TELLING OUR STORIES, SHARING OUR LIVES

A COLLECTION OF STUDENT MEMOIR WRITING
Brooklyn College
Fall 2008
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INTRODUCTION

Brooklyn College students of the class of 2012 began their college experience through the pre-freshman reading of Jhumpa Lahiri’s The Interpreter of Maladies during the summer before the start of the Fall 2008 semester. On Orientation Day, they discussed the book in small groups, led by members of the Brooklyn College faculty and staff. Once classes began, they discussed Lahiri’s fiction and then attended a lecture and reading by Lahiri when she visited Brooklyn College in September 2008. Conversations about The Interpreter of Maladies continued in class during the first weeks of the semester, culminating in students’ writing their own stories. We call this collection of student memoirs Telling Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives.
PART 1
ROLE MODELS

Elizabeth Persaud • Reynaldo Piniella • Iemi Hernandez-Kim
Esther Varon • Christian DeJesus • Deondra Harriot
Daniel Slepitsky • Marina Pavlica
CHILDHOOD DREAMS: DR. CROSSING GUARD
ELIZABETH PERSAUD

In today’s society, children are expected to know exactly what they want to be from day one. One of the first questions I remember being asked was, “What do you want to be when you grow up, little girl?” Even as a kindergartener, I hated being put on the spot. I felt as if I was on a stage, under white hot, bright lights, with the whole school watching me, everyone hanging on my next word. I watched as all the other kids leapt high out of their seats with their aspirations. I was terrified. My palms were so sweaty that my schoolbag almost slipped out of my hands. While all the other kids wanted to be astronauts, power rangers, or dinosaurs, all I wanted to do was make it through the day and go home.

I felt tiny as I walked home that day. I was like an amoeba on a slide, afraid to make a move because I knew someone was watching me ever so carefully through a microscope. If I had only wiggled the wrong way, I would be thrown into a great dark, smelly abyss—otherwise known as the trash can. As I was walking home, my face seemingly buried into the ground, something, someone, caught my attention. I heard a loud, sharp sound that changed the course of the world around me. As the bustling cars all screeched to a stop, I looked up. There he stood, immensely tall. My small, shiny eyes almost could not behold all of him at once. He was dressed in deep navy blue, almost black, pants and a wispy powder blue shirt. Around his neck dangled a large, shiny whistle—the object that had produced the powerful noise that seemed to control the environment. But the man who possessed it was more magnificent. Except for his silvery-gray hair that glistened brilliantly in the burning sun, he appeared to be an overgrown school child, all dressed up in his uniform. His face was very striking. His eyes were profound pools of blue, soft and kind. His lips were rather small. When he smiled, they vanished and a million wrinkles danced on his face. For such small lips, the smile was enormous, as if trying to hug all of humanity. I soon learned that he was there to protect us from the roaring cars, raging like bulls, trying to run us over; and he did this faithfully, every single day. My young naïve mind had never witnessed such kindness. It was then, as I traveled to school a young kindergartener, that I set out with my first life goal. I would become one of the few, the brave, the noble—a crossing guard.

As I saw that man every morning and afternoon, I felt a warmth inside, content in my heart that I had found a worthy occupation. One day, I was the only child crossing the street. This was my very first day walking home by myself. I felt ten feet tall. However, as I approached the corner, my confidence seemed to flow away from me like a paddle lost in rushing rapids. And there he was. He saw me from across the street and he worked his magic. He smiled at me and said “Hi!” Then, he held my hand and walked me through the clear stream with cars banking up on either side. He waved goodbye after returning me to safety. I was ecstatic. The friendly, magical man had said hello to me, a small frightened child. I ran home, excited to tell my sister of my aspirations.

When I saw her, I teemed with glee. “I want to be a crossing guard” I exclaimed, jumping up and down. However, she did not share my joy, not in the way I did. At first, her face was unreadable. Her brows furrowed together in confusion. She was assessing what I told her. I became impatient, my small hips swinging from side to side, waiting for her to respond in joy. Then, her face changed once more. Her eyes shone with a sense of condescension. Seemingly out of nowhere, she burst into laughter. It hit me like the rupture of a balloon popped with a sharp pin. I did not understand, and my own brows began to furrow. She
explained to me, through gasps for breath, that becoming a crossing guard was not a job; it was something the elderly did to fill up their time.

The sound of her continuous laughter echoed the shattering glass of my dreams; the shards cutting into my confidence, bleeding the pain of failure. I could not be like the reliable, friendly, helpful man who filled my travels with joy. I could not make little children feel as important as royalty, adorned with precious jewels. It felt as if all the voyages I had traveled since finding my answer to that one important question had been erased. All that was left was a white, blank paper. I stood once more under the white hot lights, a miniscule bacterium with no aspirations. Only, now I felt like someone had realized this and had thrown me away. So there I sat in my room, decaying with last week’s mystery meat.

Of course from that day on, I searched for a worthy goal, something that would not cause others to respond in the way my sister had. Through other experiences, I decided to become a doctor, a new goal which I am currently working towards. However, looking back, I realize my goals have not been completely changed. They have just been twisted, contorted and shaped and molded so much that they have created a new title for themselves.

I have learned that a small child is really like a piece of play dough. When they are just taken out of the container they are soft, moist and impressionable. They can become anything they choose. Some may change their minds and change their shape constantly, remaining pliable. However, being on display under hot lights all the time had caused my play dough to set and dry. My molding had made it so that my new goals still possessed all the qualities I had placed high on an intricate, porcelain pedestal that deemed them marvelous. As a doctor, I could still become a reliable, friendly, helpful person. I could still bring wonder and magic to the minds of children. I would still possess the ability to part the waters of danger and create a clear, safe path for people to tread. I’ve realized that simple childhood experiences can truly spark lifetime dreams. In concurrence with this, I will still happily become one of the few, the brave, and the noble.
I grew up in a calm, safe neighborhood in Queens without a care in the world. I lived the routine life of any nine-year-old boy. I woke up full of energy ready to eat my soggy Frosted Flakes (that’s how I like my cereal) and go to my elementary classes. I lived two blocks from my school, P.S. 13Q, but I always chose to skip speedily down the street whether it was a cool, brisk day or a dark, stormy afternoon. I would run home from school in time to watch “Mighty Morphing Power Rangers” and would imitate the Red Ranger gleefully. Life was all well until one day I got some news that would rock my world: my parents were getting divorced.

My parents got married just after I was born. My father, George Piniella, is a Puerto Rican and Cuban man who at the time worked as the fire safety director for Bell-Atlantic (now known as Verizon I believe). He had a huge beer belly that made people wonder whether he or my mother was the one pregnant. He had a thick beard to make up for the lack of hair at the top of his head. He held on to his three strands of hair longer than Homer Simpson. My mother, Rosalyn Piniella, is an African-American woman who worked for the NYPD. She had a nice figure at the time but following my birth she lost it (she still blames me for it). They lived happily for many years until 1999.

My father was an alcoholic. He would come home at all hours of the night or sometimes not at all. My mother knew he was having an extramarital affair but for a long time she didn’t say anything because of me. One day, though, she finally had enough. When my father walked through the door my mother hit him with a right hook that brought back memories of Mike Tyson in his prime. With that one black eye, the fate of their relationship was sealed.

My father moved and my mother kept custody of me. Growing up without a father is something that damages any child but especially a boy. No one is there to teach you the fundamentals of basketball or how to deal with girls. Knowing that I would dearly miss this important figure in my life, my mother contacted her brother to see if he could fill the giant abyss in my heart.

My Uncle Warren is definitely one of the most strange but unique people I have ever met. He was a large, bald African-American man who resembled either an NFL linebacker or the rapper Biz Markie (both of which are far from attractive). He talked slowly and had a tendency to sleep with his eyes open. His favorite food was octopus, which was definitely not something I would find in my school cafeteria. Of course, when he first tried to bond with me I wasn’t receptive to it but eventually I had no choice. He said to me “I know you are taking this situation hard but just know that your parents love you.” I nearly laughed out loud when he said this. He began to do all those “fatherly things” like play and watch sports with me, give me girl advice, teach me how to fight etc. Soon I began to look forward to spending time with him because it was a breath of fresh air from hearing my mom complain all day about how she can’t pay the rent anymore since my father left. One thing my uncle could make me do all the time was make me laugh. It wasn’t from his jokes but just from the way he carried himself. One time, his foot froze while he was driving so he got out of the car and ran ten blocks, then came back. It may not sound funny but just imagine a goofy 300 pound man running full speed on one leg and you will get the joke. Another time I fell asleep while he was driving me home. I woke up and we were in front of my house but the only thing was he was sleeping too! I asked him how we got home and he responded “I guess we just kept going straight.”
I began to tell everyone my uncle was actually my father, just from the connection we had. My real father always tried to be a part of my life but I always pushed him away. I always felt like it was his fault all this needed to happen in the first place and I never forgave him. Sometimes I would sit and wonder how my life would have been if my father had stayed around and I can't see it. I think his leaving made me a stronger person by teaching me to stand on my own. My uncle's support and guidance have made me the young man I am today and I couldn't be any prouder of my accomplishments in life so far.

Sadly, my Uncle Warren passed away in 2003 from a heart attack. His funeral is still the saddest day of my life. It was a dark, cloudy day to begin with but then it began to rain. I couldn't even bring myself to look at his body because I was so distraught. I cried non-stop the entire day because I just couldn't believe he was gone. Again I was without a father figure but this time I knew whenever I needed advice, I could look up at the sky and my uncle would be there to answer my cry for help.
DON’T CHEAT. THE BRONX, DAY 0

“Don’t cheat on me over there,” he told me as we lay on his bed listening to soft music.

“I won’t.” I was going to Mexico the next day. My mom and I argued about my boyfriend and she decided that this was the only way that I wouldn’t be around him. She would call me stupid, say that I couldn’t leave the house. Then she would utter, “se parece mucho comotu…” He seems like your…but I would always walk away before she was able to finish. I knew exactly what she was going to say. That he’s like my father. She said that whenever somebody did anything wrong. If I missed a curfew, left something out of the fridge, didn’t call, anything, I would always be referred to my father. Even on television, if someone treated a woman badly, or forgot their keys, she would start a rant about my father. Then at the end of every single rant she’d say, “Ya no quiero hablar de tupapá.” I don’t want to talk about your father anymore. Neither did I.

I lied and told her that we’d been going out for two months. If only she knew that we commemorated our one-year anniversary on 4/20 by doing what most people do on 4/20. My boyfriend and I constantly talked about how marvelous it was that we decided to go out that day. Anyway, I refused to let the boy go and she refused that I refused to let him go.

So she proposed: either I go to Mexico or go to my summer classes at BOSC, but during my days off I’d only be allowed outside for two hours and only in Brooklyn. Manhattan and all other boroughs would be strictly prohibited.

A week after she made her proposal, I was on a plane heading to Mexico, for the first time in ten years.

¡ESTÁS CON UN PIPOPE! MEXICO CITY, DAY 1

My cousins, Felipe, Mara, Ana, Gabi, and I were sitting around the kitchen table eating tacos de pastor with a thin slice of pineapple on top. Everyone else fell asleep in the living room. Felipe kept telling me how tacos de pastor are the best tacos in all of Mexico. And the best tacos de pastor are from Mexico City. Hence, Mexico City makes the best tacos in all of Mexico. My entire family has a pride for Mexico City. Most of them are proud alum or students of Unam, which is supposed to be the best Spanish speaking college in the world. My grandmom is famous for telling stories of how disgusting Frida Kahlo was when they went to same school. She always said that it made no sense that Frida wore indigenous clothes since she lived in the city. All my aunts and uncles say how the dances in Bellas Artes in Coyoacan could never be topped by any Broadway show. Everyone was proud to say they are somehow related to this part of Mexico. At times it did get a little annoying.

¡Estás con un pipope!” You’re with a fucking poblano asshole, Felipe said in disgust. This was the first thing that was said about my boyfriend. Usually in America everyone else is against Mexicans but here Chilangos (people from Mexico City) and Poblanos (people from Puebla) are eternal rivals. Our family is
filled with broken homes, drugs, and alcohol, which, of course, gives us the full right to judge somebody from a different city because of their darker skin. I hate that word, pipope, more than I hate the word nigger. And I hated that they referred to him as a pipope.

¿PUEDE HABLAR ESPAÑOL? MEXICO CITY, DAY 10

“¿Tu mamá puede hablar español?” Can your mom speak Spanish? Asked my younger cousin Nuria, who before this trip, I didn't even know existed.

“Claro que sí.” Of course, the ongoing joke within the family is that the very first words that my mom learned in Spanish were “pinche pendejo” fucking asshole.

“Mira Iemi sí se internacional. Su mama es Coreana, su papa es Mexicano, encontraron en Italia, y ahorita vive en Nueva York.” Look, Iemi is international. Her mom is Korean, her father is Mexican, they met in Italy, and now she lives in New York, my Tía Lupis always said with pride. I didn't have to be reminded; I knew that I was different from everyone else. My eyes are slanted, my Spanish has poor grammar, and my mom, unlike my aunts, never even asked if I wanted a quinceñera. I'm a Korean in a Mexican family.

EL BIOMBO. MEXICO CITY, DAY 15

My grandmom's house is painted orange and has a terrace exactly in the middle with tile pottery and toys that the younger cousins use. Inside there are three separate areas: my grand parents’ area, two of my uncles’ area, and my Tía Dulce’s area. Everyone always gathers in my grandparents’ area to talk about anything and everything. My grandmom will always sit on the couch leading all conversations while my granddad will sit on the kitchen table eating sweets, not really knowing what’s going on. Every hour or so, one of my uncles will come downstairs from his area to ask my grandmom for a cigarette. After he gets his cigarette, he will ask for forgiveness for bothering everyone. Then he will hurry up the stairs. It will be evident that schizophrenia is killing him.

In my Tía Dulce’s area, there are the infamous marble stairs that everyone loves. Everyone in the family, especially those who grew up in the house, loves these stairs. You see, these stairs seem massive when you're young and looking up. They curve and have windows that extend from the floor to the roof and a railing with elaborate decorations. We all have a story of how we almost died when we decided it would be fun to take a pillow and surf down the staircase.

The stairs lead from the bedrooms directly to the living room. In the living room are five wooden chests and numerous folding screens that belonged to my mom’s mom. Each chest has a metal lock that’s in the shape of a fish; in order to open it you have to stick the key in the mouth and push it rather than turn.

“Si quieres, puedes abrirlos.” You can open them if you want to, my Tía Dulce told me one day as we discussed my parents’ marriage. “Sabes qué. Te quiero enseñar este biombo.” You know what. I want to show you this folding screen, she said as she got up to pull out a silk folding screen that had birds and plants illustrated on it with string. The edges were brown from old age and the borders had holes in them. Tía Dulce told me that it didn't matter how well she maintained it, they were inevitably going to be ruined. Then I started to open the chests, pulling out cards written in Italian, Korean, and Spanish, all of them quite foreign to my eyes except for a few words. Pictures, jewelry, clothes, an iron, boxes, money from different countries, baby shoes. Everything from my mom's past was revealing itself as I kept opening more and more chests, pushing the metal keys inside the mouths of metal fish. Even though I had flashbacks of my mom calling me “stupid” and “daughter of a fucker” from our last fight, I strained to keep my eyes from crying.
until I was alone.

“No haces como yo.” Don’t do what I did, she told me constantly when we were tired of screaming at each other, when we were just sitting down trying to recuperate from the huge battle. I would always suck my teeth and walk away since I never understood what it meant. But here it was. This is what she didn’t want me to do. She didn’t want my pictures, clothes, jewelry, and other belongings in boxes for my daughter to find in her home country that wasn’t even my home country. She didn’t want me to hate my husband for making me put my entire life in boxes. But, I thought, my boyfriend will never let me experience these feelings. No, not him. I only saw him in a golden light. I thought that one day I’ll marry this boy. He’ll get out of the Bronx, me out of Brooklyn, and we’ll live along the pretty side of Central Park. I’ll have beautiful children on one side and this beautiful husband on the other. Things were going to be perfect. So those tears that I cried for my mom were short and sweet. I was with the guy of my dreams.

I was quite the naïve stupid girl.

¿LO EXTRAÑAS? ACAPULCO, DAY 25

Some family members and I took a small vacation to Acapulco. We rented a vacation house along a hillside that overlooked all of the beaches. Salsa was constantly playing in the background and intimate chats were constantly happening on the glass table where our butler served us drinks.

“¿Lo extrañas?” Do you miss him? My Tío Raul asked as he took a pull from his cigarette and a sip from his cuba that the butler just set on the table. We just finished talking about how handsome and gentlemanly I found my boyfriend to be. Everything was in a positive light until he decided to ask: “¿Lo extrañas?”

I wasn’t sure if I missed him. I thought of him, but it was different than before. I no longer saw him in the light of teenage love. His face only came to my mind as his face.

“No,” I said taking a painful sip of my cuba. I never liked alcohol.

“Entonces, no lo quieres.” Then you don’t love him. I nodded at him, not knowing what to say. This was the first time someone had told me that I didn’t love him. When I talked about him with my friends, they’d respond with, “Aww, you’re in love.” My mom would yell at me saying “Stop loving him.” Even my cousins would say, “You’re so blinded by love.” But for the first time, someone told me “You don’t love him.”

“¿Oye, a dónde vamos?” Hey, where are we going? My cousins wanted to know which club we were going to that night.

That night I wore a long shirt as a dress; it was a good foot above my knees. My straight hair was metamorphosed into wavy locks. I was two inches taller due to heels, and my eyes, lips, and cheeks were heavy with fake pigments from my cousin Ana’s makeup bag. It was the first time that I dressed like this. The image reflected against the mirror was satisfying.

We danced the entire night and drank mysterious drinks that glowed in the dark and made you drunk before you even had a chance to figure out what you were drinking. My shirt rose every time a raggaeton partner grinded along the beats with me. My makeup melted off every time a salsa partner stopped spinning and pulled me around. And every time one of my anonymous dance partners asked if I had a boyfriend, I cringed when I said yes.
TU MAMA NUNCA ERA TONTA. ACAPULCO DAY 26

“¿Por qué tu mama no lo quiere?” Why doesn’t your mom want you to be with him? My Tía Pilly asked as we were lying down next to the pool watching the sun set.

“No se.” I don’t know.

“Tu sabe que ella me dijo por el teléfono?” Do you know what your mom told me over the telephone? Tía Pilly sat up with excitement as if we were preteen best friends at a sleepover.

“¿Qué?” What?

“Ella dice que se parece mucho de tu—” She said that he’s a lot like your--.

“Ya!” Stop! I quickly interrupted her. “Ya se. Qué se parece como mi papá?” I already know. That he’s a lot like my father?

“Sí.” Yes.

“Ella necesita descansar, siempre dice eso con cualquiercosa.” She needs to relax; she always says that about any little thing.

“Tu mama nunca era tonta.” Your mom was never stupid, she said as she lay back down and put her sunglasses on.

¡ES J!, ACAPULCO, DAY 27

One night, my cousins and I went to a club and got extremely drunk. We decided that in order to cure our drunkenness we needed to go to a restaurant and eat tacos.

I sat on the table, trying to get a good grip of my lemon soda. I grabbed onto that little part of the can that opens it and started to push it back and forth so it would break off while saying the alphabet in my head. A, I pushed back, B, I pushed forward, C, I pushed back. I kept repeating the mantra until finally, it came off at J.

“¡Es J!” It’s a J! I exclaimed as I held up the little metal piece. “¿Tu sabes qué esto significa?” Do you know what this means?

“Ay, qué lindo! Iemi va casarse con un Javier, Juan, o-ay ¿que otro nombre empieza con J?” Aw, how cute! Iemi is going to marry a Javier, Juan, or-what other name begins with J, my cousin Raul said as he took the piece from my hand.

“Espera. ¿Lo vas a cortar?” Wait. You’re going to break up with him? Felipe asked with a huge smile.

“¡Lo voy a cortar!” I’m breaking up with him! I said while initiating a toast. We proudly tapped our sodas together.

BUSCA UN NOVIO EN TU NOVIO. MEXICO CITY, DAY 29

I was in my room packing everything into my suitcase when Tía Dulce came up and asked, “¿Todo esta bien?” Is everything okay?

“Sí.” Yes.

“Imi, yo creo que tu necesitas hablar con tu papá.” Iemi, I think you need to talk to your father. For the first time in my entire stay, a conversation about my father was brought up. I put down my suitcase and sat across from my aunt. “Yo se que estas muy enojada, pero es tu papá.” I know that you’re very angry, but he’s your father.

“Mi papá nunca quiere escuchar.” My father never wants to listen. I told her everything. How much
I hated that my father yelled at me whenever I tried to tell him anything. How angry he made me with everything that he said and did. How furious I became just by looking at him.

“Yo se todo, Iemi. Pero, si tu no lo perdonas, vas a buscar unqué en tu novio.” I know everything, Iemi. But if you don’t forgive him, you’ll look for a father in your boyfriend.

“No entiendo.” I don’t understand.

“¿Mira, por qué tu maman te mando aquí?” Look, why did your mom send you here?

“Porqade mi novio.” Because of my boyfriend.

“Y porque ella no lo quiere?” And why doesn’t she like him.

“Bueno, dice muchas pendejadas.” Well she says a lot of shit. “Siempre dice que recuerda de mi papá.”

For the first time, my boyfriend walked away from the smoke screen and I saw him for himself. He’s an exact replica of my father. My eyelashes stopped batting at his name and my heart stopped beating when I thought of his embrace. I looked at my aunt and thought ‘I fell in love with my father...’

“En una mujer’s vida, hay dos hombres, el papa y el novio. Y cuándo no tenemos un papa buscamos para él en nuestro novio.” In a woman’s life, there are two men, the father and the boyfriend. And when we don’t have a father, we look for one in our boyfriend.”Busca para un novio en tu novio, no un papá Iemi.”

Look for a boyfriend in your boyfriend, not a father Iemi.

I LOVE YOU. MANHATTAN, DAY 32

“Hey!” He was the very first person I called when I came back. Despite everything that happened in Mexico, I still missed him. I wasn’t sure if what everyone said was true or if I even stopped loving him. I decided that instead of guessing, it’d be better to see him face to face in order to realize the truth.

“Wow, it’s nice to finally hear you! So how was it?”

“It was good. Soooo, do you want to meet up?”

“Today?”

“Yeah at 12. City Hall? Can you make it?”

“Yeah, yeah. I can make it.”

“Okay, so I’ll see you then?”

“Yeah.”

“At 12. At city hall.”

“Yes.”

“12 o’clock. Okay? Not one, not 12:30 but 12.” He seemed to have chronic tardiness. No matter what or where, he never showed up on time. He would always stroll in 15 or 30 minutes late.

“Yes! At 12! Just chill, don’t worry.”

“Okay, so I’ll see you later. At 12! At City Hall.”

“Cool, later.”

“Later.”

I put on a shirt that made me big on the top and skinny on the bottom. My hair was neatly pinned up. I put three sprays of my best perfume on, and brushed my teeth two times before I left.

At 12:15 I reached city hall expecting to find him there. I walked around the neighborhood a few times and he was nowhere to be found. I decided that I’d wait for him on the bench where we always sat.

It was two o’clock and he still hadn’t arrived. My hair was ruined. I smelled of sweat and I didn’t care
about my breath. My stomach was growling loudly. I tried to call him but his phone went straight to the answering machine. I walked around the neighborhood to see if he was waiting somewhere else, but he wasn’t. I thought, ‘I’ll call him one last time and if he doesn’t pick up then I’m leaving.’

“Hey Iemi!” he said frantically.

“Where are you? I’ve been waiting here for two hours straight?” I yelled.

“I’m sorry, I got caught up with something.”

“When you gonna get here?”

“Soon, listen I gotta go.” He hung up immediately.

I sat on the bench watching the worried faces of people as they went to court. I seemed to blend right in. My foot had a twitch as it constantly tapped the ground. I would stand up, walk to one bench, sit there for five minutes, walk to another, and repeat until I got tired. My fingers would run through my already terrible looking hair. The only thoughts that were running through my head were ‘Where the hell is he? He’s never this late. Fuck! I hate waiting.’ Then I would trail off and think ‘I wonder how Felipe is doing? School is about to start. I should read.’ And before I knew it, it was three o’clock.

I got up and started walking to the train station. ‘Fricking A, I hate waiting,’ I thought as I started to pull out my metro card. I was cursing him out in my head when I heard him calling.

“Iemi! Iemi! Hold up.” I turned around and saw him running towards me.

“You’re three hours late!”

“I know, listen I had a thing. I’m sorry.”

“What thing?”

“I had to go and pick something up for my sister.”

“Wait, if you knew that you had to do that, why did you agree to meet up?”

“I don’t know. I just miss you.”

“But you’re three hours late!” I yelled as my hand slapped his chest.

“Yo, calm down. I’m here now.”

“No don’t tell me to calm down. Three hours! You know what I di—”

“Listen! I said I was sorry. I’m here now!” He interrupted me, then hugged and kissed me. “Just chill. Alright?”

His embraces slowly erased my irritation and anger from his tardiness. We walked along the East River with ice cream in our hands. Once we hit Chelsea, we sat on a bench; my legs were on top of his and his stories made me giggle.

“I love you,” he told me after we kissed. I looked at his hand intertwined with mine, and memories started to creep. I couldn’t help but think of the soda can that determined who I was going to marry, the chests that held all of my mom’s belongings, and the sharp advice that was given to me by my aunts and uncles. I started to remember all the nonchalant feelings I had towards him while in Mexico.

“Iemi?” He hesitated to say after a long silence.

I stared at him, and I saw my father’s eyes looking back.
She felt guilty. She didn't know why she yelled that way. There was a soft knock on the door. “What?” Esther called out weakly. The door opened, and Sally was standing by the threshold. Her sister looked sad too.

“Please,” Esther tried pleading but she didn't have the energy anymore. Instead, she buried herself in the warm comforter. Sally allowed herself in and found a spot on the unmade bed. After Esther apologized for being angry, Sally stroked her sister's brown hair and explained that it's not anger that she's concerned about, it's the sadness. They both knew what Sally was indirectly referring to.

“I miss her too,” Sally said softly, filling in the empty space.

As tears streamed down from Esther's hazel eyes she had another thing to feel guilty about. “I don't,” Esther confessed. Sally looked at her younger sister but didn't say anything. “I can hardly remember her,” she continued. “It's like she's a character from a book, not someone I can really recall in my own memory.” The tears kept falling, staining her face red. “What scares me most is she's not even gone for a year. There is still another two months till October, and I don't feel sad. How can I not remember her? We lived together. I shared a room with her!” Sally continued staring, clearly speechless.


“Of course you remember her,” Sally said calmly picking up the tear-stained pillow from her sister's face. “Because she is in your memory, your own eyes have seen her and your own ears heard her and your own fingers touched her; you just have to let yourself open up that door and out will come your emotions.”

It was true that door was hard to open up. Esther kept it locked and threw out the keys. Very rarely did she let herself turn the knob or even go near it. Her friends were her escape; without their knowing they took her away from all of it.

“We're going to the city today. We'll all meet by me at two thirty.”

“Ok, thanks, Raquel. I'll call you if I'm in the mood.”

Because Esther wasted the usual hour debating back and forth if she should go, by the time she got to Raquel all her friends were already seated in the car service. Of course, since she was last to arrive, Esther had to sit in the front next to the unhygienic man driving the car. With much effort, she managed a smile. What was with her today? Her mood was so up and down. Turning around uncomfortably, Esther looked at her friends. She felt detached from their laughter. “Guys, I don't think I want to go,” she whined.

“Ok, Esther, too late for that.” They all laughed at their friend's typical indecisiveness.

The driver was clearly annoyed with Esther while she clicked the seatbelt in and out. Suddenly he looked at her and said with his heavy foreign accent, “You want to go? Go!” For some reason, Esther
listened. She opened up the car door and ran out. Before she did, Esther turned around to see her friends’ incredulous faces.

As she ran down Ocean Parkway tears came pouring down. The tears along with her feet were unstoppable. Her feet kept running until she was out of breath. For some odd reason the tears didn’t surprise her. Even though she had nothing to be sad about, Esther was for some reason expecting them, waiting for them, and here they were, on Ocean Parkway and Avenue C.

When Esther explained to her friend Lenore what happened, Lenore didn’t seem so surprised or shocked by her friend running out of a car. “Esther, are you sure it has nothing to do with her?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” Esther answered curtly. “I hardly even thought about her today.”

“You do know what date it is? Don’t you?”

Finally it hit her. It was October sixteenth. Everything made sense. She thought back at a year ago at this time. Flashes of that day haunted her. Esther was saying goodbye to her. Here she was, exactly a year after Reina’s death, running out of moving cars. For some reason this news made her smile; Esther realized that she would never forget.
I remember when the Fisher-Price basketball hoop was placed in my room. That was the day my father put a basketball in my hand. I was no more than four years old but I felt a bond, a love that had been born. Prior to this day, my father had introduced me to baseball, but it did not compare to his picking me up for a slam dunk. The great feeling of shooting the ball into the hoop was something I would follow throughout my basketball career. It did not matter if the basketball rim was five feet tall or if it was NBA regulation height. Since my first encounter with the sport, I have always associated basketball with my father.

