimate separation. So to remain pure, one was to curb their lustful thoughts. But, as Paul the Apostle wrote in the New Testament—if you're too horny, you could always just marry. And I was a little too young for that. The way that sex was spoken about at church, one would think that we were in Christendom times, and the pastors acted as knights that had to protect and avenge the virginity of their women—and just women, since men were expected to have sex. Every church I have attended, even in my 30s, had an obsession with talking about sex within the confines of marriage. Sex outside of marriage would ruin our society and break God's heart.

So, can I even assume that my parents were virgins when they were married? I don't know, because we couldn't and didn't talk that openly about sex. Is that why they had the sex book? I have to applaud them for even having the book since it apparently mattered to them to be educated on it. As their child, I don't even want to think about my parents having sex at all, but we didn't have conversations about their experiences. They would remain as parents, not people who had lives before they had me, before they met each other.

There was only one time that my mother talked about a guy that was not my dad. She told me about a guy that liked her while she was a teenager. He wrote her letters that she and her friends later realized were from Song of Solomon. And Song of Solomon is pretty racy. I wonder if he wrote her a verse like this: “I said, I will go up to the palm tree, I will take hold of the boughs thereof: now also thy breasts shall be as clusters of the vine, and the smell of thy nose like apples.” We laughed over his amorous, plagiaristic attempts.

With my knowledge base left to be filled later by things I read (thank you, *Waiting to Exhale*) and heard from other kids, I must have subconsciously decided that anything that dealt with liking a boy must be suppressed, buried in the depth of my heart, underneath the friendly smile of a benign friend, or underneath impossible flirtatious lines. The fear of becoming pregnant and shaming my family was my birth control. I wasn't used to positive attention from men (at least not anymore). My father's absence, due to his work schedule, was something that I walked around like those oil stains in the grass. I didn't want to fall into any feelings that I would have to address and try to understand. I kept myself on the periphery of the absence, and on the periphery of sexual development.

Not only was I safe to myself, I was safe to cute guys like Greg. I would never be desirable in that way. When I look at my seventh grade picture, with my small smile, with the red lip stain my mom allowed me to wear, in a blue and white flowered outfit, and my hair done, I had a look of restraint that a thirteen-year-old shouldn't have. Maybe like some poised political wife, but not a kid. It's like I put myself on a shelf, like I was done—not like I was just about to start.

This sense of sexual safety—which germinated from a growing influence of American evangelicalism, my parents’ reticence about sex, and my own fear of my strong feelings—was something I vacillated back and forth with, like with a family friend and my feelings for him. He was like a brother, our families having bonded back in Ghana before we had even met—my father and his parents meeting in medical school. In a journal entry in January 1991, I wrote “I thought I had overcome this, but I’m afraid not.” Looking back, I sounded a lot like St. Augustine and his *Confessions*, but at least he had had some fun. I was just fretting over *maybe* possibly having some fun. I saw, and maybe still see, a crush as an illness to recover from; a virus to run its course through my body, and then to finally disappear so I could get on with the business of school, serving God, and surviving adolescence. Yet I could barely admit this crush to myself, even in the sacred space of my three-subject notebook or a diary. I still can’t, because what’s the use of unrequited longings and desires, even if they are a part of the human condition? I feel ashamed that I ever even liked him. The crush started when I was at least 10 years old. I kissed his hand in the back of his family’s plush brown van while we were on our way to some meal together with his family. He jerked it away and I pretended nothing had happened, but my face couldn’t hide the elation, beaming in a smile, erupting in giggles. At the same time, shame simmered underneath.

In their pool, I’d shove and push him, like the crazy, free tomboy that I was. At that point, I was seen as the annoying little kid sister because I can still see that side-eye he gave me. My shoving wasn’t reciprocated. I sensed his toleration and irritation. I wasn’t an equal. How could I be, with the gulf of four years between the ages of ten and fourteen? Even though I wasn’t certain about what was happening—not that a newly double-digit child could anyway—I couldn’t fully own my feelings. They were foreign invaders, speaking in some dirty, sultry

language that I couldn't understand. All I knew was that I didn't want to like him. This was the first time that I viewed feelings as something to tame or something to control, with moral weight. It was the beginning of a lifelong wrestling match between my head and my heart. And even though we would be close friends much later, that was as far as it got between us. Uncle J. made a joke when we were teenagers that if we ever got married, it would take us forever to do so because we were both so indecisive. I didn't, and still don't, understand what he meant by that. But at that point, the thought of marrying him was like marrying a brother—a joke in Alabama, a nightmare for me. Yet that stolen hand-kiss was one of the first times that I crossed a line. I made a move.

In high school, my boy encounters were odd. The first thing that I remember is being in our dilapidated, cavernous auditorium, with its wooden seats, balcony, large white pillars, cracking and falling paint and water damaged ceiling tiles. I was hanging out with some people, and I don't know how this came up, but this guy declared to me, "You're too cute to fuck." And I took that as an insult. Cute as in innocent? Cute as in not sexy? What I didn't do was try to be just cute enough to fuck. After all, being an evangelical Christian meant waiting until marriage for sex. That guy's pronouncement on my fuckability still bewilders me. But at the time, I just shrugged it. It's not like he would ever have the pleasure of knowing anyway.

Another kid, Damon, with his wide-set eyes, mustache, and toothy grin, tried to hug me before class in Algebra. We weren't close, at all. He was just an acquaintance. I hugged him in what I thought was an appropriate, full-on hug—not even the chaste, Christian side hug. I had put my arms around his neck. But Damon wasn't having it.

"Are you a lesbian?"

"What?"

“That wasn’t a real hug. You need to hug like this.” He placed my arms on his torso and gave me a more intimate hug.

“Um, OK, yeah.” I was yet again bewildered by his actions and had no idea what the big deal was. I don’t think he liked me, though. He was just horny and maybe a tad lecherous.

My reputation of being a prude was readily established. It didn’t stop a senior that I thought was ridiculously fine, Brian, from flirting with me. He was a preppy, light-eyed dude whose best flirtatious line was "Looking good in that wrap skirt!" He ended up dating my friend, Amber. "Boy, oh boy, did he come on strong. But since flirting was like second nature (which I didn't know until I used my brain), I took it the wrong way," I wrote. Of course I took it the wrong way. Brian would later make another comment to me about being a lesbian at the lunch table. He said that I had hair in my teeth. I ran my tongue over my teeth, confused. I looked at my friend Stephanie who whispered to me that it had to do with being a lesbian. It took me a long time to understand the cunnilingus reference. Both Brian and Damon were trying to goad me into some hypersexual state that I was never going to share with them. All it did instead was insult me. In retrospect, I can say that however of a late bloomer I was, the guys in my high school didn’t necessarily respect me as a sexual being.

Still, when I talked to my youth group friends, it was always about boys. Granted, that was to be expected, but in my construction of my self, my teenaged self, I’m shocked at how my lost 10th grade year was focused on a guy friend of mine, Matt. I lost my high school yearbook for that stretch of time, and I don’t remember much about school. That year, I spent fretting over a “friend” I wanted so desperately to get close to.

Matt, or as I kept writing in my journal, Matthew, was a tall blond with straight, shoulder-length hair and blue eyes. I'm not sure I can place the accent in my mind but he was a Southern boy, one you could bring home to Momma, including mine because he was so darn polite to adults. He was a couple of years older than me. My friend Robyn, who dated him for a while, said recently, "You had a crush on him," which made me want to crawl out of my skin and leave it at the bar at which we were sitting while we imbibed our Christmas Eve margaritas. It was something I fought, mainly because, deep down, I had some sense that my feelings weren't going to be returned.

Even living in the South, in Birmingham, and even now, the idea of race being a barrier was something that never crossed my mind. And yet it was most likely there, like some invisible Plexiglas wall, only letting us get so far. Were these white guys that I was growing up with seeing me as untouchable? Or like I was some loose girl? Was I seen at all? It didn't seem like I was, as I saw my guy friends had, lusting after and dating my girlfriends. I was in the friend zone whether I wanted to be or not.

Also, I was an emotionally intense person that had not yet learned how to create appropriate boundaries. I don't mean that in a stalker way—that took too much energy. I felt that I needed to write him—about what? I can't even remember. But he never wrote me back.

This penchant, *crush*, all started when we were hanging out at my friend Jan's house one summer night in August, somewhere in suburban Birmingham, over-the-mountain where my friends lived. Jan was a grade or two ahead of me, and in high school, that year gap seemed like a chasm. I rarely hung out with her friends Dawn, Charis, Jody, and Angie. My friends Heather and Robyn checked out her bedroom, plastered with Contemporary Christian Music superstars like Michael W. Smith, Amy Grant, and DC Talk. We ate dinner on their screened-in porch. I

was having an interior decorating moment, marveling over the modern ketch, the homey gloving room.

They, but not me, were playing suck and blow. Everyone was sitting boy-girl-boy-girl on soft but sturdy cream-colored couches. A playing card was passed around between each person as girls giggled and the guys looked wide-eyed, laughing nervously. They egged each other on, but also held collective breaths each time the card was passed around. Matt kept staring at me while the game went on. That game, and possibly Matt's stares, made me nervous because I didn't want to accidentally kiss someone if the card fell between us. I didn't really know these kids yet, and the point of the game was to grab an accidental kiss as well as to create some comedy if the kiss occurred between two people of the same gender.

So I left the game and went outside with Robyn, then Heather and Jonathan—this artsy musician guy with longish, almost white, blond hair and glasses—his friend Kelly, and then Matt all came out later. And then Matt said, "There's no one I'd like to kiss in there. Deborah's out here." I laughed it off, burying my head in my lap. But that's how that whole bonfire of obsession was created in my 10th grade year.

I read the pages now and I don't remember the intensity nor do I remember why I was so intense about it. Why did I insist that this young man be my friend and read my letters (which he loved) and write me back? Why didn't I just give up? So many pages of frustration for this unrequited penchant—OK, *crush*. Meanwhile in our little group of six: Melissa, Heather, Amber, Robyn and me, except Jill who was our resident unavailable-to-the-masses beauty, had had a piece of Matt. Melissa, who is ten days older than me, went to junior prom with him. Amber went to senior prom with him. Heather and Matt were best friends. Robyn dated him. I just emotionally lusted after him. I say emotionally because I never physically lusted after him, but

with how I wrote about him, I may as well have. Because not only my parents had closed that door to sex, but the evangelical Christian church I was going to did too. We signed “True Love Waits” pledge cards that vowed sexual purity before marriage. All I had were my unpartitioned, crudely hidden, poorly controlled emotions. All those hormones transformed into epistolary, unrequited longings for unavailable guys.

And yes, a girl’s adolescence can be about shrieking and hormones and fainting—but I never saw myself that way. I was the serious nerd who grew up in a nerdy household, would pursue a career as a doctor, and would marry last in my group of friends. It makes sense since that’s how my parents met—at work while furthering their careers. Everyone expected this from me. Our little group of girls, dubbed the Giggly Girls because we would giggle our way through the church service, put together a time capsule when we were eighteen years old and made predictions of who would get married first. Robyn and I were predicted to be the last ones. And we still are.

With the lack of talk about boys in my house, it made me internally boy-crazy, yet outwardly very focused on school. At least school was in my control, and I was good at that. I was not good at convincing some guy to like me, let alone love me.

So without a real boyfriend to pour all my devotion into, I poured my passions into and through my letters. I started to get angry about Matt not writing back and had a heart-to-heart with him, and then asked Amber to investigate, and then learned that I was “crowding” him, and then gave him space, and then still I was mad at him, for a year. And now he’s some newly elected politico on the red side of life back home, with four kids, and what did *I* want? His devotion? His innermost thoughts?

Matt and I eventually stopped being friends because he wasn't giving me what I wanted, whatever metaphysical object of desire that was, besides love. But at Ramsay, in eleventh grade, I randomly fell into friendships with, and into the laps of, two other white guys. During the last period of school, I had an independent study, French III, in which I was the French teacher's teaching assistant. So I hung out in her office. A large window brought in light opposite the door. Her office, located stage left of the moldy, decrepit auditorium, was crammed with books, her desk, and a large couch. The mold gave Mrs. Summey many a migraine. This was where I started my transition from hanging out with mainly black folks to hanging out with the theater kids, which were a mix of races but predominantly white. It was rather random how and why this happened. It wasn't intentional. Because I was a floater in high school and not really bonded to one group, it just happened that I would see these two guys and other theater people regularly. Even though I did float around, I wasn't looking for a group of friends. I had my Giggly Girls and others at church. I didn't seek Scott and Trey out. They just happened to be there when I was there.

Scott was just a bit taller than me with curly, untamed red hair, a wiry build, and a big, toothy smile. He was in my Honors Geometry class in tenth grade, but I really wasn't friends with him then. Trey looked like a lost flower child from the 1960s, long, dirty blond hair, large blue eyes, and was odd. In retrospect, because he went to EPIC (Education Program for the Individual Child) which wasn't too far from our high school, Trey was most likely gifted. His oddness was in the things he said sometimes, in weird, cartoonish voices. I wish I could remember something so I could quote him. One time while we were in the library, he banged his head on the table, on my hand, and on a book. Either way, those two guys were messing with my

head, on purpose. If you looked up the terms, “naive,” “too trusting,” and “a good sport,” I’m sure you would see my sixteen-year-old face.

I beat myself up because I called Scott a cracker. I have no idea about the context except that I was definitely joking. He teased me about it by pretending to be mad at me. I called myself a screw-up, even after he said it was all a big act. I was concerned about Scott on an individual level, not on a group level, like a white man with many privileges and a black woman with not as many. The group level would have informed me that this comment of “cracker” could not have hurt him as much as hearing the n-word from Jennifer back in Nashville had hurt me. I just didn’t want this new friend to be upset or mad at me. My sensitivities had overrun me. But truly, I didn’t know any of this yet.

After we “made up,” there was one odd day where I was physically carried by both Trey and Scott. I don’t know if it was over the shoulder, over the threshold, like a pine tree log straight up and down, but I remarked how they were both strong. And that day in late October, I was also on Trey’s lap, which I stated was “fun.”

So later, in November, I chronicled in detail how Scott and I were talking about sex. We had been hanging out on the second level of the stage. To get up there, one needed a ladder. I had already been up there with Trey. But with Scott, “we were pretending that he’s going to rape me, and he pulled me up the staircase...” Then “he ‘tried’ to rip my clothes off. Then we acted as if we just had sex. Then I sat on his lap. He told me to sit facing him. Too bad, I had a dress on. Then he said, ‘Get off me, girl!’ So I hit him and the rest of the period, we laughed whenever we looked at each other.”

As I was walking through the very well-worn path of my adolescence, reading that shocked and surprised me. I had no recollection of playing rape games. And because I grew up in

such a sheltered household, I still don't know what constitutes healthy sexual play between children and teenagers. It was as if someone tripped me and I fell headlong into this black hole. I got a bit depressed for a few weeks afterward, frozen in the fear that every encounter that I had had with men was stained with my lack of agency.

My foray into dating and/or sexual awakening wasn't empowering. It was humiliating.

I know my other theater friends who looked like me, like Jade and Tamika, were more secure in their budding sexuality (or good at faking it, who knows?), and that theater stereotype of being sexually liberal—sure, I saw it. I saw them flirt with those guys that way. Yet I didn't see everything. Looking back at this, the pantomiming of rape and being carried around as if I was some little trinket still bothers me, especially under the hot glare of the white male gaze. All of these things were subconsciously in play, and as a tomboy who was used to being equals with boys, I don't know how I was socialized into this limp dishrag of a girl, as an object. Not as a person. Worthy of love and respect. It's also that there weren't those conversations with my parents of how to be with boys and how to still be myself. I had to figure all this out, along with dealing with my intense feelings, on my own. And that saddens me, still. Although I have since crawled out of that black hole of uncertainty about my dating life, having those missing memories puts this present life in perspective. I did the best I could with the little information that I gleaned on my own.

The same insanity that happened with Matt repeated with Trey—many letters, full of whatever was burning in my heart. Replace one long-haired, charismatic yet aloof dude with another one and get the same head-splitting, emotional migraine from banging my head against a myriad of obviously closed doors.

Not soon after the incident with Scott, our theater group held a Dramathon—twenty-five hours of non-stop drama. We had black poly-cotton t-shirts with a spotlight on the word Dramathon in all caps and the tag line—“Doing it all night long...” I still have the shirt. I had built up the courage to confront Trey about his flirting as we sat on the stairs right under the balcony, stage left. He gave me some lines about how he was a marrying man who had all this love to offer, and he was just giving his love to everyone else. Whatever that meant. What meant more to me was when he talked about music, something that I had started getting into in earnest—mainly writing about R&B artists like Jodi, Tony, Toni, Toné!, and Tevin Campbell. I believe he played guitar or bass guitar—something rock and roll related. I looked in those blue eyes as he talked, although I was not, and am not, one for consistent eye contact. What’s funny is that after he gave me that line, I wrote, “He’s such a great guy, like a fluke of nature. Guys his age are supposed to be the sex-crazed, selfish jerks.” Later that month, I found out he was dating two girls at the same time. So much love to give.

I look back and think that this was such a waste of time. I could have been doing something more productive, more centered on what I wanted to do, on activities that brought me pleasure instead of frustration. I wonder now if I had still been playing piano, an activity that had brought me great comfort, would I have been as boy crazy?

Right after I won my first paying piano competition, with a \$40 check in hand, my father announced that he would not pay for lessons because he didn’t find me to be serious enough. It wasn’t a sane response, but at this point, my father’s mental illness had started to take hold. At the time, I just saw it as a spiteful thing to do to a child who enjoyed making music. Part of me still feels that way, but I can filter it through the lens of understanding—this man was not

completely healthy. Maybe he had his own internal, mysterious pressures, but it is a regret that I have to this day, that I didn't try to find another way to pay for the lessons.

With that refuge taken away, I believe that the answer is an easy no. Where was the girl who loved *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, *Nancy Drew*, and *The Hardy Boys*, and Judy Blume? If music and/or reading had stayed in my life more prominently, I might not have had time to write all those letters, to think about all those boys, and to make all those stupid calls. When Trey had told me that I was a “somewhat friend” and that I had too much time on my hands, he was right, because friends do not try to mind fuck the other as he had. I tried many times to stop being his friend and he would pull me back in with questions about my ignoring him or whether I was mad at him. If Trey was gifted too (which I am sure he was), he could have had the same emotional overexcitability as I did, and we just could not unclench from each other's energies. And, well, he was kind of an unrepentant jerk.

Meanwhile, back at church, I befriended Ben, Matt's younger brother, and we shared a love of alternative rock music. He gave me the Foo Fighters first CD for my birthday. He played bass guitar and was in a band called Berty Hurch. Ben and I bonded also over our mutual hatred of Matt during my junior year. Ben was tall like his brother, closer to my age, but had blond hair and green eyes, and a little more golden tan than his brother. He definitely wasn't as nerdy—Ben was a regular guy, which was refreshing. But again, like so many relationships we have with one another, it was because we came to the same place every week. I don't even know if our faith had anything to do with it besides meeting at church. We didn't talk that much about religion. We talked about music and love. With my identity as a nerd, I would have never imagined being friends with Ben. Matt was more like me—an intellectual, very heady.

One Sunday, Ben and I sat beside each other at church and laughed while playing a morbid game of how to get rid of Matt. Hell hath no fury like a woman, and the man's brother, scorned.

"I can run over him." Ben said.

