TELLING OUR STORIES,
SHARING OUR LIVES

A COLLECTION OF STUDENT MEMOIR WRITING

BROOKLYN COLLEGE

FALL 2009
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the support of:

William Tramontano, Provost
Donna Wilson, Dean of Undergraduate Studies
Milga Morales, Dean of Student Life
Ellen Tremper, Chair, English Department
Janet Moser, Director of Freshman Composition

Fall 2009 English 1 Instructors:
Catherine Baker, Moustafa Bayoumi, Lauren Belski, Donald Brown, Weston Clay, Erin Courtney,
Steve D’Amato, Rebecca Liss, David Miller, Patrick Nugent, Tanya Pollard, Molly Pulda, Matt
Reeck, Jonathan Reeve, John Roy, Helen Rubinstein, Christa Schneider, Evelyn Spence, Jane
Stafford, Jessica Stein, Albena Vassileva, Ken Walker
Sarah Brown, College Assistant
Brendan O’Malley, Writing Fellow
Patrick Kavanagh, Assistant to the Dean of Undergraduate Studies

Faculty and Staff Discussion Leaders
The Staff at Printworks

Cover Art: “Read.” by Bruce Labounty
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments iii

Introduction 1

Part One: From the Kitchen 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Corner of Parsons Boulevard and Archer Avenue</td>
<td>Ghavin Deonarain</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So Much More Than Plastic Chairs and Sticky Floors</td>
<td>Conor Boyle</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Slice of Home</td>
<td>Allison Guttadaro</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Real Sambar</td>
<td>Joshua Pulinat</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandma’s Best</td>
<td>Martina Arroyo-Burton</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part Two: Changing Places 15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exponentially from No</td>
<td>Phil Ma</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Day that Changed My World</td>
<td>Maritza Gomez</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judgment</td>
<td>Arshad Bacchus</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who Am I?</td>
<td>Alana Jordon</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Beauty of My Trip</td>
<td>Randy De La Cruz</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Beginnings</td>
<td>Alexander Kopenkin</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Experiences of a Young Soul</td>
<td>Romona Heywood</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children of Circumstance</td>
<td>Jawaria Amir</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Surf Shack</td>
<td>Matthew Purcell</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Part Three: The View from Here 45

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Just Skin</td>
<td>Nayoché Lynch-Cabreja</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Jungle</td>
<td>Julissa Contreras</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Festival through My Eyes</td>
<td>Azam Mukhtar</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A New Light: My Thoughts on President Obama</td>
<td>Frieda Benun</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Child and the Peacock</td>
<td>Hamaad Hassan</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Falling from Stars</td>
<td>Sarah-Meira Rosenberg</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judaism, Secularism, and Guilt</td>
<td>Benjamin Rudshteyn</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prypiat</td>
<td>Eugene Deykin</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Grass Is Always Greener in Fort Greene</td>
<td>Victoriya Levkovskaya</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Move, Short Drive</td>
<td>Erica Niezvestny</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part Four: The Strongest Bonds</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I No Longer Stay Aside</td>
<td>Nuruddinhodja Zakirkhodjaev</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Spirit</td>
<td>Cendy Lopez</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Cruise Legend</td>
<td>Marcus Konner</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Windows into Childhood</td>
<td>Fiona Madray</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity</td>
<td>Dominic Lim</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kreah</td>
<td>Keren Baker</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Benjamin</td>
<td>Adam Chubak</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Unexpected Transformation</td>
<td>Fatema Osman</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Brooklyn College students of the class of 2013 began their college experience through the pre-freshman reading of Barack Obama's Dreams from My Father during the summer before the start of the Fall 2009 semester. On Orientation Day, they discussed the book in small groups, led by members of the Brooklyn College faculty and staff. Conversations about Dreams from My Father 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 ONE: FROM THE KITCHEN

Ghavin Deonarain • Conor Boyle • Allison Guttadaro
Joshua Pulinat • Martina Arroyo-Burton
My diet is a myriad of different flavors, textures, cultures, and cooking techniques all mixed up into a rather haphazard eating pattern. I pride myself on knowing the best places in the city to get any food, whether that be Thai food, Chinese, Mexican, Continental, or whatever ethnicity I’m identifying with at the time. However mashed and mixed up my eating habits may be though, there is a definite staple food in my life. That staple food is that all-American food, the halal cart gyro.