My dad and I have never had the typical father-son relationship, but he was always there on the sidelines. I grew accustomed to him being another coach on the other side of the court and I would listen to him more than my actual coaches. For the rare practices or games that he would not show up to, I would just see him when I got home and he would listen to me go on and on about how I played, how other people played, and what I could have done better. Come to think of it, we would talk about all that even if he was at the games and saw it for himself. I loved his insight because no matter how well I played there was something he could point out that I did not do right. My other family members or friends who rarely went to my games would just tell me I “played fine,” even if my foul play that day stunk up the court. Not my dad. Now that it’s been three and a half years since he moved out, I see how much our basketball-oriented father-son relationship meant to me.

My father was never one for talks. With my sister and me, he would make jokes to get through to us, and his form of advice was telling me “watch out for the girls who will drop their panties for you because you play basketball.” I knew he cared, but when it came to us talking, we could not have a conversation longer than five minutes if sports were not thrown in there. When we hung out, we would go to the park, the gym or to a Knicks game. I do not recall any other places we have recently gone. This might be a problem to some people, but not to me. I consider myself lucky to have a father in the first place. My brother’s was taken away from him, and countless friends of mine either do not know who their father is, or just have never seen him. If not for anything, my father gave me the one thing I love. For that I am forever grateful to him.

That love however, is not pain free. For these three and a half years I have used basketball as a means to keep my father close to me. I have experienced my ups and downs with the sport since then. I saw how much I needed him, relied on his being on the sidelines when I was away at prep school. I had been recruited to play basketball for a school in Massachusetts and found my games difficult to stand out in because I had grown so accustomed to having my father there. The support the other kids got from their parents bothered me, because my father were three hours away during my most turbulent sports period. After a while, I got used to his not being there and my play adjusted, but I would still use him as my motivation. With that said, this method of keeping my father close to me used to work efficiently, but I cannot combat the issues that circle my house, or the tension between him and my mother.

The little my father has done financially has not helped his relationship with my mother. Financially my mother provides for my sister and me. My father is just there for moral support. Thus, this has aided in driving him away. I used to see him every two days. Then two days turned to every four days. Now more recently there have been times when I have gone weeks without my father. I feel powerless about that because the one thing that I do well cannot fix this relationship. I can put a team on my back and lead it to
a victory, but I cannot fix this family.

The concept of divorce or separation did not bother me much. I understand people separate and it is the sad truth that nowadays, many families have been experiencing divorce and separation. Although this may be selfish, I am just viewing the issue as it pertains to me. The house felt just a little bit emptier when I realized that he was the only one who believed in me as it pertains to basketball.

It was September 13, 2008 and I came home from a great workout with two of my coaches. It had been a milestone for me because I had not been as motivated as usual as of late. I come home excited, talking to my mother about how I did, how I cannot wait to go back, how I finally see my progress, my dreams of playing overseas and how they seemed real and how excited I was to have a chance to play ball in California. She just nodded, put my dinner on the plate and walked away. My mother never cared too much about what went on with basketball. Where my father would get into detail asking me about my games, my mother would just ask if we won or lost. But on that day, seeing my mother’s lack of concern hurt because I finally realized that there was no one in the house that I could share my love, my passion with and hear insight on it. It hurt to realize that my father was the only one who cared to see that I succeeded with basketball and at this pivotal point, I needed people around who are going to help and push me. I would hope that those people would be my family, but things do not always work out that way.

In particular, I still need his yelling on the sidelines. I need his complaining that I did not play defense even though I had three steals and a block. I need his constant reminder that I should watch Jason Kidd, Steve Nash, and Chris Paul (or Chris DePaul, as he likes to call him) and study them to make myself better. I need his tapes of games from the 1980’s and 1990’s of the all time greats, and I need him so that I know that I am not going in the wrong direction with this basketball thing, because he never let me fall out of bounds. So now, more than ever, I need him to pick me up for that slam dunk, because there is no one else who can. There is no one else who cares like he cares for my success with the round ball. With the defense that my mother is putting up, I have to free him up and give him the assist, especially for all those years that he has watched me assist my teammates on the court. We make a great team, and he has helped me too much not to reap the benefits now that I am finally headed in the right direction.

There are many decisions that I have to make now, and I have to make them without my prime supporter. Without the person who taught me how to play this game, I have to decide what school I am going to play ball for. He does not have a say in this matter because he does not provide for it financially, according to my mother. So, I am left discussing basketball and the opportunities that it gives me with people who do not see the sport and what it does for me. My mother cares about education, which is important, but what she does not see is that without basketball, I would be less disciplined when it came to school, as well as less engaged. All this I wish to talk to my father about, but it grows tiring to leave voicemails and to have him not call back. I did not even know where he lived until last year. Who would think that someone who lived so close would be so far away?

September 13, 2008 helped me understand where I stood with my parents. My parents are the yin and the yang, the heads and the tails, the Puerto Rican and the Dominican, the educator and the athlete, and most importantly, the mother and the motivator. They balance each other out, but right now the balance is off and I am at a standstill. I am left wondering whether I am going to thrive on the lack of support or become complacent like so many other athletes who were motivated by others but when it came time to push themselves, could not do it. So with the recent distance of my father, I have to fix the balance. I must become the motivator, as it is tattooed on my back, shoulder to shoulder: “Motivation is the key to my
evolution.” I may not be able to carry my family on these shoulders just yet, but I can surely carry myself. Because even though my father picked me up to dunk on the fisher price basketball hoop, I eventually grew, and now I am dunking on regulation basketball hoops. Although my success in the sport has grown exponentially with or without the support, it just does not seem right without him. The same love for the game that built a foundation for our relationship apparently is not strong enough to hold the home. Now it is time to start from scratch, build a new foundation and create a new home. Motivation is the key...
“Weh yuh say mummy?”

“Mi say fi go sweep out di house” said my mother.

The already swept house showed no speck of dust. My mother was always obsessed with having a clean house, but today, she was even worse.

I took the broom and swept particles not visible to the naked eye. My mother approached me, took the broom and placed my hand in hers while leading me to the backroom. She showed me pictures and told me stories of when I was a young child, memories that I cannot recall. Doing this, she told me never to forget these memories and the home where it all happened, at least in her own words.

“I love you,” she said. She mostly always expresses her love through words when she is upset and knowing that it is my duty as her daughter to make her better I simply replied:

“I love you too,” but it sounded kind of practiced.

I took my mother's bipolar-like behavior for the fact that I was leaving in a few days. Even though I was just going to visit for a few weeks, to her it was more. To her it meant that soon her first born would be leaving her arms, that one visit would mean another, and then forever. As far as my adolescent life goes, I have never been away from my mother for long periods of time. Sure I go to school and have had the occasional sleepovers, but I have never been away from my mother for more than three days. I left my mother in the dreary room and continued sweeping the perfectly clean house. The next morning I woke up to the cries of my baby sister.

“Dee come get yuh sista, yuh know dat yuh only have so long wid her”

“Yes mummy,” I replied.

I laid by the side of my three-month old sister, who seemed to be drifting off back to sleep. My mother made breakfast while I laid there crying. I cried because I knew that I would miss out on my sister’s “firsts,” the first time she would crawl, the first name she would utter. I cried because I was already missing her. I missed the way her little fingers curl around my pinkie, that she has that new baby smell, and the purity of her innocence.

I placed a pillow by sister's side and walked into the living room; from there I can see my mother in the kitchen. Silently I stood there watching her as she made breakfast with sadness in her eyes. I wanted to comfort her but I knew she would brush me off with her “I'm ok's,” so instead I stood there watching. I wanted her to know that wherever I go, she will always be in my heart. Her strong posture may fool others, but I know better; what she really wanted to say is “Dee stay and don't ever grow up to quickly”. But instead she puts on a smile.

“Mi want u to hurry up an' eat because u haffi go do yuh hair fi tomorrow.” I nodded in agreement.

That night I lay in my bed in pain; my hair was done too tightly. I lay there thinking about my travels and my mom until I finally drifted off. In the morning I got up to find my mother next to me with her arm across my waist. “Get up” she said “get up and go bath.” I did exactly as I was told.

The shower was cold. I did not care much, because in a couple of hours I would be in America, the land where dreams come true. I hugged my relatives and friends as my father put our suitcases in the trunk of his car. My father drove us to the airport with my uncle in the passenger seat, while my mother sat next
to me in the back. My aunt was taking care of my sister. As the warm Jamaican air whipped across my face through the open window, all I could think was, America! My body giggled at every turn and each stoplight. I will be in the land of the rich, the famous and the infamous. I did not look at my mother on the drive to the airport; instead I looked through the window, with excitement in my eyes.

I hugged my mother and gave her a kiss, as did my father.

"Mi love unno y’er, and mi a go miss unno,” she said. “Mi a pray fi a safe flight”

We said bye to her and my uncle; then we entered the inside of the airport. I did not cry because my enthusiasm had the best of me. A few hours later while we were boarding the plane, I saw my mother on the waving dock waving frantically. I waved back, she smiled and for the first time I felt my tears. I cried for my mother.
It was only a week into school and already I had gotten accustomed to the hundreds of students rushing, cramming, shoving their way through to their next class; Mr. Lotto’s piercing voice yelling “No running!”; and of course, the aroma of the cafeteria sneaking up into the hallways, giving us a hint of what to expect later that day. I usually got to my history class before everyone in order to get a seat up front. That class seemed to be the only class I actually enjoyed; the Boston Tea Party and the American Revolution always filled me with pride and joy.

Within a minute, the seats were occupied by familiar faces and Mr. Palmer entered the room with his customary cheerful expression. A broad, pale man, well in his forties indicated by the streaks of gray in his dark brown hair, he always looked sharp with his shirt and tie. Always smiling and greeting students as he walked the halls, Mr. Palmer never went unnoticed.

As the bickering settled down, Mr. Palmer stood before us and energetically cried, “Who can tell me in what year the Declaration of Independence was adopted?” There was silence amongst the puzzled freshmen as I rushed through the pages of the textbook in my head. I was stumped. It was on the tip of my tongue, yet I couldn’t remember. A few moments later, I stuck my hand out in the air and waved it furiously as if it was an emergency. “1776!” I quickly yelled out in relief. But before my answer could be confirmed, there was a sudden knock on the door and all of Mr. Palmer’s attention was drawn away.

He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him as the classroom erupted with chatter. A few minutes later, Mr. Palmer walked back in the room with an expression no one thought he could possess. His face was solemn and he did not say a word or quiet down the room; instead he walked back to his desk and sat down. No one noticed his re-entry, and so the chatting went on for a couple more minutes until we observed Mr. Palmer quietly starring out the window.

He looked back at us, and with gloom said, “Two planes have just crashed into the Twin Towers.” The room felt paralyzed, not seeming to accept what had just happened. No one knew what to say or think. At the moment everything seemed so unreal: Was it accidental? Was it an attack? And if so, who would do such a thing? One student even shouted to ask if it was a joke, but we didn’t hear the answer we wanted.

Without saying a word, Mr. Palmer opened up his discolored cabinet which was covered with pictures of his family and students and took out a radio. As we sat in our seats, in awe, a news reporter frantically reported, “The South Tower has just collapsed! A billow of smoke has just surrounded the area for what seems like a collapse of the South Tower of the World Trade Center!” This is unbelievable, I thought as I gazed through the room of speechless faces. At this point, several teachers and students joined the classroom to listen to the tragic events only our minds could visualize.

After the reports of the second World Trade Center Tower collapsing, the principal got on the loud speaker and directed all the students to the auditorium. While we walked through the halls of buzzing fear, we heard some alleged ideas as to what exactly was happening on the other side of the river but still, no one knew exactly.

When everyone was seated in the auditorium, our principal stood nervously and announced, “As some of you may have already heard, the Twin Towers were hit by two planes and have collapsed. As a precaution, we are contacting all of your parents to pick you up from school.” He continued, “For now, everyone head to
the lunchroom.” It made no sense, why would there be a precaution if it was just an accident? What exactly is happening? I had to know.

As everyone made their way to the lunchroom, I sneaked through and headed to our history classroom where Mr. Palmer sat with the same expression we had left him with. “Mr. Palmer, what’s going on? Why are they calling our parents?” I said softly, trying not to interfere. It took several moments for him to find a voice as he turned the radio off. “It’s precautionary,” he murmured, “There are reports that two other planes crashed, one into the Pentagon and the other into some field in Pennsylvania.” It bothered me to feel so confused. At this point, Mr. Palmer turned the radio back on to reports that indicated the desperation of lives that were captured in the towers. The news reporter went on to say people even jumped out of windows in desperation. After a few moments, Mr. Palmer told me to go back to the cafeteria in case someone was to pick me up. I thanked him and made my way out.

When I arrived at the cafeteria, it was pure chaos: parents and children rushing in and scrambling out as quickly as they could. Everyone was mystified at the situation, and too fragile to handle it. I sat there, eating my expected pizza and chocolate milk, contemplating how such a thing could happen. As I looked around the lunchroom, I wondered if anyone knew or had family that was in one of the Twin Towers and how upsetting it was, but was cut off with the sound of someone yelling my name. After searching for a familiar face in the swarm of parents, I finally spotted my sister and ran towards her. After much pushing and shoving, we made our way out of the building and headed home as I questioned the world under the smoke-thick air.

That evening, our family sat around the television, watching the news. Most reports were saying the cause of the day’s disaster was unconfirmed, while others linked it to terrorism and accidents. A good portion of the night had weeping family and friends asking and seeking for their loved ones. As I sat watching the shaking hands hold up the photos, I hoped that they would soon find them but knew it was probably not likely.

On my way to school the following day, I realized how much patriotism flourished throughout the community. There were American flags on cars, windows, lawns – you name it. Everyone was trying to show support to their nation and the lives lost the previous day. At school, students wore fatigues and pinned American flags to their backpacks. It was something out of the ordinary. People who witnessed what had happened told the story of what they had seen, of what they had lived through, to anyone who would listen.

That day at school, the day after the terrifying disaster, I arrived to my history class earlier than everyone, as usual. But rather than being anxious to discuss the Declaration of Independence, I was more curious to see how Mr. Palmer was doing. Upon his arrival, we all noticed the effect the previous day had on Mr. Palmer – dark bags were new to his eyes, a scruff indicated he hadn’t shaved, and he wore what seemed like the same shirt and tie he wore the previous day. He spent the entire class time talking about his friends in the fire department, one in particular who had lost his life in one of the towers, and how they were one of the first ladders to arrive on the scene. Mr. Palmer was just one of the thousands of people who had lost someone close to him, and that was a gripping thought to ponder.

For the next few weeks, we spent every history class talking, discussing and reading about the incident of September 11th. We shared our thoughts and feelings on the day, what we saw and heard, and read multiple accounts of first-hand experiences. No one had a problem with it, nor did anyone say anything. In one account we read, “We are all in this together, forget about the differences and move together towards
the future,” and so, as a class, we did. We even went to Ground Zero for a field trip one day, and paid visits to the local fire departments.

Although patriotism stood strong within the classroom, so did the community of the New York City citizens. Many people still found ways to help – from volunteering at local hospitals of Lower Manhattan to donating blood to the Red Cross. This spurt of patriotism lasted for months on end. What fascinated me the most was that it was more than just showing support and pride of our nation, but rather the nation uniting as a whole. It was a connection. People from different backgrounds helped, trusted, and supported one another. With pride came kindness and warmth, and it made me and many others feel safer.

I remember one particular day when our family was invited over to our neighbor’s house for dinner. The smell of the creamy gravy, mashed potatoes and savory meatloaf filled the house. Coming from a Russian family, I wasn’t used to the American dishes presented but I’ve always imagined the taste. We had never spoken more than a few words of “Hello,” but yet we were invited along with a few other families to show appreciation for the lives lost. All of us were in some extent strangers and came from different cultures but as the night unfolded, we all united to some extent.

Back in Mr. Palmer’s class we eventually got back to The Declaration of Independence and The Civil War, and field trips to the local museums instead of fire departments. But even though we moved on, we never forgot what we, as a class and community, went through. Now that I look back at my young self, I understand the significance in the lessons that I learned in that class – with the help of others, through unity, we can overcome any obstacle we face. And that is not only what Mr. Palmer’s class did, but America as a nation as well.
My connection to my family originates in my early childhood, beginning with an experience not unlike that of Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrator in “The Third and Final Continent.” By the time I had turned three, my family decided that it was time to visit Serbia, their country of origin. The visit’s purpose was to see my extended family, much of which still lives in Serbia to this day. I did not realize it, but that very first visit, the beginning of what would be an annual sort of pilgrimage for my family, would change me profoundly. In much the same way as Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrator, it took one extraordinary human being – my own Mrs. Croft – to open my life to a new world, one outside my childhood, changing me forever in both character and identity.

Though I have no memory of my first visit to Belgrade, Serbia as a toddler, my next at the age of five is quite clear in my mind. I remember the first sensation upon exiting the airport was a feeling of heavy, humid heat, much like that of my home New York City, only there was also an indescribable sense of dust in the air, as if there were a desert nearby. The ride in the car held much the very same scent, though the landscape changed quickly from rolling farmland to the dusty orange-brown or ash-gray pavements of a city twice as noisy and four times smaller than my home. Looking out into the busy streets, I could see screeching tramways, dirty old buses, and little cars that smelled strongly of gasoline. The world, it seemed to my five-year-old mind, had been completely flipped onto its side in just a nine hour plane trip, changing from the relative calm of Bay Ridge to the hustle and bustle of a sprawling city.

The first place we went was to the home of my paternal grandmother’s oldest sister, my great aunt. For the next month and a half, this was where we – my father, mother, sister and I – would live: in a small, too-dim apartment with rusting window frames, old furniture, and rooms that were either too noisy or too hot.

My great aunt Draga remembered me from two years ago as clearly as if I had never left; even in old age, she was still the sharp mathematician she had always been, her bluish-gray eyes gleaming craftily as she glanced at everyone in turn. She had gray, curly hair, a slightly puckered mouth, and paunchy cheeks, wrinkles covering her skin in every way imaginable and crinkling every time her expression changed. The first words I remember hearing her say were: “Don’t mind me; I’m too old for someone so young to be bothered with me.”

I didn’t know how old she was until I was nine; that same year, she turned 80 years old. Much like Jhumpa Lahiri’s narrator, I was struck dumb; between my birth and my great aunt’s birth lay 71 whole years! I felt the same utter amazement towards my great aunt Draga that the narrator felt toward Mrs. Croft. My nine-year-old mind could not believe that she was still alive – that she could still walk and talk and move on her own.

My great aunt also took care of me while the rest of my family was out. She taught me to play cards and to cook, and also spoke to me at long intervals of her own life. I learned, slowly, about fragments of her life – her initial life in Croatia, her arrival in Serbia for a job as a professor, the deep sisterly devotion she had towards her youngest sister, my grandmother. As we spent time together, I saw her more and more as a person from another time, almost another world; a spinster of great poise and dignity. She held a sort of tactful regality in her stature, even when dressed in her shuffling, ratty pink slippers and blue and white
polka-dot gown. That was before Alzheimer's hit.

After two years of the disease, she was a shell of her former self; at a third of her weight, with a third of her teeth, she looked much more like a woman of vast old age than ever. Confined to her bed, she could hardly keep warm even in the summer, and that sharp intelligence in her eyes had faded away. She no longer recognized any of us, confusing us for the various loved ones she'd lost to tuberculosis or war.

The last time I saw her, when I walked into the room, she looked me straight in the eye. For a moment, I thought she knew who I was, and spoke to my mother. “She was always like that, Seka,” she said, pointing vaguely at me. For a moment, recognizing my grandmother’s name, I was disheartened, but she had not finished. “It always seemed that there was a beautiful light within her, and that you could always see it when her eyes smiled.” It wasn’t the last time I saw her, but I believe that she said goodbye to me that day. It was as if all the years between us had suddenly melted away, and a deep sense of familial love suddenly welled up within me, filling me with the pride of knowing she was family. This new connection to someone whose genetics I shared suddenly inspired me to find out everything I could about my family history.

Only a month later she died. Like Mrs. Croft, she had opened a new world to me, a world of the past, of my ancestors. Now, being Serbian, being a Pavlica, had gained new meaning; I was part of something bigger than myself. Her death only solidified it; like the narrator and his wife, I was no longer two halves of a whole: Marina and the Pavlica in me were now one and the same.
PART 2

MOVABLE FEASTS

Emily Cama • Angelica Berry • Anne Boatner • Jiali Huang
Jack Levenson • Peter DeLury • Sasha De Silva
I can still remember opening the front door of my house and feeling the brisk winter breeze brushing past my bare cheeks, thinking of how grateful I was for the slow but undeniable effects of global warming, at least for that day. Even though it was towards the end of February and still winter, the air was warmer than it was supposed to be. Nevertheless I threw on my pea coat, grabbed the gloves I knew my mom would remind me to take, my video camera and ran down the stairs to greet my father waiting for me in the car. “It’s the year of the rat!” he called out from the car window. I sat in the backseat and smiled at him through his rearview mirror, tingling with excitement as we went on our way to Chinatown for my father’s martial arts demonstration for the Chinese New Year.

From the day I was born my father had tried to teach me martial arts, more specifically Wing Chung, as he would correct anyone who mistakenly called it Karate. He loved to tell me about the first school he opened when he was only eighteen years old, and all of the other schools he had trained in since, though I’ve only seen him teach in the house. Students would usually arrive every night after we had just finished eating dinner. Some faces I’ve seen for years while others changed with the seasons, but no matter who was there my father made sure they trained hard and trained well. Eventually my father accepted the fact that I was more into makeup and boys and continued training my older brother instead.

As time went on and I got old enough to understand, as my father put it, my parents separated and my dad left. It seemed as though the martial arts part of my life had somewhat parted from me as well. His new apartment was too small to train in so he found a more suitable sized place for a reasonable price in Chinatown. I no longer watched his students come in one by one as we cleared the plates from the dinner table, or heard their laughter about old times, how things used to be, and stories of previous tournaments they had competed in. It felt as if it had been years since I observed the quick hand and foot technique that they made look easy but I knew was strenuous due to the amounts of sweat on their shirts when they would say goodbye. In fact it had been years, two to be exact, and the Wing Chung I had always secretly loved had turned into a distant relative that one hears about here and there but still feels awkward speaking to on the phone. I was excited because I knew that this day would be different.

My brother sat in the passenger’s seat next to his Sifu (Chinese for “teacher”) and they both spoke in a nervous excitement about the upcoming event. I stared out the window capturing the images before they quickly turned into a blur as the car sped by. Suddenly these glimpses of green trees and grey pavement turned into a celebratory red and I knew immediately we had arrived. The streets were crowded, the music was loud, and the air was thick with tradition and pride. The repetitious beating of drums followed by the loud smashing of cymbals sounded in my ears as I stepped out of the car and onto the dirty pavement covered in confetti and lettuce. My father and brother stepped out too, both wearing the same shirt, a black t-shirt with red Chinese letters on the front and back. “What does the G stand for?” I asked. “It’s the symbol of the Chinese Freemason where I teach,” my father replied. We then met up with a bunch of other guys also wearing the same t-shirt, and my father introduced me to his students. There were a lot of new faces this time, but I was just as happy to see them as I was to see the old students. The new told me I look just like my brother only with hair, and the old exclaimed how pretty and grown up I’ve become. I assured them that I was the sibling who received the “good looking” genes and returned the compliment of how the years
have done them all well.

I quickly took out my video camera, feeling like nothing more than a tourist, and zoomed in on two giant lions dancing outside a grocery store. The lions weren't real lions of course; they were men from other martial arts groups dressed in costume. One man would have the job of holding the exceptionally decorated lion head in colors of red, orange and white with sparkles, ears that flapped, huge eyes, and a tongue that hung out of the lion's mouth. This man had the important job of actually making the lion “dance.” The other men would crouch low with the long fabric spread over them serving as the body of the lion. The lion danced outside of a person's store for good luck. Then as a way of saying thanks, the store owner would put a red envelop containing money inside the lion's mouth, sometimes hidden in a head of lettuce. Each lion was part of a team, so as they danced other men and women provided the music. One person would bang on two or three huge drums resting on what looked like a huge wooden cart, while the others used the crash symbols or a tambourine and helped wheel along the person with the drums. Everyone wore a t-shirt representing their martial arts organization. I tried getting the best angle possible in the huge crowd of smiling and cheering faces and eventually caught a good angle; little did I know I would be able to see this occurrence happen on each and every block until the sky turned black.

After what had seemed like an eternity, it was finally time for the demonstration. A crowd larger than any of the ones we had seen before gathered around a gated off circle in what was now night time. The young Chinese students that were a part of my dad's organization went first. They took out their lions and put on a special show. Not only did one man control the head, but he jumped on another man's arms causing the lion to appear larger than life. There were about three lions dancing and shaking their heads and two men holding funny masks that I have never seen before. The music was louder than ever. It was explained to me later that the men were wearing comedic Chinese opera masks, which made sense since during the performance the two of them put on a skit with one pushing the other and falling which made the crowd laugh. After the special lion dance performance the martial arts demonstration began, and unfortunately so did the rain.

The men didn't care at all, and even appeared to feel tougher for braving it out. The first act up was a two man pole form. The crowd grew quiet, so quiet that the only sounds heard were the poles clanking against one another and the pitter patter of the rain hitting against the floor and metal balconies. After they had finished, they bowed to each other in silence, and then again to the crowd and received a roaring applause. Next up were the students I had met. In one act they went in a group of four, in another two, and even one performed solo. Each of them also received loud applause, which was a relieving and comforting surprise since none of them are of Chinese background. Finally it was my father's turn. I watched him before he went up and noticed he looked especially calm and collected. I had been in such awe, surrounded by manner and tradition in an environment completely foreign to my own, but somehow when I was looking at him it had seemed as if he had been right at home, in a place he had always wanted to be. I was proud of him before he even stepped foot into the circle. He walked into the center of the crowd, all eyes on him, the first non-Chinese martial arts instructor in the Freemasons. “Yeah Sifu Cama!” his students all cheered him supportively, my brother and I screamed too, and off he went. His form was as fast as lightning and in the dark of the night it seemed as if he had five arms. In my seventeen years I have never seen him with such energy as he had in those few moments. He finished the form, bowed, and accepted the loudest applause of them all.

Absorbed in an ambience of pride and accomplishment, we joined the Freemasons at a fancy traditional
Chinese restaurant not that far from where the demonstration had taken place. I shook off my umbrella and wet coat, took my seat, and stared at the large table covered with different foods. It had been an extremely long day and my stomach was rumbling, but once I looked at the food it came to a stop. I did not recognize one dish that was being offered. Not to seem unappreciative, I tasted everything from each dish, with the exception of the miniature squid that my brother placed on my plate.

After listening and enjoying the laughs and stories I felt I had long missed out on, it was time to say goodbye. We exchanged final congratulations and then my father, my brother, and I left the dinner. As we were walking to the car, we passed a shabby looking yet busy restaurant. “Hold on, I know something you’ll like,” my father assured me and went inside. I suppose he had noticed I didn’t eat much because a few minutes later he came back out holding a bag in his hand. “What’s that?” I asked. “Sweet bun dumplings,” he replied. He told me to eat them in a spoon so that none of the sweet juice spilled out and explained that it was the way real Chinese men ate them. Now every time we go to Chinatown I smile thinking back on that day and insist that we have some.
I really know the meaning behind the title “sugar daddy.” My dad is the one who initiated my sweets addiction. He is the one who taught me that aiming for sugary snacks is the way to go. The desire for a piece of candy is not just a biological urge but a part of my lifestyle. Candy and junk food are instilled with childhood memories.

Back in the day, my dad had a few jobs here and there but they were never his primary focus, just a means of helping out. My mom is the one with the stable career and that is how it has always been. However, my dad had duties separate from finance to attend to. It was his job to take my sister and me to and from school each day. Our elementary schools were never within walking distance, so we grew accustomed to car rides. We also grew fond of these car rides and for a very particular reason; they usually involved sweets. It was a frequent occurrence that on the trip home, my dad would park his car in front of a bodega, leave, and reenter holding a glorious brown paper bag. The joys bestowed upon my sister and me came in different forms: bags of chips, cookies, ices in the summer, and more often than not, the candy of our choice.

The treats were not limited to the car rides. At any given time, the pockets of my dad’s jackets and jeans were just as exciting as the paper bags. My dad always had candy on him. I could reach into his coat and find Sour Patches, Super Bubbles, Charleston Chews, or any other type of candy available at the corner store. Whichever candy I demanded, he supplied, and I was never left with a craving unsatisfied. Why? Why did my dad always have a candy supply on hand? Simply put, he is a sugar fiend. He would buy candy and such for himself and we would take delight in the spoils as well. I've grown up with the notion that an abundance of sugar is a common part of daily life and synonymous with contentment.