"Oooh! And this is how you can play it off: 'Oops! I thought that was a dog. My bad.'" I said as we high fived each other.

I don't remember us bonding this way, but that's what I recorded in my journal. I thought we had bonded at a trip to Six Flags over Georgia. Either way, he was my buddy.

My obsession with platonic guy friends seems to stem back from when I was a tomboy and had boys mainly as friends. Nothing got too complicated. I got mad, I got over it, I moved on. As I grew older, I realized that hormones and age made everything complicated. I always questioned whether I liked any guy friend. All those lines seemed to be made fuzzy by the way the focus seemed to shift from just hanging out to actually sharing feelings.

Yet I was jealous that he liked this other girl, Lindsey, as a friend, too. Not because she was another girl, but because she was Lindsey. She was a Southern girl, with dark hair and eyes, with a popular silver beaded bracelet that said "I have money." None of my friends liked her, except Jill—kind of. All the guys in our youth group liked her. I noted in my journal how Ben hated talking on the phone with me but loved talking on the phone with her. She was carefree, the type of carefree that would casually write in someone's yearbook, "What's up, my nigga?" Also, she was a gossip, so we tried not to talk around her. I resented her a lot, because she seemed so Plasticine and transparent.

Still, Ben and I became close as friends, in that Kindergarten, egalitarian sort of way. When I took a gap year between high school and college and we hung out, he always drove me

home, which was at least a 30-minute drive. But one night, we went to some restaurant and were hanging with our friends and he yelled at me about not driving or being ungrateful about his driving me home from hanging out. I wish I could remember what he said, I just remember the volume. Now Ben was not a yeller. I think he was just frustrated with the driving. I was too. I lived in a house with five cars and didn't have my license yet. I don't remember what I said, but that he did that in front of our friends made me feel so small and helpless. When he drove me home, we didn't say anything, that long drive over-the-mountain, back to my house. When he pulled up, he apologized with a much softer voice. I still felt like I wasn't independent enough. After I went away to college, our friendship withered away.

It still bothers me that as a writer, and as an adult, I can't define what happened during these very open-hearted-to-the-wrong-guys years. I can't label it or diagnosis it. But I can observe it: that it was me trying to find some sort of anchor while lost at sea, floundering, flailing my arms—and the shore of self-respect is just one inch away.

The only word that comes to me is shame. It's a big, dirty shame that I wanted to stay buried in that sea of forgetfulness. I want to label it so I can see how it affects me now. Am I still looking for that anchor, or am I finally that anchor? I cling to the truth of the latter.

This overextension of my personal boundaries didn't end with Trey and Scott either. LaToya from junior high, we still kept in touch and she wanted me to talk to her ex-boyfriend, Seth. We only talked on the phone, but would talk for hours. I don't even know if I remember what he looks like. He maybe had a Southern drawl. He kept promising to meet up with me, and something would always happen. I even invited him to my graduation. This theme of being stood up or stood at a distance happened with other guy friends as well.

If I have a true regret for this time, it would be that I didn't actually try to pursue another weird kid in school, Steve. Steve was a year ahead of me, maybe 5'9", with wavy brown hair that he would occasionally wear in a bun, blue eyes, played soccer, and occasionally wore broomstick skirts. He looked like Eddie Vedder to me, so his best friend, Josh, and our friends called him EdVed behind his back. Josh told me one time they were on the phone and he accidentally called him that, and Steve replied, "What the hell did you call me?" I have no idea how Josh played it off, but I thought it was hilarious. He only came into my existence or purview because Lakisha mentioned that he was cute. Later on in my junior year, he was in my 6th period keyboarding/piano class. Even though my lessons at UAB stopped, I still was able to be exposed to music through school.

Steve offered me a cracker. I took it, thanked him, and then he wished me a "good day." My mouth was full of crackers, and I said, "You too." And then I said, "Have a good weekend" and he replied, "You too." Of course, this is like Jordan Catalano from *My So-Called Life* talking to an Angela Chase, and I died a million little teenage deaths from the interactions. Some other time, we locked eyes. But eventually, I found out he was dating someone and taking her to prom. But out of all the guys in my adolescence, I sometimes still think about him; of how he was so brave to bend gender in the Bible belt; about how he was reportedly non-conformist and anti-establishment. If I had only focused on him, I would have not seen it as a waste of time. As someone who didn't completely fit in anywhere, Steve was like a flare shot out into the dark skies of my loneliness. Steve was the type of guy who could possibly maybe get me, and I would be the type of girl who could possibly maybe get him. That flare blazed with hope, even if the hope ended up being dashed.

As a girl who wasn't into her feelings because she feared that she would drown in them, it may come as no surprise that I didn't start dating until college.

CHAPTER TEN: FAMILY & FAITH

Intense emotional expression of any sort—love, hate, fear, disgust, sadness—weren't welcomed in my home. I got that message loud and clear at age twelve. I sat gloomily in my room, ivory vertical blinds shut but the sunlight escaping from the outer edges of the windows. I sat on my multi-colored brown, matted carpet, faced a full-length mirror. As I peered in, I saw in my mind's eye the picture of my dead grandfather, my mom's dad, lying in his casket my grandfather. He looked tall and thin, in a brown suit. In my mind's eye at the time, he was darker skinned like me. But he actually was lighter skinned like my mother; her sister, Auntie Marian, who looks just like her; the eldest, Uncle Alex; and her younger brother, Uncle John. My grandfather, also named John, died in 1980 and my mother did not travel back to Ghana to say goodbye. I'm not sure why. Maybe she couldn't afford to go home. It could be that she was either pregnant with or had given birth to Michael.

Perhaps I was trying to conjure up tears, or they may have just needed some encouragement to come to the surface. I cried, feeling the weight of those unseen burdens of first generation immigrants—the lack of extended family. Unlike my friends from school, for me there was no going over to Grandma's house, to have her spoil me with love and baked goods and stories about my mom when she was my age. No blood cousins to play with, no aunts and uncles to add to my spoiling. And no Grandpa to tell me about when he was a young man and how he met Grandma and how he felt when my mom was born and about the European parts of the bloodline. We had to create our extended family, almost from scratch. Our new extended family consisted of my father's medical school classmates. We moved away from our Ghanaian community in Nashville and the one in Birmingham wasn't the same for me. Luckily, everyone

was considered family in Ghanaian culture, and I addressed every adult as Auntie and Uncle. Family friends my age could be like siblings and cousins. But it wasn't ever the same as being with my mom's extended family. And even as a pre-teen, I could feel those empty, unfillable spaces echo with a longing for a connection to who I really was, to who we really were as a family. This came up during the holiday season, as classmates would talk about their family gatherings, about what was cooked and eaten, about family members' antics. My immediate family didn't have that sense of tradition, and during my adolescence, we had already started to splinter, since my father was working more and more out of town.

After I was done crying over my grandfather, I emerged from my room, with a tear-stained face and ambled to the living room where my mom was doing something— watching the news or crocheting, or maybe both.

“Eh, what's wrong?” she said.

“I was just thinking about how I never got to meet my grandfather and how I miss him.” I said, rubbing my face.

“Ho,” she said, clucking her tongue.

That's how I remember the exchange. But when I told my mom this story later, she didn't remember. That day, I vowed never to share my feelings with my mom. Over twenty years later, I broke that vow in a last ditch effort to be understood by her. I sobbed over the phone to her about our sorry relationship, about how I didn't feel like I was protected from all of the things we went through due to my father's mental health. I wanted her to be a mom and say I'm sorry. Yet she gave that same exasperation of disdain. “What can I do it about it now?” she said. I thought, *I don't know, try to make this better?* But I knew that she wasn't able to. She saw the past as

irrelevant to our present, and I saw it as a continuation of our story as mother and daughter. I needed us to travel back to the past to make sense of the present. She couldn't understand my emotions about the past, how they were relevant to the present. I believed that my tears could fill the cultural and generational gap that stood in between us, as a way for my mother to see the gap and then make her way across it. She couldn't cross over to the other side and see things how I saw them.

The same sadness that I found for my grandfather came again when his widow, my grandmother, died after complications from pneumonia, in 2011 at the age of ninety.

And as my cousins gathered on Facebook to work on raising funds together for her funeral, they reminisced on all the many memories that they had of her, of how she would relentlessly tease them, provide for them, love them. This woman raised many of them as their parents worked. Instead of calling her Grandma, they called her Auntie. On her birthday last year, one of my cousins posted a Happy Birthday message to her, and a cousin-in-law remarked on how much she loved her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. He was very moved by her love for all of us.

Reading these posts of affection and adoration, I realized I missed out on knowing a special person, a person I was a part of and who was a part of me, even if we had never spoken or met. I was her fourth child's firstborn child. And that made my grief of her passing even more pronounced. She was my last living grandparent. When I look at her picture on Facebook, a black and white picture where she is dressed in multi-colored Dutch wax cloth, peering with her wide eyes, I see some of myself in her, someone that I could say that I was related to if we stood side by side.

I wonder if my grandmother felt like two pieces of her heart, ones that belonged to me and my brother, were always lost, because we had never met her. All my other cousins grew up with her, calling her “Auntie,” because she was always so close and had helped to raise a lot of them while their parents were working during the day. But with her death, parts of my history, and the parts of the histories of my parents (Grandma loved my dad as her own son), were shut in the grave.

Grandma Christiana had such a wicked sense of humor. When my mother turned sixty, she told her, “You’re now a young lady!” My mom reminded me that I had promised Grandma that I would go to Ghana and visit her before she died. I had failed to deliver that promise. The excuses that I can give are the following:

1) Traveling to Ghana is expensive. I never seemed to have at least \$1500 for the plane ticket. And then there’s the cost of the visa. And the inoculations, including the malaria pills that make you feel ill. But I have so many family members there, getting there would be the hardest part. But at the same time, I would need to bring a lot of gifts, too. And I would need a lot of time over there, at least a month, so I could really see and experience Ghana.

2) My parents never went when we could afford to. And I can give at least two reasons why.

a) They would feel like outsiders in their own country. I asked my mother about this a few months ago in a different way—did she and Dad ever think that they would return home for good after my dad was done with his education? But Ghanaian immigrants to America were looked on derisively as too snobby and too good for Ghanaians. I never thought of their lives here as exile, and how they didn’t really belong here in America, even as citizens, or back home. They were caught in a similar in-between state that I was, although it was configured differently. They knew who they were, as Ghanaians, as Africans, as Americans, as Christians. But all of

those identities for me were in flux. I could never pledge allegiance to just one of those, not even the Christian one, even though I had tried. I was every one of those and none of those. I only knew how to be me, in my own country, population: 1.

b) Like me, my father had his own issues with his parents, even before he married my mother who was not Akan like he was. My father didn't go home and bury his parents when they died. As a teen, he needed a jacket for school. His mother had money for it, but refused to give it to him. He related that story to my mother, too, and she didn't understand why he was still focused on that. I do find it strange and yet altogether predictable that I feel no sense of loss when I think about my father's parents and his side of the family.

The closest relative he seemed to have was his cousin, Auntie Victoria, who we called Auntie Vic. She and her family lived on the southside of Chicago, on South Throop Street, a name that my father would love to say with emphasis. We visited them once in the summer when I was a child. She was younger than my dad and seemed really full of life, really fun in that way that other family members seem like they would be more fun to hang out with and live with. She died of brain cancer some years ago. Otherwise, there was another cousin or brother of my father's in Chicago, but I felt very awkward calling him just because we were blood-related, and so I never did.

From my point of view, my dad wasn't like my mother, who would claim anyone remotely related to her, including my Auntie Paulina's husband, Uncle David (who went to high school with my father)—his brother George, and his wife Salome. My mom and Auntie Salome have never met, even though Uncle George and Auntie Salome have lived in the States since 1991.

I recently met them in Seattle where they live. When I called Uncle George, they gave me the classic Ghanaian guilt trip, gently chiding me for not having called them earlier while I was there for a conference. I had completely forgotten their existence, which I blame partly on my mother for not reminding me that they lived in Seattle, and partly on my addled graduate student brain. Auntie Salome's name was spoken in my house a lot because she and my mom talk on the phone all the time. Auntie Salome calls my mom the big sister she never had. And, as Ghanaians do, they fed me. We went out for Chinese food one rainy Saturday afternoon, and afterwards, they took me to their house where I had some tea and talked for hours about Ghana and my parents. When they returned me to my hotel, they gave me some money for my trip back home. In terms of love, it's an expression that I can rely on—that my family will do their best to take care of me in terms of my physical needs, especially with food.

In the early 1990s, my family started to visibly fragment when my father stopped attending church. We had been going to a non-denominational church for a few years. We would usually all drive together, but sometimes we drove separately if one of my parents had errands to run later. We sat together in metal and cloth chairs, sang worship songs, and his loud baritone voice cut through the mix of voices. The pastor, a burly, tall man with salt and pepper hair liked to fly private planes, like my father did. I wonder if that was a coincidence, or if my father sought that out when looking for churches for us to attend.

But the faith movement, based on a Bible verse that said it was impossible to please God without faith, grew in my father's heart like kudzu on a telephone pole. It was the answer to

everything. If you got sick and didn't recover, it was because you didn't have faith. If you lost everything and never had your abundance return, it was because you didn't have faith. Any loss or bad thought or calamity that befell you, you were responsible for if you lacked faith. It was really a non-starter conversation because even if you claimed to have faith, and your life was in shambles, you really didn't have faith. Instead of relying on the mystery of faith, my father needed to have the assurance of faith, a guarantee. Back then, that was the life that I knew. My mother, father, and younger brother attended church on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and sometimes Wednesday nights.

We had our own communion ceremony before Sunday night services. Mom baked bread pudding and poured grape juice into a glass pitcher, our homemade Eucharist. I liked those times of solemn silence. Even my brother, Michael, with his ADHD, was able to keep still for a few minutes. Dad took the bread pudding and said, "This is my body, broken for you. This, do in remembrance of me." Mom carefully cut the bread pudding; with her sturdy hands a few shades lighter than mine, took our plates, and served the bread pudding. I heard all our mouths chewing the bread pudding reverently. I have no idea why we used bread pudding instead of a loaf of French bread or challah.

Dad took the pitcher of grape juice. "This is My blood, which was shed for you. This, do in remembrance of me." He poured the juice into heavy glass tumblers we only used for special occasions like this. We slurped Christ's blood silently. Then Dad would take the tithe check, the offering for the church, and bless it. He stuck it back into his big cordovan Bible that contained his beautiful scripted notes on yellow-ruled paper. I always thought he had the best handwriting of any doctor I knew.

The Bible was the rulebook of our lives. I owned about six of them, at least. The kudzu-like faith grew and grew, overshadowing everything. If it wasn't for TV, reading young adult fiction, and going to school, I'd only know life through Trinity Broadcasting Network, the cassette tapes that my parents listened to, the religious books I read, and the church services I attended. Jesus literally overshadowed everything, with a picture of him in the bathroom, a large portrait of Swedish Jesus in the den, a picture of him in the half bathroom that freaked out a friend of mine who came by to pee after she had dropped me off from school one day ("Jesus watched me pee!" she said). Jesus was the seen guest. He was the lens through whom we saw everything through. Faith was the bubble that we lived in. We were to be in the world, but not of it. Classical music was fine, but nothing modern and not explicitly Christian.

Before my father stopped going, our church social life flourished. We always had people over to our house after church for Ghanaian meals of savory stews served over rice, delicious meat pies, warm yeasty bread, and a dense, layered salad. The sounds of conversation and laughter and the smells home cooking made our home warm and welcoming.

I look back now and think how ironic it is that this one unifying being, who brought my parents together, across heavily guarded ethnic lines, and then across the Atlantic here to the United States—it/he wasn't enough to keep my parents together. My father had started to at least separate from that community that he loved so much, if not that being, too. He believed that the Holy Spirit would single-handedly guide him and lead him into all truth. Not having the fellowship of other churchgoers, and having a job where he would fill in for other doctors, the only stable people in his life were us and his med school classmates.

My father started to seem more and more distant, in his own world. He was off in the backyard building an experimental plane in a garage that he built, or tinkering with his cars in the garage or driveway, or computer programming downstairs in his office or upstairs in the den, or playing the organ that he built, or flying his private four-seater plane. Yet during this time, the small gap of autonomy was transforming into a ravine with a raging river full of delusions and paranoia, slowly drowning my father, carrying him further away from us. We didn't know what it was then—my dad was always eccentric.

It seemed that we all tried to find some way to find some shelter from the encroaching darkness that was stemming from my father, the darkness being his undiagnosed, unmedicated mental illness. I found church and my youth group. My mother became even more ardent about her faith as my father started to slip away. She found refuge in her friends, too. For example, she had her German friend, Gisela—a tall, kind German woman that my mother and I visited once. She introduced me to a fruit tea that looked like potpourri and Amish Friendship bread—she gave my mom the liquid starter and we ate it for a while.

My mother, brother and I soon started to go to another church that our family friends attended, and we would go as much as we could. Sunday morning, Sunday night, when the youth group met, and Wednesday night for prayer meeting.

My brother's ADHD and developmental delays started to become even more burdensome. He walked around our neighborhood, sometimes only with socks on his feet. He tore up my first journal that I had when I was in first grade, along with our other childhood books, trashing his room in a rage. His tantrums and yelling took over his sweet persona. His room would be a picture of his mood—mostly shredded and disheveled. Before, my brother would be the first to greet our bone-tired father from his long-distance temp gig trips, yelling out,

“Daaadddyyyyy!” as he would run down the stairs, tugging on him with glee. How my brother adored him.

My father bought a small Piper airplane and would go on trips across the state with my brother. Any little task that Michael could accompany him on, my dad would say, “Are you ready to go, Mike?” and Michael would reply, “Ready!” They were more like buddies than father and son.

Even through these tougher times, my brother still was known as a loving child in our church community and among our friends, especially as someone very outgoing and caring. At the new church, one of my mom’s friends remarked about how he once asked her if he could give her a hug and how she had needed one so badly. On the other hand, he kissed my friend Robyn, which freaked her, and me, out. His love for people had no boundaries, including for my father, even when my dad’s mind started to falter. His leaving church was the one thing that seemed to protect him from what living in America had done to him.

It surprises me now that two medical professionals failed to suspect that mental illness afflicted my father until I was about eighteen and my mom mentioned about watching an episode on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* that made her think that my father was suffering from bipolar disorder. What mattered more to her was how God saw the hierarchy of the household. My mom believed that if the hierarchy was kept, even with a literal mad king as my father, then God would honor that and take care of us. The father was the high priest of our family, the one who technically should have been praying and interceding for all of us. Instead of disposing him, my mother would just pray for him and pray for all of us. The rule keeper had come on the scene to save us. Yet this was the God who gave her this husband, brought her here to America, who had given her salvation, the Holy Spirit, and his spiritual gifts. He had brought her through the

grinding machine of acculturation. Still, I'm not sure that a family that bounced off one another like four pinballs in opposite directions is what I'd call godly care or an answered prayer. I also tried to find some shelter in high school, but that place evolved into a place of torment.

Of all the cultures that were stressed upon me, being a Christian was paramount. That's why my church's youth group was so important to me. I was accepted for who I was, and wasn't (or so I thought, and still think). Yet my mom still didn't want me to hang out with them too much, even with knowing who their parents were, even though I was a good student, even though I was pretty much a good kid. I can only speculate as to why she didn't want me to go out much. 1) Living in the last few years under her roof, it was a way for her to keep me home. 2) America was still considered "other"—I wasn't Ghanaian enough and hanging out with American kids would make me more American and less Ghanaian. 3) Just general over protectiveness with a heavy sprinkling of irrationality.