My pre-eminent reason for loving gyros doesn’t stem from any cultural obligation, or even from excessive exposure in my younger years. In fact, up until seventh grade, the gyro was a completely alien concept to me. Meat wrapped in what resembled a tortilla, expertly garnished with onions and green/red peppers, and topped with the classic white sauce and extra hot sauce (of course!), was something I wouldn’t have touched solely on the basis that I had no precedent with which to compare it. Up until that point, my life was unfulfilled and quite empty with my traditional meals.

Then, my father started working nights. While being at home with only minimal parental supervision and an endless afternoon to entertain himself seems like an attractive option to a child of twelve years, the novelty wore off quickly, and I began to miss my dad—so much so that I would wait up for him to come back from work, usually around 12 or 1AM. Naturally, I wasn’t as much of an insomniac then as I am now, so I only exercised this liberalism with my curfew on the weekends. It started out as an almost monthly event, and soon began to become weekly. And every week, I’d have nothing to eat until my dad came home. This was due to a preoccupation with the prospect of getting to see my dad before I was ushered into my room and put down to rest until Sunday. I was so preoccupied that I actually forgot to eat.

My father, realizing that I was hungry almost every night, brought me home a gyro one night. I still remember my first experience of a gyro. At the time, dad worked at Parsons-Archer, the last stop on the E and F line trains (he was a train operator back then). Right outside of Parsons-Archer there was a gyro stand, modest in its build and not exactly expert in its art. This was where he would get his lunch, and later, would get me my dinner. I poked at the concoction with a fork, standard fare in a gyro bag but seemingly useless now that I reflect on it. Tentatively, I raised the fork, upon which I had speared a miniscule piece of chicken (at that point I wasn’t a fan of lamb), and almost comically struggled to put it in my mouth. My face was held in a permanent grimace until I had finished chewing and swallowed. Finally allowing my faculties to return to me, I began the arduous process of evaluating my first bite of my first gyro.

It was love.

I ravenously tore into the rest of the meal, all table manners and utensils forgotten. I didn’t even open the can of Sunkist next to me (a feat in
and of itself as I drink almost as much as I eat). Bite after bite filled my mouth, and I began to enjoy it so much I was already preparing myself for next week. And my dad didn’t fail me. For months on end, I’d have a gyro whenever my father walked into the door late Saturday night/early Sunday morning. They’d come coupled with conversation and stories of the late night activities of the subway. Always quick with an anecdote about some idiot who tried to hop a turnstile or a funny aside about a bumbling co-worker, my father would entertain me for hours on end. We’d laugh the night away without any thought of the responsibilities our sleeplessness would cause us to neglect the next day. It felt like a return to a time when my father and I spent every waking moment together that we’d lost due to his choice to work nights.

It soon became more than a taste sensation. It began to be a tradition my father and I shared with each other, alone, on weekend nights. My mother and sister were asleep, and the men were left to rule the house, in their hot sauce and white sauce stained glory. It was a magical time, shared with the man I idolized and modeled myself after, sweetened with a little bribe of roasted meat. I believe that it was this particular facet of my gyro experience that molded me into the gyro connoisseur that I am today. While I would certainly have loved the flavors that gyros offer in any case, I don’t think my curiosity would have grown into an obsession had it not been for my innate association of gyros and spending time with my father after being bereft of him for a significant amount of time.

Of course since then I’ve expanded my culinary expertise in “Gyroism.” This initial foray into the gyro culture only whetted my appetite, and I soon delved in so deep I don’t think I can ever get out. Gyro is now about more than taste. It has become a sort of job, an identity. There’s a thrill for me in the hunt for a good gyro stand, the stoic look of my compatriots’ faces reflected on mine while we judged the fate of the gyro practitioner and his laugh of approval and kindly conversation once we’ve granted our approval. For me, gyros have become more than a food. They are now a hobby, a pastime, a passion, and even a lifestyle.
We, my friends and I, are the youthful vanguard of the new American identity. We are neither multicultural nor omni-cultural. Without a concrete or common past, we create our own personal culture, shaped by contemporary experience rather than archaic traditions and customs. To this end, we must pick and choose our own methods of expression, from values and vernacular to music and meals, each dictated by its own individual circumstances. Every action we take serves to develop an identity by which we may define ourselves in an expanding and seemingly boundless world.