Eventually, my mom became concerned with my dental hygiene and forced my dad to stop purchasing candy on a daily basis. To date, the candy halt declaration from my mom has been one of her saddest enforcements. I still eat my fair share of candy but not nearly as much as when it was at my constant disposal. The sweets can't be stopped. At some point, the focus of our household sugar phenomenon switched to cakes. The switch came about as a result of a compromise, the rationale being moderation. Snack cakes serve a dessert purpose, and eating them once a day is more practical (healthy) than a candy binge. My mom has never been a big candy fan but she doesn't mind a donut after dinner now and then.

I don't officially know when the snack cake boxes started invading our cabinet shelves but I know I was raised on them. I remember another after school stop would be the Hostess Store, where my dad liked to buy bread, but in addition bought Twinkies and HoHos. It's been a long time since I've accompanied my parents to the supermarket, but I remember my dad always headed to the aisle with Little Debbies and all the other cream filled brands. Now, when visiting any grocery store, my instinct is to do the same.

Sweets are a ritual, a reminder of the past, happiness in the present, and a huge portion of my personal food chart. Candies and cakes sustain me physically and emotionally. My family approves and embraces my dad’s sweet tooth. It is embedded in who I am. I believe sweets have a bonding quality among individuals and I associate them with excitement. My dad is the one who always took my sisters and me trick or treating and made sure that our buckets were filled to the brim. My dad is the one who always adds excessive amounts of sugar to his coffee and I now brag that I use 12 sugar packets. My dad is the one who feels the need to randomly buy a box of donuts. My dad is the ultimate sugar daddy and I take pride in his example.
I have fifteen minutes to serve twelve of the best drinks I’ve ever made to four judges sitting at a table I have decorated. Three additional judges, adorned with clipboards and multiple stopwatches, hover around me. I’m hooked up to a wireless microphone so that everyone can hear the presentation I’ve been reciting in the shower for the past week. My grinder whirs aggressively, the sharp clack of the dosing mechanism echoes in the exhibition hall, and my steam wand hisses, but these are sounds I’ve learned to find comfort in. This is the 2008 Mid Atlantic Regional Barista Competition and I have never been more nervous in my whole entire life.

These competitions are a chance for baristas all across the world to prove their skills. There is an incredibly intricate 1012-point scoring system with lots of math. Industry professionals, shop owners, and former competitors judge the handfuls of baristas eager to flex their coffee making muscles. Baristas make four single espresso shots, four single cappuccinos, and four signature drinks, espresso beverages of their own creation. They are judged on technical skill, presentation, and taste.

When I got a job at murky coffee in Washington, DC, I never thought I would compete, but last February my coffee trainer and mentor encouraged me to sign up for the regional. I reluctantly signed up and began preparing.

I showed up at the training center ready to prepare and quickly hit a wall. I stood blankly in front of the espresso machine. Insecurity and fear monopolized my thoughts. If I don’t do well, I won’t be taken seriously. If I fail, I might as well quit the best job I’ve ever had and go join a convent. Everyone is better than me. Why did I sign up for this?

And then I remembered. Aaron wouldn’t have asked me to sign up if he didn’t think I was capable. I’m one of the most experienced baristas in my shop. I am creative, competitive, skilled, and eloquent. I’m a perfectionist. I love coffee. My aggressive bout of insecurity caused me to fall behind but with all that out of the way and five days until competition, I started to cram.

I spent late nights at a training center cooking things on a hot plate, grinding up spices, making table settings, preparing round after round of cappuccinos. I took notes on extraction times, espresso aging, milk waste, and of course, taste. I took breaks to go down the street and get falafel and french fries and promptly returned to watch videos of former champions, fervently taking notes on what they did to win. I timed myself over and over again. I tasted shot after shot of espresso. Needless to say, I got very little sleep.

I show up at the Washington Convention Center at 8am for the competitors meeting. Of course there is coffee available. There are already hundreds of people setting up tables and preparing for the exhibition. I am competitor 23. I am from murky coffee, Washington DC. I would please like my grinder placed on the right of the espresso machine. I will need a power cord underneath the judges’ table. I feel like I am about to throw up and I’m not sure if it’s the coffee or my nerves.

Backstage, I unload my things onto a prep table, polish spoons and cups, nervously chew on half of the peanut butter and molasses sandwich I made the night before, and wait.

It’s go time. I run a lint-roller across my shirt, throw on an apron, and wheel my cart onto the tiny stage. I press a button and my prep time begins. Fifteen minutes to get all your stuff from cart to stage, set the judges’ table, make sure the machine is working how you want it, and taste more espresso. Before I know
it, my time elapses and seven judges walk onstage.

I am forcing myself to breathe.

“My name is Anne Boatner from murky coffee in Washington, DC. Today I will be serving you a three-course espresso menu. We’ll start off with cappuccinos, then move on to espresso, and finally, I’ll serve my signature drink, Espresso Masala, which I will begin preparing right now.”

My signature drink is a twist on the garam masala spice blend. I grind cinnamon, cardamom, cumin, coriander, cloves, and black pepper in front of the judges. Then, I scoop about two teaspoons of the blend into a glass of soymilk. After I’m done serving my cappuccinos and espressos, I will pull shots of espresso in two ounce glasses, add half a teaspoon of muscovado sugar, strain and steam the infused soymilk, and pour it in the glasses.

“To warm up your taste buds, I’ll be serving you a single cappuccino. The richness of the espresso is heightened by the sweetness of the milk and you will find notes of milk chocolate, caramel, and hazelnut. Please enjoy!”

As I’m pouring the milk for my cappuccinos, my hands start to shake. Deep breath. This is not the time for nervousness.

“Espresso Toscano is a three bean blend roasted lightly in the Northern Italian tradition. The Brazilian components provide the blend with sweetness, while the Sumatran bean gives the blend richness and body.”

There is a drip on the side of my espresso cup but I’ve already served it and there’s nothing I can do about it.

“Please enjoy the way that the sweetness of the espresso is heightened by the savory spiciness of the garam masala. Please sip the foam then use a demitasse spoon to incorporate the sugar from the bottom of the glass and sip again.”

I almost drop a ceramic tray while serving my signature drink. The judges see me fumble, but I’m almost done and I can’t do anything about it anyway.

“Thank you very much. It’s been excellent serving you and I can’t wait to do it again.”

I have forty-five seconds to clean up. I toss dishes in a bus pan, flush my grinder, and wipe down my espresso machine.

“TIME!”
“Yes, I want a cup of coffee, please.” I selected my flavor and gave the menu back.

“Ok, a cup of coffee and a cup of strawberry ice cream, right?” The waiter repeated our order.

“Oh, wait for a moment, please.” Moon held onto the waiter and then asked me, “Li, do you really mean coffee, not tea?”

“Yes, I want a hot coffee, I am very sure. Thank you for waiting, sir,” I replied.

“God, Li, you drink coffee?” She was very excited.

“Hey, close your mouth. Why can’t I drink coffee?” I objected.

“Are you kidding me? I still remember that the first time we went to Starbucks, and what happened.”

“I forgot it.”

“Liar! Let me remind you what you did at that time,” she said. “After we tasted that most popular coffee, you covered your mouth with your hands and shouted, ‘This is terrible.’ You know, after you did that I hoped I would disappear.” Every time Moon talked about this experience, she got angry.

“Oh, I just remember at that moment, you shouted louder than me. So finally, we had to run away with a lot of people watching us.” I enjoyed playing the trick.

“Oh, bad girl!” she raised her hands and hit me twice. “Have you got stuck? Why do you want to drink it again after such a humiliating experience?”

“I think you do not know that expression, which suggests ‘A cup of coffee per day, you can get health every day.’ From science reports, we learn that drinking coffee can burn out the excess water in your body and help to protect your heart, so right now coffee has become a happy drink for me.”

“Oh, Li, stop joking.” Moon got a little bit angry and tried to hit me again.

“Ok, ok, no joke…Calm down, girl. As you know, I am a hot drink person. My stomach only accepts hot drinks but here in America, it is always hard to find any hot drink in local stores except coffee. Drinking coffee is a part of the culture in America. I can not change this situation, so the only one thing I can do that is to change my mind,” I said seriously. It was an absolutely no joking answer.

“But after the first time you tasted it, you told me you felt sick with that taste,” Moon said. She was still unable to believe my change in opinion.

“Right, but nothing is impossible, if you really want to do it,” I said. “The first time I could not stand its taste, but when I tasted it again, I could drink a little bit, even though I frowned, and I still did not like its taste. After several times, I learned to get pleasure from its bitter taste; I enjoyed its botanic smell.”

“Excuse me, here is your coffee and here is your ice cream. Enjoy them.” The waiter put our coffee and ice cream on the table.

“Thank you.”

I put some cream in my coffee, and then blended them, “Do you want to try it?”

“Thanks a lot, but keep it for yourself,” Moon responded.

“Oh, Li, how are the pancakes that you have in America. Do you enjoy them, now?” Moon liked to play tricks on me. “Pancake” was another food that I had a horrible history with.

“Of course not, I can get a lot of delicious food instead of them,” I replied with a smile, but in fact, I
did not know exactly, when time passed, if I could change. Maybe, maybe not. I held the coffee cup, took a deep breath, and then tasted it. A particular reaction from the specific tropical coffee's smell and taste flew through my body. It was totally different from my favorite jasmine tea, which attracted me to drink a lot in my hometown due to its natural flower smell and soft sweet taste. In the past, I had felt terrible about coffee; yet right now, I was so enjoying it.
Friday night is a most interesting one in the Levenson household. The food eaten on this night reveals culture, religion, and individuality. It is my favorite night of the week. It is only on this night that our food is not Americanized. It starts off with everyone sitting in the living room eating what we call Maza, preparing for the Sabbath meal. Maza is not a food itself but just another word for appetizers. It doesn't exactly consist of your typical hors’ d’oeuvres. It could be Lachmagene—mini pizzas, without cheese or sauce, but with meat that is more sweet than salty. Sometimes we have Sambusak, which is similar to Lachmagene except that it’s wrapped up and the meat lacks the same sweetness but is more like ground up beef. My favorite is Kaak, which is like a cracker. It's made out of your bread dough then shaped into small unique shapes, sometimes like a mini Jewish star. Egg yolk is then smeared on top followed by a sprinkling of sesame seeds. It's then thrown into the oven to give it a characteristic crunch. As we munch on these culinary delights, verbal debates often break out, usually about politics, which usually bores me, so I just focus on what's important, the Kaak. What's unique about Maza is that when the main dish is ready, its smell carries through the course of its own steam right through the kitchen, into the living room, and the argument ceases.

My culture and my religion are very strong influences on what I eat. I am Jewish of Egyptian, Syrian, and Brazilian descent. This history provides a melting pot of culture that is unique, which comes out in the food that I eat. Lachmagene, Sambusak, and Kaak all happen to be Syrian; however, the main course on Friday night tends to be from my Egyptian and Brazilian backgrounds. The first dish that comes out is usually Hommid or Adeh Soup. An Egyptian delicacy, Hommid contains steamed, soft, vegetables, like carrots and celery. Along with these vegetables is Kibbeh, which are just miniature meatballs. These items are swimming in liquid, which is both minty and tangy. Adeh soup, also of Egyptian descent, is a soup of ground up lentils and pasta along with exotic spices, which I don't even know! After this is brought out, my Dad goes to the fridge and brings out the drink that reminds him of his childhood, called Maracuja. Maracuja is a fruit native to Brazil, and this is its juice. Its taste is so sweet and strong you could taste it from your nostrils. The next dish, the main one, is the dish that ceases all arguments. It looks like roast, but its magic is in its seasoning. The seasoning aside, its texture is like nothing I have ever sensed elsewhere. When I ask my grandmother about its “undisclosed enchantment,” as she calls it, she always says, “Ah, Rohi, (an Egyptian term of endearment), sorry, ancient Egyptian secret!” I just laugh this off and hope maybe she will tell me next time. Dessert usually brings out more of my Brazilian heritage where we eat Guarana. They're small fruits and look a little bit like cherries, but their flavor packs a punch, being both very sweet and very sour.

Along with my culture, my religion is an important factor in what I eat. In fact, all the foods that I eat that are influenced by my family background belong more to the Jews of the nation rather than to the nation itself, with the exception of Maracuja and Guarana. Because I am Jewish, I obey the provisions of kosher eating very strictly. Growing up in Brooklyn, the diversity in my own hometown is as dense as in my own home; therefore, I can't say keeping kosher here has posed great difficulty.

My culture and my religion are both direct factors in what I eat. I eat certain things to maintain my unique culture, which I plan to pass down to the next generation, as well as my religion. I eat a lot because of a Jewish mother who always says, “Honey, have seconds, you’re a growing boy!” But mostly I eat more to conserve these two things that make me unique rather than eating these foods for their taste themselves.
A Delicatessen Story
PETER DELURY

When I was six years old, my brother would take me to the delicatessen right across the street from my home. He was ten at the time. He would take me by the hand and walk me up and down the aisles as I laid my eyes on the various foods. We passed the bubbly soda and the crunchy bags of twenty-five cent chips. Along the way, James would take things off the shelves that weren't appealing to me. I saw him with cans of what looked like beans. The food on the package was colored brown. It looked like the puddles of mud that would collect in dirt after a heavy rain downpour. I was ready to vomit at this point. When we finally returned to the front of the store, my face lit up like a candle and my eyes glittered like a starry sky. There was candy, gum, and ice cream lined up very neatly. My brother turned to me and said “Now it’s time you see the stuff I like!”

I looked at him with a big grin then turned back to feast my eyes on what sat before me. My eyes went from left to right then back again. The wrappers on the candies were so colorful and attractive that I could stare at them all day and the ice cream looked so cool and refreshing. My brother told me that I was allowed to pick any two things from this big collection of candy and ice cream. After about five minutes of debating with myself, I chose a Hershey's chocolate bar and a rainbow-flavored Marino's ice.

After James paid the cashier with the money my mother had given him, we headed home. Even though it was a short period of time to wait, the anticipation that built up inside me was phenomenal. I was dying to open the bag and salvage my two treasures. When we went inside, I snatched the bag from my brother and began to eat my treats. As soon as the Hershey bar met my tongue, a sudden chocolate sensation overcame me. The milk-filled chocolate melted in my mouth as the winter snow melts when the sun beats down on it. I felt this was all I needed to be happy. However, I remembered how dry my mouth was. I shrugged it off. At this point I pulled out the Marino’s rainbow flavored ice. When I opened it, however, it had already melted because it was sitting out too long. I began to drink the ice in its liquefied state. As soon as the ice rolled along my tongue to the back of my throat, I felt a sense of rejuvenation. The cold freshness of it all just brought me back to life.

Sadly, the ice was soon gone as well. My brother was eating his own treats when he turned to me and asked if I liked what I had picked. I told him it was the best thing I ever ate and thanked him for showing me the candy and ice cream. From that point on, I went to the store with my brother whenever my mom needed him to go over there. I would constantly try new types of candy and ice cream every time and I couldn’t get enough. We’d shower ourselves in junk food and neither of us seemed to mind. As long as we were happy, that’s all that mattered.

Looking back on this, I see that the very junk food my brother acquainted me with all those years ago still plays a prominent role in my life. In a way, the diet I live by is my brother’s presence in my life. His rebellious nature and the food that symbolizes that nature can clearly be seen in my character. In fact, I still go to the very same deli that I went to with my brother. The milk-filled chocolate, the rejuvenating ices, and all the other candies and ice cream are still there as if they had never left. My brother may be living on the other side of the world right now, but the memories of food that he and I once shared are still with me as well as all the other memories of his hospitality and kind nature. I still eat Hershey bars all the time,
and the taste is as good as it always has been. My brother has influenced what I eat as no one else has and I don’t think anyone will ever come close. When I get older and have kids, I hope they get to experience what I have and embrace the luxury of candy and ice cream as I did, so that they have something to pass on to the next generation.
I do not remember her saying it. I do no remember reacting in any way. I guess I could not believe it. Maybe I was in shock. Maybe I just did not know how to react. Maybe I just did not understand. I was ten years old and my brother was just six. She sat down with my brother and me. Her words I could barely recall. It was a few days or weeks after our talk; she left that rainy August and was not to return. She went to New York, the city where dreams and aspirations came true, as it was termed amongst my relatives.

At first I did not really understand what was going on. I could not comprehend in any way why mom would want to just leave my dad, my brother and me behind. It truly perplexed me. Surprisingly, three weeks after, she returned bearing gifts: clothes, snacks and lots of toys. She shocked us all when she came back. Then, I thought to myself, maybe she was just joking when she said that she was not returning.

The next year she headed back to America. I remember clearly when she left. It was two days before my eleventh birthday. How I pleaded with her to stay just two days longer, but she left anyway. So on the day of my birthday I got excited, hoping to see her pop out of somewhere and greet me with her smiling face, but she was not there. Weeks passed and she did not return. She would call every week and send barrels of all sorts of scrumptious treats. It was like a treasure hunt as we searched each barrel wondering what was for whom. She would send pictures but never tell us the details of her life up there in New York. We assumed that New York was different from Trinidad but we did not really know how it was different. We could only make inferences of how the city life was through her pictures but never from her experiences. People in Trinidad who had not been abroad could only assume how life was in New York. They felt that everything in New York was cheap and that life was easy. So I hoped for the best in my mother’s new life.

Some years after we got our visas, my brother and I excitedly went to visit her in America. We wondered if she had changed. A few months after, we were looking down at the city in the night sky from the airplane. As we descended to land, my heart was filled with anxiety. I was thrilled and anxious to experience all that I saw high in the sky but most importantly I could not wait to see my mom again after all those years. As I stepped off the plane with my brother, I felt strange in the new environment. The atmosphere was different. Everything looked so big. The JFK airport was huge, especially compared to the one in Trinidad! I walked in awe while observing the paintings, the infrastructure and the technological tweaks in the airport that surrounded me. After the struggle to get our numerous pieces of luggage, we met with our mom. The heavy luggage was filled with all the confections and preservatives that my mom had requested. It was a teary occasion when we were reunited. We were so overwhelmed by seeing each other for the first time in so many years. It was a moment that I would remember eternally.

As we arrived at the parking lot, pulling our heavy suitcases behind us, I noticed that all the cars seemed to be painted in dismal, dull colors. They were not highly decorated or glossed. Looking around, I realized that the streets were much bigger than those in Trinidad and trees lined them in an interesting, symmetrical way. The scent of the air did not reek with car exhaust. When we were in the car, my mom turned on the radio. All the radio stations were different from what I was used to. The radio shows that I was accustomed to had no significance to these people in New York. Driving along the roads, I saw that many of the buildings touched the sky. Even the apartments were made differently. They looked more beautiful and defined. Also, everyone talked the way you heard on television. Most importantly of all, there were many
types of food. I wanted to try them all.

At the end of those two months, my brother and I returned to Trinidad. When I returned to Trinidad the environment felt eerie. I began to believe that maybe New York was where I truly belonged, so I anticipated the next time that I was to visit my mother.

The next time I visited New York was the Christmas of that same year. The traditions we held at Christmas were quite similar to the way Americans celebrate theirs. The only difference was the types of food prepared. Even though we did not see the so-called “white Christmas,” a few days after we did see the snowflakes falling from the heavens like droplets of clear crystals. We lavished our tongues with the heavenly gift from the cloudy skies just as the folks on television did. The wondrous flakes fell to the ground and we lay our bodies down and motioned our arms and legs in and out to form snow angels. Though it was a wonderful experience, I must admit I had never felt very cold so that experience had to be short lived.

The following summers I visited, then the summer when my brother and I were to stay for good came upon us quickly. We went to many outings, places and parties as we had done for the past summers we were in America. Of all the places we had been to in America, I loved going to theme parks the most. We went to the theme parks “Six Flags” and “Dorney Park” several times. They were much bigger than the “Coney Island” in my home country, which was the only source of roller coasters. They had so many different options to choose from. The rides were so exciting, so exuberating, so amazing and awesome.

Slowly, the realization of missing out on all the entertainments, people and especially the food of Trinidad sunk in. As time progressed, I started to yearn for some of Trinidad’s finest comforts like phoulorie, calaloo, sugar cake, tamarind ball and all types of chow more and more. Some of the delicacies I could find in West Indian stores on Utica Avenue but some you could only get in Trinidad. So I came to understand the importance of my culture in my own way. I realized now how I had taken so many things for granted at home. I even started listening to the Soca, a type of music native to my country, more frequently. I thought that Labor Day celebrations on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn would have been a good opportunity to keep my culture alive but the festivities, to my disappointment, were nothing compared to those in Trinidad. So I tried to keep some of my customs alive not out of necessity but out of sheer desire. Every now and then I would buy some doubles or roti. One day I want to share my culture with my own kids.

I miss terribly the food products I cannot have, the overly friendly people, the places, the scenery, the exotic beaches, the elaborate festivals, the holidays and traditions. Even though I have urges to experience some of the festivals and eat some of the foodstuff from Trinidad, strangely enough I would rather stay here in New York.
PART 3

INTERPRETING

THE INTERPRETER

OF MALADIES

Diego Cruz • Joshua Ammons • Oliver Lamb
Darkness not only creates the opportunity for unity but also for a sense of enjoyment in each other. In “A Temporary Matter,” Jhumpa Lahiri uses the circumstance of having no electricity as a condition to bring both protagonists, Shoba and Shukumar, closer. Both characters live isolated from each other with a lack of communication; the force of dimness manages to start a change in their relationship. I personally experienced a scenario back in my hometown that brought my neighbors and me closer to one another. As I recall, having to spend time without electricity gave me significant insight into my life and into the lives of those around me. Indeed, today I realize how my hometown maintained a positive outlook and a cheerful attitude towards our degrading situation.

In the story “A Temporary Matter,” Lahiri uses darkness as a force to bring Shoba and Shukumar closer vigorously. The couple begins to speak at a deeper level of intimacy and surprisingly reveals secrets that each had kept hidden. Lahiri writes: “How about telling each other something we’ve never told before” (13). Immediately, confidence blooms between Shoba and Shukumar to confide their unrevealed secrets. A game usually represents enjoyment. This game and the force of darkness combined works to integrate them both.

West of South America lays Ecuador. Born and raised in Ecuador, I recall witnessing how my town began forming social groups. I fit perfectly within a group whose ages were between seven and fourteen years old. Twice a week, a blackout would randomly hit us and everybody in our town would be without electricity for three to four hours. These blackouts did not make me question why or how they occurred, I guess because I enjoyed myself from beginning to end. Many games were played and I believe it was the shadow that covered my town that made these games so unique. For instance, we played hide and go seek. It felt like the perfect game because of the circumstances under which we were living. I recall how my parents constantly warned us not to climb over the gate of an abandoned building, but we disobeyed. This building had two floors and approximately ten rooms on each level; it was a dark place that simply made all of us local children happy. Moreover, there were days when my fellow neighbors and I would just sit and tell jokes. I remember how my friend’s kerosene lamp illuminated the faces of those inside the circle. It just felt as if a whole new town was suddenly converted upon the lives of the residents. Overall, these games played in the darkness allowed me to build a better relationship with my neighbors. I am not suggesting that our circumstance, similar to “A Temporary Matter,” was the only reason that we became closer. It helped us communicate because being in darkness encourages each one of us to seek company. I strongly believe that being without electricity urged me to feel sympathy for my neighbors.

Similarly, the whole setting of “A Temporary Matter” manages to show unity among the town, as well. Lahiri writes: “At eight o’clock the house went black … but everyone was out of their houses tonight, the air fresh enough to make people restless, screen doors opened and closed” (15). This emphasizes how neighbors engage in one or more activities around town; it shows how they learn to appreciate each other by conversing and listening to one another. In the same way, when my parents stood outside our home, I noticed how my neighbors would step out of their houses with that certainty of the whole town being out and ready to exchange words. Parents would eventually bring chairs to accommodate the town’s favorite game of Bingo. It did not bother me watching them chat and having fun with one another. Instead, it made me feel as if the
night would never end. I remember my parents always looking up into the sky trying to find a meaning in each star but often confusing them with a UFO. Although I do not believe in aliens, I joined the group of parents as they counted the stars above us. In addition, a few neighbors would place a radio or a television outside their home; this served to entertain those who were less fortunate and did not own their own radio or television. These gatherings were some of my favorite events because it simply showed how much love we had for one another, a caring experienced only when darkness visited us.

Overall, “A Temporary Matter” and my personal experience show the conception of unity. I believe these blackouts helped build these communities, which later gave a significant meaning to life in my hometown. It definitely brought everyone closer and strengthened the relationship between all of us. Today, I realize that the reason why the lights went out was mainly that my town was not well developed and the source of our energy would be turned off to prevent fires. Moreover, the building in which we played was being demolished for the purpose of a local hospital. It certainly was the best year of my life. I was innocent and did not to see the difficulties and struggles that communities and families themselves go through.
Jhumpa Lahiri’s book of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, reflects a realism that is seldom read in fiction. The characters are neither boring nor extraordinary, but they do face situations and dilemmas that are indicative of real life. Though the stories are all unrelated, they do share similar themes. These reoccurring motifs are religion, New-world v. Old-world tradition, gender roles, and secrecy. These themes become vital in the development of each and every character in the work.

In Lahiri’s collection of works, a common, yet subtle theme is secrecy. In the stories, many of the characters find themselves in different situations that manifest solely because they have withheld things from their loved ones. Such an example is in the opening story of the book, *A Temporary Matter*. In the story, the married couple, Shukumar and Shoba, find themselves divulging secrets that they concealed their entire marriage. In the end, their lack of communication proves to be their downfall. In the story *Sexy*, the entire story is centered around a secret affair between a single woman and a married man. In this story, Lahiri takes a creative turn, in which the protagonist Miranda keeps secrets from Dev, the married man with whom the affair is taking place. This is a bit of irony that even within an affair, a relationship initially built upon secrecy can in fact fall prey to secrecy. But furthermore, it is Lahiri’s use of secrecy that in turn humanizes her characters and makes them more relatable to the reader.

A second important overtone in *Interpreter of Maladies* is the presentation of traditional gender roles. Rather than presenting gender roles as stated by tradition, Lahiri presented the reader with instances in which the “roles” of husbands and wives were often challenged or reversed. In the title story, *Interpreter of Maladies*, the character of Mrs. Das behaves in an almost opposite manner from any traditional Indian woman. She is cold and callous towards her own children and is blatantly honest about her infidelity when speaking to Mr. Kapasi. Mr. Das, on the contrary, nurtures the children and shows a general interest towards his family. Gender roles are also challenged in the story *A Temporary Matter*. Shukumar (Shoba’s husband), while being a student at home, begins to take on the traditional role of females in Indian society in his domestic work. At this time, Shoba provides as the breadwinner in the relationship and portrays an insensitivity that is traditionally indicative of men.

In the collection, religious descent also plays an underlying role in the stories. The majority of the characters in the book are Hindu and this plays a part in some of the stories. One significant example of this is in the story *This Blessed House*. In the story the protagonist, Sanjeev, finds himself at odds with his wife over some Christian relics in his Hindu household. Though religion isn’t stressed too greatly, it often is a catalyst for the theme of tradition. In Indian culture, religion is the launching point from which tradition is developed.

Tradition plays the most vital role throughout the stories. More specifically, tradition is often presented by the clash between Old-world (Indian) tradition and that of American, or “New-world” tradition. It is often portrayed that ideal traditional standards are those of India. Tradition is then shown to hold little weight in America; gender roles, distaste for religion and culture, etc. Many stories portray that Indians in America as aware of tradition but find themselves abandoning it with changing times. The story of Boori Ma in *A Real Durwan* is, in itself, a metaphor for the plight of Tradition and how it is becoming victim to changing times. Boori Ma represents all that is old tradition; she often recalled her glorious past and readily
maintained the present (providing maintenance for the building she inhabited and her duties as durwan). Many characters served as examples of the lack of tradition: Mrs. Das, Twinkle from *This Blessed House*, and Shoba to name a few. Then there are those who clung to tradition and found hardship, most notably Mrs. Sen, who discovered American life difficult and nearly impossible. But all in all, it was tradition or the lack thereof that fueled many of the book’s characters, and in turn provided a dynamic that solidified the differences between the characters.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* provides a clear window into the heart of Indian culture. It approaches culture from all sides and serves to educate as well as entertain. The reoccurring themes of religion, tradition, gender roles, and secrecy lie at the heart of the book but with broadened scope, one can also see that these very themes play a part in everyday life and extend beyond that of Indian culture. So it becomes evident that Jhumpa Lahiri has captured not only the heart of Indian society, but that of humanity on the whole.
Within the last century, America has sent her citizens spiraling into the depths of a new space; not the endless vacuum beyond the stratosphere, but the infinity of cyberspace. With seamless communication through various media nationally available, the resulting effect is a breakdown of direct human interaction. Jhumpa Lahiri explores the function of technology in her short story “A Temporary Matter.” No longer interested in each other, the characters Shukumar and Shoba are depicted at a loss for direct communication, instead taking solace in their respective media. Through Shukumar’s reminiscence of the days when they would cook together, the reader is provided with an example of the two characters’ unmediated interaction. Finally, an electrical outage alters the dynamic of the characters’ communication. Jhumpa Lahiri contrasts the interaction of Shukumar and Shoba when they are with and without electrical power to demonstrate the isolating and distracting effects of technology on human relationships.