It could have been all three. I was miserable about staying home while all my friends hung out. I know I must have invented FOMO (fear of missing out) before the internet had entrenched itself into our lives. Every time I got to hang out with my friends from youth group, without my mom's presence, I journaled about how I savored each moment and tried to write it down in my journal, as if it was a special event. It was cloying, effusive, avoidant of my even deeper feelings, and just a plain mess. But it was all that I lived for. Yes, it's seemingly all that every teenager lives for—freedom, to be with friends, to get out of their house, to belong.

I don't remember much of my parents' involvement in my life in high school. After ninth grade, they stopped looking at my report cards because it required a parent to pick them up, but the following day, it would be given to the student. That helped when I made a 68 in AP

Calculus during one grading period—they would have grounded me for sure. It's not what my journal chose to focus on, either, except to be annoyed by them, specifically by my father's negligence of taking care of the house. All five cars had something wrong with them. There was a hole in the eaves of the roof, right above where I slept. Squirrels scampered in, shoving out tufts of cotton candy colored insulation outside onto the ground. I heard their screams and high-pitched growls, their scratching in the ceiling. I even had a nightmare about them.

I was in the school library with my friends and I was about to get a book from one of the shelves and a squirrel jumps out and sinks its rabid teeth into the sole of my sneaker. I screamed in horror as Trey and others grabbed me and the squirrel and tried to pull us apart. He said in a matter-of-factly voice, "Now, what you have to do is twist its neck like you would a chicken." He pried the squirrel off my shoe, which had a huge white and turquoise rubber chunk of my shoe in its mouth, and demonstrated what he had just explained. It was almost bloodless. And then I woke up.

I doubt that the roof was ever fixed while my family lived there. It was emblematic of what was going on with our family. It was as if mental illness had crept into a hole of our roof, causing havoc that was at first internalized, but then you could start to see that insulation fall to the ground. We just hadn't labeled this devolution correctly yet.

I should remember more because although my parents had no clue about me, they would tell me about their lives, as if we were close friends. I patiently listened, because part of me felt like I was being seen as an equal. But that equality card was always revoked when they wanted to impose my role as a subservient child, especially revolving around not being able to hang out with my friends, or go on a school trip out of state or out of the country.

I was involved in the French club in high school and there were two trips that I wanted to go on—one to New Orleans and one to Paris, France. I remember the second time I asked my father to go, after first asking my mother who told me to go ask him. We stood in their bedroom. I remember the amount, \$900, and I knew he had the money. My father was constantly buying things from catalogs or for his cars. It was during some weekend when he was home, during the day. Weak sunlight meekly made its way through their light-blue curtained windows. I asked him for the money, showing him the information that Mrs. Summey, the French teacher, had given me. I was trembling on the inside because I already knew the answer. We can't afford it was his flat reply. I sulked back to my room, feeling that trapped feeling again. Yes, this may sound like some first world problem—and it was. But it was also a relative problem. We were upper-middle class, as far as I could tell. I know now that he was only repeating the same snub that his mother had done to him. I'm not sure he knew, or still knows, any differently. I felt like I wasn't a priority in his life, just like he had felt that he wasn't a priority in his mother's life. Both incidents felt like they were tinged with spite, but I tend to believe that most people are not malevolent. Everyone has their own reasons for their actions, private reasons. Still, to me, this felt like he didn't want to pay for the trip, period—not that we couldn't afford it.

The axis of contention during that time was always about asserting my autonomy and the classic individuation issues that come up in adolescence. But I feel like my parents made it excruciating. As much as I was a slacker in high school, I was doing well academically. I didn't get into trouble. I kept to myself. I was a devout Christian. Check, check, check, check. In my eyes, I should have been seen as a prized child. But I was really a coddled child, a child that could not be trusted to make her own decisions, a child that deserved to be micromanaged—except when it came to major life decisions, like where I would attend school.

My mom did not like me wearing red nail polish or make-up. She confiscated all of that when I was around age sixteen. I thought it was completely unfair, because our family friend's adopted little girl, who was maybe four at the time, had her little nails painted in bright red. Not that I would ever bring up facts to counteract what seemed to be the irrational fears of what red nail polish would bring to me. She also confiscated two cassette tapes that I had received from Pop-Tarts tops, one of them being the ungodly C + C Music Factory, with the destructive song, "Pride (A Deeper Love)," an Aretha Franklin number which sang about having self-respect. Can't talk to me about sex, but can confiscate nail polish quicker than any Pentecostal preacher could.

During the summer before my senior year, my mother decided to go back home to Ghana. I had planned on going on a missions trip across the country with my youth group, and she knew that. I had been fund raising for months, and I'm sure she had been planning to go home for months. She hadn't been back since she immigrated in 1977 and this was in 1995. Eighteen years of separation from her large family—I couldn't blame her for wanting to go back home, but the timing of it was awful. For six weeks, I was stuck at home, the lady of the house. I am sure that my brother, being developmentally delayed, was the main reason I stayed behind, too. He was fourteen at the time, but could never take care of himself on his own at his age. One afternoon, my dad drove me to Food World to buy groceries. It was the first time I had purchased *seventeen* magazine, which had Kellie Martin, an actress from the TV show *Life Goes On*, on the cover. I bought every type of Teen Spirit deodorant I could—four different scents like California Breeze, Ocean Surf, Caribbean Cool, and Orchard Blossom. I had to subvert somehow, and I knew my dad wasn't going to be paying attention to what I bought.

I never got an apology for having to cancel my plans, nor any thanks for taking care of the house while my mother was gone. I felt that I had been taken for granted. I was expected to be there for my family. My plans seemed like they were easily forgotten as my mother made her own plans. Per usual, I was relied on by my parents to be an adult when I really needed them to be my parents. I resented them for not consulting me as they would a fellow adult and, at the same time, not think of how I would be taken care of as their child. It's the reason now that my mom doesn't travel much. She has only visited me once, when I graduated college.

Even as pouty as I sound now, this felt like a series of denials to “Deborah being able to do something that she wanted to do”—go on trips, hang out with friends, all the things my peers did with ease. I felt like I was bound to the house. What I had really wanted was some respect. Even if I had to cancel my plans, if I had been talked to like I was close to being a grown-up, a rising senior in high school, instead of ignored, the incident wouldn't have been so frustrating and disappointing. Deep down, I felt like I had taken so many hits for the team, starting from age eight, when I got a boy's bike so that I could hand it down to my brother—I thought eventually, these sometimes unnecessary sacrifices would pay off. I had done all that I was asked to do, and there was no *quid quo pro* here, no reward for being a dutiful daughter. What was the point of being good besides the avoidance of my parents' wrath?

During that summer, I realized that my blind obedience did very little for me. It did not protect me. It did not elevate me. I was just stuck in the role of caregiver for caregivers who didn't really take care of me in the way that I wanted and needed. No one could look out for my own interests but me—a lesson I learned as an infant, but really learned as a teenager. In our house, I had to keep changing my expectations of how things were run, depending on the day, depending on how my parents felt about anything.

Before my mother's trip, I had tried to get God on my side, praying with my youth group leader who was leaving for upstate New York. It was the last time I could hang out with him. I remember standing in our youth group meeting room, just Richard and me, holding hands, standing as solemnly before Sunday night service had starts. I stood as holy as I could, praying that God could get me out of this jam, offering my desperation as some incense to move God. I had no idea what miracle could happen, but I thought I could try. I felt like I was praying for some Hail Mary pass to connect for the heavily underrated underdogs.

And, nothing happened. No holy intervention. No answered prayer. The youth group went on their trip. Afterwards, Richard and his family left town for upstate New York. One of my allies during adolescence had left me, right before I had one of the worst years of my life—my senior year in high school, a nadir in my adolescence.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE INTERSTITIAL SPACES

As a teenager, I had a very high ambivalence about fitting in. I floated amongst groups of friends, never fully belonging to anyone. It's the plight of being an immigrant's daughter. You're never "enough" of the home country or the new country. You're a hybrid, which means you can be an outcast or a bridge. Depending on the day, I felt I was both. But most of the time, I felt like an outcast.

My freshman year of high school was my best year of my high school career. The seniors and freshmen loved each other—contrary to the idea of seniors hazing freshmen. Maybe that's why I didn't journal about it—I was actually having a good time.

I wanted to go to Ramsay High School, which wasn't zoned for where I lived in the suburbs. I wanted to go because it was a magnet school. Like when I went to Garywood for junior high, I had heard horrible things about my local high school, like how the average ACT score was fifteen. It sounded abysmal and I was deadly serious about my education.

Ramsay was a Birmingham City School that anyone in the Birmingham city limits could apply to. Where we lived, Birmingham was right up our street, just a few houses away. We could tell where the line was when we had thunderstorms, which usually knocked out our electricity. We could see over the street the street lights that were still on.

This was a conversation that I had with my parents, who wanted me to go to an expensive private school where our family friends' children attended. It was a prescient move to not go there. Although my father was a doctor, I didn't want to go to school with kids who got brand new cars when they turned sixteen. At the time, we lived a comfortable life, although our home had never been renovated. My parents respected my decision and my mother spoke to the school

board—I believe the one I was zoned for—to release me. In my journal, I wrote that the school I was zoned for didn't even have lab supplies. I'm not sure how we found out about this. We paid approximately fifty dollars a month for me to attend this magnet school, a red bricked building that sat high on a hill, with a red brick driveway. It was located in the Five Points South neighborhood, just south of downtown and right next to the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

In eighth grade, I wrote a 125-word essay about why I wanted to go there. I'm sure I said something about the academics, maybe something about having a chance at a better future. I had to take an I.Q. test in the lunchroom. I sat there with maybe 100 other students, and I had a cold. My nose ran as I was filling in those bubbles. I was trying to hide it, as I wiped my nose on my jacket sleeve. I was elated when we got the letter that said that I was accepted. Ramsay had only about 700 students, with a girl-to-boy ratio of three to one.

I not only stuck out because I was allegedly a prude, but because of how I spoke. Ramsay was a predominantly black high school and that same Damon kid accused me of speaking “white”—which just meant I wasn't speaking African-American Vernacular English. Coming from a home where my parents spoke the Queen's English, the word “ain't” didn't have a chance of being uttered in my house. I still can't say that word without feeling awkward.

I did look the part as much as I could, though—Ramsay had a preppy look. I didn't wear Tommy Hilfiger or Polo. I didn't want to. But I did wear button up shirts and jeans and Bass loafers and lace-up shoes. Yet one girl, Nikita, in band class accused me of dressing white when I wore this dark green button up and jeans. Unlike the flowery harem pants from sixth grade, I wore that shirt again. And again, I was being shamed into being “normal”—or at least their version of it. Being “white” meant you weren't loyal, that you were a sellout to your race, that

you could not be trusted. With this being adolescence, belonging meant everything, so othering people was a part of that process of forming groups. This left me alone since I never did belong to one single group. This also left me vulnerable, since I was only loyal to me.

Academically, my inner judge at Ramsay learned that there was always someone smarter and better than me. She gave up her jurisdiction in academics during my first semester of ninth grade. I made four A's and two B's. I was used to being number one academically. However, being at a magnet school that attracted a lot of other smart students from around the city, I was reshuffled a bit. Kenyatta, a quiet, hard-working girl, was number one and never let go of her spot from the beginning. Or she may have flip-flopped with Lakisha, a tall, wide-eyed, loud and perky girl who wore her black hair short in a pixie cut. Our GPAs were inflated, so an A in an honors class got us five GPA points. Kenyatta took all honors classes and I did not.

When I stood by the water fountain where our ranks had been posted, I looked up and felt my slacker nerd era begin. What was the point of trying so hard and not getting first place? I could do just enough and still be up there on the list. But my mother's words still haunt me, words she gave me one evening when we were talking about school and grades: "You're not living up to your potential." How would I know when I had reached it? Is this just some line that all parents use to make sure their kids aren't slacking?

My letter writing phase hadn't been with just unavailable boys. I wrote my Honors English eleventh grade teacher, Kate. Passing notes with the teacher, I did that! She would hand

me a folded piece of notebook paper, scrawled with her lovely, almost geometric handwriting. She had written once that I should just forget all those guys and just focus on living my life. Those words were buried deep in my mind and heart, I hope, because eventually I ended up doing that.

She was a slim, spunky teacher who was about ten years older than me. In class, we read the most interesting books, like *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*, *The Tao of Pooh*, and *J.B.* She turned me on to Camus and I read *The Stranger* during one grading period. I'm not sure if I fully understood French absurdism, but I did like that it was different and felt grown-up. She lent me the journals of Sylvia Plath, which I couldn't finish because they were even more depressing than my own journals. She also turned me on to my favorite book, *The Fountainhead*. The one test that I flunked was because I had read too much and I didn't remember enough for the test.

What matters to me now, besides that she was another teacher in my life who was emotionally there for me when my parents couldn't be, is that she saw me as a writer. This was an identity that I had abandoned as a child because I didn't find it to be that practical. Writing seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime chance to make a livable wage. This was in the age of fiction, before memoir and personal essay had become popular. And I wasn't interested in fiction.

My favorite essay that I've written was one where I had to compare and contrast my life with someone else's. It was basically creative nonfiction dressed up as a class assignment. I had become a fan of the cult TV show *My So-Called Life*, which focused around a smart girl who dyed her hair red, Angela Chase. I used her vernacular, where all things became similes ("like"). I wrote like that for five pages and Kate ate it up. She gave me an A+++++ and said that I could be a humor writer like Dave Barry. I had no idea who he was, but if she was comparing him to me, then I knew that he was a big deal and that she thought that I could become a big deal, too.

This would be a seed planted in my life that would slowly grow for close to two decades. Kate was a teacher who got me. Although I was painfully loquacious, she listened and tried to understand my adolescent angst. She even gave me a ride once, to some youth group function—washing cars for our summer missions trip. She bought me a Dr. Pepper at Chick-fil-A and she used the drive to Hoover to meet up with a girlfriend of hers. She was the big sister that I needed and the number one reason I sit writing this now.

During that summer of loathing when my mother was traveling home to Ghana, the theater kids and proto-hipster friends I had made during eleventh grade must have been hanging out over the summer because by the time I came back to school as a senior, they had all changed. I felt that I had been left behind while taking care of my family. These were stressors that my parents didn't know about, and I didn't want to whine about since what's done was done. But I had had enough being told “no” when it came to enriching my own life.

But for the flip in attitudes towards me from my group of friends, I namely blame one particular girl, LaShaundra, for this. It's not like I believe she channeled the spirit of Machiavelli and plotted against me. I believe she was bored and found me boring. She was merely a bully in a nice girl's, unassuming clothing. Early on in our senior year, we were sitting in the lunchroom. I had become reticent, mainly because I enjoyed listening more than talking, and I had nothing to say. LaShaundra threw down a petty challenge. She said that if I didn't say something interesting that day, then I couldn't sit with them anymore. I mentioned something about curry. It was a lot of pressure to stay “in,” and it was a humiliating way to do so, from kids who were just as interesting as me.

Then it became about teasing me all the time. I'm glad I can't remember what was actually said about me. I felt like how a freshman should have felt, not a senior—inferior. I went for months not writing in my journal, but when I became a part of the Thespians, many of those “friends” were in that group. At the statewide Thespian conference in March 1996, I wrote how I wish I had actually gone to that expensive school that my parents had wanted me to attend, because now I had no friends. My journal instead focused on those abysmal friendships with the Godots that never came, Seth and Ben, but also on newer friendships in my church's youth group that I had in girls like Amy, Jill's younger sister, and Rebecca, a transplant from Kentucky who sounded more Southern than any of us. I gave them their own individual pages in my yearbook.

What still perplexes me, but is maybe unsurprising now, is how I was dealing with race at the time. Living in “Bombingham,” a term I didn't even know about until I heard it in some civil rights documentary, I knew I could feel the unjust bloodshed in the soil, at age eight, and I couldn't understand it. My crush on Matt brought up a quandary that I journaled through with some cloying “racial reconciliation” schlock: “We are free from racial boundaries in God's family... We are now empowered with God's Word to overcome racism.”

If I quoted any further, I would incriminate myself, and even though I can give myself a pass as a teenager, it's still bothersome to know that I thought and felt that way, even while heading to college. It makes me glad that I left the South when I did, because I'm sure I could have turned into one of those confounding black conservatives—my love for *The Fountainhead* notwithstanding. It astounds me now because I don't remembering being all “colorblind.” That term is specifically how white people talk about racism, or dodge talking about racism, in church—not just my churches, but almost every church I have attended. Now I see the term

colorblind as an insistence on erasure of culture and identity. I don't know where I heard it. It's not like my parents said this, per se, especially since there was always the fear that I would assimilate. I believe that fear kept me in the house, and it wasn't even outwardly expressed, like in talks with my parents. It was shown by limiting the time I had with my friends, which was already limited. When it came to being attracted to Matt, I tried convincing myself that I could be friends with a white dude and the world wouldn't implode, liked I did when I was Kindergarten and first grade.

What was creeping up in this attraction was the issue of assimilation. With other Ghanaian-American peers, I've seen us marry both black and white spouses, but a lot of us with the latter. Is that necessarily a sign of assimilation? I don't know— it feels like it. I had a conversation with a family friend at their house one summer, after he had returned from some pre-med summer program. He had met a Latina woman and was attracted to her, but it didn't work out. "I tried!" he said, shrugging his shoulders—meaning that he had tried dating women of color but to no avail. Eventually, he married a blond haired, blue eyed white woman he met in college. His older brother also married a white woman that he met in college.

Even though I didn't have the term assimilation, I feared that I was becoming "whitenized" by my youth group and wanted to have more friends who looked like me. I was in two different worlds—a predominantly black high school with an 80/20 split between black and non-black students, and then over the mountain at church, in a more white space, with a mostly white laity with a smattering of black parishioners, a lot of them African immigrants.

To speak to the white person who would say, "That's racist," for me to say I want more friends that look like me—first of all, you already have that, congratulations. Second of all, living in a dominant culture that seeps into every little crevice of our minds, our actions, our

desires; to become automatically being the “other,”—not the default color of “flesh” or “nude” or the default Band-Aid color—it eroded my humanity, by planting the almost imperceptible seed of self-hatred. It was something I could feel at age five when I said I wanted to be white. It was something I felt at age ten when I wanted my middle name to be Barbara (yes, Barbara), and not Akosua. It was something at age fifteen that made me have to convince myself that being friends with a white guy who may be interested in me was OK, that it was revolutionary because of evangelical Christianity. And this silent specter of “less than” took me many leaps out of who I was already while being contorted into a product of assimilation.

CHAPTER TWELVE: SWEET HOME NOT YET

By the time I graduated high school, I felt like I had been released from prison. Some family friends of ours had come to my graduation, which was held in UAB Arena. I made sure that the assistant principal, Mrs. Watters, whose office was painted a glaring Pepto-Bismol pink (she was a member of the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, whose colors are pink and green), would pronounce my middle name correctly. I don't remember who I sat near, and I barely remember my name called except that it was pronounced correctly. No one called out for me or cheered, which made me sad. I wanted my entourage to be visibly happy for me, like other families were about their children. And it's not like Ghanaians are all that reserved, either. Not that my mom would yell, "That's my *baby!*" I still wanted the collective, "Heyyyyyy," like, "Hey, look at your graduate. Hey now, look out!" And, as with most of my school events in my life, my father didn't go to the graduation. He stayed home. I never expected him to come.

I have a picture of me, with my eyes closed, looking down, somewhat smiling, in a bright blue graduation gown, with balloons and the many different colored cords I received: red for the Thespians, white for Mu Alpha Theta (the math honors society), gold for National Honor Society, and purple for taking AP classes. The only cord I didn't receive was for the Disc and Diamond R.O.T.C club. I was tied for fifth place out of one hundred and twenty graduating seniors. Not bad for a girl who gave up trying to do her best in ninth grade

After all of that struggling, I had finally earned my ticket out by receiving admission into University of Chicago. I chose that school since it was just as expensive as the Ivies, but also because in comparison to writing about anything, their essay questions were a lot more fun to complete. I wrote a love story about a freshman girl grinding through finals week who meets a

guy in a frozen food section and they both wanted the last Chunky Monkey ice cream and he ends up asking her out. I had to use lines from the novel *Sister Carrie* by Theodore Dreiser, my favorite country song, and work them into a scenario in which two people meet in a frozen food section in a supermarket. U of C was the only college I got into. I received no guidance on those schools that I applied to: Harvard, Princeton, Boston University, Emory, and Duke, with the last three not having completed applications because my father made me choose applying to Emory or Chicago—he said he was tired of paying the application fees. Harvard and Princeton, I believe, waived theirs because of my guidance counselor. Duke said I didn't have a completed application, but I don't know what was missing. Boston University—same issue, no application fee. Just like the three trips I wasn't allowed to participate in, the excuse of not being able to afford the fees was now affecting my future, let alone my leisure time. I never did believe him, since I knew in his manic moments, he would buy a lot of things for himself.

I remember that walk from my house to the mailbox—it was a sunny spring day in April, the sun warmly shining. I had become quite accustomed to going to the mailbox—not only because I was waiting for admittances and rejections, but because I had kept in touch with a few of my church camp friends through correspondence. I retrieved the mail and walked back to the house.

University of Chicago was sneaky. They sent both a thick and thin letter. In the den, I stood near the top of the stairs and I opened the thick one first, which talked about deposits and housing, but I didn't understand if I had gotten in. The thin envelope had my admittance letter. I was so grateful that my days in Birmingham were numbered. Out of all of my classmates, I was the only one to cross the Mason-Dixon Line. Everyone else went to schools like Alabama, Auburn, Birmingham Southern College, Samford, Alabama State, and UAB. After all the teasing

and alienation, I knew I didn't want to bump into anyone else that I knew again. LaShaundra went to Howard, so she went the second furthest. Another friend, Salama, a fellow Thespian, went to Vanderbilt and I had no idea that I would see her again a few months later.

During the summer, I was finally able to leave the house for a while and breathe in that fresh air of autonomy when Birmingham hosted the quarterfinals for Olympic soccer. I was recommended by Mrs. Summey as an Olympic Youth Ambassador. My job was to help tourists and athletes with basic directions and assistance. We learned the basics of Spanish, French, and German in intensive classes that met at Ramsay. I received a \$400 stipend and an itchy poly-cotton blend white t-shirt. I made some friends, Fong, Stephanie, and Liz, all of whom went to the Alabama School of Fine Arts downtown. I was so jealous when Fong and Stephanie met Alexi Lalas and Claudio Reyna from the U.S. Men's Soccer team. My experience wasn't as exciting. As I had written in my journal, "6 days of boredom for \$400."

In July, it became apparent that I wasn't going to go to college, although I kept holding onto to a tattered, anxiety-laden hope that a miracle would happen. As my friends were preparing for college, I had to wait. It reminded me of not being able to go on that missions trip with Richard and the youth group, except worse. I would delay my escape from this house. I would be trapped there for God knows how long.

The only thing that University of Chicago needed, besides the deposit, was my father's IRS forms. And he didn't want to give them to the school. I asked him why, insisting that they only wanted to verify his income. And, at this point, my father's cycling of bipolar had him not taking as many temporary fill-in doctor gigs. He was home a lot but he was still in his own world: buying a litany of knick-knacks like drinking birds; in the backyard tinkering on the

experimental plane; sitting on the couch, watching TV, stewing in depression, a depression that was most likely the bottom part of a manic depressive cycle. None of us knew it at the time. Maybe his friends had suspected, but at this point, he wasn't hanging out with his friends that often.

I was worried that I wouldn't be able to go to college. I had this deep fear sitting in my stomach that my father was going to pull something. But how could IRS forms be an issue? It was July 1996, and so I wanted to check in with my father about what was needed. The deposit had already been sent. We had a conversation in the hallway that lead to our bedrooms. It was the same knowing that informed that I wouldn't be able to go to Paris. But this wasn't Paris, this was my future. I casually asked him while he was passing when he was going to give U of C the IRS forms. With his flat affect, he replied he didn't want them knowing what he made. It was the thin linchpin keeping me 900 miles away from starting my independent life. Or, I should say, continuing my independent life. I countered that they only wanted to know what he made from a verifiable source, just so that they could provide our family with aid. I stood there, looking at his face that now seemed to be fixed in a permanent frown, incredulous to his reply. He mumbled some sort of unintelligible sound and walked back to the den. I felt like my reasonable logical words were falling onto the floor and shattering, unable to fulfill their intended mission—persuade my father in letting me go.

I went back to my room, crestfallen. Anxiety and dread pulled me under down to an abyss, in a perpetual fall. I felt alone. I had no idea what I was going to do. How could I *not* go to college? Would I ever go to college? There was no way that I could be stuck here forever. It was one thing that I couldn't be social with my friends or go to exotic places to practice my French. It was another that I couldn't complete this milestone of American adulthood, attending college. In

my memory, my mom was not a support. I don't think Michael knew what was going on, because he was in own spiral of sadness, with the way our house had become.

I sought the support that I knew I could rely on at the time, my faith. I spent a lot of time in my room, praying very desperate prayers, sometimes with the blinds drawn in order to get a holier mode of mind. I prayed that God would change my father's mind. It was like when I had others pray for me at church. But mid-September came and went, and I was still at home.

The Dean of Admissions called me a couple of days later, after September 17th, which was the first day of orientation. I went into the kitchen to get the phone. He had a nice, low voice. I don't even remember what I told him—did I tell him the truth? Or did I just say I wasn't coming? I did say that I wanted to defer admission for a year. The Dean was fine with that, although he said he was sad I wasn't coming. It was an out-of-body experience while I briefly spoke to him, because nothing that was happening to me made sense. It was beyond my control, and I was placed in the hands of someone who was unwell, at his mercy, controlled by his whims.

In order to please my mom and family friends in my life, I applied to UAB's Honors Program, even though there was no way I would want to attend. I'd be stuck at home and not too far from my high school, which I now loathed. I also was recruited by Vanderbilt University in Nashville, mainly because their population was 95 percent white and even within that group, most were from the South. And that's how I saw Salama again. She had joined the Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority, which was how she was able to survive the lack of diversity. Still, she told me she had had a rough time adjusting during her first semester. I used the recruiting trip as a chance to see my old friends Ruby and Afua again who were a year behind me and were also recruited by and accepted to Vanderbilt.

Even though I enjoyed my Nashville visit, and although being in Nashville would be a lot better than living in Alabama, I knew that Vanderbilt wasn't for me. I had thought about Alabama and Auburn as potential schools to attend. Both schools had heavily recruited me when I was in high school, with fancy receptions held by their alumni clubs. But to defer admission at University of Chicago meant that I could still give my dad a chance to come around, for God to do something miraculous. I prayed and cried and beseeched God in my bedroom. I didn't want to give up—just to give myself a break from the

A part of me never recovered from this forced gap year. I still say to myself and to my close friends that I died the day when I was supposed to go to school, September 17th, 1996. In my mind, whomever I am now was not who I was supposed to be. The dreams I had were delayed, thrashed around like a mouse caught in a trap, and then morphed into something else. It killed my spirit to have to wait indefinitely for something that might never come. All this waiting to leave and create my own life, to leave this darkness, this choking and invisible absence of tangible love and affection—it had all been halted by someone I barely knew anymore, my father.

On the day I was supposed to be in Chicago, Auntie M., one of my father's medical schoolmates, and her family came over. She and her family were very closer family friends at the time. She sat on my bed that evening and put her arm around me. I was so angry. There was no need for me to feel this helpless. My father wasn't thinking clearly and yet we just had to go along with it. Auntie M. had grown up with my father, and I know that she was alarmed that the man she knew back home had become someone unrecognizable.

Neither she, nor did her doctor husband Uncle J., nor did my parents realize that coming to America meant a hard transition and adjustment into acculturation. Being medical

professionals would not shield them from the cultural pitfalls. I only heard my dad's stories, in increasing fits of oppression, but those feelings of oppression came from his experiences. If I had only heard more of those stories from other friends, I wouldn't have thought that my father was just unwell. His unwellness seemed to be accelerated by being here in America—but that's just how I see it now. Back then, I didn't have the knowledge or the diagnoses or my own clinical training as a social worker that I received years later. And I haven't had the time and space to re-filter my childhood with the lens of chronic mental illness.

And it's hard for me to describe. How do you describe an absence, something that you didn't even know that you needed—involved parents who cared who your friends were, what your grades were, how you felt about yourself in the world, let alone as a black woman in America? I have been able to only show the effects, like the wake left by a boat. The provisional love that I relied on had fled—college had been put out of my reach. And that caused an existential crisis that was bigger than any hole that I imagined falling into as a child.

During that gap year, I could really see the splintering of my family. My mom had been working as a nursing assistant and was also still heavily involved in church. My dad was off doing his own thing. This left my brother to rage in his room. He was fond of slamming the door, so much so we took off the knob on his door. He tore up all the Golden Books that we had grown up with as children. This was an almost daily occurrence. He didn't like to be told what to do. He was a full-blown teenager and fully showing his autonomy through his anger. It could be that he was responding to what was going on in our home, the growing separation between the four of us.

For me, I was still stuck at home. I still didn't have my license because I didn't want to go with my father again and fail. So I tried to apply for jobs at the mall near our house, like at various department stores. No one ever called me back, but I'm not sure if I followed up on my applications.

Since I wasn't working, there wasn't much else to do besides my ongoing prayer vigils in my room and attending church with my mom whenever she would go. Not having a license meant I still relied on my mom to take me places. I ended up hanging out with friends from church, Ben, Melissa, and our friend Michael, a lot. We had all graduated high school and we all stayed in town. Ben had wanted to hang out a lot, and so did I, but my mom decided to impose an 11pm curfew, which I still find laughable. After not being able to find work or go to college as planned, I had to be in by 11pm. In retrospect, it only made sense in terms of disturbing the house, but at the time, I saw it as more and unnecessary shame to my already embarrassing plight. I just didn't know what my crime had been to deserve the punishment I was enduring.

Again, I wondered if she had stuck up for me or tried to convince my father to let me go to college. I never asked because I assumed that she didn't, that because we were in this evangelical household, hierarchy is what was paramount, even if our high priest was mentally unstable. I still wonder if she thought about our safety or well-being—the letter of God's laws versus the Spirit of God's laws. What I should have wondered about was her mental state. She had to contort her soul around this flimsy, sexist idea about men in charge of the home.

And here is where it gets hazy, when it comes to recalling the nature of my parents' relationship. I remember more of what they did and didn't do when it came to me. In this fog of memory, one incident sticks out, like a ghastly beacon.

When I was in eighth grade, my mother had to have major surgery. I had just taken the I.Q. test at Ramsay and I came to see her post-op while she was recovering. She was lying there, knocked out on morphine, clicking on the button to administer more. She was moaning slightly. It was the weakest and most helpless that I had ever seen my mother. It was just me and my mother in her room, and I felt so awful that I couldn't do anything for her. Later, she would joke about the experience and pretend moan. Sometimes, my mother had a surprisingly sick sense of humor.

What happened after that was unfathomable to me. We didn't have health insurance because my father was a doctor and we were relatively healthy. My parents were stuck with a \$10,000 bill and my father did not want to pay it and wanted my mom to pay for it. She refused. At this point my mother wasn't working and he asked her to start working in order to pay the bill. One afternoon, he called two of my mom's close friends and sat them down in our den. He had my mother sit with them, too. He recorded their conversation on video, where he told her that he wanted to pay the bill. I watched the scene play out in my room, with the door cracked. My mom had that plaintive voice that basically pleaded, "Why are you doing this?" Her friends were perplexed and distressed by my father's behavior. I could hear it in their voices. He was trying to implement the biblical way that Jesus commanded that people should deal with conflict. He dealt with my mother first, but when she refused, he then brought in one or two others to help. That meeting lasted for an hour and I have no idea where that tape is. It seemed that what happened next was that he gave up and ended up paying the bill. Watching that play out from my bedroom, I had witnessed one of the most humiliating moments in my mom's life. She sat there and tried to hold back tears but was unable to. When we talked about it later, she brushed it off,

as if it was just how my dad was. But I knew that husbands and wives did not need to film a confrontation about money. It was a deep betrayal.

Although I hadn't seen anything more dramatic than that while I lived with my parents, I knew that they weren't happy because they talked to me more than they talked to each other. There would be times that I knew more than either of them knew about each other. My father never had any qualms about shooting down my mother's requests—and it'd over small or large things. Although these specific moments are also lost in that fog of memory, the quality of my mom's voice when she pleaded with my father will be a sound that I always remember. It was his obstinacy that started to make me wonder if he had crossed the line from eccentric to lunatic. Although it seemed my parents had a love affair of saying no to me as a child and teenager, my father saying no to my mom made no sense.

Having seen enough of my father's outright disrespect of my mother, I had tried convincing her to leave him, to stay at a friend's house. When I was fifteen, on the way back from school, on some sunny day, we had the conversation about getting out of the house.

"Where would I go?" my mom asked in that irritated tone that she until recently always used with me.

"You have friends! It'd only be for a little while." I thought I could convince her to leave because of how my father treated her.

"We have nowhere to go." And that concluded our conversation. I don't think she was up for uprooting me, my brother, and herself, or at looking at what was happening. But I didn't have that luxury. I was frustrated because I didn't believe that we didn't have anywhere to go. In retrospect, I know it must have been, for one thing, shameful to have your daughter tell you that your family is FUBAR and that we should leave; to leave your husband and start over. She had

already done that before when she came to America. I can look back now and see that she had been in a prolonged, emotionally abusive situation, one that is even hard for me to pin down. She has since told me that if my father had laid a hand on her, she would have left immediately. Emotional abuse is harder to prove, to the abuser and the abused. It's also harder for me to remember what was actually abusive since it became so normalized.

She also was thinking of my brother and me. I'm sure she wanted to leave, but when she said that we had nowhere to go, she was thinking of our well-being. I know now that leaving any abusive situation is complicated. I'm not even sure if her friends knew, besides the two that came over on that horrible videotaped confrontation.

Still, I felt like I needed to intervene. When I was a junior or senior in high school, I wrote a letter to my dad, making sure that he would pay for college. He came to me while I was watching TV in the den. I also asked him to treat my mother with more respect.

“Do you want to talk about the letter?”

“No.” I was scared. I had just told my father to basically do his job. At the same time, it also I felt as if I had written a directive, not necessarily a touchstone for discussion. What was there to talk about? Will you pay for college, yes or no? Will you respect my mother, yes or no? I was sad that I had to do that, but I also wanted to make sure that I would be OK.

“OK.” He walked away. Later, though, he did assure me that he would pay for college. I guess he was more lucid back then. It floored me that although I had asked him point blank about college, and had his word, that he broke it so readily.

As one can imagine, all that depression that I had maybe staved off in high school found me in my gap year. I lost twenty pounds. It was something I was proud of, although I was never ever overweight. I wanted to even lose more and weigh 110—a weight I hadn't ever been since

junior high. I lost the weight because my father was camped out in our den, and my room was at the far end of the house. I was so disgusted with him that I didn't even want to see him for the few seconds it took to walk to the kitchen.

When springtime 1997 rolled around, I checked in with my dad to see if he would give the IRS forms for school. I gave him the same pitch about how this was only to validate his income, which wasn't much anymore since he had been out of work for a while. Because of this lack of income would get copious amounts of aid. I don't know if it was my pitch, or God, or a break in the clouds of his illness, but he agreed to send in his tax returns to school and I was allowed to go to school.

But his thoughtlessness of me was cemented before my gap year.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: S.O.S. TO HOTEL SIERRA

Flying was my dad's favorite hobby, maybe even his mistress, to the point that he started building an experimental plane called a Velocity airplane. He built a backyard garage and painted it white. He spent more and more of his free time there. Sometimes he would need my help with the construction of the plane, so I would make the trek out to the backyard which I remember mostly in the summer, with large fans and classical music blaring.

The assembly of the plane kit involved super-strong, amber-colored glue that he had to mix together called epoxy resin. To cover the plane's canard and wings, he used sheets of woven fiberglass that made me itch and required a shower after handling them. My dad painted the epoxy mixture onto the fiberglass sheets that covered the plane. A day or two later, those sheets would be cured. Dad knocked on the wing to show me how solid it was. It was bumpy and hard to the touch, the fiberglass fibers trapped and frozen in place, under amber.

Back at the house, my mom, with curly dark red hair, fair skin, and a dusting of freckles on her nose and cheeks, was never into what my father did. They lived separate lives. My mom was more domestic. Her strong hands baked ginger crinkles, fruit cakes, bread puddings and pound cakes, and cooked savory stews and dishes for the week.

My father's obsession with flying had always been there, before I even met him. This was the second time it had been realized. He owned and wrecked a plane when we lived in Oklahoma City, and I only learned about that many years later from my mother. It may have been a sign that things hadn't been right with my father since he came to the States. It was also something brought up in passing, never fully discussed.

Although I didn't understand this hobby, I knew that my dad and I were a lot alike, especially when it came to the arts. In my adolescence, my creative expression had shone best through two different avenues: my musical pursuits with piano and clarinet and through my literary pursuits via my dreadfully but passionately written fan fiction based on TV shows and my devouring of books. Not only did my father appreciate and play music (on an organ that he assembled himself and a Spanish guitar that he played occasionally) but his creativity also appeared in odd places. To me, the oddest was putting reflective floral decals that he had cut himself on our blue metallic Peugeot station wagon. I found it embarrassing. The decals confused my classmates and friends. They thought we were florists. As much as he wasn't around, I understood him better than my mother because of our shared love for creative self-expression. But even though I understood him better, it didn't mean that I really understood how his mind worked, and how it had been starting to fail him, slowly. It became even more evident over twenty years ago, on a road trip to a municipal airport that we took on my birthday—my father's mind had been walking that fine line between genius and chaos, and had silently fallen into an abyss of mental illness. It just took us some time to realize it and to name it.

In 1995, Christmas Day, and my eighteenth birthday, I drove with my father, Joseph, and younger brother, Michael, from our home in Fairfield, Alabama. We headed east on the I-20 to Talladega Municipal Airport. It was about an hour away and my dad thought it'd be good driving practice for me. I didn't necessarily want to since it was my birthday. But since my father wasn't keen on celebrating holidays anymore, due to his more strident and obsessive Christian beliefs, there wasn't much to do at home. My mother, Dorothy, had gone to work. So we piled into the

silver Subaru station wagon—stick-shift because my dad *had* to teach me that way—and I drove with a little nervousness rolling around in my brain and in my limbs.