For months following the death of their stillborn child, both Shukumar and Shoba do their best to avoid interaction. They use technology as a substitute for the communication they once had with each other. Lahiri writes, “For months now they’d served themselves from the stove, and he’d taken his plate into the study, letting the meal grow cold on his desk before shoving it into his mouth without pause while Shoba took her plate into the living room and watched games shows” (8). Mealtime, without the availability of technology, forces humans together because without electrical light, the natural light of fire becomes the only alternative source for illumination. The candles that Shukumar and Shoba share symbolize the ancient scene of a group gathered around a campfire. Lahiri describes Shukmar’s frustration at his inability to avoid the confrontation of eating: “He pushed the blazing ivy pot to the other end of the table, closer to the piles of books and mail, making it even more difficult for them to see each other. He was suddenly irritated the he couldn’t go upstairs and sit in front of the computer” (11). Shukumar attempts to recreate the communication barrier his computer afforded him; the books, mail and pot all symbolize artifacts of civilized society. Unfortunately, his efforts only frustrate him since the obstruction fails to provide an escape from the meal that confines him to an interaction with Shoba. The unmediated experience forces the characters to embrace, an experience they had not shared since before their child’s death.

Lahiri reveals Shoba and Shukumar’s life before they each desired isolation, before they used technology as a substitute for humans. The act of Shoba’s cooking, using ingredients made entirely from scratch, serves as a juxtaposition to their isolated state. Lahiri writes, “Shoba would throw together meals that appeared to have taken half a day to prepare, from things she had frozen and bottled, not cheap things in tins but peppers she had marinated herself with rosemary, and chutneys that she cooked on Sundays, stirring boiling pot of tomatoes and prunes” (7). Old fashioned cooking methods symbolize a pre-modern lifestyle, and through Shukumar’s nostalgic reflections of communication with Shoba, technology is shown as the force that severed their connection. Lahiri goes on to contrast their previously elaborate act of food preparation with Shoba’s current dietary habits; Shoba would prefer to eat a bowl of cereal than to craft her meals. Shoba has lost the desire to interact with Shukumar, indicated by the suspension of her cooking for him. Without that desire, there is no need to cook because modern technologies, such as the cereal Shoba eats, can offer an alternative.

During the power outage, when technology is unavailable, a shift occurs in the interaction between
Shukumar and Shoba. With no retreat, the two characters are forced to interact and embrace the reality of their situation. As Lahiri describes, “Something happened when the house was dark. They were able to talk to each other again. The third night after supper they’d sat together on the sofa, and once it was dark he began kissing her awkwardly on her forehead and her face…” (19). Lahiri drives the point home by having the most paramount of human interactions, sex, occur in the absence of technology. Finally, when the power returns, Shoba uses the light to recreate the barrier that existed before the power outage, allowing her to disassociate the connection they had shared in the dark. She explains to him that she will be leaving him, and in return Shukumar severs their connection by revealing the mystery of their child’s gender. However, in the final moments of the story, Shoba shuts off the lights to have a final pure embrace.

Technology substitutes direct human interaction by providing an alternative reality to connect to. Lahiri shows that with technology present, Shukumar and Shoba have a means to isolate themselves. Lahiri also demonstrates Shukumar and Shoba’s previous loving interaction, absent of technology. Finally, by disconnecting the power, Lahiri proves that without electronics people are forced to embrace each other. Lahiri foreshadows a bleak future in which a person’s life is entirely contained within the digital world, opening humanity to the possibility of true, unimaginable tyranny wrought by the authority programming cyber space.
PART 4
IN THE MOMENT

Yaelle Guttman • Hussein Alwahby • Miao Chen • Farzana Islam • Rachel Leibowitz • Therese Tull • Zvi Eljasz • Maria Boltysheva
I studied abroad this year, and like most of us who embark on this life-changing experience, I gained weight. It was not a mere five to ten pounds, oh no! I gained twenty hefty pounds to my frame (I will not say to my name). The embarrassment that followed my departure when I arrived home was thick. I was so ashamed of my appearance that I decided to camouflage myself in my bulky school sweatshirt and a long black skirt. What would my mother say? My friends? My relatives? I had sentences replaying in my mind such as, “I sent one daughter abroad and two came home today!” To my dismay, my mother did comment on my weight, but her complaints did not include that sentence. They went something like this, “Yaelle, GO JOIN THE GYM!” To this I would answer, “So you think I’m overweight?” This was my teenage self-esteem kicking in. Or, in other words, my ego. To me, joining the gym meant that I was part of America’s obese population. This was my thought process. I would not give in and humble myself to realize that the gym was my best option if I had the sincere desire to lose this weight. So what, you may ask, changed my mind on this subject? The answer to that question is that I began to feel sluggish. I was slow and I knew it. Gone were the days of being nimble and quick-footed as I would cross the finish line as first place in relay races in school. Gone were the days of being graceful when I danced; I felt so clumsy, and I knew something had to change. That something was me.

With much anticipation, the awaited day of enrolling myself at the gym finally arrived. There were actually options to choose from in the caliber of membership. I decided to enroll myself in the higher echelons of the gym and become a gold card member. This form of membership included discounts at various stores and extra classes which only a gold member could enjoy. After registering, I received a shiny plastic identification card, stating my status as a gold card member. How exciting! My weight loss journey had finally begun.

I decided to attend two kickboxing classes, and ride the elliptical twice a week. Never before had I stepped on any form of exercise equipment, but I thought that as long as I had bars to hold on to, I would be safe. When I stepped on to the elliptical though, it suddenly morphed into a fast-paced stallion. It was almost as if it were saying, “Ha! Who’s in control now?” It took me a while to get accustomed to pedaling forward on this high-resistance machine, but I made it through that half hour, and I vowed to never use that machine for a very long time. Only lower resistance machines would do for now. Then came the kickboxing class, the highlight of my week. Let me first mention that I had previously attended kick-boxing classes, but none could compare to this one. This was intensity squared. The instructor strutted into the room, nose in the air, and began the workout after she switched on the stereo. She wore a sleeveless T-shirt with shorts, and you could see her strong muscular biceps as she flexed her arms ever so slightly. “O.K everyone, let’s go! And left and right and left and right, jab, jab punch, punch—come on people you can do it! Let me see you look like the commercial now!”

I was exercising in the front row of the room, so I had a full view of myself in the mirror. The sweat began to form steady rivulets flowing down my back and stomach. My complexion transformed from the familiar pale skin to bright vermilion red. As I watched myself kicking and punching at nothing but air, I began to think, “I am kicking and punching away at all the fat, but also certain natures and tendencies that I would like to change about myself.” Who was that person mimicking my exact moves in the mirror? What
did she represent? My energy levels kicked up a notch, and I felt utterly invincible, “Anger, kick! Impatience, kick! Laziness, double-time kick!” These thoughts were racing through my mind and actually giving me the strength to continue this hard-core workout. I glanced at myself in the mirror once again, expecting to see the familiar red-faced girl I had grown accustomed to looking at for the past forty-five minutes, but, instead, I saw a slight change. I had not simply become someone different; I was new and improved. I was everything I always desired to be. I had transformed from a frumpy girl arriving at the airport worried about pleasing others to someone strong and determined. I owned this workout. I smiled at myself as I stared into that mirror of clarity. As I shifted my gaze from mirror to instructor, I noticed that she was looking back at me, a smile spread across her lips. Could it be possible that she read my thoughts? The name, “kick-boxing” surely fit this exercise, and I had come up with my own personal definition to add to it.
Christmas. The sound of that word brings glee and innocent smiles to children worldwide. It is that age when you know your parents, not Santa, put the gifts underneath the tree, but still you see the magic in the world. It is supposedly one of the happiest times of a child’s life, but not for me. I was eleven. As I awoke from my dreams, I remember walking over to the window only to behold a sight that New Yorkers hardly ever saw, snow, and a lot of it. The ground looked glossy, sleek, and glass-like. It looked as if it would shatter into a million pieces if anything fell on it. It was so delicate looking and I felt I just had to experiment for myself. Quickly running down the stairs, the sound of my steps grew more and more rapid as my excitement grew. The thought of throwing snowballs, and making snowmen and snow angels filled my heart with joy.

Quickly, I got dressed in snow gear: sweatpants, then snow pants, undershirt, regular shirt, sweater, scarf, gloves, boots, the works. From when I woke up to what I looked like after, it seemed I had gained roughly one hundred pounds. My body shape changed from this little cute teenager to this round, plump little man. Despite all of the layers, the inability to move, and the uncomfortable itch that winter clothes always gave, I was still excited. It seemed nothing could take away that childish curiosity that I had about the snow. My gloved hand went for the doorknob and turned it open. My excitement grew as I pushed the door open a bit and already got a taste of how cold it was. The cold, crisp air whipped across my face and in that instant my face became flushed. I had not expected it to be that cold, but when I saw what was on the other side of that door, it was all worth it.

Four feet of snow covered the entire neighborhood. My eyes widened well beyond their capacity. This had to be a dream. I was in a winter wonderland. It was perfect, just like a movie: kids playing with each other in the streets, parents inside making their kids hot cocoa with bits of marshmallow and homemade cookies that they could snack on. If I was not so worried that my saliva would freeze, I would have been salivating right there. My gaze drifted from the front of my house to the back where I saw a perfect opportunity to make a little snow cave and pretend I was going to go mine for ice crystals; somehow I always wanted to do something that Indiana Jones did. Biting my frosty lip, I looked at how much snow I would have to cross. The path to my backyard had never looked so difficult to get to. The snow was soft but the massive amount of it made it tough to move through. After all, I was only an eleven year old, roughly around five feet. As I made my way to the backyard, I pictured myself sailing on one of the seven seas. I was a world-renowned pirate off to get his booty. All other sailors were scared of my black sails with the typical cross bone, flailing in the sea breeze, almost ominous looking, striking fear in anyone’s heart.

While my imagination ran wild, it had to come to an end. I saw the gate to the backyard but I noticed it was quite impossible for me to open the gate due to the amount of snow. With quick childish wits, I climbed the gate and sat at the top. What I saw was the most beautiful sight I had ever seen! I saw mountains of snow, all glossy and sleek. As I sat on the gate, which I decided was my throne, I gazed at my kingdom. This was my land and I was king.

With that thought in mind, it was time to explore my land. This was when things turned sour. As I hopped from my throne, I soon realized that I had greatly underestimated the solidity of the snow. My body crushed the snow as if it were a mere twig beneath a shoe, trapping me in a cavern of ice. I tried to push myself up but the more force I used, the lower I sank into the cold, dark, abyss. Soon the ice was over my
head and that is when I began to panic. “Mom!” my voice shrieked out. She always seemed to be there for me; what made this any different? Usually she was the one who helped me through situations but many calls for help later, I realized I was on my own. “Am I going to be stuck out here?” “How long does it take for a person to freeze?” These were some of the questions that rushed through my mind like racecars going one-hundred and ten miles per hour. Around and around they went, gaining momentum and substantially more fear overcame me like a silhouette.

I could not let it end this way; I was too young, too cute, to be denied another day in life. But what could I do? Every time that I tried to move, my body sank deeper into the snow. Soon I would reach the ground below me. Thoughts and fears began to swirl once more in my mind. If the snow just so happened to collapse, to fall on me, I would have no way to get out then. I was already in over my head, literally; having snow on top of me would just magnify the problem. Snow had invaded my gloves and snow boots and quickly turned my warm, limber body parts cold and numb. A shiver shot through me like bullet, the same kind of shiver that one gets after hearing nails on a chalkboard. I had to find a way out of this situation and fast, before my body became so cold and numb that it would be useless to me. I had learned about hypothermia, a state in which your body gets so cold that you faint and never wake up due to lack of blood flowing through your body. Well, it seemed like it was happening. I figured that if I moved around, my blood would circulate but with each increasingly difficult motion, I sank until I suddenly had stopped. What did I hit? It was cold, wet, and rather hard.

My eyes shot open and gleamed with a ray of hope. It was the ground, I could not sink any lower than I was at that moment and I could use the ground for leverage so I could stand. “Brilliant!” I thought, somewhat struggling to stand. As I stood in the snow, my body kept shaking. It seemed as if I was going to be able to see the next day. A smile came across my now blue tinted lips and I made my way back to the house; my journey through this unknown land was through. I retired my crown. I did not want to be king of such a dangerous kingdom.

As I got inside, my snow clothes quickly came off. I rushed to my mother, excited to tell her what had happened even though I was angry at the fact she had not heard my calls for help. As I explained my situation and how I almost came in contact with death, she laughed. She actually laughed at my near death experience! She quickly explained that everything was just in my head, that I worried too much, and that she was proud I was able to handle that “grave” situation by myself. I felt foolish, to say the least, but I knew what had happened and came out stronger than I was that morning. She gave a warm smile that made all the numbness disappear and she spoke softly, “hot cocoa?” I grinned childishly and said, “with marshmallows!”
A Summer Day with Murakami

MIAO CHEN

During the summer, my friends and I went to see Murakami at the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibit was creative and innovative as well as deep and profound. Takashi Murakami both embodies and amplifies the modern Japanese style of art of exaggerated figures. His creations are mind-boggling. The majority of his artworks include creatures that are so insanely cute and sweet that it can give the viewers diabetes. But at the same they are also the same monsters that you would see in your worst nightmares. Since it is art, there is never a correct way to judge anything and it is best that one should appreciate the pieces simply because the artist gave them meaning.

If only theory applied to reality…

The first piece we were greeted by in Murakami was a series of statues of a female android transforming into a jet. The walls were painted white with designs of liquid streaks spiraling across the huge space. The girl was created in popular Japanese animation style, anime for short. Her sparkling larger-than-life eyes and gleaming beach-ball breasts stared into space while viewers looked up at her from below. As you walked around the display, and observed her colorful transformation, you realized that her vagina became the head of the plane.

My friend Soojee, who was with me at the time, told me that the liquid on the walls represented semen. “It has never been done before,” she said.

The android girl was going to soar into a sky of semen.

After my artistically open-minded friends looked more profoundly at the statues and other paintings in the first room, we entered the second room of the exhibit. There were other paintings from Murakami’s smiling flowers and melting acrylic characters. Like arrows, the first two pieces in the room shot through me and forcefully conquered my remaining patience. The first one was My Lonesome Cowboy. He was also created in anime style like the android in the previous room with spiky blond hair and blue, super-sparkling eyes. He was naked from head to toe and the only thing he was holding was his erect penis. He was lassoing his own semen.

What is that?! Is it supposed to symbolize the absurdity of the human obsession over sex? Or is it supposed to make viewers question what is absurd and what is not? But what is that?!

My eight-year old brother covered his face in shame.

Across from the cowboy was a large-breasted girl squeezing her oversized nipples. Her breast milk surrounded her the same way the cowboy’s semen encased him. “That’s creative,” was what I should have been thinking, but I had to force myself just to look.

What is that?! Inside my mind anguish, confusion, and madness thundered. I stood still with my blank face of acceptance. But my inner thoughts were experiencing a storm. What is that?! It was embarrassing, shameful and thanks to the museum, the only given information was the name, date of completion, and medium used. No one else really understood what the figures really meant either so I was left to go, “What is that?!”

There I was with my little brother, both raised by a family whose father thinks that any girl wearing a skirt above the knees should be arrested for public indecency, staring at the disproportionate bodies of smiling artworks. I wonder if there is sweet candy to go with the bitter medicine of disillusionment.
I think that the most embarrassing part about that whole event was the brief flashback I had when I saw the erotic figures. My brother had asked the birth question a few weeks ago after he watched our 10-year old, boot-legged *Dumbo* video for the ninetieth time. I told him what my health teacher told me and he gave the “huh” face, except it was “hah” since he said it in Chinese. And during that moment of my blanking out, my brother asked me what the statues were doing.

My parents never spoke to me about the birds and the bees. But somehow I always knew. We communicate through unspoken words. Or maybe I just find these things out from the streets... But if my parents had such a simple time with me on this subject, why is my brother so difficult? And why did he have to come to me when he didn't even know the vocabulary for the terms I needed to explain to him what was going on?

If my face could defy the laws of physics or if I could morph according to my feelings, at this moment I would have looked like *The Scream* by Edward Munch.
It was a chilly afternoon in October of ‘95 and I was a student in Mr. Rafaeli’s kindergarten class. Holding hands with our partners, we all marched down the large stairs in two single file lines like miniature soldiers. There was an excited murmur coming from behind me, which was immediately hushed by someone else. We were all going to the lunchroom.

I stepped into the blue tiled lunchroom and was overcome with amazement, the same feeling I experience every time I enter the cafeteria. The air was buzzing with the din of hundreds of kids. There were people of all shapes, sizes and colors and everybody seemed to have a white foam tray that was spilling over with food. Compared to most of the people there, we were dwarfs. My classmates and I waited on the long lunch line under the close supervision of lunch monitors. After receiving our own foam trays of food, we sat down at a nearby table.

People around me were stuffing their faces with food, laughing hysterically, or engaging in all sorts of banter; it didn’t take long before my friends and I joined in. Trying hard to fit in with the older kids who hovered around us, we exchanged stories about who broke our teacher’s crayons and who snuck a few Lego pieces in their corduroys. This was our gossip circle. Rose, the mildly coy one in this circle, accepted her turn to tell a story. I looked to her as I proceeded to peel away at my bright orange tangerine, though I had intentions to save it for later. As she told her story, I was breaking the fruit up into cloves and popped one into my mouth. Being as unpredictable as she is, Rose ended her turn with the silliest joke. At that moment, I could not decide whether to laugh or chew. My indecisiveness eventually caused a seed to slip down my throat. Embarrassed, I didn’t utter a single word and continued to act as if nothing had happened.

Returning to the classroom, we all put away our books into the cubby of our desks and walked toward the matted floor; it was naptime. Everybody was on a blue or red mat with his or her towel and stuffed animal. Before I knew it, most of the students were fast asleep. Occasionally, there was a snore or a quiet giggle. I was restless, unable to sleep. I clenched my fingers around Snuggles, my brown teddy bear. Fortunately he was a stuffed animal; otherwise he would have been completely asphyxiated by my tight grasp. I lay there thinking, what would have happened if everyone knew that I swallowed a seed? I imagined my friends pointing their fingers and laughing at me. Will a tree grow inside my stomach? The thought actually made me chuckle. But something felt weird; there was an extra flow of air into my mouth. Something was different, but I didn’t know what.

At a quarter to three, Mr. Rafaeli walked us down to the school entrance and dismissed our class. The day was over and I ran out with the sea of children. All of my friends were now alongside their parents and loved ones. I became anxious. Where’s my mother? As soon as the heavyset woman in the sunglasses tilted out of the way, I spotted a familiar maroon shalwar kameez – the only Indian garment in this huge mass of people. I clutched the shoulder straps of my pink Cinderella book bag and ran to my mom and greeted her with a huge smile. My mom smiled back. But her smile slowly grew as her eyes were fixed on my face. What’s going on? Why is she smiling so much? Wait a minute… did she know I swallowed a seed? I was nervous and completely bewildered at the same time. She asked to see my teeth and laughed out loud. “Where is your tooth?!” she asked. With my index finger, I searched for my tooth but there was nothing but empty space. “Uh-oh.” My mom burst into laughter as she picked me up and smothered my face with kisses. That seed I accidentally swallowed wasn’t really a tangerine seed; it was actually my first loose tooth.
Senioritis
RACHEL LEIBOWITZ

The end of senior year was inching closer and the seniors of SHS knew they had to end the year with a bang. They were always known as the “lazy class,” the ones incapable of pulling off any schemes or plans they thought up. This was their last chance to prove the rest of the school wrong and they decided to do so with the classic idea of a senior prank.

Because they were a small grade, only about fifty girls split into two classes, there was one particular group that easily instigated and influenced the rest. Lior was the most ambitious thinker of the group. With her long brunette hair and flashing dark eyes, she always wanted to do things that were nearly impossible and screamed trouble. But for this particular prank, no matter how obscene, everyone in the class seemed willing to get it done.

On a rainy April day, typical for teachers not to show up for class, the mischievous group began brainstorming for the perfect senior prank. Sitting in the back of the humid classroom, the four girls started throwing out ideas. “How about faking a teacher’s arrest? We have all those friendly policemen on Ave. M,” said Rebecca, smacking her gum.

“Young, that’ll go over real well with the administration,” Rachel chimed in.

“I know! The whole class can disappear for a day!” suggested Estelle, her curly hair bouncing with excitement.

“We did that last year. We can’t repeat something that didn’t even work out the first time,” said Rachel with a dismissive wave of the hand. Up until then Lior sat quietly; then she mumbled something.

“What did you say?” the three others asked in unison.

“Chickens,” replied Lior.

Preparation for the prank went surprisingly smoothly for the girls. A few calls to a butcher—Lior’s cousin Daniel—and Daniel’s car were all they needed. The arrangements were set and all the girls had to do was wait for the day to come.

The early morning was sunny and clear, ideal weather for mischief. Lior, Rebecca, Rachel, and Estelle met at Daniel’s house and piled into his beige “soccer mom” minivan. He was to drive the girls to the butcher, the back seat perfect for holding boxes of live chickens. During the car ride everyone was silent with eagerness and the only sounds were of early morning traffic and the murmur of the radio. They finally reached the butcher and the girls let out a cheer. With a smile on his face, Daniel went to receive the chickens and placed them in his car. The stench hit everyone, momentarily causing them to lose their enthusiasm, but as they headed toward school the excitement built up again.

They arrived at school right on time before the students returned from morning assembly. Hearts pulsing, Rachel and Estelle checked that the hallways were clear. Daniel, Lior and Rebecca rushed the boxes to the bathroom. After a few minutes, students started coming up the stairs and through the hallways. Daniel, Lior and Rebecca let the chickens loose and off the feathered poultry went.
As much as the plan turned out successful, the outcome was pure chaos. The feather covered hallways were filled with laughter and screaming. Girls were running after chickens, away from chickens, holding chickens, and taking pictures with chickens. Teachers were fuming and yelling, trying to clear the packed, soiled hallways. After some time the hallways and classrooms grew dirtier, but the chaos still didn't subside. Seeing her school completely out of control, the principal forced Daniel to collect the chickens and get them out. Not wanting to cross the line too much Lior, Rachel, Estelle, and Rebecca listened and helped Daniel collect the chickens.

The girls had to clean up and apologize to the teachers but each of them felt a sense of accomplishment. Lior was happy that one of her plans had finally come to life. Rachel was proud that her friends were able to pull a prank off, unscathed. Rebecca and Estelle loved being the talk of the school for weeks and weeks to follow. Daniel enjoyed his morning chasing girls in an all-girls school. And the chickens felt free from their last run before returning to the butcher.
B lack. It was all black. Everyone still rushing to get into places. Costumes in disarray backstage. Hearts beating fast and loud with no one but its owner to hear it. Everyone’s in place. The curtains are closed. “Queue curtains…stand by lights,” says Ms. Blackwell into the walkie-talkie. The curtains open. “Queue lights.” The stage is flooded with hot light, and the crowd, knowing the number well, begins to cheer. “Bird master!!!” “Bird!!!!!!!” “Thereeeeeeesssseeeee!!!” Brooklyn H.S. for Music and Theater’s stage began to come alive.


We continue to dance as one. It’s so hard to believe that this is where my dancers and I are now. After months of preparation, it all came down to this one moment. From February to May, Monday to Friday, 1pm-3pm. Struggling with each other to understand the movements. Dance Company meetings full of strife, argument, pain, annoyances, agony, encouragement, and triumph. Days upon hours for one moment. It almost makes me angry that it’s just one moment. But then my eyes catch the crowd as I spot and it’s worth every second. I gave them the movement, and they took it, and accepted it as their own. I love them. They gave me sweat, pain, diligence, and time, and I took it and accepted it as my own. We pulled the chorus one more time. Leaving the stage, everyone took their last leap. Some high, some low. It ended with me. I leaped, spun, ran, caught my body, contracted and expanded and ran off stage.

All of them are here; we have been together for the last 18 months. Training together, fighting together, sleeping together and eating together. I know them better than anyone knows them; they are brave, strong and fearless; but not today, not now. I am looking at them sitting on this small bench wearing terrified faces. These are my comrades who are supposed to be the best fighters of the IDF. The ones that volunteer and work hard to be in this elite unit are now in complete silence, pale as the desert sand. As I am experiencing the same feeling, I understand that I had never before seen them like this.

We are all together in the belly of a 130-F Hercules waiting to leave the ground and closer to our first jump. The silence is broken by the two massive powerful airplane engines which suddenly start roaring. The plane starts to move slowly down the runway. Still no one utters a word, and feelings of fear are electrifying the energy in my body and surroundings.

Erez, the usually incessant rambler sitting to my right, is silent as a fish, which makes my fear factor peak high. The plane is now accelerating on the runway and we’re off. The only person here who is not scared to his bones is our commander, muscular, lean, six foot three, with a trim beard - he looks like an action figure. He is the only one who stands firmly with a big relaxed smile on his face, not really helping diminish our fear.

The red light turns off and the green light flashes all across the plane’s belly. At that moment, we all stand up in a robotic motion as if we are all preprogrammed robots. My mind is racing with pictures of the numerous drills that we have been practicing for the last two weeks, so many times that they are engraved in my mind forever.

The green light stops flicking and the plane’s door rapidly opens, sending a flash of bright light and fresh air flowing through the cargo bay. I can’t tell which is faster, but the combination of fresh air and bright light makes me feel better for one lonely second! Suddenly, I see that I’m first in line, which means that I’m the first to jump! Erez, who is standing behind me and checking my parachute bag, gives me a tap on the shoulder, the signal that everything is in place. As I step to the door, my head is spinning with thoughts, one of them being - why did I volunteer to be the first to jump? At this moment, all I feel is that I want to travel back in time and wait for someone else to make the choice of the ‘dummy,’ what we usually call the first jumpers. As Erez is tapping my shoulder, I feel my heart pound so hard that I can actually feel the heart pumping blood and releasing it into my veins. Looking at the door, I see that there are only six steps from the bench to the door and with each step I can feel my heart, fear and excitement all rallying above. This is it. I am at the door, standing with my hands holding both sides of the doorway. It seems like my body can’t take this fear anymore and just then - WHAM -it hits me like a giant meteor blasting though every cell in my body, fast and strong. This is the best feeling a person can have. I feel nothing but the sense of an ultra being. Fear has been replaced by adrenalin; excitement transformed itself into pure euphoria. Right there standing at the door I’m having the best feeling in my life— pure adrenalin is injected in my system. I have never before felt this strong and pure and on top of the world. My body is charged; if someone touches me he will be electrified by the energy pulsating through my veins. Now I’m filled with an endless source of valor and determination to make the jump. The captain gives his okay and I’m off, free falling! I can’t really understand where I am. I feel a slight feeling of vertigo. I am like a bullet flying at a speed I never imagined
my body could withstand. The wind is blowing in my face so hard it makes my cheeks climb up to my eyes. And then BAM, my parachute opens. At this point I hear nothing, as if I’m in the depths of the ocean; up here in the sky, there is no one or nothing that can break the piercing silence. It is a unique silence, as if someone just stopped the world. As I’m falling slowly, I see the desert dunes for miles and then, suddenly, there is only one more minute left to enjoy this amazing view.

After I hit the ground, I look to the sky to see my friends up in the air. My brain is still trying to digest the fact that I jumped out of an airplane; and that is not easy because until today every other plane that I went on in the past landed on the ground with me still in it. I have just felt the most radical and amazing feeling in my life.

Ever since I can remember, extreme sports have always been part of my life. Skateboarding, surfing and snowboarding are all considered extreme sports and they are all pretty radical. However, now since jumping off the plane, I have decided I need to take things to the next level, need to experience the adrenalin feeling again. It is like now I need bigger waves to surf on and steeper slopes to ride on. I find myself traveling to Colorado to ride the highest cliffs or flying to Peru just to surf a 15 foot wave. Problem is that all this adrenalin comes together with considerable risk. It is as if adrenalin and risk come together in one package. The risk creates fear and the fear generates adrenalin. People who do not know fear do not know what adrenalin is. Anyhow, my concept of life has changed; I will always look for the next excitement, willing to jeopardize everything for a thrill. I strongly believe that as long as I live I will be a risk taker, an adrenalin seeker. From the moment I jumped out of the Hercules, adrenalin became an integral part of my life.
Inna stays home this evening. There is nothing to do. She was called by her boss and told that her customer had cancelled the last and the only appointment she had today. Thus, there is no need to stand at the unoccupied beauty salon and wait for the occasional stray visitor. Her parents are at work, as usual. The house was cleaned in the morning. She has already prepared all the New Year's presents in advance. She tries to occupy herself with any action. She calls her friends, but nobody has free time to speak with her. Everybody is preparing for the New Year: cooking, shopping, or packing bags to travel somewhere during the long weekend. Her earlier years have been flashing through her eyes. Her whole life, she has always looked for any opportunity that presented itself to conquer it, no matter what it was. In her early school years she always strived to be the best in school. Even in classes that she did not understand, she still studied enough to get an excellent grade. Her hard work paid off every time as she made the honor roll every year in high school and middle school. She was always among the top students at school.