It was a brilliantly sunny day, with temps in the low 40s. It was a little windy. The bare branches danced and waved their seasons' greetings. The roads were empty. The car kept veering left and I wondered why. It could have been the wind, which I heard swirling outside.

“Dad, why is it doing this?” I let go of the steering wheel and watched the car go into the empty left lane.

“It's the alignment. I'll look at it when we get home.”

“Great.” I pursed my lips and kept the car in my lane.

Under my driving hand, we made it to the airport in one piece. My dad, also an avid driver, didn't critique my driving much. And thank *God*: my dad was an imposing figure, with his large hands, long tree trunk legs, and big voice—he was not the most ideal driving companion. He kept one hand behind my headrest as he kept his eyes on the road and stroked his beard.

I'll never forget driving with him in the beater red Chevrolet Cavalier. This car had power steering, and to go into reverse, you had to pull up a ring on the gear shift. I was seventeen and we were driving near my high school in downtown Birmingham one autumn afternoon. I took a left hand turn, trying to beat a red light while someone was crossing the street and a car was coming in the opposite direction. My father bellowed, “My God! You almost hit a car and a person! Pay attention!” His voice filled the car and shook me with fear. That he took the Lord's name in vain meant that he was really scared.

But this drive to Talladega was rather pleasant, despite the wonky alignment. I preferred highway driving with my dad, because I could drive 80mph and he didn't care—mainly because he drives 80mph, with his knees.

I pulled up to the empty parking lot. I was expecting this day trip to be uneventful for me. I was going to read my book in the terminal as my father conducted his flight exercises. Michael hadn't said much on the trip, except to talk to Dad about what flight exercises would be done that day. When we had stopped, he bounded out of the car with glee. He loved flying and all sorts of other boy things, especially cars, dinosaurs, and robots. He was sixteen but developmentally delayed, so he still had a sense of childlike wonder with everything. He ran with his skinny little body to the hangar and waited for my dad to come and unlock it. Flying with my dad as his de facto co-pilot was one of my brother's favorite activities. This was one of the first times I remembered accompanying them.

I gave Dad the car keys and I grabbed Sylvia Plath's journals. We headed to the hangar where my dad has kept his Piper four-seater airplane.

"Alright, Debbie, we're going to do some flying for a few hours. Do you want to come?" He usually never asked because he knew I usually wasn't into going along for his aviation exercises. I didn't think this was some birthday invitation, either.

"No thanks, Dad, I'm gonna go read."

"OK." He turned to my brother. "Michael, let's go!"

They climbed into the plane and made their way to the runway. The plane's tail number started off with HS, which he would call out to the air traffic controller as "Hotel Sierra," part of the aviation alphabet. This alphabet was created to avoid confusion between pilots and the control tower. Anytime letters are spoken, the aviation alphabet is employed, e.g. **A**lpha, **B**ravo,

Charlie, Delta, Echo, Foxtrot, etc. I forgot what the numbers were after the HS, but for my father, HS stood for the Holy Spirit. In his plane, he had a bumper sticker that said, God Is My Pilot.

I shielded my eyes with my hand and saw them take off into the wide, open sky, until the white dot of their plane was swallowed into the blue. I sighed and shuffled over to the terminal and grabbed the door. It was locked. I peered inside into the 1970s-styled terminal, with its hard, mustard yellow seating and wood paneling. It reminded me a bit of the untouched interior design of our home. It was dark, without a soul to be found. I felt my breathing quicken as I walked around and tried to find another way in, and then it finally dawned on me: it was Christmas Day. No one would be in there.

Even though Christmas Day is my birthday, my father didn't think twice about us driving out the private plane airport in Talladega. He believed that observing any sort of holiday was idolatrous, referring to a verse written by Paul the Apostle in a letter to the Colossians which said, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." My father took the Bible very literally, and it wasn't in line with how we were taught in church. For example, we saw Christmas Day as Jesus' birthday. Christmastime, Good Friday, and Easter were very important holidays to the Christians that I grew up with and came to know. I'm not sure that my father knew that the word holiday was derived from the term "holy day." Also, many holidays and Christian traditions derived from the pagans. For example, Jesus' birthday did not fall on December 25th. It was picked because it was already a popular pagan holiday that celebrated the birthday of the sun. December would have been too cold and rainy for shepherds watching their flocks during the nighttime. This puts Jesus' birth in the early fall.

Many American Christmas and Easter traditions have pagan origins, such as Christmas trees and Easter eggs. I can't blame him too much because in evangelical circles, Bible interpretation usually has a strict interpretation. At the same time, Bible interpretation varies from church to church and person to person. Yet from my experience, it helps to put the Bible within the time it was written in order to fully understand what the people were facing culturally. It took me many years and churches to understand this for myself, but even when I was eighteen, I knew my father's insistence on not celebrating holidays was strange.

Still, my mother thought that we could warm his heart and try to celebrate a holiday that celebrated him—Father's Day. When I was in my early teens, my mom made us give him Father's Day gifts. We got him a balloon and a card and sat it on the crowded desk in their bedroom. He never responded to it—at least outwardly.

We had no large Christmas tree with shiny, gleaming gifts. That was a very American tradition, but even our Ghanaian immigrant friends had adopted this tradition. When we were younger, my mom, brother, and I used a miniature one with little colored lights in the rec room downstairs. I hung up the plastic apple ornaments that my elementary school teachers gave me and two plaster ornaments that I painted in first grade: one of a Santa Claus and one of an angel with yellow hair and a pink robe. That was the extent of our decorations. We didn't exchange gifts—except I always got birthday gifts. I don't remember how Christmas was celebrated when we lived in Oklahoma City, but in Nashville, it was similarly stark or clearly unmemorable.

As I got older, we got used to my father's personal beliefs. I thought they were weird, because I thought my dad was weird, but after trying to appeal to him through our meager celebration of his fatherhood, we gave up. It was emblematic of his pulling away from us, which became more and more apparent as mental illness. But at the time of this driving trip, I accepted

it as my father being eccentric, which he always had been. So we created our own Christmas. My mom and I drove to the mall to get what I wanted—usually some nice watch. My mom was good about getting me cute Christmas birthday cards, which were hard to find and lacked variety. My favorite one said, “Have Yourself a Merry Little Birthday” with a host of little animals, encircled and singing around a glowing cake. I’ve received that one twice.

Our Christmas tradition looked more Ghanaian, focusing on food and company. So we went to a family friend’s house for the day. I’d have the humiliating “Happy Birthday” song sung to me, which deep down, I enjoyed because my family would never do that for me otherwise. Compared to the American spectacle of Christmas and gifts and tidings of comfort and joy, our Christmas was sedate.

With my father’s mind clouded by mental illness, and not just an eccentric point of view about the celebration of holidays, he was not in tune with how the rest of the world operated. It put me in a perilous position.

Since my dad and Michael were doing touch and go’s—a maneuver that flying students practice by landing on the runway and then taking off again without fully stopping—I thought I’d be able to wait out my dad’s flight and flag him down. I waited for an hour, as the winter winds blew, as the sun shone brightly, and as my ears started to burn. I pulled my jacket up to my ears. That feeling of dread started to fill my body, emanating from the chest, up into my throat. I did not want to cry.

I found a payphone outside of the terminal and I tried calling home, even though I knew no one was home. I left a message.

“Mom, it’s me. Dad and Michael are up in the air and the terminal is closed. So can you come get me in Talladega? The payphone number is 205-...”

I couldn’t stand still. I kept pacing back to the hangar near the runway and back to the phone. The wind and sunshine were my only companions. Maybe I was in disbelief that my dad just left me out here to fend for myself. I kept my arms folded to hold in the little warmth I had. The winter sun was marching across the sky. I felt my bones and teeth starting to rattle. Only *I* would have the dad who wouldn’t think that a private plane airport wouldn’t be open on Christmas Day.

But even though I was a walking ice cube, I’m not even surprised that this would happen to me. My dad was the only one I knew who owned a plane and who was building a plane. But he was also the only one I knew who taught his daughter how to drive stick, something I was proud of. I just accepted, or more like *acquiesced*, that this was my dad—not a *dad*, per se. I expected a dad to make sure that his daughter was safe, whether she was eight years old, eighteen years old, or thirty-eight years old. He was more like an absent-minded, selfish, older roommate who liked hanging out with my younger brother more than my mother and me.

After my pacing jaunt, I gave up on being able to see the plane and decided to read my book. I sat by the payphone, waiting in the sun. I looked up and saw some bird of prey gliding, letting the air float it around. *Oh great*, I thought, *maybe I’ll freeze to death and it’ll pick apart my corpse.*

Afternoon arrived and I got up and walked to the road to see if there were any cars coming by. I paced back and forth between the road and the phone. There wasn't much to see—our car, the hangars, the bare trees of the Talladega National Forest, and me. I wonder why I never called 911. I never deemed this an emergency; only a grave inconvenience. If my mom had done this to me, I'd be panicky, mainly because I didn't expect her to space out like this. She was reliable, so I would have been concerned that something awful had happened to her. But I had some sad understanding, from the many stories he told me about growing up, about his own mother issues: my oddball father—who, at this point, was already suffering from bipolar disorder—was his own person, best fit for bachelorhood, and for being your good buddy. Not fatherhood.

I didn't expect him to come through.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, I saw a long brown car pull up on the road near the terminal and I ran towards it, waving.

“Hey, sweetheart, what are you doing out here? Are you alright?” An older woman with poufy, curly brown hair rolled down her window with an inquisitive look. An older man was sitting next to her.

“Hi, my dad and brother are up flying, but my dad forgot that the terminal was closed because it's Christmas. Can I hitch a ride to somewhere warm?” I was breathing hard.

“Where do you live?”

“Birmingham.”

“Sure, we'll take you. We're actually headed that way.”

“Oh, good! Let me call my mom first.” I ran to the payphone, ready to leave a message, but then my mom answered.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Mom.” I tried to sound upbeat.

“Ay, Debbie.” My mom always had a faintly irritated tone when she answered.

“I have been stuck outside all day and I am going to hitchhike back to—”

“Wait, what happened?”

I was a little exasperated, as if it was obvious what had happened. “Dad forgot the terminal was closed and so I’ve been outside all day. So this couple is going to take me back to Birmingham. So, where should we meet you?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Em...let’s meet at the McDonald’s near church.”

“OK. I hope they know where that is.”

“Alright, Debbie, I will meet you there.”

“Thanks, Mom. Bye.”

I looked back at the runway and look up at the sky one last time. It was around 2pm at this point. I climbed onto the sofa-like seat in the somewhat cluttered car.

“Sorry for the mess. Can you find a place to sit?”

I shoved papers over. “Yeah, I’m fine. I’m just glad you guys pulled up! I’m frozen!”

“Alright, let’s turn up the heat for ya.”

Because I had been outside for so long, I didn’t even think if these people were going to abduct me, if they had in mind to harm me. If I had known that statistics showed that in the most serious child abduction cases, most kids murdered by non-family members are killed within the first three hours of their abduction, maybe I wouldn’t have gotten in the car. In 1996, the AMBER alert system (America’s Missing Broadcast Emergency Response) for child abductions had been established, named after Amber Hagerman, a nine-year-old girl from Arlington, Texas.

She was riding her bicycle, was abducted, and then murdered. So that wouldn't have helped me. In 1995, there were an estimated 128,000 missing children in the U.S. According to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, out of the twenty-two *reported* missing kids in Alabama, none of them went missing in 1995.

So becoming a missing child wasn't one of my concerns, while I waited for the plane to land, and as I got into this older couple's car. I was not one of those kids who would end up on a milk carton, with a digitally aged new picture of me at 21. I had to trust that these people would get me home because the only other option was hypothermia.

I was not missing; I was *neglected*. And now I knew why—my father wasn't well. But that doesn't change that it happened. Understanding the why gave me cold comfort.

But at the time, instead of seething with resentment, I was overcome with gratitude that any human being had come by here at all. I even toyed with the fact that maybe they were angels—who would be out here on Christmas Day? What were the odds?

The couple knew where the McDonald's was, off of the 459, so I set off on my first and only hitchhiking trip, back to Birmingham. The conversation, if any, was a blur. Perhaps we talked about how this was my birthday. Perhaps we talked about why my family and I were out here in the first place. Perhaps I asked them if they were driving out to see family. But beyond the heater flooding me with warmth, I was flooded with relief as we exited off and pulled into the McDonald's parking lot. We walked inside and my mom was sitting by the window. She was still in her dark fuchsia scrubs and sneakers. She stood up and smiled.

“Thank you so much for bringing her home. I'm so sorry about this.” This would have been a great hugging, tearful, *Lifetime Television* movie scene, but she was not a hugger. And I was not a crier. The Beckwins, sans my brother, are a bunch of stoics.

“We’re just glad we saw her!” the woman replied, patting me on the shoulder.

“Thanks so much for the ride.” I shook their hands.

“Merry Christmas!” They walked back out and drove away.

“Merry Christmas!” My mom and I called out and waved goodbye, then we looked at each other. I didn’t have much to say and neither did she. I was so tired and numb, on the inside. We headed home as the sun was making its westward path behind Red Mountain.

I don’t remember if my dad ever apologized, but I never ever expected him to. I had already calculated that this was an honest mistake for him, that he wouldn’t be thinking about how the rest of the world worked. He would only be focused on what he wanted to do on a day where most people were nestled with their families, opening presents, and eating together. If it were any other dad, a dad I had an actual connection with, and expectations of, I’d be angry and hurt. In theory, I knew I should be mad and disappointed. In reality, this was just my dad being my dad. But where did the selfish part end and the mentally ill part begin? Even my current adult mind cannot make that delineation.

Little did I know at the time I was left alone outside, but the plane, Hotel Sierra/Holy Spirit, was funded by a mutual fund for my brother and me for our college tuition. It had been started in 1978, not too long after I had been born, and had matured to around \$95,000. My mom told me this after the fact, while we were in our den, trying to figure out where I’d go to college and financial aid.

“Why didn’t you say anything, Mom?” In retrospect, I didn’t expect her to do anything, because what my father said went. But I don’t know if she did try to do something. If she did, she didn’t defend herself.

“Debbie, it’s already done.”

“But—but aren’t you my mom? Why didn’t you *do* anything?”

“Ay! What did you want me to do?”

“I don’t know—*advocate* for us?”

She shook her head and walked away.

I confronted my dad about the college fund during our last conversation in the early 2000s. He had called me while I was living in Chicago, waiting for a miracle to go back to college to finish my fourth year of college.

“So why did you spend that mutual fund on a plane?” I was sitting in my bed under blankets.

“Because it started to lose money, so I withdrew it.”

I thought about the hell I endured during my second and third years of college; of bouncing back and forth between the financial aid office and classes; sneaking into the library with my friend Laura, who would slide me in with her ID because I was always on restriction; my grades that slipped into an alphabet soup; waiting for financial aid to be awarded later and later—all of this due to my parents goofing up financial aid applications and not giving IRS forms in time. I grabbed and released the blankets with my hand. Anger was simmering because I owed—we owed—over \$6000: peanuts to the University of Chicago, and peanuts to my now-defunded college fund.

At this point, my father's bipolar disorder had deteriorated his mental health to the point that he was not working. He had also served time, about a year, in prison on narcotics charges. He sold prescriptions for Oxycontin and morphine to patients he hadn't seen. At the time, Oxy had been causing cardiac failures, so it was hot in the news. His arrest made the front page of *The Birmingham News*. I suspected that the Feds used this arrest to make an example out of him. I almost can't blame them, since prescription drug overdoses are now the number one cause of accidental deaths in the United States. But at the same time, he was sick, and prison, although the number one psychiatric provider in the U.S., did not make him well.

I missed all of this while I was up North. I had no clue because I had stopped talking to my mother for a while. I was frustrated and angry at how I had been struggling in college to support myself and it seemed like she had enabled all this behavior. Our family had gone down the drain and I felt like my mom stood by as it happened. It was all because of the hierarchy that had to be kept. The man had to be the head of the household. And maybe there was some fear, too—fear to strike out on her own and make a new life, since my father did not want his illness to be treated.

When my dad was out on parole, he wrote me paranoid screeds, asking me to ask Jesse Jackson to help him. I could never read all of the letters, typed in single space, sometimes with red-lettering which made me think of the New Testament. This was my dad—he was supposed to be smarter, wiser, and more level-headed than me. Regrettably, I threw them away because they were too hurtful to read. If I had those letters now, I would have a window into his mind and how it had been broken.

I had come around a bit with how far he had come down. I really knew now that he wasn't well, not just weird. My anger had been smelted down into a paperweight of compassion that sat at the bottom of my heart. I wasn't sure how to use it yet.

Still, that was the most lucid, most honest conversation that we had ever had. He then surprised me with a bit of fatherly affection.

“You know, you and Michael, you were great kids. You didn't get pregnant, you didn't get into gangs.”

“Uh, thanks, Dad.” I appreciated the sentiment, since I hadn't received many accolades from my dad. I could count them on one hand.

But still, it was too painful to talk to him with his mind in such a garbled state.

“Dad, you know, you need to get help.” I felt my throat close up. The parent-child roles had officially switched. I was his mother now, the mother that he didn't have, the one that he really needed. I also really needed him to be reliable again, to be my dad, even if he was strange and hard to understand.

“I'm fine.”

I started to feel desperate, chafing at the parentized role that I was shoved in. “No, Dad, you're not. You've been cycling since I was a kid. You were depressed back in Nashville—”

“No, that was situational depression after the residency program closed.” Yes, this is me, challenging a doctor about a psychiatric disorder, but I still had the upper hand—lucidity and a BA in psychology.

“No, Dad. I lived with you while you ate half a carton of ice cream and then would go on spending sprees. This isn't normal. Remember when Auntie Phoebe came from Atlanta to talk to you about this, years ago? It's getting worse.”

“Debbie, I’m fine—”

“Well, you may think that, but I can’t talk to you until you get help. It’s just too much, Dad.” We sat through some stony silence as I played with my comforter. “Dad, I gotta go. Be safe, and, *please*, get some help.”

“Bye.”

My eighteenth birthday was the penultimate Christmas I would spend with my family. Soon after this, my dad’s bipolar disorder wrecked us and loosened our bonds to each other. We would lose the house to foreclosure while I was away at college because he went to prison. Although my mom tried to hold him back, my brother saw the Feds break into our house and arrest him. Michael had shared with his therapist that he couldn’t get that image of his dad shackled out of his mind. And this happened over ten years ago. Out of all of us, my brother took the brunt of my dad’s fall the most, with his innocence tattered by the gale force winds of his own anger.

My mom was not used to such adversity, from her idyllic childhood with her loving family (or so she told me). And she told me that she had taken that for granted when it came to my brother and me. Idyllic childhoods don’t just appear—they are created. Her parents must have had that in mind when she was growing up. They enjoyed her and her siblings while they raised her to be a kind-hearted citizen. With my dad’s focus on making it here in the States, there was no room for that sort of intentional creation of our childhood.

My father’s intense focus of making use of his medical degree took us all down with him, along with the spoiled bill of goods sold to him when he walked through the golden door that Lady Liberty held open for him and my mother. Education wasn’t enough to make it here.

Neither was having faith in a higher power. My mom could not see the ticking time bomb of mental illness because his faith had slowed down the clock. Once he abandoned it, the clock sped up. But it wasn't even his faith. It was his faith community in ScriptureUnion. Faith was just the vehicle that brought him to those people. And just like me, when his family failed him, he found strength in his friends. But in America, even the support of friends sometimes isn't enough. Family was needed, even if it was the family that you left behind.

My mother walked through a dark time of anxiety during the foreclosure, as she packed up our life and moved over the mountain. Our relationship is currently tenuous at best, and there's no expectation that lights will turn on for her, about her role in our family's demise. Or, if they do, she won't claim the responsibility. I expected so much more from her.

The Birmingham News reported in a front-page story that my dad tried to hide that he had Hotel Sierra/Holy Spirit as a part of his assets, but that the Feds found out and had seized the plane. I couldn't help but feel some vindication as I read the story. That money had been promised to me and my brother. It would have prevented a lot of my woes in college, including my own bouts of clinical depression. The money had been stolen, and then hidden in a plane, and then confiscated by the government. It showed how disordered my father's thinking had been. This same story was a part of the case of woe and loss that I presented to my college's new, more sympathetic Dean of Students. There was absolutely no way I could pay for the debt I owed them. She forgave the debt and I came back and graduated at age twenty-six, eight years after my acceptance.

The only way I knew that my family life was unhealthy was to be away from it, when I finally went away to school in Chicago, the contrast to our unnormal life.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: WALKING ALONG THE EDGES

When I came to Chicago for college, I wasn't prepared for how much I would learn outside of the classroom and how much I would change. Jonathan, who was my best friend for the first two years of college, was a kid from downtown Manhattan who looked like one of those preppy Brookies from back home. He always wore this greenish brown Brooklyn Dodgers hat to keep his dark brown hair just so. Our relationship was the main catalyst of my worldview changing. Looking back, I can see that he was the negative exposure of who I was at the time. I came from an evangelical Christian household in Birmingham, Alabama, with Ghanaian immigrant parents. Jonathan's parents were from Minnesota and were atheist. This should have been some epic showdown, like Richard Dawkins vs. Pat Robertson. Sometimes our arguments were epic, full of ad hominem attacks and misunderstandings.

What intrigues me the most is how I remembered things, or how I chose to remember them. According to my journal, our relationship, and my first year in college, wasn't as easy or blissful as I thought it was. My memory not only failed me, but maybe protected me.

Jonathan and I lived in the same red-bricked, apartment-style dorm that faced Lake Michigan, a ten-minute walk down the leafy streets of Hyde Park from our neo-gothic campus. I lived on the second floor and Jonathan was on the fifth. I don't remember how our friendship started, except that it was quick. This quickness was definitely attraction, a mutual attraction. But we held the relationship status in ambiguity for about two weeks.

The first time I remember hanging out was in his room, eating Oreos with milk on his bed while he sat at the computer, playing music. I could see Lake Michigan from his window, lying flat and still like my dark blue comforter.

That time in his apartment was just like how we had first met at the student union during orientation, where we talked for four hours about all the deep things that my heart had been trying to share with uninterested guys from high school. These were things that he wanted to hear about as well as share with me. I was excited as we moved around the student union's large rooms as we kept talking.

The way I had remembered our deciding to just be friends was that I was a little nervous that he might have liked me, because we had been hanging out so much. Maybe it was that everyone assumed that we were dating already. We walked back from dinner or some orientation event on campus, we were in my hallway on the second floor and I was at my door. The hallway is light with garish, warm fluorescent light that bounced off the eggshell walls and orange-red carpet. I had been thinking about what I was going to say.

"Hey, I just wanted to make it clear that we can only be friends. As a Christian, there's no way I can date an atheist." The words fell out of my mouth in a breathless huff.

"Um...OK...that's cool. I respect your beliefs." He looked at me, puzzled. "I'll see you later?"

"Yeah, sure. I'll see ya." I gave him a sheepish smile and went into my apartment, a tad deflated. I hated that I had to do this, pour down a slab of concrete of faith on an area of my heart to ensure no feelings could grow. What would I tell my parents if I ended up dating him? That isn't even a question that I would want to hear an answer to, so I wanted to make sure that there would be no reason to ask it.

The undercurrent of this fear was true. It was something that carried me along as I was in love with him. Even typing that is strange to see, to admit to myself: *I was in love with him*. Vulnerability wasn't necessarily valued in my house, so even being vulnerable on the page is still

hard for me. How this had started for me was that I had seen him and thought he was cute. Nothing monumental, just a piqued curiosity. I don't remember scoping him out, this plotting to be near him, but I did. I had him help me study for a physical science/chemistry proficiency test. It sounds so normal and quotidian to me now. I never thought that I could get out of my own head to be normal. Yet our school was not filled with normal people. It was filled with intense intellectuals who were passionate about their beliefs and ideas. Jonathan and I were no different. Together, our intensity was exponential. We wrote each other lots of emails, made lots of phone calls, and spent a lot of time together.

During that time of relational ambiguity, in early October, I emailed him to ask what was going on with us. I still marvel at me initiating this sort of talk because the girl that left home had been friends with guys who had no intentions for being with her. I'm surprised that I learned that I needed to create some boundaries and healthy expectations—as much as teenagers are able to do that. Jonathan replied that he thought about us being more than friends but then decided against it. It was because he was unclear about how I felt. Now I think, *why didn't you just ask me, kid?* I went along with it, but I believe I made it known how I felt about him anyway. And again, that bravery impresses me now. I had characterized myself as frightened, and, more importantly, immobilized. Even in the mythical version of me telling him that I did not want to date, I still had agency and tried to create the life that I wanted. In contrast to the life that I was beginning to leave, where my parents either gave me too much freedom or very little freedom, I'm happy that my former self was trying to do the best she could to be present and be true to herself and her desires.

So we held that tension, which was mainly neutering the attraction that was there. But it was always there, even if it rarely played out physically. Our honesty was one of the things we

valued in our friendship. I'm not sure where that sort of deep trust came from. Maybe it had to do with being far from home and finding someone similar. I'm not sure if we had earned that trust yet, especially since there were times that we didn't speak to each other on purpose, because the arguments we had always seemed to threaten to tear us apart. We were trying to find our flow as friends and it was hard. It felt like we always paddled upstream, never downstream.

Somehow, though, the friendship grew anyway. It crept up, right along the wall I, no *we*, erected, like a vine closely hugging a gate. The sexual tension that we were trying to tame morphed into horrible arguments that I had forgotten. I didn't remember that he called me names, like "stupid" and "childish."

And yet we kept coming back to each other. I found myself more and more, hanging out in his apartment, or going to lunch or dinner at a local pizzeria with him. Looking back, being a staunch Christian and a staunch atheist—they were two sides of the same coin of fundamentalism. Maybe that's why we clicked so easily and quickly. It was the type of relationship where iron sharpened iron, where we grew each other up and learned how to treat the opposite sex with respect. And learned these lessons the hard way. Our stubbornness in being right about things was part of the glue that held us together. There was something about being friends with someone who should have been your arch enemy, something about loving that person despite the various differences. We had something to prove, mainly to ourselves. If romantic love wasn't going to work, then we would be the support that we needed to get through this really tough school.

Looking back on how I reacted and obsessed and still loved him, despite all the fighting, I wonder if I was just a complete doormat and just took entirely too much crap from him. My

friends knew all about him. They heard me whine and moan about him as if he were my husband. Did we persevere through our immaturity and in the end, really love each other, as friends or more? At times, Jonathan could be hurtful, and then he'd write me things like that I was the only one he could comfortably relate to. In the world.

There was no letting go of that. No one had ever said that to me. I never had felt that valued by any man in my life prior. I had come from friendships where I had to pull teeth to be seen. Even my parents had checked me off as good and I didn't need much hand-holding as their child. I had taken pride in their *laissez-faire* policy with me. Now I was placed on the "the only one in the world" pedestal, set apart from everyone. And I liked it, a lot. I never knew that I wanted to be seen until I really was. I knew that I had fought for it back home, but I didn't really know what I was fighting for. I knew that he meant what he said, with his adolescent intensity and earnestness. And yet I couldn't really trust in that. I never felt settled. We never felt settled. Maybe because we kept fighting. And maybe because this was in, as our college tagline stated, "The life of the mind."

And when I say fighting, it was more of intellectual sparring, like in the tradition of U of C. But somehow, it always got personal. As a tomboy, I knew how to play tough, and although we meant to draw a little blood, I don't think Jonathan expected me to be *that* girl. In a sense, it was my protection. It could have been, too, just the sexual tension that would ebb and flow between us, restlessly searching for a place of resolution. I had to initiate hugs with him a lot, and I wrote in my journal, complaining about it, how he never wanted to touch me. It bothered me on different levels. As friends, I didn't want to have our friendship just be words and thoughts. I wanted it to be manifested in some way. As a woman that I thought could possibly be sexual desirable, I towed the line and didn't cross it, but I didn't think that not dating meant

never ever touching each other. I didn't think that a hug was going to turn into something else, even if I really wanted that to happen. I knew one of us had to have some self-control, and the way that women are socialized, I knew that would be me. I would resist. I would say no. But maybe it was that Jonathan didn't trust himself with me and chose to be an ascetic. It made me feel less human, and it made me angry. I deserved hugs!

My conflicted feelings were made manifest on one November evening when Jonathan and I walked to a park on the lake, Promontory Point, or known more affectionately as "The Point." Although now, I wonder if this was the same walk we took where he told me about a girl that he liked, a friend from my Calculus class, an Indian girl. He had told me that he preferred dating interracially, which I found very intriguing as someone who was new to city living and all the diversity of thought it brought. The walk actually happened in May.

The Point was land that jutted out into the lake, with trees and open space and a few older buildings. From there, the Chicago skyline was easily seen northward. The bare trees cast their shadows on the ground as the streetlamps shined their eerie, unnatural light. The wind blew westerly and stiffly off the lake.

In retrospect I couldn't walk along a lakefront alone with a guy friend now. The Point is too romantic. At the time, though, I really wanted something to happen, even though I knew my faith and my family wouldn't allow me to be "unequally yoked" as the Bible says, with Jonathan, an unbeliever. I could not date an atheist, ever. I could maybe flex this rule a little bit if he believed in a higher power, if he were to be, say, agnostic. But I *grew* up with another Bible verse that says, "The fool in his heart says there is no God." In the end, even if Jonathan was the one who first turned me down, the question of the existence of God created an impenetrable

barrier between us. It was at the root of my ambivalence, even though I made my feelings for him clear. I risked climbing the heavily guarded wall anyway. It wasn't because I was just desperate, but deep down, I thought love was worth it. It was my mind, the dogma that I had grown up with for almost two decades; it kept me from climbing all the way over.

But then there are these pesky chemical messengers called hormones that really do not give a shit about dogma and doctrine and belief systems.

We grew tired of walking and sat down under a canopy of trees, on a slippery, crackling blanket of leaves.

“Do you want to lie down?” Jonathan was on his back with his arms behind his head and was looking at me with his curious brown eyes, smiling. “Come on...” he patted the space next to him.

I raised my eyes and pursed my lips. “Um, OK...sure,” I cleared my throat and felt my face get hot, but I lay down next to him, on my side, with about an inch of space between us. As I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, I could smell him, this musky, verdant smell. I got cold and silently made my way to his body. He was slim, and I could feel his ribs and sternum. I had never been this close for this long, and found it hard to get situated. I put my head on his chest and then his shoulder—I felt uncomfortable, as I felt his bones protruding into my body. I didn't know where my arms were supposed to go. Were they supposed to go behind his head? No, that wasn't working. It felt like a few minutes of awkward agony until I finally found that cozy spot, his arm around my shoulder. I felt anticipation coursing through us as we laid there in silence, now facing west back where our dorm was. Our breathing was starting to match, and I felt a shawl of calm cover us both.

I didn't get to see if we could be more, like I had really wanted, because two high-beam headlights shone on us.

"Agh!" Jonathan sat up, with his hand shield his eyes.

"The park is closed!" a voice from the police car screeched. We hadn't noticed that it was 11pm.

"OK!" I slowly sat up and we waved them off. We looked at each other and laughed, shaking our heads. Jonathan stood up and gave me his hand as I stood up, brushing off the leaves that had adhered themselves to me. We walked back to the dorm, leaving the heat of that moment at the Point, because we never talked about it again. So much of this is conjecture on my side, because although we were honest about mostly everything, I was too afraid to ask about how he felt now, to hear what he thought and felt. Not knowing let me play with this in my head, creating different scenarios that would never come into fruition. Yet I could only guess what would have happened had the cops not shown up. Like a sitcom that teases out the tension between two "friends," that cop car appeared a little too conveniently. And it was the closest I would ever be with Jonathan. Even if my memory fails me as to why we were out there, I remember what we did and how I felt, and how more-than-friendly that encounter was to me.

I felt torn, leaving school to come back home for the Christmas holidays. Jonathan and I had gotten incredibly close incredibly fast. I already started to miss him and my new life in Chicago, one that did not involve my family or the heartache and shame I felt when I thought about them. I had just escaped in September. I felt like I was being thrown back in jail.

At the same time, Jonathan was terribly homesick and wasn't feeling very connected in Chicago, including to me. We left for break with him up in the air, heading back home, maybe

never to return. I didn't remember this at all, but I was frightened I'd lose the best friend I had at school.

My dad picked me up in a car and then we made our way to Meigs Field, an airport for private airplanes and jets. It jutted onto the lake, just south of downtown. We got into his plane and flew the two-hour trip back to Birmingham.

Abruptly, my father said, "I want to divorce your mother."

I sat there, unable to speak, feeling panic flutter in my chest like a trapped bird. *Merry Christmas to you, too, Dad*, I thought. Although I initially felt panic, because I was shocked by the news, I wasn't surprised—they had lived their lives so separately. My father had stopped going to church in the early 1990s, and I felt like I was their go-between for information. I knew more about them as individuals than they knew about each other. I stammered out an "oh." I can see now how this was most likely what his mental illness was wanting him to parrot—most likely not what he wanted.

When we drove up to the house, and I walked the short walkway, up the wooden stairs, Dad opened the door and Mom was already at the bottom of the stairs. She gave me one of the two hugs that I remember. I felt bad for her as I drowned in dramatic irony. She had no idea what was coming, but maybe this would end the empty shell of their marriage. Maybe we would all get some relief from the truth.

"Hi Debbie, how are you?" Mom said in her quiet, sing-songy voice.

I smiled weakly. "Tired." Michael ran down the stairs and greeted me.

"Hey, Debbie! Let me help you with that!" Michael helped me with my suitcase up the half flight of stairs. He surprised me with how adult he sounded. Michael had always been one to surprise. Because of his developmental delays, it's still hard for us to tell what has fully

developed and what hasn't. Michael seemed to be socially adult at times, but yet couldn't get the basic cognitive concepts of adulthood down, like working a 40- hour work week, paying bills, living on your own. I liked these little sparks of adulthood. My brother was growing up, in his own way.

I walked up the stairs, down the hall to my bedroom. I plopped onto my back on my bed, staring at the popcorn ceiling. I kicked off my shoes and let out the longest sigh. I held in my tears, because there was no way I could let her know what Dad had told me. That was not my news to tell. And Christmas break this year was three weeks long. Our school's schedule alternated between two weeks and three weeks for winter break.

Two weeks later, while driving to church without my brother—he wanted to stay home with Dad—my mom said with a laugh, “Your father told me he wants to divorce me.”

“Whoa. What did you say?” I tried to feign shock, twisting my mouth to the side and giving her my sad eyes. Internally, I was crushed. I had to go through this conversation again with my mother, re-traumatized as I sat through a discussion of divorce.

“Hmmp, I told him no. He's not well, Debbie.”

“But still, why aren't you going to give him a divorce?” I was reminded of when I was fifteen and I asked her to leave my father. Now, he was giving her the opportunity. But I didn't think she would take it. And she didn't. She saw my father as someone who needed her care, even though he wasn't keeping up his end of the bargain. He wasn't taking care of himself nor was he taking care of her. The hierarchy of the male head of household had been pulverized by my father's mental illness. Even though his manic and depressive cycles made him unreliable not only as a husband and father, he was also unreliable as a doctor. His temp gigs started to dry up and his obsession with providing for his family started to increase.

“Debbie...” She gave me that “Mom knows best” look and I kept quiet, crushed again on the inside.

What I had forgotten about this time was how much money trouble my father was in already at this point. In my journal, I recorded that after the break, I returned to school having not registered, my school fees unpaid. I had to convince my dad to do that via email. He was also very controlling with my mother. My mom bought or leased a car, with her own money, a Mazda. My father made her take it back and made her drive only the red Peugeot with its fallen off muffler.

We were all trapped on this sinking ship of a family, still in the band, playing our assigned parts.

When I came back to school, I was ready to embrace my Chicago life again, the one that was starting to be centered on my “friendlationship” with Jonathan, the one guy who wrote me back, the one guy who wanted to hear what I had to say—well, most of the time. Like an itchy sweater two sizes too big, I shrugged off the Debbie persona, the one who would be forever eighteen (I was now nineteen), forever a child in my parents’ eyes, but not *their* child. I was powerless back in Birmingham. In Chicago, I had that just-right sweater of Deborah/Deb. She knew what the fuck she was doing. She wasn’t (gonna let people know that she was) afraid of anything. Debbie was always imperfect, always not in control, always stuck at home, always trying to escape the fates. Deborah was (on her way to be) a grown woman, with a bit more panache. She was a bit more urbane, developing her street smarts. Deborah had successfully made her escape and didn’t have to be defined by her parents. This was her time now, her life, and she was staking her claim in Chicago.

Winter quarter had Jonathan and me seeing even less of each other. There was one huge hiccup in my relationship with Jonathan, though, that still has left an impression on me. Because I wasn't his girlfriend, I was treated like one of the guys. But I wasn't one of the guys.

Before classes had started for the winter quarter, Jonathan, Doug, and I set off to this rock concert on the northside, at the Aragon Ballroom, a large, opulent room that held thousands of dancers during the 1920s through the 1940s. We had to pick up our tickets at Tower Records, which was in tony Lincoln Park, located about twenty blocks south of the venue on Clark Street. I don't even remember how we got there because logistically, the red line el train was quite a ways from Clark Street. It was early evening, but the skies were already pitch black. The wind was bitterly cold, and my hat didn't cover my ears.

"So, how are we getting to the Aragon?" I stamped my feet to keep warm as I looked to Jonathan as our navigator.

"Uh, well it's that way." Jonathan pointed northward up Clark Street. "We can wait for the bus to come." We looked up at the bus stop sign and couldn't determine when the bus would come. I came to know later that the Clark bus was always late and unreliable.

I shoved my hands into my not-warm-enough black parka and did a dance of warmth while Jonathan and Doug stood and chatted. I kept looking down the street to see if a bus was coming, and only saw the headlights of cars. After twenty minutes of this, I started to get angry at the waiting and walked over to Jonathan and Doug.

"Hey guys, I don't think this bus is coming. What should we do?"

"Let's try to find a cab," Jonathan replied.

“Alright, that sounds like a good idea,” Doug said. So we started to hail cabs, and all of them were occupied. On a Saturday night in Lincoln Park, I’d find out later that this would be the norm.

“You guys, this is not working,” I said, my arms tired of flailing.

“I don’t think we have any choice but to walk,” Jonathan sighed. “But it’s not that far.”

“Alright, let’s do it, 'cause we don’t have that much time,” Doug tried to conjure up excitement about the trek ahead, and I shot him a look of annoyance.

“Then we should get going,” I replied. At this point, it had been about forty-five minutes of waiting. So we started our walk up north in silence, the wind blowing from the east.