She excelled not only when it came to school but in other areas as well. When she was a student she tried hairdressing, and she became famous in her town due to her gold hands and creativity. But today has surprised her unpleasantly. It is a very different unusual feeling for her to stay in silence and not know what to occupy herself with. Usually her schedule is too busy, but not today. She is off from her second job’s responsibility also, which is to baby-sit her young twins. They are visiting their grandmother at her house near the river and will stay there for one more week until the end of the New Year holidays. Probably at this time they are sitting at the round table, covered with the white lace tablecloth, having dinner; a hundred to one grandma baked one of her special pies. It is very warm inside and smells of vanilla. They are laughing and discussing the day’s events. She imagines how wonderful it would be to be there with Grandma’s care and tenderness, to wake up when sun has already risen, drink fresh milk, and go out to coast or slide...

Suddenly the phone interrupts her imagination.

“Hello,” Inna answers, amazed.

“Hi, baby! Are you ready for a big party?” Zhanna screams. “Tickets are on the way! Be sure your passport is not expired! You have to be at the airport in four days. No rejections and no doubts!” She hangs up. That is all about her! Inna’s old school friend is always full of spirit and energy. They grew up together, shared the same school desks, lunches, and all joys and sorrows. Zhanna married two years ago, left their small town and moved to America, where her husband got a job. They live in a mountainous locality with many resorts, beautiful stores, and good-looking people. Inna receives this different world’s pictures every week by e-mail and never imagined that it would be possible to see it for herself. She has got a chance and will not let it go.

Surprisingly she gets her Visa in a quick and easy way. Four days after getting the “destiny” call, Inna stands in the registration line, and ten hours later her new life starts, very fast and crazy. She comes for a couple of weeks, but stays for an uncertain time. She never loses any opportunity either to earn more money or to find new contacts. It is not so easy to learn a foreign language or to adapt to completely different life conditions. But she is strong enough for difficulties. Since she has this chance, she will use it in full. She has three jobs: in a store, in a restaurant, and babysitting. Somehow she finds time to attend gym, driving courses, and for her new hobby – skiing. She buys two cars, one for herself, the other to send abroad to be...
profitably sold. She delves into her new life fully, never afraid or doubtful. The only thing she is missing is
her young twins. How are they without her care? She has become an adult since they were born. She did
everything that every good mother would do for her baby: playing, feeding, cleaning, walking, and diaper
changing. That experience tempered her, made her strong and self-sufficient.

She has been in the USA only two years. Her life is full of nice enjoyable affairs and joys. Her
lovely family members visit her two times and are going to move here soon. She is opening a restaurant, very
small, but her own. She meets her love to whom she will soon be married. Her slogan is “never give up; this
chance was given to you for some reason, so, use it fully!” In a nutshell, no matter what comes, she is always
looking to be the best at it, to conquer all the obstacles in her way, and so far she has always succeeded. She
is my second cousin and she is younger than me, but I always bring her up as a positive illustration of how
life can be built by our own hands. Sometimes it is not so easy, but it is always very possible.
PART 5

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

Al Peter Barnett • Alicia Walker • Gabrielle Storm Gale
Jessie-Ann Wellington • Joan Araujo • Nusrat Azmi
Aram Tahmesebi • Lumena Louis • Roy Benaim • Haseeb Sana
Dry Cry
Al Peter Barnett

On my way home my cell phone rings. Someone is calling from the house. I answer. It’s my sister Ynolde on the line. She’s hysterical, and so too are the two other voices I decipher in the background belonging to my father and brother Andre. She says to me “mammy had a stroke, she collapsed and went unconscious, we tried to revive her but she’s disoriented.” I immediately pulled my car to the side of the road, overwhelmed by a degree of numbness foreign to my sensations. I vaguely comprehended the words ‘hospital’ and ‘ambulance’ coming through the phone, and barely registered the car horn being honked and the shout of ‘ASSHOLE’ directed at me as the vehicle drove by.

It had been a stereotypical Trinidad Sunday evening up to that point: nice weather, easy going, with an aura of serenity and nonchalance, which ironically, aided my haste and panic as I raced home cops and robbers style. I began thinking about the past week -- Tuesday in particular when my mother initially indicated she was not feeling well. She subsequently complained of the ‘regular’ cold symptoms and decided to ‘take it easy’ for a couple of days. She was the quintessential fifty-seven year old God-fearing Caribbean woman: a bit overweight; a bit hypertensive; with a bit of arthritis in the extremities. Very rarely did she, or any of us for that matter, seek medical attention, opting instead for basic over the counter drugs or traditional herbal remedies for relief.

By Thursday evening she appeared to be getting better, and by all accounts everything seemed fine. That Saturday afternoon my eldest brother Andy, eldest sister Carey and I, sat on the porch chatting with our mother; even then she appeared to be, and indicated all was well. Unfortunately this was a fallacy.

I left home that evening and decided to spend the night at my girlfriend’s. At some point over that period my mother had a relapse; her symptoms began to reappear but she chalked it up to fatigue, and decided to ‘take it easy’ again. She would awaken from an afternoon nap around 5:00 pm, walk into the kitchen where my father had been preparing another herbal concoction, smile at him, give him a kiss on the cheek, turn to walk away, then collapse.

My tires screeched on the asphalt as I pulled up at the house behind Carey’s car. I ran up the stairs and proceeded to my parents’ bedroom. The room had that harrowing scent of sickness. The combined waft of herbs, ointments, and novena candles filled the room. My mother had been placed on the bed and was being attended to by everyone. Carey and my father were to her right side, toweling her face and holding her hand in prayer respectively. Ynolde and Andre were on the left massaging her limbs whilst offering words of reassurance and comfort. Andy worked a 3 pm – 11 pm shift at the oil refinery that day and for some reason or the other his cell phone kept going straight to voice mail. He was unaware of what was transpiring. I shifted to the base of the bed and looked upon the abstract version of my mother for the first time. Her hair was strewn about and wet, her face slightly contorted to the left side. She blinked slowly with an invisible gaze, her breaths shallow and fast. When she attempted to speak it was mostly unintelligible – like her tongue had become traitorous. Her skin was pale and chalky; her cheeks now appeared divorced from their once rosy complexion. She would occasionally wince whenever she tried to manipulate her limbs, fingers, toes. Any attempt at movement seemed to induce agony, yet she kept trying.

Once again I am overwhelmed by numbness. I look at the faces of my father and siblings all distraught, with fresh rivers of tears flowing down their faces. My gaze happens to catch my own reflection in the mirror.
I had not cried. Not once. I kept staring at my reflection and began questioning my lack of tears. I knew I loved my mother very much, I knew what she was going through wrenched at my heart like nothing I ever felt before, yet no tears. Suddenly I became aware of an approaching siren. I left the room and went downstairs to signal to the ambulance.

Carey and Andre stayed at home with our father. Ynolde rode in the ambulance. I followed in my car. Twenty-two minutes later we arrived at San Fernando General Hospital. An orderly wheels our mother on a gurney into the Emergency Department. A nurse approaches my sister. They speak for a few minutes, then Ynolde approaches me, puts her hand on my shoulder and repeats what she was told, “there’s a strike at the hospital, they’re understaffed, so we will have to wait to see a doctor.” I close my eyes, grit my teeth, and inhale deeply. This is ridiculous, I think to myself. Why Lord, why?

Our mother’s condition had not changed since we left home. A nurse had put her on oxygen, and that was it. I looked around and noticed that we were grouped with eight other patients, all awaiting diagnosis and treatment. Twenty minutes had gone by, still no doctor, no medication administered. Tired of waiting, I decide to try to talk to someone, anyone who may be able to expedite matters. I was almost at the other end of the department when I suddenly heard a voice shouting “HELP! HELP! SOMEBODY HELP!” It was Ynolde’s voice.

I ran back, two nurses were already there as our mother began having general convulsions. Her eyes rolled back exposing only white, she looked even paler, and her skin felt cool and clammy. Her breaths became even more rapid, and her facial contortions worsened. Finally a doctor arrived. He instructed one of the nurses to take us aside, the other to draw the curtains around the gurney. After a few minutes the curtains opened, the convulsions had stopped and I could see our mother lying there, still, peaceful, her eyes closed and her breathing so faint her torso barely moved; she looked as though she had fallen into a deep sleep, the kind of sleep that satisfies body and soul. Out stepped the doctor. He approached us, inhaled deeply, and as compassionately as he could, informed us that our mother had had a second stroke, and as a result of the brain damage incurred, he was certain she would not make it through the night. Ynolde turned to me, buried her face in my chest and wept. Again numbness paralyzed me; I could not cry.

I called Carey and told her the devastating news. She was already on her way to the hospital. I decided to go locate Andy at his job because no one was able to contact him. On the way there, my mind became flooded with questions—questions of fate and purpose, piety and religion, but most simply yet significantly “why her, why now?” The numbness began to overwhelm me once again. It had become familiar to me by now and I felt it slowly saturating my entire body. I did not like its effect. It paralyzed me emotionally and took control of an essential part of my being. It made me stoic, it made me inhuman. I decided not to question, but seek strength through my faith. I remembered my mother’s life. She had a good soul, was a loving wife of thirty-seven years who raised five good children. She was a teacher and social worker to children and adults with down-syndrome and the handicapped throughout her adult life. I resolved that she was blessed and extraordinary in the eyes of God, and he needed another angel. Simple as that, he needed another angel. I had to stop the car. I pulled over to the side of the road and felt the unassuming power of my revelation; it made sense to me, it felt soothing and felt right to me. I could feel the numbness ebbing away, the paralysis cured.

I’m startled by the ring of my cell phone. I pick it up; it’s Carey calling from the hospital. Though foreboded, I answer. She hesitates, draws her breath, then with voice quivering she says “Mammy gone boy, Mammy gone. She just stopped breathing.” I whispered, “Alright,” then hung up.
No numbness this time; I feel everything. I want to feel. I deserve to feel. The memory of her. Her instruction throughout my life. Her maternal outpouring of love. I want to remember, I want to process, so this time I do, this time I can. This time I weep.
I had always been perturbed by the saying, "you can never go home again." What could be the meaning of such a phrase? However, I am getting a bit ahead and in order for you to truly understand, I have to go back to the beginning, not the beginning of my life, but to the point where I decided to leave home. I had always felt trapped in Jamaica; I wanted to go out and see the world, experience new and exciting things. After I graduated high school, I decided I was going to live with my father in America. Looking back, it is almost amusing how naive I was; I believed I had finally received my chance to spread my wings. But as my grandmother always said, "Rockstone a riva battam noh kno' sun hot," which translates as “a stone at the bottom of the river does not know the heat of the sun.”

I moved to New York that December and it was immediately not what I expected. In my head I had built this fairy tale of what New York would look like. I had pictured a bursting metropolis; every day would be a journey filled with new exciting experiences. Instead I got a city that was filled with varying shades of gray and brown. There was the deep gray of the streets, the light gray of the sky and the depressing gray inspired by the cold weather. All the houses looked alike—just streets filled with lines of brown monotony—there were no trees, no dirt and no grass. It was as if the city had strangled all signs of vibrant colors.

I now understood what it meant when someone said they could be surrounded by hundreds of people but still feel alone. The food tasted like the chef had forgotten some vital ingredient, some ingredient that I could never quite figure out. The people existed in a world by themselves. There was no togetherness and the feelings of being a part of a community did not exist here. Everyone moved so fast as if they needed to achieve everything that very second; there was no lazy day spent at home with family and no taking a second to just enjoy life. Every day I stepped out of my house and felt like I was living in a world where everyone received this memo informing them of how to act and dress that day, except I always missed mine. I could not wait to go home and finally see the things I had missed. For years I had been complaining about what was missing in my life. I never truly appreciated my family, my friends or my country.

After spending months in New York, the wait was finally over and I was leaving the place where I felt like a stranger and returning to Jamaica, where I would be surrounded by family and friends. Would everything be the same or would everyone have changed? Would the mangoes be in season? Would I have the same easy camaraderie with my friends? My mind was racing with questions and for the first time in a long while I was excited. The pilot’s voice over the intercom interrupted my reverie, “Ladies and Gentlemen we have arrived at the Norman Manley airport in Jamaica. All visitors, a warm welcome and all returning citizens, welcome home.” I had never heard such beautiful words and felt a kind of peace settle over me. I was home.

I stepped out of the airport and looked around, trying to take it all in. All around me were scenes of varying shades of green; there were mango trees, coconut trees, ackee trees and flowers bursting with the colors of the rainbow. There was the familiar hustle and bustle of people all around me. I felt at ease: each one of these people was like family. I no longer had to ensure I spoke formal English; I could just let myself speak with the confidence I would be understood. The earth smelled good enough to eat, like it had just rained, but I could feel the warmth of the sun on my skin. It was as if I had been dreaming in black and white for all these months and I was finally awake. I glanced around and saw my mother and noted that she
had lost weight. I wanted to ask her about everything and everyone. If I knew everything that had occurred in the past months then maybe I could pretend I had been there and experienced it firsthand. We got in the car and started to make the short trip home.

Upon arrival home I got out of the car and examined my house as if I were seeing it for the first time; it was different. For instance it was now white and the mango tree that had been in front of the porch was gone. I had loved that tree and could remember many days spent under it with a novel. Was that all that had changed? I had made the trip to attend my aunt's wedding and so I knew that this was to be the last time when all my family would be under the same roof. I could close my eyes and remember days when the threat of a looming hurricane would lead to everyone on the porch watching the storm. We would all just sit with chips and cookies watching the trees dancing in the wind while trading stories. For this one visit I wanted everything to have remained the same.

I held my breath and walked through the gate. I hoped that even if everyone had changed superficially that they were still the same. My sister had gotten taller but she was still the shy little girl I had remembered, my grandmother looked older but she still smelled of Downy, and though my aunt had gained weight she still had her wicked sense of humor. The one thing that hadn't changed was the family dynamic. There was still the loud trading of good natured insults and jokes and gossip when everyone got together. I hoped I would still feel like a part of my family and not just like a casual observer.

As usual, everyone congregated in the living room and all eyes turned on me. They wanted to know everything and I wanted to tell them all the horrible things about New York, except I couldn't. Instead I told them about the first time I saw Times Square at night and how I never even realized it was dark until I looked up and saw how the millions of lights on billboards and buildings had created an artificial sun. I described the wonderful blend of diverse groups of people and how at any given moment you could hear several different languages being spoken.

Eventually the conversation switched from me and everyone started to discuss the wedding. I sat in the room surrounded by my family and suddenly felt incredibly sad. In order to understand this sadness you first have to understand the relationship I shared with my family before I left. I have always needed to know everything that was going on around me at all times. In my family that meant finding out what was going on in everyone's life at any given moment, even the things they tried to hide, especially the things they tried to hide. I was no longer that person, however. I did not know who my aunt's new boyfriend was or what had happened to the last one and I was no longer the person to consult about what program was airing on TV that night. I was surrounded by my family and I felt lost. New York had robbed me of my family identity.

All too soon my trip came to an end and I was back at the airport, forced to return to my life in New York. I gave the security my passport and walked through the checkpoint at Norman Manley Airport in Kingston. It was a dreary summer day, the kind where the grayness of the sky is cast on everything around it and the rain looks just one moment away. I glanced through the big glass windows and saw my mother walking to the car. My mind was screaming for me to turn and run, but my life was elsewhere now and there was no going back. I took my passport and walked into the lounge which was filled with a mixture of tourists and locals. One specific group of tourists caught my eye; there were two girls who looked to be about sixteen and one boy who was a bit older. The girls were both dressed in white tennis skirts and pink shirts with short ruffled sleeves while the boy was in black shorts and a Hawaiian print shirt. They reminded me of a group of chattering tropical parrots unable to contain their excitement. With resignation I walked to one of the benches, sat down and glanced covertly at the group again. There was another outburst of
carefree laughter and feelings of envy radiated through my entire body. When was the last time I was that obliviously happy?

Life had not stopped while I was away and though some things remained the same, some had changed. I did not want to just hear about new developments over the phone; I wanted to be a part of it. I did not want to live a life filled with regrets and if I went back to New York that was what would happen. It was time to take the bull—not by the horns—but by the balls.

I stood up and ran out of the airport; I was returning home. When I got outside I looked around the parking lot, spotted my mother and ran to the car. Immediately her face lit up when she saw me. I told her my decision and she told me everything would be okay, I was home. We got in the car and started to make the trip home; my mother could not contain herself and was just rambling. She looked at me and said, “I am so glad, I thought...”

“Now boarding Flight 675 to JFK,” a voice announced over the speaker. I jumped up and realized it was just a dream; I did not have the courage to just leave; in my head I knew that if I should, my mother would not greet me with happiness; she would just look at me and tell me to go back. I picked up my luggage and handed the flight attendant my ticket. There was no going back and even though I wanted to with all my heart, I just couldn't go home again.
“What a girl called the dailiness of life,” if only they knew how much I used to dread the start of it daily. Five-fifteen in the morning, crack of dawning. The Bronx High School of Science for four long years of my life. I wouldn’t arrive back to Brooklyn that evening until it was dark outside. “Adding an errand to your errand. Saying, ‘Since you’re up…’” is how I was awoken by my Grandmother on Saturday mornings whenever she decided to start a never ending project in her backyard. She would run the vacuum on purpose to wake me up with no regard to how long my week had been. College couldn’t come fast enough.

“Making you a means to a means to a means to” was who I was to the children I raised in high school referred to as my parents. Making me a means to their ridiculous needs and emotional abuse. Having the audacity to suggest I transfer from Bronx Science to another high school in New Jersey just because my mother eloped my junior year. A man she knew for only 3 months. Right. I didn’t think so. My silenced tears had become the “well water pumped from an old well at the bottom of the world.” The tears that nobody heard. The tears from the bottom of my soul. The tears that I could no longer hold. “The pump you pump the water from is rusty and hard to move and absurd,” as my stubborn parents were to their only daughter when she needed them the most. If only I had a plumber to repair the damage they had done. The rust of my tears. The pain of 16 years. “A squirrel-wheel a sick squirrel turns slowly.” Could high school go by any slower?

All I needed was to escape the madness of my family. To start all over again at Florida A&M University in Tallahassee. If only life were as simple as that squirrel’s in the tree. If only life was that simple for me. Something as simple as conquering a nut made it happy. I don’t even know what happiness means. But there was one thing I would come to find that the squirrel and I had in common. I was sick just like it. I was bald headed and 89 pounds a month and a half after my graduation in June 2004, and so my matriculation at Florida A&M University was deferred until August 2005 unfortunately.

College began without any money. My parents hadn’t saved up any for me. So I became a bartender at a nearby Reggae Club and a waitress at the Waffle House on Tennessee Street. Ten hours a night for four nights a week, I slaved on my feet taking orders, making waffles, bussing tables and cleaning. I’d arrive at my first class in my work uniform, smelling of waffles and barely able to keep my eyes open. I’d suffer through the day, feeling nauseous from my lack of sleep, “through the sunny inexorable hours.” There were times I’d pray to make it through my shifts. There were times I didn’t have the strength to. 48 hours, sometimes 72 hours I remained awake at a time. I’d be so busy that I’d forget to eat most of the time. The Waffle House had become my kitchen and my job. I was there so much that I even clocked into work in my dreams.

Rapid weight loss. Stress beyond belief. Two menstrual periods a month. Lord please help me. This circle of life. The wheel we constantly turn daily. Tick tock. Watching the nights waste away. Drunk patron after the next. Some of them were disrespectful to me. “And yet sometimes the wheel turns of its own weight.” It was the Lord himself that carried me when I had no energy. “The rusty pump pumps over your sweating face the clear water, cold, so cold!”

It was the words of my former roommate Walter that brought me back to church, a place that hadn’t been a part of my life since I was 15 years old. As I walked into the doors of the Greater Works, Miracles &
Deliverance Center, I felt an overwhelming warm presence that words would do an injustice if I attempted to explain. As I fell to my knees, let go, and gave it all to God, I was delivered.

Suddenly, the rust my parents had created had gone away. The pain of my childhood was lifted from me, my soul repaired. The Lord was there and he knew that I was suffering. Hell on earth. For 19 years, I had been pumping scorching rusty water. But God rescued me from the damnation and chaos of the reality I had been born into. He freed me and transformed damnation into a newly constructed dam; Now, I "cup my hands and gulp from them the dailiness of life." Thank you Lord for safely bringing me out of the Storm.
“Attention all passengers, this is your pilot speaking. Please buckle up and enjoy the ride from Port Of Spain Trinidad And Tobago to JFK New York.” I sat on the plane next to my sister looking at her in deep despair. I did not know what to expect. I braced myself to see my mother for the first time in seven years. I was leaving behind my culture and the people I shared most of my childhood memories with. I was supposedly giving up my life as I knew it for a “better” life with my mom, a better life, where my dreams would come true.

As the plane landed I was overwhelmed; butterflies were in my stomach, in my throat, under my feet and I felt as if I were walking on air. I was anxious to see the woman who had abandoned me and missed out on critical and developmental milestones in my life. As I walked out of the airport, my mom greeted me. I was shy, so shy and uncomfortable that I couldn't look her directly in her face. I mostly kept to myself. I didn't have much to say to my sister or to my mom. I didn't open up until months later when I felt comfortable enough to share my feelings. At this point, my mom began to see and understand who her twelve-year-old daughter had become.

Who was I? At the ripe age of twelve, I questioned myself about life and my identity. I was a passive introvert who normally concealed her feelings of hurt, anger, and fear. Living in Trinidad with my dad and his wife wasn't always easy. I was mad at my mom for leaving me to live with them. His wife was very mean to my sister and me. My memories of her will forever be imprinted in my mind. She was a stocky, short, dark-skinned woman with wavy hair. She used to make me work hard by carrying water on my head from a standpipe to fill a tank. This was a procedure that most families followed because where we lived, we didn't have a daily supply of running water. Running water was only available on Tuesdays. I was still lucky, however, because the standpipe was in front of my house. Some families had to walk two or three miles just to get a bucket of water. Can you imagine how they felt by the time they got home and realized half of the water had fallen out the bucket? In my community, this job was usually left up to the males in the family but in my family it was left up to me. I am a very willing individual and people tend to take advantage of me. I realized the hard way that if I don't show people that I am a willing individual then I can avoid being mistreated. Since coming to the U.S, I haven't allowed my mom to know how willing I am. I am afraid that she as well would take advantage of me.

My stepmother was always jealous of the love my father showed to my sister and me because we are the youngest of his nine children. I remember my dad waking up at five o’clock on Saturday mornings to feed the chickens and do our laundry. He was forced to fulfill a mother’s role and he did a marvelous job. I remember him always being there when I needed him most. Now I have to deal with living away from the person who brought me up and it has really affected my transition.

The transition from my Trinidadian culture to the American culture was my greatest challenge. It came to my realization that America’s culture is different from mine, because I had experienced it first hand. In my culture, the whole family would gather on major holidays. For example, on Christmas, all my cousins, aunts, and uncles would all gather at a different location every year to have dinner and to exchange gifts. Every year my grandfather would give me a bright, colorful towel and a bottle of lotion or as we Trinis would call it “ah bottle ah cream.” This was something I really appreciated very much. Since living here in the U.S.,
I would no longer expect my mother to buy me a towel and lotion as a gift. I would expect a laptop, a pair of UGGS or an iPod. It is a norm in the American culture to purchase pricy gifts, and teenagers my age expect to receive them. The main reason is parents can afford it, but the gifts in my culture are still cherished regardless of the price.

I also grew up eating home cooked meals daily. When I got home from school my father’s wife would have my hot food covered on the table. But now, living here with my mom, everyday after school I would either buy jerk chicken from the Trinidadian restaurant on the corner or Chinese food. I “may” get a home cooked meal on weekends when my mom doesn’t have to work.

Now that I have matured, I have realized that the way I was brought up, and my moving to America, had a lot to do with who I am at the present moment. At this point in my life, I can truly say that I am a confident, socially-integrated young woman whose dream is currently being fulfilled. I believe that if my mom hadn't left Trinidad and come to the U.S, I wouldn't have been able to accomplish my dream of attending college. When I was younger, my heart's desire was to attend college in the U.S. I remember hearing many stories about my cousins who had the opportunity, but they didn't accept it because they were afraid of leaving behind their love ones and their culture. At the time I was young so I didn't have the opportunity, but I had a good imagination that allowed me to be there while I wasn't really there. When the opportunity came I accepted it. Not only because it was my dream but also because I was fed up of my previous living conditions.
Ambiguous Muse

JOAN ARAUJO

I like to remember myself lying down on a hammock on the roof of the house that my father built, the overhead chimney producing enough shade to guard my eyes from the sun, and the breeze rocking my body back and forth in perfect relaxation. I like to think back, myself with pen in hand, scribbling every idea and notion that catches my fancy, free from all the restraints of the outside world. I can still hear the sounds of the highway that stood next to the house, the buzz of speeding cars, unnatural yet peaceful, like honey bees echoing from far away, only not monotonous, but with a random stop and continuation of sound that followed no scale.

I can still smell the aroma of freshly baked bread from the bakery two blocks down. I don’t think I’ve ever been as content as in those days of self-inflicted isolation with only the birds and stray dogs that ventured up the wooden stairs to keep me company. When I was hungry, I walked downstairs and picked mangos or oranges from one of the trees in the back yard. When drowsiness came over me, I simply closed my eyes and let myself be carried away by sleep. The routine of my day was entirely up to me, and though it may sound like I did nothing but lie on my backside and enjoy the scenery, I actually wrote more poetry in that time period than I have in all my years here in New York. I’ve since grown out of my poetry infatuation and moved on to the short story; next I hope to tackle the novel. However, that will be no time soon. I have no idea what it will be about. I try not to think about subject matter. One day, a week from now or ten years from now, I will close my eyes and open them with the birth of an idea engraved in my mind. I still have plenty of maturing to do as a writer, but I have no qualms about waiting: a writer is like a fine wine; you only get better with age.

I wish I still had the worn out hammock and the plantain trees and the blue Caribbean sky to inspire the urge of emotion that swelled inside me till I almost busted at the seams, writing being the only way to diffuse the overflow. Try as I might I can’t replicate the phenomenon. I go to parks and sit by rivers. I close my eyes and breathe in the city air in long deep gasps, but it’s just not the same. The air tastes of sulfur and the scenery feels too man made. Most of all, it’s almost impossible to be completely alone in a city where there are more people than stars in the sky.

I remember one instance in particular. It was a Sunday morning and spring had just begun to sprinkle the city with color. From my bedroom window I could see the first hint of a blossoming earth, a zigzag of florid dye snaking across the yard. My heart ached with anticipation, elated to be done with winter’s confinement. I grabbed my small writing pad along with a pencil and ran out the door. I glided through the city, enjoying the warm breeze caressing my skin, until I came upon what looked like the perfect spot to sit and reflect: a wooden bench, broken and battered with time. I was enthralled by how old it must have been, the number of faces it must have seen. Weeds crawled up the bench’s legs. No doubt one day the weeds would cover the entire wooden edifice.

As I sat down and closed my eyes, I immediately felt like wrenching the bench from its foundation and taking it home with me. I imagined how I would somehow fit it inside my miniscule room and all the writing I would do while I lay on top of it. I would draw inspiration from all the long gone souls that left their print on the wooden surface. At that moment I felt a poem traveling through my body, eager to exit through my hand. I knew this one would be good, raw and real, like the blisters pricking my elbows. A bell
rang from a distance. Before I knew it I was surrounded by a swarm of children frenzied with the excitement of being released from school. The area surrounding my bench seemed to be their place of socialization. I stood up abruptly and left, content to return another day.

I did not wait long to return, but as I eagerly approached the spot where the bench should have stood, I saw that there was nothing there but empty space. I got closer and examined a chunk of wood lying on the pavement. I held it tightly in my hand. After what seemed like a long time, I put the piece inside my right pocket and walked on home, the fragment pricking my leg with each step I took.
I like to tell the procedure of how I put on my veil. It is one-and-a-quarter feet of fabric that I fold by pulling one corner to the opposite corner. Now it's an isosceles triangle in which two sides are perfectly equal and the remaining, bigger side lies on my head. I wrap it tightly one inch above my eyebrows, giving it a round shape all the way to my back. I place it that way so that I can show my eyebrows and the one inch space gives me a chance to show my earrings. I braid my hair so that the fabric won't get tangled with my hair while I pin it up. I don't like to pin it up in the front of my lower chin, although some people do, because I feel as if it suffocates me.

It annoys me sometimes when the same questions are repeated to me by my fellow students. “Why d’ya wear it? Ain’t you hot? What’s gonna happen’ if ya don’t wear it? How do I wear it? Do you have to wear it 24/7? Don’t ya wanna show yar hair?”

With a smile, I answer them. “I wear it because I want to. As for the fact of hot weather, I really don’t feel hot because I’m used to it.” Sometimes I joke around with them, saying I don’t want to show my hair because mine is prettier than theirs and I don’t want it to get dusty or damaged by sunlight.