Jonathan and Doug shot up ahead, with Jonathan taking long, quick strides ahead, with his hands stuffed in coat pockets and his head down against the slight wind that had picked up. My ears were hurting, stinging from the cold. Doug was about a quarter of a block behind him. Jonathan being a city kid was walking so fast that I fell behind quickly. I was about a block behind.

We passed by a gated empty lot to our right and I could barely see where Jonathan was. I started to panic at how alone I felt. “Hey, can you guys slow down?” I yelled ahead to them

“No, we’re already starting to be late, Deborah,” Jonathan chided. Doug said nothing.

“Hello, I’m a girl just walking by myself in a city and you don’t want to be around to protect me?” I was starting to freak out, being the suburban girl who wasn’t used to the more city trappings of Lincoln Park, Lakeview, and Uptown, where the Aragon was. Hyde Park was what I called a floating suburb on the Southside, residential and closed off. I hadn’t been in Chicago for even six months yet.

“Bah, you’re fine, just keep walking.”

“Ah, fuck you! You need to stop walking so fast, dammit.” Angry tears streaked my face. I had somehow expected him to treat me like a girl and walk by my side. The truth of how he treated me had stung. Was he going to be like all the other guys from back home? Also, maybe he believed in me too much. Maybe this is what platonic friendship looks like. Jonathan and Doug were more of a couple than we ever were. Our dormmates always confused them for one another, even though I never thought they looked alike. One of my friends called them JonDoug. So where did his loyalty lie? It seemed there was only so far he would go when it came to our friendship. Did the “only person in the world” pedestal even exist? Because I was feeling less than common while we were walking north on Clark.

We continued our cold walk in silence. It took about an hour to walk to the Aragon. I was so happy to see the marquee with its red and white blinking lights. We got inside and we warmed by the standing-room-only crowd. Soul Coughing was playing “Step aside and let the man comes through,” and Doug was singing it as pushed our way towards the front of the stage. We watched Everclear and other bands play while crowd surfers annoyingly kept making their way up and down the crowd. Jonathan and Doug were closer to each other than I was to them. We kept being separated by the undulating crowds.

When the show was done, we found the el and took the red line south, which was full of our fellow concert goers.

“Did you like the show?” Jonathan asked me over the roar of the train.

“Yeah, it was fun.” I forced a smile because I was still pissed at him about leaving me to walk by myself. “What about you?”

“Yeah, it was cool, but I kept getting hit in the head by that one guy who was crowd-surfing.” Jonathan gave me a sidelong look.

“Oh no, that sucks.” I wanted to examine his head, but I pulled my hand back and played with my hat instead. It was hard to keep on my side of the wall, a wall that was meant to keep me safe. “They were obnoxious. What about you Doug? I loved that you were singing that Soul Coughing song as we got in the crowd!”

“Heh, me too, it was *great*,” Doug yelled as the train descended underground.

“Awesome.” Even though Doug annoyed me by his very presence, I was trying to be nice for Jonathan’s sake.

The winter quarter went by quickly and finals week found me with the flu, miserable and bed-bound. I worked at the library as a book checker—making sure patrons weren’t absconding with unchecked library books. But I could find no one to cover me, so I trudged to campus and sat there, eyes bloodshot, slumped in my chair. I think I was sent home because I looked so bad.

One day during that week, I was in my bed, writing out a term paper long hand before I would go downstairs in the computer lab and type it out. The sun was shining, reflecting off the snow on the ground, making the skies brighter. I hadn’t seen or talked anyone that week, and my roommate, Carina, knocked on our door. Carina was a petite, Mexican-American with milky white skin and piercing brown eyes.

She poked her head in the door. “Hey, how are you feeling?”

“Ugh...” I croaked.

“Well, look who is here to see you.” Carina gave a mischievous smile and opened the door wider. Jonathan poked his head in and smiled. I feebly smiled back and he came in. Carina shut the door. I sat up in my bed.

“Hey.”

“How are you?” He brown eyes went into sympathetic puppy dog mode as he stood near me.

“Eh, I feel like death. And I have to do this stupid paper.” I started coughing and turned my back towards him as I coughed into the wall. “Ugh, sorry.” My voice felt like living sandpaper.

“Well, do you need anything?” He raised his eyebrows.

“No, I’m good. Thanks for coming by, though. It’s good to see you.” I felt my eyes get watery.

“Yeah, of course. Well, I got you this.” He pulled it from his jacket a yellow envelope with my name on it.

“Oh, thank you!” I croaked. “That is so sweet of you.”

“You’re welcome.” He looked like he wanted to hug me, and I don’t remember if he did. I doubt I let him because this flu was evil. “I should let you rest.” He started backing for the door.

“Yeah, thank you. I do appreciate you stopping by. Thanks again for the card.” I fingered the card, running my fingers along the seams.

“Anytime. Let me know if you need anything, OK?” Jonathan had his hand on the door.

“Sure thing. Bye.”

Jonathan left and closed the door gently. I fell back in the bed and opened his card. It was Jerry Seinfeld on the cover, and inside, he said, Get Better Now! Jonathan had signed his name.

And actually, this never happened. I have imagined most of it. But that’s how I remember getting the card. It’s a really nice scene, as if we had reconciled. What actually happened was

that although I really was sick during finals week, before Jonathan left for spring break, he left that card for me.

Maybe as a way to cope, I had to write this myth about us, as if we were on a sitcom and we had five minutes left to resolve our conflicts. Mislacing when we went to the Point for our cuddle time in November when it actually happened in May—the story has changed, and it actually makes more logical sense for the story to have resolution at the end of the school year. Of course, this has become very meta now, since I am thinking as a writer, not as a character in this story. The misplaced details and new scenes in my own story made me wonder how we remember things and why. If every time we access a memory it changes, then at the very least, I want to trust my written memories down more, since it was closer to the actual event. But like how I remembered that I had rejected Jonathan first, the feelings of that were true. As a memoirist, capturing the truth of our feelings during that seminal time is what's most important. But what scares me still is how my mind was re-weaving our story. It wasn't as happy as I had made it to be. And I needed one year of college to not be so unhappy. Maybe now, I can handle the truth, the facts as I have recorded them.

And Jonathan was there in happier times, too. I had been involved on the campus ministry, InterVarsity, and had a whole different group of friends there, as well as my Vineyard Church, where a lot of those same students attended. My world with Jonathan and the Christian friends clearly didn't mix. Being evangelical, we all saw him as someone who needed Jesus. But I also saw him as my best friend. These two disparate worlds met when I got baptized in the spring. Even Richard Dawson wouldn't have gone to Pat Robertson's baptism. That's when I knew our friendship had transcended the wall that we lived with.

Still, I prayed for Jonathan and all my other “heathen,” destined-for-hell friends as much as I could. I was encouraged in my Christian groups at school to bring non-believers so that they could know God. If only Jonathan would come to know Christ—then I wouldn’t have to push him away as I did. We could even be closer. Yet I wasn’t that much of a proselytizing Jesus freak. My faith was private, too, and I liked the mutual respect Jonathan and I had. He listened to my faith concerns and never judged me (or at least he didn’t tell me that he judged me). It was possible that by praying for him, I was still judging him.

One evening in the fall semester, when we were still getting to know each other, we were in our familiar position--me on his bed, he sitting at his desk, fooling around on the computer. He played Indian music. The lake was stretched in its royal blue satin beauty as the sky grew darker and deeper in its own ethereal blue.

“I don’t know about this music, man.” I pulled my legs up to my chin as I looked at Jonathan.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s Hindu, right? I have no idea what this is doing to me spiritually, especially since I don’t understand the words.” My mother’s tone was echoing in mine.

“Well, I don’t know anything about that, but can’t you just enjoy the music by itself?”

“I don’t know...” I thought about it, interlacing my fingers, hugging my legs closer. “Maybe?” I realized hadn’t thought about it as just music appreciation. Everything, every person had some spiritual significance. It was a Manichean divide that Jonathan kept breaching, that I *let* him keep breaching, that I was starting to enjoy and maybe need. I remember this being a long conversation, and how I was getting annoyed at myself that I was annoyed by the music. It

was beautiful, the tabla beats, the sitar, a soprano voice singing arpeggiated melismas. I could feel my fundy walls start to crumble a bit. I sat and listened, watching the bright light of the computer screen fall on Jonathan's face.

Little did I know that his walls had been breached, too. I wouldn't know this until many years later.

I had been trying to be a good Christian, though, and this baptism was another way to show my fidelity to God, and to the world. It was in June and I invited Carina and Jonathan to go. Carina was Catholic, but not practicing. I somehow fully expected Jonathan to come to the baptism. Despite all the arguments and tensions, he was still the person I could rely on the most. The arguments always looked scary, and felt scary, like we were both pushing each other over the edge. But through all those disagreements and crushes that we had on other people, we had built a foundation of trust. Sometimes, I still think it's a miracle, because there is no way I could be in a relationship, even with a woman, like the one we had. When one is younger, one tends to put up with a lot more crap than they would as an adult. We were still forming our identities, forming our non-negotiables. Now that I'm pushing forty, there is no way that I could tolerate the ambiguity of our relationship, even though it worked for the most part.

Although it was June, the sun blazing with piercing intensity, Lake Michigan was still icy cold. It went from freezing over to being somewhat tolerable in the summer, but never warm. I was in a black tank top and nylon soccer shorts. Carina and Jonathan made small talk on the beach while I walked with Pastor Rand and one of the elders that I adored, Mark. Mark was an older white man in his 40s, funny, and honest. They guided me into the water.

“So why are you doing this today, Deborah?” Pastor Rand asked me. I looked over at Jonathan who has his sunglasses on. Carina had her hand up, shielding her eyes. Both were smiling at me.

“Well, I thought I was baptized when I was a kid, but I don’t remember it.” My teeth were chattering. “I wanted to have this profession of faith now, as an adult, and reaffirm my love for God to Him and to the church.”

“Good, good! Alright, you ready?” I looked at Mark and Pastor Rand and nodded, smiling. “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son—” Pastor Rand and Mark had their arms wrapped around my back as I was dunked under. Electric cold zapped me under the blue-green waves. “—and the Holy Spirit!” I was brought up, up from the watery grave, now a new, shivering creature in Christ. This ritual represented that my old sinful self has now been reborn in Christ because of his death and resurrection. It mimics his death and resurrection. Also water being a universal symbol for cleansing has great significance for this rite.

When I came up from my holy dunking, cheers erupted from my Christian friends. I have a picture of them with me after my baptism, but not of Jonathan and Carina for some reason.

Back at the dorm, I started to see that we were all seared by the sun. Carina was going to a christening later and her skin looked bright pink in her white strapless dress.

“Oh no, look Deborah!” Carina touched her skin which went from white to pink.

“Oh no! That sun was real hot today. Sorry, hon.” I frowned.

“Eh, I gotta go. But I am happy for you today.” We gingerly hugged each other.

“Jonathan was there for you, huh?” She raised her eyebrows suggestively.

I shrugged it off. “Yeah, but he’s my best friend.” I gave a look like it wasn’t that big of a deal, but I felt hot in my face in a way that had nothing to do with the sun exposure of that day.

“Right. Alright, girl, see you tonight!”

“Bye, girl.” After she left, I walked to Walgreen’s to pick up two big bottles of aloe vera gel and two thank you cards. I was pretty sure that Jonathan was a hot mess, too. So I called him on the phone to come downstairs.

Jonathan came down and I looked him over. His nose and arms were red. I scrunched up my face.

“Oh man, the sun was so hot today. I didn’t even notice until later. Carina looked so bad. So I got you this.” I gave him the thank you card and the bottle of aloe vera gel.

“Oh, you didn’t have to get me that. Thanks, though.” He took the gifts and grinned.

“Well, you came out to support me. It meant a lot to me for you to be there. And you got burned. It’s the least I could do.” I heard my voice crack.

“Of course I was going to be there. I know how important your faith is to you.” Jonathan cleared his throat. I stood tip-toe and hugged him, trying not to turn the sunburns, my chin resting on his shoulder.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he whispered. Maybe the hug lasted a beat too long, but I didn’t care. An atheist got sunburned for me because I was getting baptism in the largest bowl of ice water I had ever been in. The aloe vera gel and card seemed so hokey and insignificant in comparison of what that meant to me. I knew how staunchly he believed in his beliefs, but his coming out to see me make this public profession of faith, it showed how much he believed in me, even though it went completely against his own beliefs. It was a different kind of faith experience than either of us had ever had. It was love.

A few days later, the school year had ended. I met Jonathan's parents, Marilyn and Gary, two salt-and-pepper haired middle-aged folks dressed in knee shorts and polos. When they were done filling up the van and Marilyn had finished smoking her cigarette, she gave me the best mom hug that I have ever had. She said into my ear, "Thank you for taking care of my son." I thought: *he was the one taking care of me*. All I could do was mumble out a "You're welcome." I'm not sure why I thought it at the time. Had my rosy lens of revisionist history already reviewed this memory for its accuracy or lack of warmth? I do remember being stunned by the compliment. Back then, had I forgotten all the rotten fights and arguments? I really must have been quite smitten if I did.

I was trying to see the resemblance between him and his parents. His older brother, Chris looked like Gary, and Jonathan looked like Marilyn.

A few weeks prior, I had already met Chris, whom I adored—it might have been an eldest kid thing we had in common. He visited from Penn and we basically just tag teamed teasing the hell of Jonathan. He also was a lot more into teasing me about my faith, but he was good-natured about it. Now I had met his whole family and I quite liked them, and they, from what apparently Jonathan had been telling them about me, liked me. They were all so warm, a stark contrast to my family.

I looked at Jonathan and gave him one last hug. His body felt firm and bony.

"Thanks for teaching me about women. I mean it. I learned a lot," he said into my ear.

"Uh, sure." It was such a bewildering statement. I patted him on the back and let go.

"Safe travels. We can chat on AOL, OK?" I had forgotten that he had never really been solely friends with a girl before. This had been hard for him, as it had been on me, except I had a lot of

experience with unrequited love with guy friends. This was just another experience of playing in the grey muck between friendship and romantic love. And we had both gotten very dirty.

“For sure.” He gave me a sheepish smile and his family piled into the van. I waved by as they drove off, waiting for my dad to come get me.

He came later in the white Lexus he paid cash money for. At least for a nine to twelve hour drive, depending on how fast he sped. We loaded up the car with my clothes and books and made our way south on the I-65. We listened to NPR or the easy listening stations he liked listening to. I looked out the window, watching the sun melt into the colors of peach and creamsicle.

“So are you dating anyone?” My dad’s Queen’s English accent pierced the silence between us.

“Uh...I’m not. There is this guy, Jonathan...but he’s an atheist.” I kept looking out the window.

“Well, that doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter who you end up with as long as they treat you well.” I was surprised by this 180-degree turn. At this point, the more poised, controlled man I knew at the kitchen communion table had started to fray into a paranoid mind of mania that would flip-flop into depression. His words didn’t sound untrustworthy. They sounded wise, like how I expected a father to talk to his grown daughter about love.

“Well, I don’t feel right about it. We’re just friends.” I was torn, hearing approval from my dad, but sticking by the fundamentalist faith that already had cracks in it. My dad had never asked me about my dating life (it had been non-existent anyway), so I was flattered that he cared.

“OK.”

I came home to a chaotic house that summer, the last one that I would see in that house. Between Christmas and June, my parents' marriage had eroded. On that long car trip back home from college, Dad had told me that he had met a woman from San Francisco online and was living with her in Talladega, a town about an hour east of Birmingham. He said he was going to adopt her son. He had been working there and had an apartment. Her little boy, a blond-haired toddler, lived with them in that apartment. My brother, also developmentally delayed and still innocent at age seventeen, got mixed up in their playing house and said that this woman was going to be his new mom. The woman called the house repeatedly asking for my father. My mother tersely replied that he wasn't there.

I had been dealing with depressive symptoms while I had been in college, but I could never get the courage or moxie to get help. Having a front row seat to the beginning of my family's demise was too much. I knew I could not return here and be healthy. That summer cracked my mental health wide open and soiled it. No one was acting like this was gut-wrenching and cataclysmically terrible. I felt like I was the only sane person in the house, but I had no power to change these actions from my dad and inactions from my mother.

I had to jump ship. I couldn't play these discordant notes of dysfunction any longer.

So, to preserve any semblance of sanity for myself, I stayed in my room and read books. I chatted with Jonathan even more online. The only chat conversation I remember was him telling me about the shit kickers he got. When I saw them in person, they were dark brown hiking boots. Jonathan was not a shit kicker person. I don't know if I told him much about what was going on in the house.

The summer was long and boring. Labor Day weekend, a couple of weeks before I would go back to school, I was reading and heard car doors slam. I got up and looked out the windows

facing the driveway and saw the woman, her son, Michael, and Dad come up the walkway. I closed my door and kept reading, but got up a few minutes later and opened the door a crack, and peered down the hallway to the den. My dad loved tennis, so they were watching the U.S. Open. I rolled my eyes and went back to my bed to read.

A couple of hours later, my mother came home from work early, dressed in her cranberry-colored scrubs. I tapped on the window and she turned to me.

“She’s. Here.” I mouthed.

“What?” Mom’s face was confused.

I said it a little louder, but not too loud. “She’s. HERE.”

Mom walked up the walkway and into the house, said nothing, and walked into the kitchen. I waited for my dad and his pseudo new family to leave, and they did a couple of minutes later. They drove back to Talladega.

I left my room and walked into the kitchen. Mom poured a glass of water.

“Well, what happened?” I asked.

“Nothing. He just came into the kitchen and said that they were leaving and they left.”

I stood there dumfounded. My brother was getting involved and didn’t know the difference. He was an innocent and needed to be protected from my father’s blatant extra-marital affair. Whether it stemmed from his mental illness or the deep lack of respect that he had for my mother, it really didn’t matter. Michael needed his parents, and so did I. But both of them were seemingly concerned for their own survival. I knew that this affair had started to irritate my mother, but I felt like I was the only adult in the room. I needed the adults in my life to be adults, and they couldn’t be.

Later in September, my father and I drove back up to Chicago. I drove the first leg as my father snored in the passenger seat. I was trying to keep awake at 3am, listening to music as loud as I could without waking him. My financial aid hadn't been settled—the necessary forms hadn't been filled out and sent by my parents. The worry pervaded my second year of school. I was so happy to have escaped my home again, but I had changed. That worry of finances, of wondering who would be there for me, was metastasizing into a deep clinical depression. That fall quarter, I started my pre-med classes and was hanging on by my fingernails. I was on the Dean's List last year so effortlessly. My relationship with Jonathan was starting to show some micro-tears that I couldn't see. I was becoming argumentative, even more than the usual. But he still stuck by me as my friend. One quiet October evening, walking back on 57th Street from the dining hall, we talked about the holidays.

“Do you want to come to New York for Thanksgiving?”

“I'd love to, but I already have plans to go see family friends in Michigan. Can I come for Christmas instead? You know how my family is.”

“I'll ask my parents and let you know.”

“Thanks.” I crossed my fingers in my head. I knew I couldn't go back home. Jonathan told me later that week that I could come. Two weeks in Manhattan—my first time visiting New York.

A couple of weeks before Christmas, we were downstairs in the TV room, sitting under one fluorescent flickering light, fighting. Not yelling, but getting into it about something. About what? I don't know. The dark waves of depression have washed away the memory of it, like the story was written on the shoreline. I just remember being in the darkness. And I didn't remember the fight then at all. I thought we had made up and moved on.

We flew into Newark, New Jersey, and his father came and got us in their silver Audi. Even though I was skinnier then, the car was tiny. I remember my knees hitting the back of the seat. It was nighttime and we were crossing a bridge and I saw the New York skyline, in its glittering pre-9/11 beauty. It was breathtaking to behold.

Jonathan's family lived in a loft. This was completely different than the split level home on an acre of land that I grew up in back in Birmingham. Marilyn greeted us both with big, warm Minnesotan hugs as we walked inside. The place was mainly white: an open small white kitchen, the dining room, the living room space, and in the back, a raised platform where the two bedrooms were, side by side. I forgot where the bathroom was—maybe off to the side somewhere. It was downright cozy, but elegant. I was trying to imagine my own family living in such a small space, especially with our problems.

When it was time for bed, I was on the bottom bunk and Jonathan was on the top bunk. I saw a gap at the top of the ceiling where the wall didn't go all the way up.

"Whoa, there's a gap there." I pointed up.

"Yeah?"

"That means that you could hear each other, right?" I loudly whispered.

"Yeah."

"So like...you must have heard you parents having sex then, right?"

"Yeah, you just get used to it. Good night." I heard him turn over above me. Meanwhile I was having a shitfit inside. *That's so gross*, I thought.

"Uh OK, good night!" I looked up at the bed above me and remembered that when I was still bunking with my brother, I always was on top. Are Jonathan and I brother and sister now? I did feel a bit of a shift had happened in the past few minutes. It could have been the depression

driving a wedge or just that we were a year wiser. I knew we still loved each other, like family, but I couldn't tell if we loved each other like lovers. Jonathan wasn't so new and unknown anymore, and vice versa, except I was definitely changing for the worse.

Living at Jonathan's house during Christmastime, with all those *atheists*, was the warmest, most loving Christmas I've had, still to this day. I observed their interdependence, always connected while doing other things. They always checked in, "How're you doin'?" and replied with a tinge of glee. "Doing fine, Dad." I envied their closeness. My family and I never had that sort of check-in system. It was adorable and endearing and I wanted that for myself. It was beyond the stereotypes of TV sitcom families—this felt so real and sincere and true. They really did care about each other, in every moment.

Chris came later with his girlfriend, Meredith, and I was fond of her, just as I was fond of Chris. She had long brown hair and green eyes, was slender and had a big smile. Christmas Day was sweet. Everyone made a big deal and said happy birthday. The only gifts I remember were from Marilyn, who got me a mauve Gap polarfleece shirt. "Because it's so cold up there in Chicago," she said. I hugged her and thanked her. Jonathan got me an inflatable red tulip and an inflatable blue-silver chair. This was back when Urban Outfitters was still cool. The pictures of me with his family have me geeked-out smiling, in front of their Christmas tree.

New Years' Eve, we went to Jonathan's friend, Murphy's, apartment on the Upper East Side. I remember getting off the train and seeing a large rat cross Broadway with us. I yelped in horror. His other four friends from high school were there, all of them diverse. One friend of his—his father owned a posh hotel and we went over there to hang out one time. I believe he was Indian-American, or possibly biracial. Another friend was from the Bronx or Brooklyn, Latino. And I can't remember the other two, but I knew I liked his friends and envied that he was still so

close to them. Murphy had some other people other, too, including a blonde that Jonathan was into. I thought Murphy was pretty cute himself—a tall, lanky redhead with an infectious laugh. The other friends, both blonde girls, were going on and on about “BVI” for the holidays (British Virgin Islands—I had no clue at the time). I already knew that I didn’t like them.

But we just sat around in this large living room—I remember dark green walls and dark wooden furniture—and drank beers. Somehow, the topic of the fight we had back in Chicago came up and Jonathan was telling his friends about it.

“Whoa, wait a minute, we didn’t have a fight.” I turned to the group.

“Um yeah, it was bad, Deborah. How can you not remember?” Jonathan’s eyes were glassy but smiling. He seemed a lot looser here amongst his friends. And I liked seeing him like that.

“Whoa, we didn’t have a fight! I swear to you, we didn’t!”

“Yeah, we did have a fight! It was downstairs in the TV room. Come on, man...”

Yes, it was pretty meta to be fighting about a fight, like we were an old married couple. It was hilarious at the time. All of us laughed. I kept insisting that we had not had a fight and he let it go. A small seed of doubt had been planted. How could I have forgotten something so upsetting?

Then we got to whiskey shots. The volume knob off of my voice fell off. I only had two—the burn was just too much, as the whiskey singed my nose hairs before I had a chance to drink it. I had just turned 21, so this was my first time being all-out drunk.

“Shhhhhhhhhh!” said everyone.

We left Murphy’s for Times Square to see the ball drop and to welcome 1999. We took the train down and I was an obnoxious loud mess.

“Shhhhhhhhh!” said everyone. I giggled.

There were, I believe, eight of us, and we held hands like kindergartners as we got off the train in Midtown, so we wouldn't lose each other. The swarms of people there were unbelievable. My loud voice was swallowed by voices drunker and louder than mine. I don't remember seeing the ball drop. We were eight blocks away and there were jumbotrons showing us the festivities. I only remember taking my first long drag of a cigarette and coughing my lungs out for a few minutes. I suddenly panicked because I couldn't find Jonathan and the blonde. Everything was so loud and I was so tired...

I don't know when I went to bed that night. I may have ended up it was on Murphy's couch. I had asked Murphy or somebody that morning about Jonathan and they told me he went somewhere with the blonde. They were hooking up, and that made me ill. But I had gone out on a date with a guy I knew from the internet a few days earlier. We weren't dating. So why was I jealous? I couldn't figure out how to feel about him, or us. I was fine if neither of us were actively pursuing someone. Crushes were one thing. Hook-ups were another.

Later that morning, Jonathan and I, bleary-eyed and hung over, made our way back downtown. I never asked Jonathan about the girl. Marilyn greeted us at the door.

“Happy New Year,” I mumbled.

“Awww, Happy New Year to you! Are you hung over?”

“No, I'm just so tired...” This being my first hangover, I didn't know that indeed, yes, I was hung over. I stumbled into the bottom bunk with my clothes on and slept.

When I got back to Chicago, with fifteen inches of snow on the ground, I was different. I had had so much fun with Jonathan's family, who took me to museums and on an architectural

tour (his parents ran a small architectural firm). That Christmas made me wonder about my own family, and the lack of visible love present. I knew that I could have had a different family experience. Maybe not a white Minnesota nice in downtown Manhattan family experience, but one that was culturally relevant to me, like the ones my Ghanaian friends had. They knew their parents loved them, even if the unrelenting perfectionism may have had them question it on occasion. Their parents were reliable and didn't send them to college with unpaid fees. Their parents, hopefully, didn't use them as their family psychiatrist and confidant. Knowing that I missed out on that sort of support imploded me and who I was.

In February, the financial aid had finally come through, but school was rougher for me. I couldn't remember anything that I had read for school. It took multiple readings, and I still maybe only comprehended half. A month later, after much prodding from the campus ministry pastor, and from Jonathan, I went to see a psychologist and was diagnosed with clinical depression.

My relationship with Jonathan started to deteriorate, but it was more because he was interested in this, in retrospect kind of freaky woman named Mari. My best girlfriend Ananda told me about her antics in their dorm, how she would sneak into guys' room and sleep with them—literally sleep with them. We didn't know about her figurative sleeping with them. I had tried to be the supportive best friend and talked with her a lot on the phone. Like with Doug, I just wanted Jonathan to myself. I had at least accepted Doug as Jonathan's shadow, but a woman was different. Plus, Doug and I had bonded over not liking Mari. Jonathan had these kind of creepy photos of their single eyes photographed, close up. Doug and I hated them.

The strain came to a breaking point and I got a phone call.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“What’s up?”

“I need to come down and see you.”

“Alright, I’ll leave the door unlocked.” Like I always did.

I had moved up to the fourth floor with new roommates, but they were all out for the evening. I heard a soft knock on the door and Jonathan walked in, just in his socks. He had hurt puppy dog eyes. I had a feeling we were about to break up.

“Hey,” he said softly. I nodded. I felt so black inside. The anti-depressants I had started with my psychiatrist had made me feel somewhat better, but it was like someone had just started turning on the light in my mind, slowly. We walked into my bedroom. I shut the door. We sat on my bed.

“So, what’s up?” I tried to be cheery, but my eyes felt watery.

“I don’t know how to say this—”

“Please, just say it...”

“Look, Mari and I are getting serious, and...I don’t know, this—” he made a sweeping gesture between the few inches between us; “this is getting awkward.”

“I know.”

“I wish I had been better at telling you to get help. We should have gone out more or something. Being cooped up in here didn’t help you.”

“It’s not your fault. I just...you know, it’s my family and everything.”

We sat in silence for a while. I only had one light on in my bedroom, shining its eerie white light. Yet I felt entombed.

“I tried to be her friend, you know.” I sighed in defeat.

“I know you did. She thinks you’re cool and I do, too. This just isn’t working anymore.” I felt the sadness growing in the room, blooming like the stinking ginkgoes that lined a street near campus. “I should go.” He put his hand on my shoulder and got up and let himself out. If it wasn’t already dark in my heart, it went pitch black when he closed the bedroom door behind him.

The last real conversation I had with him was on a Sunday morning in the spring quarter. We bumped into each other getting laundry. The washers bumped and grinded while the dryers tossed and turned. Fabric softener and bleach wafted in the air. I kind of assumed I was still “in”—or maybe I wanted to be “in” and tried to catch up with him. The meds had made me feel like my emotions were asleep, so I was blunter with him than I should have been.

“Hey, how’s it going?” I was leaning on the doorframe with change in my hand.

“It’s good.” He looked at me cautiously, as if he didn’t recognize me.

“How’s it going with Mari?”

“Good, good.” Jonathan was inching for the hallway.

“So, how’s the sex?” I felt that it was the wrong question to ask. This had gone past being nice, past “acknowledging his existence” to “I want a kiss-and-tell.”

“Uh, it’s fine. Kind of don’t want to talk about it.” He gave me a weird look.

“Um, OK...” I didn’t understand the reticence on the subject. But this was never what we talked about, even at our closest.

“I’ll see ya.” He walked down the hallway to the elevator.

“Right, see ya.”

It got messier after that, over a stereo that he had lent me, which I thought I could *have*. He was sending un-Jonathan, hurtful emails to me about it, telling me that he had to convince his parents to let me come over for Christmas, even though he had told me that his brother Chris had had a friend of his from school over the Christmas before, that it wasn't a big deal. I was still too depressed to get it then, and it was a good thing. I showed the emails to my co-workers. "Can you believe this? This guy is crazy!" I laughed. He and Mari came and got that stereo from my apartment where I was subletting for the summer. Just like a break-up, I left the stereo by the door and left and made sure my roommate gave it to them. I came back a few hours later to see it gone. Somehow, that felt like closure, and I felt no mourning after that. A scythe came and cut him clean out of my heart. Or so I thought.

That was fourteen years ago. I can see now that although I've long since been in decent mental health, no longer on meds, I was probably already suffering from depression when I got to school. Too little, too late to escape living with someone else with mental illness. It also means that I probably wasn't in the best head space to be a good friend to him or anyone. Not to say that depressed people can be and deserve friends, but I still smelled of the smoke of the burning house I left back in Birmingham. Maybe it was a part of why we fought. Maybe he had a bit of depression, too. I can't say. But reading my journals gave me the correct story. I find it sad and strange that I came up with stories that I had told others and myself about our friendship, like it was a myth. And it was a myth. It could be that my psyche needed to massage down all those rough, spiky edges to my history in college, because then every year in college wasn't pleasant.

It took a while, but I graduated from college in 2004. My ardent faith has collapsed into an apathetic agnosticism, so my mantra right now is, "I don't know and I don't care." Because of

the depression, so much of that time has been erased or re-written. But what remained was my ambivalence towards Jonathan, because on the other side of belief, it felt like I had some unfinished business with him. The gulf, ideologically, between us wasn't measured in yards, but inches. From the alumni directly, I discovered that he lives in Honolulu, doing some tech business, but I couldn't be bothered to look him up on LinkedIn. I wanted to email him. There was a draft that sat in my inbox for a while.

Ever since I left church, I had been wondering what I would say to him, and his family now. Was I the bad guy? Was he still mad? Would he be shocked that I left church? What would Chris say about it? Would he even write back?

And so I finally sent that email draft, and we have corresponded. We apologized for how we treated each other. I told him how much he had affected my life—well, as much as I could without seeming too unseemly. He's married and has had his first child, a son, by now. The one thing that surprised me was that he showed me where he went to grad school—as if I still mattered somehow. The last thing he wrote, he asked me what literary nonfiction books would I recommend to him. I wrote a pretty honest email back about all that grey between us back then. Knowing he was married, I kept a lot off the page, but if we never spoke again, my conscience would be clear. The irony is 1) he probably already knew and 2) now he has been reading the Bible and I have been flirting, although not successfully, with atheism. Two sides of the same coin. Now, we walk on its edges.

At the very least, even if my honesty was relying upon an old foundation of trust, I know that there is no hatred between us. I still believe that he had a lot to do with who I am now—a person who has many different identities, and not belonging to any group. I learned that, for a little while, with a lot of work, I could possibly belong to someone, and that all the intersections

created a mosaic. And someone could value all of those things, place me on a rickety pedestal that I had no business being on, but still be a friend to me when I needed one. Although those circumstances will never happen again, I can find some solace that this contentious relationship helped me to value diversity, and thus value myself.

EPILOGUE

My dad reached out to me on Facebook a few months ago. He just typed my name, Akosua. I couldn't open it for days. It was like a blade of trauma, cutting through what felt like my blanket of safety from a distance. He had also reached out to his classmates. I finally responded to him a month after he had written to me. Then not too long ago, he had been sending me a litany of messages, none of them with words. The first was of a rendition of Amazing Grace that he had composed—the mp3 and the sheet music. Then there was a picture of me that he had taken from my Facebook profile page and enhanced with what seemed to be Photoshop. My hairline had become abnormally smooth, as well as the texture of my tightly coiled hair. I told my mom that I looked like Black Elvis, because my hair looked like I had a pompadour. We laughed for a while. There are currently 14 messages that I have left unread. Because Facebook notifies you when the recipient of your message has read it, I don't want to perpetuate the fixation he has due to his delusional thinking. Now, it's not hurtful. It's just strange. Why is my father spamming me with Mona Lisa pictures and classical pieces that he has arranged?

My mom couldn't remember what county he lived in now, which I found funny. She is older and is even more estranged from him than I am. But how could she forget that name? Maybe because she had already moved on, out of necessity. The worry used to burn inside of her, worrying about how he was. Although they have not formally divorced, she can only focus on God's love for her.

Maybe as a way to find some sort of resolution for myself and for this memoir, I went home for Christmas to Birmingham in 2013, the first time in six years. To keep myself sane and

happy, I stayed in a hotel that wasn't too far from Ramsay High School. It made me so happy to be close to a place that ended up causing me so much pain and humiliation from "friends." I saw my close proximity to my alma mater as drawing on some writer's muse, creating some energy vortex that I could be inspired by. I worked on my thesis in the business center, emailing myself certain sections. In my room, where I could see the white bell tower of my school, and the iron statue of Vulcan, I realized that I was home, but not where I grew up.

I didn't expect much from my time there except to hang out with Robyn, my old friend from my church youth group. I only spent about eight hours with my brother and mother. To my pleasant surprise, nothing bad happened. I had steeled myself for confrontation and conflict. But there was no drama between us, and no bringing up the past from either of us. I didn't feel like I was still eighteen years old. I felt like we were all in the present. We had a light lunch and talked about a relative of hers who had passed away from cancer. After that, we went to see a comedy movie so that my brother could laugh freely, since he tends to miss the social cues of the appropriate amount of laughter, and that my mom could stay awake. Movie theaters, with their dark, cavernous rooms, always put my mother to sleep.

Later, we went to see family friends, Auntie M's family. They were so happy to see me. Every time they came to Orlando, I avoided their phone calls because of their ineffective over-involvement in my life, which involved a strange incident, with me kneeling down in front of my parents (Ghanaian style) apologizing for not being obedient enough. It was some sick Hail Mary pass, as a way to try to heal my family. This happened when I was nineteen, right before I left for college. It was as if they couldn't see how mental illness was ravaging their classmate and dear friend, my father. And they are both medical professionals. They saw my resilience and outspoken nature as threats. It was also the first time in years I had hugged my parents. I didn't

even know how they felt; the shapes of their bodies were foreign to me—rotund stomachs bumping into mine, large hands clasping my back. Sixteen years later, I winced at that moment as I walked into their house. It was a humiliating event that was just as insane as my father bringing his mistress over a year later.

I sat and talked with them about what I hoped to do after graduate school. They prayed for me, anointed my forehead with oil that smelled like roses, I assume to invoke one of Jesus' names, the Rose of Sharon. It's also been said that sometimes the presence of God smells like roses. It was strange to have that ritual performed on me, but this was not the time to come out as an apathetic agnostic. Besides, prayer usually never hurt. Auntie M. asked me, "Have you forgiven everything that your parents have done?" And I replied that I had. I meant it. But I didn't like how it was almost an edict. That I had no choice. And it was more for them to feel better about themselves than about me. At least as an adult, I could see that and create boundaries. The visit didn't send me into a depressed funk for weeks. I took what I needed and left the rest. They should have been more concerned about if I had forgiven them, and I am not sure that I have. Yet.

I realized that they really didn't know what had happened to me since I had left home, and how I felt that not only my parents had let me down, the whole Ghanaian community had let me down, especially this couple and their sons who were close friends of mine until about a few years ago. I grew up thinking we were interdependent, there for each other. But when it came to talking about mental illness and confronting the head of a household, Ghanaian tradition trumped our needs. It didn't help that my father was a private person and didn't want to share his own torments. But I still felt that in a sense, we had been abandoned. I knew they did the best they could, but it wasn't enough. My immediate family itself is diasporic.

I came back home and read my journals for a couple of weeks and felt trapped again. I had read what these friends had done, too. All of it came roaring back, all the desperation, frustration, hopelessness, existential loneliness, and heart-pain—along with new wounds to be cleansed and healed.

Forgiveness is not the abjuring of justice. Justice, in whatever way it needs to come, will come. Forgiveness is easy; forgetting is impossible. Forgiveness for me is letting the offender off my proverbial hook. I stop asking them to make it right. Forgiveness is also not forgetting. Through the remembrance of hurts and disappointments, it was all to get to some place of self-understanding so that I can be damned sure that I don't repeat the same things, keep attracting the same dad-like duds, the frozen-mom-like friends.

I had no time to grieve or process many of the things we had been through as a family, but the Universe has given me another chance to work through those hard events again, from a place of strength, compassion, and understanding.

The only thing I can hope for is that this wasn't all in vain, that the human condition wasn't just this Sisyphean exercise in gross futility. What it's all for, I don't know yet. And I'm not supposed to. But I hold onto the promise that it's for something—something bigger than me.

What kind of Ghanaian am I? One that has been separated from her land, but resides in another land. I'm Ghanaian enough, but once I return to the land, I'll be even more Ghanaian. But for now, I must accept the separation and try to bridge that gap, to find all that information and culture and essence of being that can only be found in Ghanaian soil, in Ghanaian air, in Ghanaian water.