It feels as if I have something extra on me. It’s been wrapped around my head and leaning on my chest since I was 11. I like the veil because I grew up with it and see it as my family’s tradition. Inspired by my grandma and mother, I would wear it occasionally to my school back in Bangladesh, but they never forced me to do so. My curious mind attracted me toward it. The huge piece of fabric, or “Borkha,” was uncomfortable at first, but I handled it with care. The most interesting thing about putting the veil on is that it changes my face to another face in an instant and makes me unique, distinct from others. My mother used to say that it’s not about just putting it on; it symbolizes my background and culture. I never understood what she meant until now.

There are many ways to understand the veil. When I wear it, I feel modest, and I’m covered up. I feel that I have more self-respect and confidence in myself, so that I don’t need to worry about how I look. It allows me to be who I am. Wearing the veil isn’t as hard as people or my classmates think it is. In fact, I have never become discouraged by their statements or questions because if people ask about you, they want to know you. Their comments never made me think of taking it off or coming to school with a different style, because I believe that if somebody wants to be with me, then they have to be with me as I am, however I am. Generally, people who judge you by your personality rather than your looks or your fashion choices are your true friends. People can change looks, but they don’t really change personalities. My friends love me as I am, and they give me the amount of respect I deserve from them. They always encourage me not to hide myself for fear of what people might say.

Wearing the veil isn’t about practicing my religion. Although my faith is important to me, and is a major part of my life, there is more to the wearing the veil than following a religious directive. In truth, I wear the veil because I want to. It gives me my identity, the identity I have always known. It shows the world where I am from, and what culture I belong to. The veil gives me safety, wrapping me up in its protective folds. The veil gives me freedom, more than most Americans would probably think a young lady in a Borkha would have. It does not cover my face, my spirit, or any part of my potential. The veil has given me so much in the first eighteen years of my life. I know that it will give me more and more as I progress.
through my goals of college, career, and family. I know that when I have little girls of my own, they, too, will wear the veil, and I will insure that they, too, understand its true significance: as a marker not merely of religion, but of who they are.
As I think back on my past, I cannot help but observe how much I have in common with the narrator of the story “The Third and Final Continent.” The story is about an Indian man who leaves his home country, India, travels to England and finally arrives in America where he educates himself and enhances his life and that of his family. Although we have had similar experiences, mine are unique. We are both travelers to new places whose adventures end in the Land of Opportunity.

The Iranian Islamic Revolution that took place in 1979 changed many things. Before the Revolution, people had freedom of religion. Before the revolution, all religions were treated respectfully. But after the Revolution, things changed dramatically in terms of freedom of religion, women's rights, and freedom in general. My mother described a world before the Revolution where men of faith did not claim to speak in the name of God. Since the Revolution, women have lost their freedom to decide how to live. Women became less than second class citizens. The Revolution rekindled hatred and mistrust of all women. Many of my sisters felt that leaving was the only way for peace of mind.

It was about six years ago that my mom and I decided to leave Iran. My mom has always had a very special place in my life. She is my best friend. So we both decided that in order for me to advance in life and have a better future, we had to leave our homeland. Since she did not want me to go alone, she decided to come with me.

When we arrived in Austria, we saw what women could be and soon after discarded our veils. Since leaving six years ago, I have come to learn about tolerance, identity, and choice. After I came to America I felt free to attend worship services at synagogues and churches whereas before the only way was Islam. With my newfound freedom, I have made many friends that are as diverse as New York is. In spite of how much I may disagree with those in charge, I do not fear incarceration for voicing dissent. Here in America the Rule of One Man's God is not absolute over everyone else. In Iran anyone who disagrees with the regime will be arrested for being “opposed to the will of god.” My mom and I lived in Austria for nine months. Although my mom, my best friend, was with me, I felt very homesick. I had to adopt a new way of life, find new friends, and learn a new language.

Much like the protagonist in Lahiri's story, I have felt isolation and embrace after coming here. Having seen what life beyond the veil can offer I can never go back to being property to be discarded at someone else's leisure. I must share my story with countless others but my story is my own.

I, like the Indian narrator, have travelled from far away from my homeland, gone through Europe, the second continent, and immigrated to the United States of America, my third and final continent. I have experienced many unique awakenings such as freedom of religion, women's rights, and most of all the rights of individuals. I truly believe that one of the important issues that has made America great and unique compared to developing countries like my homeland is the separation of church and state. In other words, in order for someone to live like a decent human being, one does not have to follow restrictive religious rules and virtues. So long as we do not violate the law, so long as we respect each other's rights, treat each other as individuals, and are not judgmental about each other's way of life, we can live comfortably, get higher education, and improve our lives.
THIRD GRADE

“Okay class, let’s wrap this up. Please put the last finishing touches on your People of the World puppets, so that I can hand back your vocabulary tests. We have lots of other things to do and nowhere near enough time to do it all. Lumena, you may want to straighten that crooked smile on your puppet before the glue sets in,” announced Ms. Glittens, my third grade teacher, as she pranced up and down the aisles of the classroom.

As Ms. Glittens handed back the vocabulary tests, my heart pumped like the strains of an ancient tambou. “Devon, eighty-six. Adam, seventy-eight. You’d better start studying mister. Vocabulary is very important. Lumena, one hundred and five. Congratulations! This is why I still teach you young folks.”

As I skipped to the desk and proudly took my test, all I could hear were the whispers. “Wow, how did she get everything right? I wish I had that brain.” I thought to myself, “Oh yeah, if I were you, I would definitely want my brain.”

“Yo Lumena, you mad smart for a Haitian girl! You must be some new kind of Haitian that I ain’t know about,” someone in the class cried out. I could not tell who it was; they were all the same. With a smile pasted on my face, I acknowledged the “compliment.” “Wait till I tell my parents about your grade, they won’t believe it!”

I never was able to fix the crooked smile on my puppet. The glue dried too quickly. Whenever I looked at it hanging on the walls of our classroom, I wondered how many people in the world shared that crooked smile.

FOURTH GRADE

4-2 was the class I was assigned to in the fourth grade. Not 4-1, the top class, but 4-2. All the other kids in my third grade class went to 4-1.

“Lumena, you got a 4 on both your CTB reading and mathematics exams. Congratulations!” my fourth grade teacher, Ms. Monrow, exclaimed. “I wonder why you weren’t put into class 4-1 this year. You are more than qualified.”

That year I learned that qualifying for something does not mean that you will always get it.

FIFTH GRADE

On a scorching hot June afternoon, I found myself marching outside, practicing the graduation entrance with my classmates. “Aww, come on Ms. Jerkins, can we please get out of the sun?” we pleaded with our fifth grade teacher. “No, the longer you stay out here, the closer you will be to your dark skin ancestors. It may take some of you a little longer to get there!” she thundered. I thought we were all people of the same world, but apparently some of us were less so than others.

I never imagined that a woman as tall as Ms. Jerkins could stoop as low as she did when she bent over and whispered into a boy’s and girl’s ears. I really wanted to know what she was saying and wished that I had supernatural hearing. She then straightened her hunched back and exclaimed, “The valedictorian for
this year is Vanessa Agrat and the salutatorian is Devon McMann! Let's give them the congratulations they deserve. Congratulations!” I must have done a double take when I remembered that my name was not Vanessa.

**SIXTH GRADE**

“How dare you tease a teacher for being Aagan,” the Guyanese school president bellowed at the packed auditorium. “I don't care how heavy her Aagan accent is, you never disrespect a teacher!” That is how they saw her. No H and no t, just Aagan. I was Aagan. The other students in the auditorium stared as my Aagan tears ran in streams down my face.

“Don't you ever let somebody define who you are! You hear me?” my mother drilled into me with her heavy Haitian accent that night. “You define yourself and grow a backbone to stand strong in front of them.”

**SEVENTH GRADE**

“All Haitian people are dumb, ugly, and stinky,” a sixth grader yelled at me in the dirty and damp cafeteria. I just sat there and ate my lunch. All of the other students were eating mozzarella sticks. I was gorging myself with diri cole a pwa avec griyo.2

**EIGHTH GRADE**

“And the valedictorian for the class of 2004, would Lumena Louis please come to the stage?” the principal roared. As I made my way to the stage, the thunderous applause from my mother melted into that of the Haitian bilingual class. Yes, I am Haitian. We are Haitian. I am the Haitian valedictorian. We are the Haitian valedictorians.

That night as I stood on the stage to accept my award, I stood up for myself, my mother, and my people. As I said, you do not always get what you deserve, but sometimes you do. Being Haitian never tasted so sweet.

**GRADUATION**

“Good morning principal, staff, parents and fellow students. I want to thank God and my mother for putting me here in the first place. I stand before you today to deliver a message of hope and determination...” On the stage, the thousands of people in the crowd seemed so far away. In the early morning, the restless people in the audience squirmed uncomfortably, as if they were anxious to leave. They wriggled around, desperately trying to go back to their blind routines. The applause I received after I gave my valedictory address sounded muffled. It was the echo of what could have been, and what I wished it would have been. I strained my ears trying to hear the applause that would say to me, “You deserve it. Your nationality makes no difference to us. We are here to celebrate your intelligence, your hard work, your hope and your determination.”

That applause never came. I’ve stopped listening.

**Post Graduation**

I’ve stopped listening to the people of the world. I’ve stopped listening to the crooked smiles of those puppets. I’ve stopped listening to the deceiving applause and lies that they give. I’ve stopped listening to the ones who try to define my character. Now I listen to the whispers of those who came before me. I listen to
my mother and to those who truly see me. I listen to those who know we are all people of the same world. I listen to my own heart beating to the strains of the ancient tambou.

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1. A Haitian drum used in celebrations, rituals, musical performances, storytelling, and conveyance of passionate emotions.

2. Rice and beans with a type of fried pork; rice and beans being a very common dish and the pork a kind of treat.
When I reached the age of eighteen, I knew that my time had come—the time when I would have to join the I.D.F, which was the Israeli Army. The Israeli Defense Forces consist of the Israeli Army, Israeli Air Force and Israeli Sea Corps. It was founded during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. After the Holocaust, many Jews from around the world migrated to the country of Israel. As the country’s population increased, an Army was built to protect both the people and their land. The majority of Israelis are drafted into the military at the age of eighteen. Men serve three years and women serve two. So there I was, going to serve and protect my country, a heroic act in my eyes, waving goodbye to my parents as I got on the long green bus, the bus that would take me from Tel-Aviv to the Desert located in the south where the Boot Camp was. This was the beginning of an unexpected journey that would be the next three years of my life.

It was approximately four o’clock in the afternoon when I got up to a loud banging on the door. “Roy, open up!” My heart was pounding and I got the feeling that something had happened. It was my drill sergeant. A tall, muscular soldier with a higher rank than mine who was in charge of keeping the base in order, he would put my comrades and me through hell everyday. Definitely the last guy that I wanted to see at my door step. It was very strange for him to show up at my room, since he had never done so in the past two years. I quickly stood up and put on my uniform pants, still wearing the tank top that I slept in, as I approached the door. When I turned the knob and opened the door, I saw my drill sergeant’s face and immediately realized that something was not right.

“Have you seen Eli?” he asked.

I replied with a drift of my head to each side, “No, why, is something wrong?”

It seemed as if my sergeant was in a different zone; he asked me the same question about ten times. I replied again, “No, why? What’s going on?”

Eli was the driver of the head general who was in charge of the entire base. We were close friends at base, sharing laughs and killing time in the late nights. He was the quiet type, never really talked much. It always seemed as if he had a lot going on inside his head. To go as far as he did was something nobody expected or saw coming.

As I closed the door, I could hear the continuous banging on the other doors that were located down the hall from my room. I really didn’t know what to think. I got dressed, tucking my uniform in neatly and brushing my red combat shoes, and rushed out. Seeing my drill sergeant at the last door on the left, I could notice the panic that was growing even stronger. That was Eli’s room, the one he usually slept nights in, when on base. By now, not only my drill sergeant, but also a group of soldiers was rushing down the hallway to reach the last door on the left. They were banging and screaming Eli’s name. I overheard one of them say that Eli had sent a text message to his commander, telling him to take care of his family. That’s when it hit me. I realized that something bad must have happened to Eli. I called a couple of my comrades and we immediately rushed down to the other side of the building. We noticed that the window to Eli’s room was open, so one of the soldiers climbed up and entered the window. It took about three seconds to hear the screaming of the poor soldier. He quickly climbed back down and started to throw up.

“He, he, is d,d,d,dead,” he cried out.

A couple of hours later, after the ambulance was already gone and the crowds had gotten smaller, I
decided to enter Eli’s room. My body was shaky and I could feel the sweat pouring from the side of my face. As I walked in, I could right away pick up the smell of the awful odor, which reminded me of the time when my father took me to a chicken house which had the same raw and fleshy smell. As I looked down, I could see Eli’s bed, and behind it the shattered wall that halted the bullets. The white wall was colored a thickened red shade. From that point on, all that was left was my imagination.

The next day was a quiet one. Nobody really had anything to say. Just by the look on everyone’s face, one could imagine and understand what was going on, soldiers holding their heads with both hands, still shocked at what their ears had absorbed the night before. This was the day that Eli’s body would be laid to rest in peace. We formed a line of about eight soldiers parallel to the grave. As the rabbi finished his last prayer, I, along with my comrades, picked up my rifle and started to shoot up in the air one bullet at a time. With every pull of the trigger, I would close my eyes tight, and could see Eli’s face appear before me. A young boy who had a bright future ahead of him, and due to family problems, decided to take his own life.

It’s been four years now since I was honorably dismissed from the Israeli Defense Force. I served for three years, and in those years, I went through a lot. I gained a lot of knowledge and experience, but at the same time I came across things that I don’t think anyone should ever have to. The loss of my friend left me with many questions and a feeling of the need to blame someone. I do think that the “call of duty” played its part in Eli’s choice of taking his own life. I understand that when serving in the Army, one knows the situations that he/she might face and the consequences that may occur. It’s unfortunate to say but sometimes the loss of one is the savior of many. In Eli’s case, it was a surprise and a shock to us, an unexpected death, not like in a battle where it would be more likely to happen. My country has fought many wars since the 1948 battle and has suffered many tragedies. We are surrounded by enemy countries and the Army must continue to be updated and strong, and continue to serve and protect its people. I do wish that one day there won’t be the need for my country and other countries to have an army.
My father worked for the government of Pakistan. He used to draw blue-prints of buildings, villages and roads. We were middle class living in Pakistan, Sialkot, the city famous for its sports exports products throughout the world. My typical day would be to go to school from 7 A.M to 2 P.M, fly a kite on my roof top and in the evening play cricket with my friends from 4 P.M to 8 P.M. I loved my life; I was never bored or had any worries to face. I was a very smart student, in fact the smartest in my class. Every year I topped in our annual exams and made my parents proud. All of my siblings did well in school and always placed 1st, 2nd or 3rd in our classes. Each year my parents would hold a party to celebrate the success of their children and elders would give us presents along with their blessings.

I did not dream of anything different in my life; I was very content with the way things were. One day a friend came to my father’s office and told him there were visa offerings for the United States. The visa was randomly given to one person/family with some background check; hence it was called the Lottery Visa. My father applied but he thought we would never be that lucky and did it just to please his friend. Getting a visa to America was a dream come true for the people of Pakistan. They had a certain image or feeling in their minds that living in America is just as living in heaven. Everything would be handed to you; there would not be any struggles as if money grew on trees in America. A few months passed after my father applied and surprisingly one day we received a response from the embassy through mail. The United States embassy chose our family to give an immigration visa.

It was 1996, the year my younger brother was born and the same year my father migrated to the America. My mother was not prepared to leave the country and the family she had spent her whole life with. It was also a wise decision to first let my father settle in America and then apply for our visas. It is difficult for one person to support his whole family in a new country. So my father went on alone. It was hard for a woman to stay alone in society without any presence of a man in the house. But my mother was strong; she kept the family together and kept us safe. We still missed our father, as she did too. My father would call every Sunday in the morning; that was the only off day from school in Pakistan. He asked if we wanted anything from New York and he would send it through any friend who came. Once my sister asked for a doll; although one can find anything in Pakistan, everyone liked the imported products from America. He sent it through a friend he met in New York who lives in Gujarat, a one hour drive from Sialkot. My cousin and I went to pick up the things he would send and I felt happy to see the things my father had sent to us.

Five years passed since my father had moved to America. He visited us every year for three months during our summer vacation so we could spend most of our time together. My mother cried every time he left Pakistan. After five years my father thought he was now completely settled in New York and decided now was a good time for us to come too. He assured us that there would not be any problems and promised a better future for us. After one more year, my father came to Pakistan; this time we were going with him. I did not want to leave my friends, my cousins and everyone I knew my whole life. But at the same time I was also very happy because my family would be living together. The day we left Pakistan my mom cried so much at the airport while she hugged her parents and her sisters.

We arrived at JFK airport at noon. Everything looked different in America. The clothes that people wear, the language, and even the weather was colder than what we had experienced in Pakistan. My father,
who was at a respectful position at his government job in Pakistan, worked as a taxi driver in New York. I asked myself if it was worth it for one to leave behind his/her country and a respectful job to come to America for a bit more money and a strenuous occupation. At first, I was rather excited to live in a new country and experience new things. But soon I found out it is not as easy to adjust in a new place and fit in with the society.

In Pakistan we only spoke Urdu. I learnt a few words of English in my English class during schooling in Pakistan. Therefore, I only knew a few words of English when I came to America. This proved to be a huge barrier between me and the American society. All I heard was English everywhere I went but I did not understand even one sentence. I was confused, lost and helpless. Where I was a top student in my class in Pakistan, I came here and I failed all of my classes. I did not understand or learn a word that the teacher would say in class. I sat there at my desk feeling lost and waiting for class to end so I could go home. Some days I thought I should just stay home because there was no point in attending classes in which I didn't understand a word. There was no way to communicate unless I learned English as quickly as possible.

I felt lonely and bored throughout the day because I did not have any friends. I missed my friends terribly who I left in Pakistan. I spent my evening time playing cricket with my friends in Pakistan, while here I spent time staring at the walls. I never went out because I didn't have any friends to hang out with. Adnan was the only Pakistani student in my class. He came to America four years before me so he spoke and understood the language perfectly. He helped me tremendously not only in school but also in my life and has turned out to be my closest friend to this day. He helped me understand the material we were studying in class and also introduced me to people that can tutor me. This was the most difficult time of my life. Even after tutoring and explanations I did not understand the work completely. The only way to solve these problems was to learn English.

One of the biggest problems an immigrant faces is to fit in to the society. I came to America with my own set of beliefs and values, which I still adhere to. America promises equality for all men but in the real world there is always some sort of prejudice towards certain groups of people. Post September 11, 2001, it was a tough time for any Muslim to live in America. The recent terror attacks have jolted the image of Islam to the people of western world/ America. In Junior High School I faced a lot of problems with students who tried to provoke me to fight them and made derogatory comments. Maybe the students in middle school at a young age were naïve and did not know any better. They thought anyone who resembled a Middle Easterner/Pakistani or had a Muslim name was a terrorist. I got into many fights because of the derogatory comments made about my religion and country.

As time passed things got better and life became a lot easier. There was still a lot of difference between my family values and America. Later when I made few friends, I learned most of them were living with single parents. Divorce is rarely seen in Pakistan and families stay together. There is a sense of honor and respect in having a successful marriage. Although in America most people have love marriages, there is still a high rate of divorce here. Yet in Pakistan most people are bonded into arranged marriages, but it's still more successful. There were a lot of good things that came out due to the vast cultural diffusion in New York. Here I saw people of every descent and nationality living in one country. I learned more about life styles of other nationalities through general conversation than through reading books.

The problems I faced in my initial years are now non-existent. Only with hard work and struggle one can be successful in America. America is the land of opportunity, although my career/goals are not yet clear to me but I know they can be achieved. I am happy to be living here and have the opportunity to
I don't have a very good memory. In fact, I have a terrible memory. Long-term, I mean. I can remember a full paragraph of dictation when I'm jotting it down in a lecture class. I can remember a new phone number if you tell it to me once. I can remember the food order of a table of four without writing it down at the restaurant where I work. But ask me to tell you about specific instances from my childhood before the age of ten, and my responses will be very limited. I'd like to think it's something psychological that I did to myself, subconsciously blocking out years of my life to save myself from remembering something awful. My friends blame the pot. But I've always been this way. The only instances I really, truly remember have been tattooed on my mind in exquisite detail.

I remember my grandmother's living room floor, covered with an unusually itchy rug of green, brown and beige floral pattern. It was one of those tricky rugs, made of some unidentifiable mystery fabric that looks and even feels comfortable when you're standing on it. But sit down, and you'll immediately feel like applying some calamine. It wasn't exactly pleasant, but I sat there anyway because that's where the presents were. Nestled underneath that monster of a pine tree, wrapped neatly and affixed with bows, were piles and piles of presents. I dug through them carefully and counted a total of twelve gifts with my name on their labels. But I had to wait my turn.

Gift-opening was a one person at a time process, starting with the youngest. Luckily, I was the third youngest so I didn't have to wait long. My two cousins, Phillip and Jordan each left a mess of wrapping paper, cardboard, and plastic and returned to their spots with my Uncle Jim and Aunt Denise.

My father liked to tape everything, every birthday, gathering, or other event of moderate significance. Now that I think about it, where the hell are all those tapes? If I could actually watch the recorded majority of my childhood on VHS, maybe I wouldn't have such a problem remembering it.

Anyway, lights, camera, action. I took the center of the floor with my gifts all spread around me. My seemingly endless father's side of the family occupied three couches, extra chairs brought in from the dining room, and some stood along the wall. I dug into my first box, tearing the plump, white-bearded men in red suits into a crumpled set of paper limbs. What I found underneath some tissue paper was a white T-Shirt with red print on the front of it, resembling a crossword puzzle surrounded by the outline of a heart. It was my grandmother's standard gift to everyone. She had it specially made, and it contained all the names of everyone in the family, a very sweet and thoughtful gift. Even though everyone knew what it was, my father insisted I hold it up to the camera for "everyone back home" to see. I never understood who he was talking about when he said that. Everyone who would have been "back home" was already there, in Washington. But I played along.

This catalyzed the opening of a slew of mediocre gifts. Following the T-Shirt came a box of chocolates, a sweater, a Barbie doll (which I already owned), coloring books, a few CDs, a set of cheap watercolor paints, and a new batch of goodies to bake in my Easy Bake Oven (which I would have liked, had my Easy Bake Oven still been in working condition.) I was on the verge of disenchantment when I picked up my last gift. The fact that it had an odd shape and was not in a bag or box intrigued me. I removed the paper with care, as not to damage this strange package, to reveal a silver-colored personal CD player with headphones, which quickly upped the status of the CDs I had gotten earlier from my brother. I felt my droopy cheeks stretch into a big smile. I held it over my head and waved it around. Not many kids my age owned a CD player of their own. It was a pretty
snazzy gift for a seven-year-old, I thought. The rest of my presents were okay, but this surely trumped them all. “Oh wow! Thank you! Thank you, Mommy and Daddy!” I got up and gave them both a big hug. They smiled at each other, then back at me. I knew then: that was family. I always knew who my family was; I knew their names and faces. But that Christmas was the first time I really understood the idea, the feeling, felt the warmth connected to the word.

After the last of my relatives had opened their gifts, we all helped to clean things up. My job was to hold open a garbage bag while others filled it with the scraps of paper and deserted boxes they’d collected from around the room. Coffee and dessert were being served informally in the kitchen, and so that’s where most of my family went. Some of my uncles retreated to the basement to watch football games; some ventured outside with my cousins to play in the small amount of snow remaining from a storm. I stayed in the living room, though I did move up from the poison ivy rug to a much more comfortable leather couch. I loaded up my brand spankin’ new CD player with the Spice Girls and lay there for what felt like hours. However, my bladder forced me to get up once.

The bathroom was located across from a spare bedroom in my grandmother’s house. I noticed that the door to this bedroom was closed over, but I could hear an argument. I wondered why there would be any discontent on such a happy Christmas Day. I pressed my nosy little ear to the door and listened to the familiar voices shouting at each other.

“I just don’t understand! Why would she be calling you here?” one said.

“I don’t know, okay? Maybe there was an emergency,” the other answered.

“Oh, what are you, her go-to guy for everything now? What kind of emergency should interrupt your Christmas vacation with your family?” said the first.

To which, the second replied, “Jesus fucking Christ! I don’t know what you want me to say. Look, can we sort this out another time?”

There was bit of a delay, then a low, “Fine.”

At this, I suspected their conversation was drawing to a close and my ear was still to the door, which meant I had a little less than a split second to run back to the couch. I ran, jumped, landed and flung the headphones back over head. My parents’ yelling echoed in my ears, so I raised the volume of “If You Wanna Be My Lover” until I couldn’t hear them anymore. My father appeared in the room a few minutes later.

“Hi ya, Sweetie. Are you still listening to that thing?”

“Hi, Daddy. Yep, I love it! I’ve just been here the whole time,” I lied with the utmost nonchalance, a skill I didn’t need so early in life, but maybe later.

“Why don’t you take a break for a bit and come get a piece of cake with me?” he suggested.

Okay.” I stopped the disc from spinning and put the player next to the rest of my gifts. I took my father’s right hand, because his left hand was occupied rubbing his temple. I hadn’t pieced it together until I noticed my mother scurry out of the guest bedroom and into the bathroom. She had only taken three or four steps but the light caught the tears on her face.

She joined us at the table soon after we sat. My parents made normal conversation with the rest of my relatives, as if nothing had happened. As I ate, I mulled over what I’d heard. I picked at my Aunt Melody’s double-chocolate fudge cake, but I couldn’t taste it. The juice I drank might as well have been water. My mind was somewhere else. Who was this “she” my mother was referring to? Why was my dad her “go-to guy”? Why would my dad be anyone else’s “guy” but my mom’s?

The events of the next year slowly gave me answers to those questions. “She” lived across the street, back
home in Florida. “She” supposedly had bad electrical wiring in her house and needed my father’s handyman talents. “She” asked him to fix it, once, which he did, once, but his visits continued. “She” had thinner arms and legs than my mother, but was nowhere near as pretty in the face. “She” probably had a name, but I don’t care what it was. For ultimately breaking up my family and taking away the warmth that I was just beginning to know and love, “she” doesn’t deserve a name.

As my father’s visits across the street became more frequent, so did my parents’ arguments. Except now that we were back in our own house, they did not take place behind a closed door. Whenever I would hear them, I instinctively ran for my CD player, just as I had in Washington. It didn’t matter what was in it at the time, as long as I could turn the volume up. I felt like the music could drown out anything. The singing, the guitars, the beats, they all took me away from whatever bad place I was in.

While it was happening, I thought I was going to remember my Christmas vacation of ’96 for the big family gathering that took place. But in retrospect, it isn’t the celebration that sticks out in my mind. It’s the way the wooden door felt against my ear, cool and dry, the way my palms accumulated sweat as I listened to each angry word spewing from my parents’ lips, the racing of my heart as I ran back to that couch and fumbled with my new gift, the pseudo calm that washed over me when I could no longer hear the yelling. Still to this day, almost twelve years later, music has an immense power over me. I’ve gone through three CD players and five mp3 players since then. Hey, times have changed, gotta keep up with the Joneses, right? It’s the action that hasn’t changed. It doesn’t matter what’s going on in my life, my headphones still produce sound for me that can bandage the broken.
I remember the clouds that day. They were the type that made you scramble for a paintbrush even though you knew you’d never capture their intricate shading and immensity. I didn’t even try. I remained on the grass, watching as the wind tugged the great white castles away, transforming the sky into a delicate sheet of blue glass. My hair fanning around my head, my eyes lazily followed the trails of clouds. A head popped into my frame. I patted the soft ground beside me.

She smiled an answer. I knew she wanted something by her grin; she usually had an agenda. “I want to go hiking.”

“And I want to lie here and watch the clouds.”

She glanced at the sky. “What clouds?” Not waiting for an answer, she shrugged. “Come.” She stretched out the word into two syllables so it sounded like cuh-ome, emphasizing the second syllable with a tug on my sleeve.

I half-rolled my eyes as I ticked off the list of reasons with my fingers. “It’s late. The camp will kill us if we are caught. And besides, where are we gonna go?”

She grinned impishly. “Around the lake.”

This time my eyes did a full rotation. “We don’t know the way. And it’s still late.”

“We’ll find the way.”

Shaking my head, I tilted my face to get a better view of the sky. She continued, her voice slightly exasperated, “You know it’s considered one of the easiest hikes. And besides, it’s only 7:30. It doesn’t get dark for another hour at least. And we’ll be back long before then. If we leave now…” She let her voice trail off hopefully. “Please?” I felt another tug on my sleeve. “We haven’t gone on a hike this whole summer. Let’s go now. Please?”

Though my face was still turned away, I studied her with half-closed lids. Her face, open and hopeful. Her body, bouncing slightly with anticipation. I suddenly felt like a villain, refusing her when all she wanted was to go on a hike.

With a squeal loud enough to deafen the forest fauna, she dragged me to my feet and down the hill. “But if we get caught, I am thoroughly blaming this on you.”

She laughed. “We won’t.”

My eyes scanned the lake, estimating it only to be about a half a mile long. The hike really shouldn’t take more than forty-five minutes, I reasoned. It would be a beautiful view, watching the lake reflecting the forest like a great shimmering silver cloth. As we veered left to follow the edge of the lake, I imagined being light enough to skate across the surface, spinning, twirling, and leaping with ease as an audience of trees waved and surged in applause.

“What are you thinking?” my friend asked as she pulled me forward down the small, winding, overgrown path.

I lied easily. “Nothing in particular.” I was always thinking of something, imagining wildly impossible but wonderfully original scenes. But these were my thoughts; I’ve never shared them with anyone. She blinked, knowing full well that I was holding back. As usual.

I picked up the pace, my feet crunching on the undergrowth. My eyes searched for a topic to discuss,
to break the thickening silence. “I don’t understand how the Indians were so quiet. We’re louder than stampeding elephants.”

She laughed, her head tilted back, as if laughing at the sky. She always laughed easily. I wondered what it would be like to laugh so freely.

The next half hour flowed in easy conversation as we followed the meandering path, attempting the silence of the Native Americans, our skirts getting tangled in the undergrowth. The lake wove in and out of view as the trees thickened and the terrain became steeper. Abruptly our small path ended, but we weren’t concerned. We had taken pioneer classes before, learning how to read the directions specified by the brightly colored tape wrapped around random trees. The tape before us was old and slightly tattered, but it pointed left. So we followed left.

“By the way, I know that a river leads into the lake,” I said, tilting my head back so she could hear me clearly. We now had to walk in a single file because the ferns were getting higher and thicker. “It seems like we’ve passed most of the lake itself and soon we’ll get to the river. I assume there’s a bridge across it.”

I don’t remember her answer because I was surreptitiously checking my watch. It was a bit past 8 o’clock. Sunset was a half an hour away. We’d be back before then, I assured myself. I looked up at the sunlight dimmed through the dense foliage. It was still light enough to spot the bright orange pioneer tape encouraging us to continue our solitary hike. But the vivid tape led us out of the forest, into a large empty clearing. No, not empty. Haphazardly scattered throughout the chest-high reeds were blackened tree-stumps, like knobby gloved fingers pointing towards the empty sky.

I swallowed hard, my stomach clenching. “Should we turn back?”

She looked around and then at her watch. “I don’t know. We have to be more than half-way there. I say just go on. We’ve been walking too long to just turn back. It can’t be more than another twenty minutes… Right?” She smiled brightly.

I shrugged, not feeling her optimism, and stepped into the clearing. My foot sank into the ground, murky water surging into my sneakers, drenching my socks. I shuddered. “Ugh. It’s a swamp.”

“Oh, cool!”

Quelling the urge to flick a bit of mud in her face, I took another step. I knew she was only trying to lighten the mood but it wasn’t helping. My stomach clenched a little tighter as the dead, water-choked trees touched our clothes as we passed between their silent trunks. Our progress was sloth-like, each step like hauling a plunger from a stuffed toilet. Every stride seemed to take more effort to heave our feet out of the thick mud, the swamp desperately clinging to our shoes, begging us to stay, forcing us to become part of its captives. I wanted nothing more that to struggle free from the mire, spread my wings, and fly home—past the dead trees, towards my hill under my clouds, across the state and all the way home, to my mother’s arms. Raising my eyes from the ground, I focused on a blackened lifeless tree ahead in attempt to clear my rippling vision.

After disentangling our faces from airborne knots of flies and mosquitoes, with the swamp hardening momentarily, we reached a small plain of short reeds punctuated with one central, lone, blackened tree. We rested heavily against it, grinning foolishly, as if we just summited Everest. My hands ran over its smooth ash face. I thought about how much energy and time this tree had taken to grow, looking longingly at the forest in its view but never to be within its reach, forced to make friends with its dull dumpy neighbors. And when it finally had gotten big enough to show off its leaves, a storm laughed and lightning struck it down. For a minute, I gazed at the tree that looked at me with the same sad eyes, seeing a lonely soul that would
never fit in with its surroundings.

Turning, I surveyed the clearing; lightning had struck every tree among the reeds. Tilting my face to the sky, I blessed the unbroken pane of blue glass and the absence of clouds, beautiful or stormy.

My friend was on the same thought page. “Thank G-d, there’s no storm.”

I turned to look at her. G-d? We’re going to need G-d to do a lot more than keep storms away if we want to make it back any time soon. We still had the other half of the clearing to cross. And the bright happy orange tape had vanished with the edge of the forest.

“We can’t stay here. We have to continue,” I murmured as I pushed off the trunk and began trudging through the marsh, heading towards the end of the clearing where the forest began again.

Soon our ears picked up on the sound of water running as the ground under our feet became firmer. As the ferns began to again outnumber the reeds, I glanced behind to say goodbye to the lonely tree. My eyes memorized the scene, the tall reeds, the solitary burnt tree, knowing that I would not see it again, knowing it would not see me again. I wondered if it would ever see another person again. The tips of its branches swayed back and forth slowly in the wind in a sad farewell. My friend raised her eyebrows slightly in my direction, but I just shook my head and continued towards the humming of the water. The ground fell away to reveal a fast flowing river, too wide to jump and too deep to wade.

“Care to get even more wet?” she joked, her hazel eyes following a branch tumbling downstream.

Biting the inside of my cheek in response, I scanned the river for a way across. Didn’t she realize what situation we were in? The sun was almost down and we were lost in the woods, alone with no water or flashlight. Did she think G-d would just send down a map and a canteen with a pat on the head, and say ‘happy camping?’

“There!” Around ten yards upstream a tree had fallen across the river, providing us a makeshift bridge. We scrambled hastily towards the log, in disbelief at our luck; these sort of things only happened in movies.

“Oh thank G-d,” my friend murmured behind me.

Once again in front, I gingerly tested my weight against the suddenly narrow tree trunk. I edged out into the open, expecting the log to snap in half, plunging me into the river, the current dragging me into the lake. Well, if nothing else, it would be a quick way to get back to camp. I was almost to the other side when my foot fell through a piece of damp, rotting wood, large splinters cutting into my thigh. My friend let out a surprised bark of laughter, immediately pressing her fingers to her mouth, horrified. Maybe she laughed a bit too easily. Not even looking at her, I pulled myself up and inspected the damage. Just a few bloody scratches and a very wet skirt. Nothing bad.

In an instant, she was kneeling beside me. “I’m so sorry. Are you all right?” She tried to examine my bruises but I shook her off, angry at her laughter.

“Let’s go.” I walked off, leaving her to catch up. She started to apologize again but I cut her off, even though I secretly wanted her to continue. “It’s nearly nine o’ clock. We have to pick up the pace. It’s going to get real dark real soon. Especially in the forest. So let’s move.” She nodded noiselessly and followed, falling slightly behind me.

Curving away from the river, we stumbled onto an overgrown road. Ferns and weeds grew in the two stripes that years ago tasted rolling tires, now infested with ticks waiting to latch onto our bare legs. We walked quickly and silently in a single file, each trying not to focus on the dimming light, the creeping fatigue, and the increasing thirst. Racing against the receding sun, we hoped to get to some sort of civilization before the light extinguished completely. My breathing quickened as my nervousness dissolved with the last
threads of sunlight and fear started to clutch my heart. Lost and exhausted, we were completely vulnerable in the woods, prey to any man or beast that would cross our path. The minute hand on my watch ticked on, unconcerned.

The road then swelled to a slight clearing, our pace slowing to understand what our eyes were seeing. Trailers lay haphazardly on their sides, as if some dinosaur had tossed them away, their windows shattered, their moth-eaten curtains fluttering feebly in the wind, their insulation bleeding onto the ground. I took a step toward one trailer, something inside of me curious to see what there might be inside. My mind reached out to pull back the fraying curtain, but when my eyes caught sight of my hand nearing the tattered, withering fabric, I sharply recoiled, recoiled at the brown fabric threads dissolving into nothingness, at how the edges of the trailer began to merge with the darkness. My eyes fell on my friend, her hairline blurred among the leaves of the forest, her features fading slowly. My body coiled into a compressed spring and broke free. “Let’s go!” and we ran. Away from the broken pieces of civilization. Away from the oblivion enveloping the shattered homes and the black hole of emptiness we had tiptoed across. Our lungs gasping for air and our bodies begging for water, we stopped, breathing loudly into the night. She forced a laugh. “Hey, if we get stuck here, we can always stay at these lovely accommodations.”

Something inside me snapped. I rounded on her, wanting to scream, to shove her down and race back to the camp alone. But from within the anger clouding my eyes, I saw something else in hers. Fear. Loneliness. It cut me short. She was just as scared as I was. And she felt alone, even though I was standing right there. She stared at me, no longer laughing, her body trembling slightly. I took another step closer and placed my arms around her, drawing her close. I felt her body stiffen and then relax as she tentatively hugged me. I don’t remember how long we hugged, but my watch finally slowed as we stood there in the forest. I couldn’t remember the last time I voluntarily hugged someone. When we separated, some of the fear had evaporated, and we were no longer alone. She smiled. I felt the corners of my mouth turn up. Once again, we continued along the road silently and quickly, but this time she walked beside me, our fingers interlaced for comfort in the growing darkness.

“What time is it?” I pressed the glow button on my watch and showed her the time, afraid that saying it aloud might make it true. Nine thirty. She nodded and grasped my hand tighter.

Suddenly, I said abruptly, "Ein od milvado.”

She turned her head towards me without breaking stride. “What?”

I was suddenly eight again, sitting on my aunt’s hard wooden floor, my cousin describing his friend’s rescue from a dangerous situation by saying three words. Ein od milvado. There is no one but Him.

“We need to keep saying these words over and over. Ein od milvado. Like a chant, we matched it to our hurried steps. Ein od milvado. There is no one but Him. Ein od milvado. Ein od milvado.

“Look!” my friend shouted hoarsely. There was a paved road. The paved road. The one leading to camp! Imbued with renewed strength, we raced up the road, our laughter mingling with those three words. Ein od milvado! Ein od milvado!

I wanted to kiss the gates of camp, knock on every door and yell “We’re baaack!” My eyes reveled at silhouettes of the campers through the thin curtains, my ears capturing their tickles of laughter floating through open windows. We stepped over the little soapy rivers escaping from the shower house and smiled at the muffled sound of a blow-dryer. As we threaded through the bunkhouses, we deliberately immersed ourselves in the pools of light cast by lamps hanging off the trees until our feet lead us to the kitchen.
pushed open the door, the rough wood so different from the smooth surface of the black solitary tree. At the sink, we filled buckets with water and drank like dying men who had crossed a desert. I looked over at my friend, her head buried in a big orange bucket, and began to laugh. She looked up, frowning. I just shook my head as an answer, my laughter getting louder. I slid down beside her on the wall, my arm snaking around her shoulder, drawing her close. Her frown slowly melted into a smile as she began to chuckle softly. I closed my eyes to the sound of our laughter reverberating through the room.
I struggled to find comfort in the words, to dwell in the pity of letters strung together. Rereading this nullified it all:

*I long have searched for demons past. To find some sort of inspiration. To find some sort of divine creation.*

My knuckles turned white. The note he wrote before he left for Africa. Before he left me.

After all these years, all these memories, and his thoughts are in a rhyming poetic scheme. Ridiculous. Our lives, our *marriage* summed up in three rhyming sentences. Disgusting.

He did not even owe it to me to pen his betrayal, his font a crisp Times New Roman. He did not even owe it to me to find explanations in his crooked t’s or try to find the reasons in the way his letters connected like vines. His writing betrayed no emotion; apparently, he didn’t even owe me that.

“That means nothing. And you know it.” I offered myself shallow comfort.

His leaving meant nothing. His going to discover himself meant nothing. His promising to never leave me meant nothing. Our memories, our interactions meant nothing. Our *marriage* meant nothing.

“He is going to come visit, you know. Two years isn’t that long a time,” my mind tried to rationalize. “And you can always write letters, email.”

Write letters. I tried that a week ago, when I found out he was leaving. I tried to make sense of the fog of my emotion, to pour my heart onto paper with words like “sad” and “angry.”

I tried to remind him of the moments we shared, our talks lost to time, of our laughter and tears, phrases that would make him never leave. In my fingers, a mind of its own as I wrote that when *I first met you, your 'hello' was velvet to my skin, that your sentences gave words to my thoughts.* I described how magical the moments: *the words, our love like an engaging novel, its narrative—the sentences the grammar the emotion—bettering through time.* I wrote how *though our talks are lost to time the memories of your questions and my responses flow in my veins, like fluoride in my bones* as I tore my emotion onto paper. *Our love, stretched along the horizons, began to thin out at the plot, the pages ripped.* I tried to make him understand. *With everything you need to work. You need the obstacles to stumble through, the plot holes and character development…*

I tore my heart open.

*Treat this as you would your writings, pour out each sentence, analyze the content, revise until perfection. Don't end with an ellipse.*

He left that day – “Goodbye…” – and the letter he left with this reply. I needed focus, a reason.

I thought of his sweater, its dull black color with a pin of some local band, waiting in the closet. Of his computer, collecting dust on his desk. Of the keyboard with traces of fingerprints, traces of his mind, growing dull with time. Of my heart torn in his wastebasket, my note shredded.

Who else? Who else would fill this room like he did? Who else would share in my daily life, in my memories? Who else would share with me his innermost thoughts, whisper sweet nothing in my ear? Who would write me epics of love, pages on my laughter? Who else would leave and then not even give me a proper *sentence* as to why? Bile rises in my throat at his selfishness. At my disgust.

I looked at the woman in front of me, her reflection a mosaic of jagged edges. Whose calm demeanor was a shrine to time. Whose words were like a needle on a photograph, whose husband hated smoking. Whose fault this would never cease to be.

“You’re right.” I said. “It means nothing.”
When my family and I arrived, the humidity hit our face along with a light breeze. The sun was disappearing into the mountains and I realized home was very far away. The heat was a signal that we must have been close to the equator; the country’s name derives from the word equator. Wearing pants did not help. Greetings awaited us. The expressions on their faces filled with sincere joy and excitement as their dimples began to show when we hugged one another. It was strange. These people came from the same place as my mother and spoke with the same accent, yet they were so much darker.

My mother was born in the U.S. but lived in Ecuador for several years. She was sent there during her early teen years and later moved back. All of her life, though, she spoke Spanish to her parents, to her sister, and to her friends in school. This was the difference between my mother, my family members, and me. I never saw the importance of speaking or writing in a language other than English. I knew no one outside my family who spoke Spanish but now it was different. Here I was just seven years into life and I felt handicapped. I had never broken a bone, had never taken medication, and never had a deficiency, yet in a place surrounded by family, I felt alone. My sisters, both younger, couldn’t understand the complexity of the situation since they hadn’t even conquered sentences in English. I sensed that adapting to this lifestyle would be very difficult.

Our stay in Ecuador was only going to last four weeks but I didn’t know how I was going to get through it. Every day was an adventure. We constantly met new people, visited new places and tried new foods. I observed new aspects of my culture. I learned that hot water was not as accessible as it was in the States; therefore I reminded myself when I returned to the U.S. that I would never again be dissatisfied by a hot shower or bath. I learned that the heat rays made it feel like the Sierra desert in Ecuador and that because the sun was more powerful near the equator I needed to apply lotion daily. I learned that mosquitoes did not care about size, color, or anything else. They feasted on all of us equally as if we were made out of candy. They were determined to suck out every ounce of sugar each of us contained: I recall having 32 bites just that first week. I learned that Sponge Bob was bob de esponja in South America because every channel was in Spanish, even the cartoons. I also learned that the United States and its culturally imperialistic ways played a big part in Ecuadorian people’s lives because no matter where I went N64 was N64, Pokemon was Pokemon, and KFC was KFC. The most important thing I learned was that for the next couple of weeks I was going to have to adapt whether I liked it or not. I needed to start embracing what should have embraced me as an infant: my culture.

During the first week in Ecuador, I met my cousins- Jorge, Natalie, and Lissete. Jorge was three years older than me, Lissete was just a year older, and Natalie and I were the same age. All three had darker skin. Even with our skin color being different, we were all cute children. With the combination of us four and my two little sisters, it was hard for any family member to say no to what we wanted to do. Our smiles shimmered so much that we could light up a morbid room full of mourners. Still, the lack of communication between us was strange. I remember our first encounter: the awkwardness, the silence, and the constant “um” and “uh.” All I knew was “hola” (which means hi); I guess that’s what made my cousins assume at first I knew at least a little Spanish. I deceived them; I should have just waved. This made me feel as if the only time we could truly get along was when our body language overpowered our verbal barrier.

My mother tried to remind me that they came to America once and visited us. She said I was about
five years old but of course I didn’t remember meeting them; therefore I would forever consider this trip as our first encounter. My cousins did not speak English well but the fact they knew words and phrases amazed me. Jorge knew English the best. He tried to explain that he read a lot of English comic books and watched tons of movies and that he fell in love with the American culture. He told me that subtitles were very useful because he could connect gestures and words together, translating his language into English. Our bond grew at an unexpected pace. It was fascinating. We were both the eldest siblings and the only boys. We both liked video games, card games, racing, drawing, and playing sports—although in that I always beat him, which made my stay that much more memorable.

Our relationship however, could not make the environment less intense. Every time I couldn’t get my point across to someone, I ran for my mother. I poked at her side countless times asking her how to say this word, that phrase or even a whole sentence. It became very irritating, the feeling of depending on someone for communication. It made what I had learned in school, and in life, significantly insignificant because I couldn’t tell my cousins simple things like I wanted chicken or pollo for dinner.

“Hey Jonathan” Jorge said after returning from the bathroom.

“Nada” I responded. He giggled at my attempt.

“What you like eat for dinner?” Jorge asked. I tried to recall in my mind how to say chicken but after a minute or two I just gestured him to hold on and ran screaming,

“Mom!”

It’s ironic because even when I was little I remember my grandparents stressing the importance of being bilingual, telling my parents that I should be more involved in my culture. They especially stressed the significance of reading and writing in Spanish but once in Ecuador I could not understand entirely what was going on. I was completely, helplessly dependent.

After three weeks, things changed slightly. I forced myself to remember terms, recognize letters, and write down words I would use often. I figured if my cousin could intertwine words in English and Spanish by hearing and seeing them than I could do the same. I impressed everyone and it felt amazing. I remember pulling my mom’s shirt telling her to listen to me converse in another language.

“Escuche me,” I said. Then I turned to Jorge.

“Hola, come estas? Todo esta bien?”

“Muy bien Jonathan. Y tu?”

“Yo… estoy bien tambien. Tiene hambre?”

“No pero, quiere comer algo?”

“Si. Yo quiero pollo!”

Just when I started to blend in, the trip was over. I felt partially empty and I wanted to stay a little longer but I couldn’t. It felt surreal, like I had taken a nap for four weeks and with a shrug of the shoulder I was back in America, in New York, and in our large home. At the age of seven, it was hard to digest it all, to really dissect it and comprehend the emotions and experience I just witnessed but it did change me, slightly. I wanted to learn more and fully embrace my Ecuadorian culture. I wanted to know that if I ever returned I would be more prepared and I was.

At fifteen, I finally went back to Ecuador. This time, it was just me, my sisters, and my grandparents—no mother, no father. They had separated and divorced but the pain and drama continued. Nonetheless, I was excited and anxious. The anticipation and the experience were more pleasant the second time around. I was eating, speaking, interacting, and acting more independently. I became comfortable even though physically and verbally I was and would always be different. Even with a tan, my skin would never be as dark as theirs.
Even with major practice, my accent would never be as thick as theirs. To the citizens of my country, I would always be looked at as an American, not as an Ecuadorian. That did not hold me back. I enjoyed my time and accepted that things had changed, for the better.

This time, I was speaking Spanish to my cousins and they were speaking English to me. I recall going to the beach with just my cousins and ordering my own helado (ice cream) for the first time, by myself. I was in a cloud of amazement after. They teased me by saying "gringo" because I sounded like a foreigner but it was all in celebration. Now, we were more than translators and interpreters, feeding off each other’s body language and hand motions in order to comprehend the message we were trying to relay. I no longer felt alienated or tongue-tied. I felt like a true citizen of the country and I knew that the next time I went back, I would not only be able to speak but to live out the language. I would be able to dance to Spanish music, eat Spanish foods, work in Spanish places, and be accepted by Spanish speakers. That is my ultimate goal.
It was July 1998 when I took my first step onto the beautiful island of Puerto Rico. My hair frizzed up from the humidity, beads of sweat formed across my forehead, and I knew my experience in this new world would be different from my normal life in New York. As a commonwealth of the United States, Puerto Rico had plenty of English-speaking people, which comforted me a bit. Sure, I understood some Spanish, but I didn’t speak any of it. I dreaded the thought of having to converse with these family members I had never known existed. How would I be able to speak to them? I couldn’t possibly manage to form a single sentence in Spanish! My mind was restless as my family and I took a car ride to our destination: Grandma Beni’s house.

The streets of Caguas didn’t seem too different from the American suburbs; these streets appeared calm, ordinary. In fact, Caguas seemed just like my uncle’s neighborhood in New Jersey: low houses with small porches, a few stores thrown about here and there, and roads empty with the exception of one or two cars. It was definitely a change from the hustle and bustle of the city. The car finally stopped in front of a small, white house. My grandmother stood at the front of it, smiling with her arms open, awaiting hugs. She rushed over to me, rambling on in her rapid, high-pitched Puerto Rican Spanish. I picked up a few words I understood, like grande, linda, and mamá: big, pretty, and mom. I realized she was just talking about my appearance. I couldn’t understand most of it, so I just nodded in agreement and tried to avoid further conversation.

My grandma had invited a few guests: the other half of the family. I had never met these people in my life and not one of them knew anything in English. A short, mustached, middle-aged man was sitting at a table, fanning himself with his straw hat and drinking a full bottle of whiskey. He called my dad over and they began to play dominos. I watched, mesmerized by their swift hand movements and equally fast talking. The man, who I later learned was my granduncle, glanced at me and smiled. He asked, in Spanish, if I knew how to play. Not knowing how to reply, I simply asked, “¿Qué?” It was all I could say.

My lack of comprehension amused my granduncle as my dad quickly explained my case. “She understands some Spanish, but she can’t speak it at all. She has a lisp, too, so it sounds bad. She got the lisp because her mother left her with the pacifier for too long.”

The two men continued to joke about things. Car rides, strange food, women, beer, sports – no topic was left untouched. In Puerto Rico, playing dominoes was a ritual for men. It was their get-together, like poker night in America. Drinks in one hand and dominoes in the other, they would slam their pieces onto the table, shouting in delight amidst their drunken stories. My granduncle often ended his jokes with “tú sabes.” Whenever he said that phrase, everyone in the room would start laughing, an obvious indication that the punch-line had been made. I was the only one who didn’t laugh. I didn’t understand enough Spanish to get what he was saying. I couldn’t keep up with his speed or his wide vocabulary. I felt so confused and lost.

Later that day, my mother and I were alone in the kitchen, washing dishes. Everyone else had gone out to the local convenience store, so the house was empty and quiet, something I had not seen since the vacation began. Curiosity got the best of me and I had to ask, “Why does he keep saying ‘tú sabes’ all the time? What does that mean?”
She smiled, patting me on the head. “It means ‘you know,’ you know? Like some guys they say, ‘Oh, this happen and that happen, you know what I mean, you know what I say.’ That’s it.” I didn’t get it at all. Why would saying “you know” at the end of every sentence in an exaggerated manner make everything seem funny? I decided not to question the odd phrase anymore. It was just too much for my eight-year-old mind to handle.

Grandma was cooking dinner and everything smelled delicious: the aroma of rice and chicken wafted through the house, making me forget of all my fears, including the roaches that clung to the ceiling. We all gathered by the table, filling our plates with spoonfuls of corn rice and peas. For our Puerto Rican family, a meal just wasn’t a meal without rice and chicken. It was the one constant theme with traditional Puerto Rican food, whether any of us lived in our home country or in different parts of America. The delicious taste of rice and chicken always brought the family together, and this moment was no exception. I awaited the usual family talk that would eventually include the ‘tú sabes’ jokes I couldn’t understand, but my granduncle said something else.

“I am learning the English. I take classes. Is good?”

I grinned, impressed with what had happened. We all couldn’t help but applaud him for trying to break his language barrier. If he was making an effort, I knew I had to try, too. All the weight was lifted off my shoulders. I wasn’t the only one with these problems. I wasn’t alone.

He noticed my smile and returned it, throwing in a wink and reiterating his question, just for good measure.

“Is good?”

With a giggle and a nod, I replied, “Sí, está bien.”

The dinner went on as it usually did, with the laughter, the chewing, and the rice flying from my dad’s mouth whenever he spoke. I tried my best to keep up with the conversation, throwing in bits of Spanglish. Unfortunately, my mother had to translate whenever my mistakes were too severe. My granduncle also tried to explain his stories to me in the slight bit of English he knew. We laughed, listened, ate, and enjoyed the moment. For once, I was sure everything would be just fine.
Let me paint you a picture. October 19, 2007. Having only recently turned 19, my friends and I are celebrating the first of two agonizing birthdays between 18 and 21, legal in all respects but one: We still cannot purchase alcohol (not legally anyway). My best friend Jack invites me to come down to the Hunter College campus to meet some of the new people he’s just met, and then we’re going to find a place that won’t card us and play a few drinking games. As always, I’m running late, so I call and tell him to just meet me in Union Square. When I get there, I meet his new friends and, almost immediately, I strike up a conversation with a redhead named Panda Bear. Our conversation simply flows; she has such affability about her. For reasons unbeknownst to me, she seems familiar. Happenstance or kismet, I am, even now, unsure. At the time, I was just shocked that a girl that amazing, with hair the color of an August sunset and just a hint of freckles under her hypnotic hazel-green eyes, thought I was cool enough to talk to.

Our conversation gradually grows from a few hours a week to a few hours a day. I imprint my insomniac nature on her; she impresses upon me her affinity for abbreviating words. I think these few weeks have been going pretty well and finally built up the nerve to ask her on a date. To my dismay, she turns me down, insisting she just got out of a relationship, and we should remain only friends. We continue to talk daily, harmless flirting developing into fare far more serious. We begin to share things about ourselves that no one else knows. She speaks to me about her younger years, unflattering details she buried with the past. I tell her about my fatter days. She tells me about her Goth phase; I tell her of the year I thought tighter pants were definitely happening. She shares her bi-curious period; I reveal the abuse I suffered as a child at the hands of my stepfather. At some point, we become so comfortable with each other that we share our innermost secrets. She explains to me that when she was younger, she felt misunderstood. Her parents couldn’t comprehend her burgeoning attraction to the same sex. She was discontented with her slightly rotund frame. Therefore, she took to cutting herself. She would lie and hide it. If asked, she would tell people she fell off her bike, or she might tell them that it was an accident she experienced as a precocious toddler. Accordingly, I share my deepest, darkest secret, something I had buried for so long not even my closest friends knew about it. Back in high school, depressed that I had rapidly gone from A+ student to failing, arguing with my mother about something that is now so trivial I cannot even recall it, I charged at my living room window, four stories up. My mother, the amazing woman that she is, tackled me. This was most assuredly not a task to be taken lightly because I was not, well, light. My intentions were clear and my resolve strong. I was going to jump; my mother saved my life. It is then, in the moment that we recall our broken youths, with her crying and me with something in both my damned eyes, that Panda Bear and I begin dating. The secrets that we had held onto for so long bring us together.

Let’s jump forward a bit to January 22, 2008. Panda Bear and I have been dating nearly two months. Jack and I have a double date planned with Panda and her friend Lisa. We four meet up and go over to Jack’s place, only our other friend and Jack’s roommate, Kyle, is home, and he’s got friends with him. Our quiet night has turned into a raucous party. Enter Janothan. He is a friend of ours from high school that I have been close to in cycles. At certain times, we would not speak for months, and at others we would hang out every weekend. This chance meeting is on the cusp of the latter. I am excited to see him, and ever more ecstatic to show off my new girlfriend. Furthermore, it’s outstanding that they get along so well. My
girlfriend and my good friend became close. They bond over the little things I do (he's always late!). I could not be more delighted that everyone is getting on so well. It is perhaps my enthusiasm for an agreeable situation that blinds me.

Janothan and Panda quickly become disconcertingly close. Upon meeting each other, they realize they have a history class together. Shortly thereafter, Panda concludes that he is cool enough to adopt into her core group of friends at school. I don’t mind at first; it’s amazing that they get along so well. However, I soon became privy to the fact that the only person she talks to more than him is me, and only by the slightest of margins. Janothan begins to tell her all of the things he holds in the deepest recesses of his memory. She tells me things that only she knows about him. We have been dating long enough that her secrets become my secrets and mine hers. He had apparently slept with the younger sister of his friend Michel. Janothan doesn’t know that I now know.

Again, we skip ahead. It is now April 1, 2008. I have taken Panda out to a sake bar to celebrate four months together with Janothan and friends. Naturally, with it being April Fool’s Day, we decide to make a few crank calls. As Janothan prepares to call Kyle, he looks at me and says he wants me to move away from him as he makes this call; he does not want to do it in front of me. When pressed for a reason, he states that Kyle knows things about him I will never know. I respond with what I do know, revealing what Panda Bear told me. This is when the fallout begins.

Almost immediately, Janothan becomes furious. He yells at me, asserts that I never should have been told that. The guy who I have defended and maintained a strong friendship with for nearly seven years looks me in the eye and tells me I do not know him. It is the first serious implosion in the already weakened foundation of our camaraderie. He is upset with Panda because he cannot imagine she would ever divulge something so clandestine. Simultaneously, Panda is livid with me, for I have apparently betrayed that which matters most to her, her confidence. This raises a most important question: When is it okay to tell a secret? I thought that, as the secret was about Janothan, it was the one time disclosure would be permitted. I could not have been further from the truth. My relationship ends mere hours after that; my friendship lasts only days more. Secrets brought us together, and secrets tore us apart. I guess there will just always be secrets to tell, and secrets to keep.
We were both born as tiny bundles of joy, completely different, ironically intertwined. Our lives were so different: dirt roads to concrete, pigs to pigeons, poor to middle-class. When I celebrated my first birthday, his mother was smothering his whimpers into her breast. She was hurrying across a desolate land, always quick to heed the warning calls of her Coyote leader. Years would pass before either of us would even meet. With our first shaky hello’s, it was clear that our story was going to be one I’d tell my children. In small, careful steps, we began to learn about one another.

He grew up here, just as I had. He lived in the neighborhood where my mother was born. Eventually we would become so close that we would find ourselves spending time in the same Petland, from which my parents were once inseparable. We first met in ninth grade; he was a shy, tiny boy, and I was a timid girl barely breaking out of her shell. I had never encountered boys; talking to him was like entering a strange, self-conscious world, completely new and unforgiving. Our friendship was constantly strained, for I was not alone in my lack of interaction with the other sex. Yet over time it blossomed. Three years of friendship eventually turned into love, and it was a love that was as surprising as it was difficult. It was out of that love that he finally admitted the truth to me; it was out of that love that he told me his story.

He quivered and could barely look me in the eye. I held his hand, and it became moist with his anticipation. I sat in bewilderment as he looked out his bedroom window. Maybe he was searching for words, perhaps strength. It was then that he spoke.

The first time he crossed over, he was only nine months old. His mother had decided to smuggle them across the border in hopes of a better life than the one she currently had. Mexico was no longer a home her; it was a barren land filled with memories of regret. Her marriage had become undesirable, to say the least, and a promise of better things lingered behind a stretching barb wire fence. Through weeds and winds, the dry brush and the seething earth, she carried him to their new address. Together they lived in a small apartment for a little over a year, before she reconciled with his dad and made her way back across, back into his arms. In Mexico they stayed for another eight years. In time she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl, and everything seemed to be panning out well. After some time, money began to run low, and with that, his father took things into his own hands. He, along with his brother and father-in-law, grouped together and made their way across; it was nearly a year before they had enough to send for the rest of the family. The day came for them to leave; it was early. The dew had only just begun to form on the branches outside, the sun still overshadowed by the moon. “Bien mi amor, avansa,” were the words his mother whispered into his ear, and with bags in hand, his sister quietly swaddled against her side, he almost felt a sense of déjà vu. Sleepy-eyed and confused, he questioned where they were going; but silence was the only response offered. They reached a hotel and went in to sleep. It had been less than one hour before his mother roused him again and requested that they go for a walk. “¿Donde vamos, Mama?” he begged, and her only reply was to keep walking…. 

I sat there, awestruck, as the words nervously tumbled from his mouth. Illegal? Could it be true? Is this real? Words raced through my head, and all I could do was cry. I was so scared of losing him. What would happen if he was ever stopped in the street? What would happen if he needed to get a job, go to college, or do anything that most took for granted? Tears streamed down my cheeks as the severity of the situation set
in. His mother walked into the room, and he told her that I now knew the truth. She sat beside me and held my hand; in broken English she asked that I not talk about it to anyone. Even though they’d been here for as long as they had with no problems, there was always a risk. I knew I would get in trouble if they were ever found. I had to face it: I was an accomplice. But at that moment I also realized it didn't matter. I wanted to help, to protect them, shelter them from whatever evils came their way. Anytime they needed me, I was there, and even when they didn’t, I stuck around. They were my family; they were a part of me. It didn’t matter if they weren't in the most conventional of situations; they were a part of my life. I was committed to the story of us.
During our first September in America, my parents were so preoccupied with unpacking that they failed to realize the fact that my brother, Yaasen, my sister, Miriam, and I had not left the house for two whole weeks. In the fall of 1994 my dad, Amanat, jumped at the career opportunity of a lifetime, and as a result, moved my whole family from the bustling, noisy, crowded, polluted city of Lahore, Pakistan to the equally bustling, noisy, crowded, polluted city of Brooklyn, New York. My seclusion from the outside world would change in a most disturbing way for me, for soon I would have to succumb to my mom’s wishes and leave the house almost every day.

My mom and dad had a way of communicating that they believed was understood by just the two of them. What they didn’t realize at that time was that although I was only five years old, I knew exactly what their secret glances and gestures meant. So one night when my dad uttered the words, “Tehmina, Amena should be getting to bed. It’s late and you know she has to wake up early for her first day of school,” causing her to give him that, “You-know-you’re-not-supposed-to-mention-that-in-front-of-the-kids” glance, I braced myself for any formidable experience that might come my way. In addition, whenever my dad spoke to my mom in Punjabi, instead of the conventional Urdu, I knew it was something serious.

I realized soon enough my mom’s reason for that particular glance. “You’re a big girl now, Amena, and big girls go to school. It’s a place where you have fun and make new friends.” “School…” The word skipped around in my head, causing me to daydream, as I so often did. I tried to remember how school had been portrayed in all those Pakistani cartoons I used to watch. It was a place of adventures, a place filled with magic and love, and a place where, in the end, all was well. Despite these comforting thoughts, I still felt a strange tingling in my stomach as my mom let me turn the old, rusted, cold doorknob of the classroom.

I can still remember the initial chill that ran through my spine as I saw my new classmates and teacher. The aroma of finger paints and brand new Legos filled the air. I slowly and quietly walked over to a blonde girl (whose name I would later learn was Lauren) playing with wooden blocks and asked her in a clear voice, “Can I play with you?” What shocked me was not her lemon-colored hair, a kind of which I’d never seen before in my life, but her response. She seemed to be saying, “Gibber gabber gibber gibber.” “Something’s wrong with her. She doesn’t know how to talk. I’ll go talk to someone else,” I thought to myself.

Soon enough, my teacher, an elderly woman named Mrs. Schwartz, whose wrinkles reminded me of my grandmother, introduced me to another elderly lady, named Mrs. Mann. Mrs. Mann took me outside the classroom and separated me from the group of kids who, for some strange reason, had not learned how to speak. My initial reaction was one of relief, but it was soon followed by a feeling of confusion. Mrs. Mann led me into a small, cluttered room that contained remnants of what used to be a beautiful mural of flowers. She wasted no time, and as soon as I sat down, she instantly pulled out a large set of cards. She wanted me to repeat after her as she pointed at the cards and made some slow, humorous shapes with her mouth. Initially, I felt insulted that someone would try to talk to me this way -- even five year-olds have some pride -- but eventually, it was something I became accustomed to. Little did I know, I would be spending a great deal of time in this odd room with this odd lady conducting this odd procedure.

As my knowledge of this new language, known as English, expanded in school, I started becoming curious about the translations of other abstract words. I would ask my mom to help me learn the translations
of new words. At the same time, I feared that I would eventually have to give up my home country’s language of Urdu to learn English. At that time I believed it was impossible to retain the knowledge of two languages, and consequently, two cultures.

I remember how I learned the difference between “yesterday” and “tomorrow.” I asked my mom (in Urdu of course), “How do you say ‘yesterday’ (‘kul’) in English?” Instead of “yesterday” she taught me how to say “tomorrow,” assuming that I wanted to learn the English word for “the next day.” What she failed to explain to me was that, unlike in Urdu, in English, “yesterday” and “tomorrow” were not represented by the same word.

That very next Monday, when Mrs. Schwartz asked my classmates and me to share the events of our weekend, I confidently raised my hand for the first time and announced in a loud, assertive voice, “Tomorrow, I went to the circus.” For the first time, my family and I had attended the amazing, jaw-dropping Barnum & Bailey Circus. Although I was pleased with my response, my classmates did not notice how much my English had improved because they were too absorbed in giggling at my error. I felt my face turn bright red, but I did not cry. My attempt was not in vain because in that instant, I resolved to make the most of my ESL meetings with Mrs. Mann and to gather as much information about this language and its semantics as I could.

That was exactly what I did for the rest of my kindergarten year, and I was proud to announce to anyone who would listen that I’d received the Most Improved ESL Student Award at the kindergarten graduation. It was at this point that I realized it was very much possible to retain the knowledge of two languages and two cultures. It became apparent to me that I could hold onto my Pakistani identity and, simultaneously, learn a little bit about and assimilate into this new culture of the place that was now my home.
Ding-dong. Ding-dong. The doorbell rang, but we didn't order any takeout; we weren't expecting any unwanted visitors. Who could it be? Not wanting to make any noise so they would know people were home, I tip-toed towards the door slowly as though Elmer Fudd were sneaking up on Bugs Bunny and peered through the peep-hole. However, I held no gun nor weapon in my possession, merely curiosity. On the other side of the door stood two Caucasian males dressed in suits. The only well-dressed individuals who came to my door unwelcome and unannounced were the Jehovah's Witnesses. These weren't your normal Jehovah's Witnesses. In the same manner that I approached the door, I left the door—with the two men standing there. To this day, I still do not know what they came to the door offering me. I could have helped them or they could have helped me, but I will never know.

When someone unwanted rings the door or calls the home, it is irritating. However, we never think to look at things from their perspective. On the other side of the door or line is a fellow human being, attempting to do their job to provide for their family, conducting information to further understand and help individuals, or taking the time to call/see friends and family they haven't seen/spoken to in a while. Instead, we dehumanize them. How could they be humans if they are infringing on our personal time and space? How could they have souls if they neglect the very fact that we do not want to be bothered? Too many times we are so focused on ourselves that we disregard how our actions affect others.

Right around the time the Jehovahs knocked on my door, I was getting desperate. I was tired of sitting in front of my computer day-in-and-day out listening to Get Up, Get Out, Get Something on repeat as I sent my resume and cover letter out to as many potential hirers as possible. However, these companies were like the dryer to my socks. I sent in my stuff intending to get a full return, but instead I got one thing back—a notice saying “Thank you for applying, but we won't be needing your services.” And those were the nice companies who bothered to get back to me. Others just went on running their businesses. Would it have been too much trouble to send a memo: “Hey fella, you're just not good enough. Sorry, better luck next time. Signed, Company with Standards.” Nope. Not even that. Then one night, I was telling a friend to go to Craigslist to find a job, the way I was, well, trying. Maybe he would have better luck than me. He sent me a link to a job opportunity with Working Families Party. We both applied, but I got the job. He didn't. Strange position, no? I was forced to look at things from his perspective. I felt worse because I felt there was nothing I could do. It was out of my hands. I had a job to do.

Now what exactly was my job? The application spoke of no tasks. I was hired on the spot and was told I would be doing something with voters, but I had no idea. All I knew was that I had my first paying job and I was ecstatic. Turns out I was to be a Field Representative for Working Families Party, for which I would go to the suburbs, do donor-to-voter registration, fundraise, advocate for affordable healthcare, better educational system, and lower taxes. Maybe I would need my friend’s help for such a task after all, but there was no possible way. I had to shoulder the burden on my own.

The sun was blaring down on the back of my neck as though I was working in the fields. There were no trees to shelter me. The homes were not as welcoming as the ones in “Leave it to Beaver.” There was
no scent of pies cooling in the summer air. There were no tall buildings hiding the beautiful day. There were no cars zooming by as you walked on the sidewalk and no strangers yelling at each other for accidentally bumping into one another. Was this the “Twilight Zone?” Where was I? I think they refer to a place like this as “the suburbs.”

My field manager took me under his wing to show me just how to communicate with these individuals. He showed me how to effectively canvas to ensure I got through to people with “vigor”—whether it be in a passionate manner or a casual/ laid back manner. It all depended on what they were giving me. I was to match or oppose whatever they were giving me, depending on the situation.

We started out going to doors with individuals who told us to cut the bullshit and get to the point—”you want money, don’t you?” Some people didn’t give a damn and would tell us to get off their porch. Some people were real douche-bags about it and you were forced to hold your tongue. Others, however, loved the work we were doing and started long conversations about their life story. These people would either donate money or at least express sorrow that they couldn’t. But no matter how many good comments you receive, no matter how many songs of praise you hear, the comments that stick with you, that keep ringing in your ears, are the ones that are negative. The ones that forced you to bite your tongue so bad, you could almost taste the blood seeping out.

Early on Tom was doing all the talking. He would just introduce me. Then he decided it was time for me to do a house and speak to a person at a door before he sent me out on my own. The very first person I spoke to, as a canvasser, was a man so right-wing that it wasn’t right. He was so Conservative that I found it unorthodox. I was trying to tell him the points to the best of my ability, seeing as I hadn’t fully learned the full page health care rap they had given me back at headquarters. I told him what we were doing for so many New Yorkers with no health care, who couldn’t afford the high prescription costs, who couldn’t afford the treatment they needed, nor the rising monthly premiums. He rebutted that we needed to worry about the Mexicans coming in and taking all of our jobs. He talked about the war. He talked about everything besides what I was telling him. And after a while, I couldn’t take it anymore. I certainly did match his vigor. I certainly did match his bravado because I felt I was in the right. Just one problem—some of the information I was blurting out was mixed up. Some of my points were wrong. He didn’t know, but Tom certainly let me know when I was done. However, at that point in time I knew I couldn’t see eye to eye with the man.

These moments helped to show me the society we live in, outside of city life, outside of liberal thinking, outside of diversity. It made me question the world we live in and why people were the way they were. It made me question whether people could change. I wondered if people could see the error in their ways, and if they already do, would they change them. I had always been a city boy, but now, here I was getting a firsthand look at what the suburbs were all about. It made me wonder if these people ever took the time to notice what’s going on in the rest of the world.

If we were to take a closer look, we would see just how close we are. The first house I spoke to that night, on my own, was a mother and her daughter. I was so nervous. People smell fear. I tried to tell them what I was doing because I still hadn’t learned the rap, yet the mother still took the time to listen to what I had to say, sighed, and told me “Good luck with my new job.” A simple act like that goes so much further than one would think. It gave me the courage to go on and continue on this unknown path through the neighborhood.

There wasn’t anyone in the neighborhood who looked like me, which was a bit unnerving. I could only imagine what it must have been like for the individuals at the door. Here was a young, brown skinned
boy ringing their doorbell around dinner and sometimes well past the young children's bed times. How did I get there? What did I want? How could they relieve themselves of me as soon as possible? I felt like a stranger inside of my own body because I was having an out of body experience, seeing as I could only put myself in their shoes. This was worse for them than the bill collectors calling during dinner.

I wonder now, why couldn't I see myself as an equal to them? What made me feel like a stranger? Was I insecure? Were they overbearing? We were so close in proximity, but all I could think about at the time was that I felt a distance from them. I felt a space, even with the individuals who were understanding, caring, and willing to listen to what I had to say.

It was getting late and I knew I would have to hurry back to the van soon. We were about to head back to headquarters at Nevins Street. We were in the suburbs---far away from anything familiar to me. The drive there had been a long one. The neighborhood was quiet. It was a dry summer night and there were no winds to sway the trees, no cricketing from the crickets, no owls to ask “who?” But there I was going door to door disturbing the peace.

Although I was disturbing the peace, I knew it was something I had to do. Peace is not peace if it is unnerved silence. True peace comes with serenity. It comes with harmony. It comes with a steadiness of mind, body, and soul. How could we have such a thing if people have no peace of mind, if they are draping their bodies in expensive clothes, if they are selling their souls? We do not have peace. We have the illusion of peace. We have the mirage of peace. We have nothing unless we create it.

Taking action was what I was doing. Taking action was what the Working Families Party was doing. We were having individuals sign petitions; we were reminding the politicians that they worked for us and not the other way around. We were giving the voiceless a voice. We were making a difference.

However, we were also being compensated for the work we were doing. The fundraising for the party became a game of sorts. Who could make the most money in one night? Soon it was as though we forgot about what we were fundraising for because we were blinded by the greed, the same greed that has hurt our society time and time again. Yes, we got into the act because we loved the idea of making a difference, but when did the line between love and money blur? Weren’t the same people we were supposedly fighting against end up in the place they were because of money? When did we forget about helping others and only think about helping ourselves? That first night I made $45. Others were astonished, claiming they made only $5 or $12 their first night. I felt proud, but not because the voices I was giving to the voiceless, but rather because of the money they had given me.

Looking back on my own mistakes and greed, I realize we cannot lose sight of what is important in this world. We cannot lose who we are and then attempt to shield ourselves in worldly possessions. If we were to do so, everything we stand for, everything our nation stands for, would be washed down the drain. Our American dream would turn into a nightmare, as light turns to darkness, and the shadows of the abyss lurk—waiting to pounce on anything pure.

Rather, we must be willing to listen and give others a chance because we do not know how much they may be able to help us. We do not know the impact they may have on our lives. They may be there to change our worlds. I think back now to those two men in suits and can only think—am I them? Am I the two men in suits walking around door to door through the heat of the summer, or am I all those people who could only see what they were doing as an inconvenience to their lives?
The year is 2004. My cousins and I gather to go to a party in a lounge located on the lower east side, also known as the village. The date is January 3rd, and the time is 12:06 a.m. The music is great; my mood is vibrant. I haven't had this much fun in a while. Midway through the night, I notice a small crowd start to form to the left of the dance floor. I take a close look and notice one of my cousins arguing with a man. A fight quickly erupts and several guys jump on top of my cousin. I jump into the crowd and begin pulling people off him and begin fighting as well. A split second later my knees buckle. My legs weaken. I reach out and brace myself on the wall for support. A sharp pain enters the left side of my chest and then upper thigh. My eyes begin to get blurry but I can see three guys lying on the ground a few feet away from me. Two of the guys seem to be unconscious and the other one has his hand over his stomach. I hear women screaming, and men shouting throughout the room. My head begins to spin uncontrollably, I begin to breathe heavily and my breaths get shorter and shorter. My eyes roll to the back of my head and I fall to the floor and black out….

The time is now 1:38 a.m. I am unconscious. I do not hear, see or smell anything around me. A sense of emptiness develops within me. My body feels numb while blood trickles down the side of my face. My jeans are soaked with blood and my shirt is completely ripped off. My eyes slowly begin to widen. I can see my surroundings again. A white hand covered in surgical latex gloves reaches over and pours peroxide onto my open wounds. I hear things and begin to stare at what appears to be the ceiling of an ambulance truck. The sounds of sirens echo within my ear. I see faces that appear to be doctors standing over me. I begin to panic and again I black out….

It is now 2:15 a.m. I wake up in a hospital bed with stitches in my face, my left chest, my lower leg and upper thigh. I try to extend my left hand but realize I can't because my left wrist is handcuffed to the metal railing on the bed. I jerk my wrist, believing I can break the restraint of the handcuffs. A police officer stands to the left of me. Frantically I ask him what's going on, am I under arrest? He replies, “You know what the deal is; you can't go around crashing parties and stabbing innocent people.” I try to explain to the officer that I have no idea what he is talking about. I try to piece together the events from the night. I remember that I did try to defend my cousin, but was wrong wrongfully accused of using an assault weapon!

Later on detectives come and ask me questions. I'm told that an eyewitness pointed me out to detectives and said I was the instigator. After the cops leave, I stay lying in the hospital bed, soaked in blood. I am restless. The feeling of the stitches pulling against my skin makes me irritated. I am still nauseous, my eyes get blurry and once again I black out……

Fast forward twelve months. The year is now 2005; I am sitting in the Court room in front of Judge Solomon. The reason why I am in court is because I was indicted and given a second degree assault charge for the incident that took place in 2004. By this time I have been to court at least seven times since the incident. I’ve been fighting this case, trying to prove my innocence but I realize the good guys get the short end of the stick. I sit between my parents, and my brother and sister sit to the left side of my father. Today is judgment day. I watch how the judge calls defendants’ names out and gives them their sentences. My family is silent. My mother has a blank stare across her face. My father crosses his legs and begins to twist the hairs on his beard. Every time the judge finishes sentencing somebody my body gets tense because I think
he is about to call my name next. I look to the left and my mother wears a disheveled look on her face. My forehead starts to perspire and my heart starts to beat faster. I’m nervous, I’m trying not to show it but inside I feel vulnerable.

The vibe suddenly changes, and the court room clerk yells out, “Next case THE NEW YORK SUPREME COURT vs. KWABENA DESPINOSSE,” My mother erupts in a loud cry; she screams at the top of her lungs. I look at the ground before I get up from the wooden benches and take a deep breath. I reach over to kiss my mother and she hugs me with all her love. She keeps crying and crying. The grasp of her arms feels as if, if she were to let me go she would never see me again. My father’s eyes widen, his mouth drops and he can’t seem to formulate the words that he wants to say to me. His voice begins to crack and he begins to tear. I feel my heart sinking to the deepest depths of the earth. I have never seen my father cry. He is very stern, extremely rigid, but this day is different because today he is watching his own flesh and blood being sent into the devil’s playground.

My older brother taps me on my shoulder when I stand up and walk toward the front of the court room. The court officers sit me down in front of the judge. My family sits six rows behind me crying as the judge convicts me of 2nd degree assault. I stand up and the court officers hand cuff me and start to escort me to a side door. My mother begins to scream uncontrollably and I turn around to get one last glimpse of my family. I see my father catching my mother as she collapses in his arms. I turn away, put my head down and begin to cry while the officers bring me into a small 8x9 cell. They strip search me and transport me into a different part of the building. I sit down on a concrete bench and start to think, and think, and think. Two hours later, a corrections officer comes by and opens up my cell. I ask him where I am going. He replies, “Rikers Island.”

January 6, 2005. I am officially in the belly of the beast. I share a large room with forty five inmates. The rooms look like a shelter filled with beds strewn across the floor. I watch the men in here fight like wild savages. I’m surrounded by murderers, thieves, drug dealers, homeless men, rapists, and gang members. Seventy-five percent of the inmates in here are gang affiliated. I watch a young man get sliced in his face and another get stabbed on his wrist. I only get to use the phone for twenty-one minutes and I constantly have to defend that privilege. I am told when to eat and when to sleep. If I don’t comply with the prison guards’ orders I will receive a brutal beating. I watch prison guards punch an inmate in the mouth with a metal flash light, resulting in that inmate losing his bottom teeth.

Violence is very common in Rikers Island. I keep myself fit by doing push ups and by lifting a bunch of chairs stacked up on top of each other. I use a blue plastic bucket as my basin to wash clothes and the same bin to cook food in. The rice I cook is so bland that I crush Dorito chips and place it in the hot rice as flavoring. Once the Doritos melt it turns into cheese and I add mayonnaise as an extra topping to my dish.

Work isn’t an option in here; it is mandatory. I have to give food to the violent inmates that are locked down within an 8x9 cell. I get fifteen cents an hour and work a seven hour shift. The correction officers randomly search our dorms twice a week. These searches allow the guards to strip search us naked and squat us down to the ground. Whenever I refuse to squat, I get kicked down and spit on. I get abused on a constant basis. The walls smell, the floors are dirty, the food is disgusting. I hate this place. I don’t belong here. I’m embarrassed to tell anybody that I have a degree. Where am I? Does this place really exist? I want to go home.
WITH GUILT, I REPLY, "YES."

AFRAH AHMED

Ye men. That's the country both my parents immigrated from to New York a little over two decades ago. They came to America for the opportunity of a "better" life. They wanted their four children to grow up with the necessities: sufficient food, shelter, clothing, education and an opportunity to voice our opinions. I have tried writing about Yemen three times for this simple assignment, but could not get myself to succinctly describe my six-month experience there. Maybe because I constantly shy away from the topic to avoid emotional vulnerability and sum up my experiences as "it was shit." I was vulnerable when it came to discussing Yemen because of my unfamiliarity with the culture. My parents never sat me down and told me what to expect. They didn't even give me a fair warning of what was to come. What I can say is, though I could not see it at the age of twelve, Yemen was the best experience I have ever had.

I always knew what religion meant to people; living in America I had friends who would pray, go to a synagogue or temple. I even knew someone who worshipped the devil and cast "spells" onto others. But in Yemen it was completely different. After I stepped out of the airport, the cultural difference was more than obvious. I thought it was odd that women wore ballos (long sleeved black robes), hijabs (head scarf) and veils. It didn't bother me so much; I just didn't understand why there was a dress code for women and none for men. Also, I couldn't stop thinking how hot they must be. The average temperature in Yemen was 90-95 degrees. When you're wearing all black and walking around the streets completely covered, it gets real hot, which from my own experience is nothing delightful of any sort. My first day in Yemen I was given a balto, hijab and veil which felt unusual for me because I was used to wearing baggy jeans and shirts and leaving my hair in a low pony tail. Adjusting to this dress code was my first experience of conforming to society and molding myself into its interpretation of what a "proper" woman was; but I enjoyed making faces at people under my veil. Sometimes my sister and I would play a game where we would guess what facial expression the other was making under her veil. It occupied a lot of our time on car drives to the marketplace (yes, we still call it that), mountains (they were so pretty) and to the houses of our aunts and uncle's.

After being in Yemen for a week, I couldn't understand how a person could allow a religion to absorb their life entirely. At first I thought these people were ridiculous. Every morning at the crack of dawn, if I wasn't woken up by our neighbor's rooster it was because I was woken up by the "muedin" (call of prayer) through the loud speakers. These loud speakers were everywhere. They were surrounding the mosques, homes; even the valley that my house was located in was surrounded by these loud speakers. Throughout the day, the call of prayer would ring in the ears of every Yemeni. Everyone would stop what they were doing, close shops, and quickly run home or to the nearest mosque just to pray. I remember thinking, "How could you stop everything you're doing just to pray?" Then I started praying.

I couldn't tell you why I began to pray; I don't remember thinking "I should just do this since everyone else is". As I recall, I wasn't even religious. I was at a crucial point in my life where I was questioning everything about life: Does God exist? Who created us? What came first, the chicken or the egg? What makes the sky blue and the wind blow? The question of God's existence was my number one priority. The reason for this was because I was trying so hard to make sense of the "truth" of Islam and seeking a trail that God might have left behind for me to find. Once I realized that it would be impossible to find, I still thought about God, but I didn't question the thought of this higher power. I just learned to accept religion for what
it was, faith. I was taking Islam out for a test drive and it seemed that the roads weren't too rocky, so it suited me best at that time.

When I first prayed, I rushed through it. I just wanted to get it over with. I was doing it for the sole reason that my entire family kept mentioning how I should pray. It then became an obligation to commit this sacred act rather than a source of spiritual guidance for me. Afterwards I felt bad. The one time I would reach out to God and whisper my prayers into his/her ears almost as if to say my heart's true desire was a secret---was incomplete with my rushed intentions. After a week or two of rushed prayer, I decided to assess the situation. "Why am I rushing?" I thought. There wasn't a reason for one. After contemplating what I had learned about Islam-- the tolerance, patience and faith-- I decided to pray more slowly the next time. I tried to look at praying as a relaxation period rather than a mandatory expression of gratefulness. As time passed and I continued to pray, it wasn't so tedious; it didn't bother me so much anymore. It became a time of day when I could relieve myself of the constant stresses of the day to take a quick break to meditate and remember where I was in life and where I wanted to be. It was the silence of my thoughts and solitude that calmed me.

I don't pray anymore, but I'll never forget those peaceful moments I had when in prayer and how tranquil it made me feel afterwards. I stopped praying for many reasons. One of the reasons why I stopped was because I didn't like the idea of "submitting" myself and having faith in God. I didn't like the idea of the oppression of women, and the Qur'an being altered to the likes of others. I didn't like the idea that God took someone that meant a lot to me, my grandmother Sofiya, in an instant without my having a say in it. Most of all, I didn't like that everything I mumbled during my prayer didn't make sense to me. I didn't understand a word of it and still don't. When I asked family members what these surah's (excerpts of Qur'an) meant, they answered "You're not supposed to understand what's being said--- just say them in prayer". I didn't understand why God's words didn't make sense or couldn't be simplified, which frustrated me. Since then, I've learned a lot more about Islam, and have come to terms with many aspects of it, such as the treatment of women, the suggested dress code and much more--- but still, I just can't seem to get myself to pray anymore. Sometimes I want to pray, and all I can think about is the tranquility I felt, but it never felt right to me. I never felt like I was affiliated with the religion of Islam for the right reasons. And when people ask me "are you Muslim?" with guilt I reply "Yes".
ABOUT THE ARTIST

Adam Thompson is an artist and adjunct lecturer at Brooklyn College. His work has appeared in numerous exhibitions in New York and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, writer and lecturer Helen Phillips. More of his work can be seen at www.thedrawingarchive.com.