Our prevailing culinary traditions have come about less through conscious choice than circumstance. In our hometown of Amityville, New York, pizzerias and Chinese food establishments exist in an almost exact one-to-one ratio. Where one is found, the other is sure to be no more than four or five storefronts away. If this abundance may at first seem arbitrary and irrelevant, we must ask ourselves, “Should any reflection of life as it is lived be discredited without further investigation?” The answer at which we must arrive is, clearly, “No.” Although not as specific or distinct as a French Bordeaux grape or a Latin American tortilla, these food types can reveal a great deal about the psyches and thus traditions of my friends and me; for tradition is only a repeated reflection of the general psyche of a particular people. Although ease of access, as well as cost-efficiency, are important concerns, the true answer lies farther below the surface. What subconscious inner conflicts can be inferred by the overwhelming presence of these eateries? Their presence is a result, after all, of an extended and pressing demand for such establishments.

One key to the allure is in the congregational aspect of such establishments. While the elderly American will most often have such items delivered, or, if in a particularly vivacious mood, pick it up for take-out, tables still exist in almost all pizzerias and Chinese food joints. This is because we as modern teens seek more than just physical nourishment. While past cultures have emphasized the familial bonding of shared meals, the prevalent attitude of today’s American family makes no time for such deliberate group occasions. Instead, I look to my friends as a surrogate family structure, sitting and sharing with those related not by blood but by joint experience.

In this way, the local eatery provides a new dining room for our family apparatus, one that places more importance on chosen ties than on those bestowed by birth, which are oft’ rent by divorce or neglect.

Another draw is the subject of taste. Today, pizzerias and Chinese restaurants have superseded the late-night diners of the fifties. This shift is a natural evolution of taste and style, consistent with the contemporary desire for the exotic without the risk of disappointment. The abundant flavor of pseudo-Asian cuisine scoffs at the bland repertoire of open-faced sandwiches and brown-yellow breakfast products of a bygone era. These piquant or citric sauces and garnishes of
Chinese food are clearly not an American invention; we as Americans often value mass appeal over flair and spice. Yet, they are certainly not the same dishes eaten in their home country. This imported-yet-modified nature suits us quite well, however. Independent of our historical footnotes, the dumpling, the Sicilian slice, and I all forge our own identity as we strive to suit our current surroundings. One adds new vegetables to the mixture, another melts the cheese and changes the sauce, while the last leaves behind hotdogs and apple pie to claim a new identity, that of the purely American identity, of imported and domestic, of past and present. My friends and I do not attempt to claim pizza as originating in Plymouth, and General Tso’s Chicken is not named after a comrade of General George Patton. Still, nowhere in Italy will you find a classic New York slice, and the streets of Beijing do not smell of chicken and broccoli (they smell of things much fouler). These amalgamated entrees have arisen much in the same way as we ourselves have risen: beginning in the history of some other, distinct culture, transported to a new land, and nurtured over centuries to reflect something more fitting to the current landscape in which we thrive.

This imagery rises from deep within suburban woks and inner-city brick ovens to unite an often scattered and uncertain youth. While my friends and I can call little in this world our own, as we are not yet old enough to see the results of many of our actions, we can rightfully lay claim to the national network of coexisting Chinese food restaurants and pizzerias. We have inherited our language from our parents. Our currency, economics, banks, and government have been a part of our lives without much choice. However, we have not been told where to eat. While we certainly did not build these businesses, they were not a gift from our predecessors. They are a result of the unspoken yearning for something to call our own. Ethnocentric and historical traditions have become things of the past, and identity now resides in a culture of our own choosing, carefully adapted from our past to meet us fully in the present. Through the abundance of pizza and Chinese food we have now become the origin of our own traditions and of our own identity.
The red benches, the double-parked cars, the perfect mix of cologne, perfume, and steamy sauce in the air. Grandparents taking their grandchildren for a tasty treat, young teens out before curfew, and first date awkwardness felt at every corner table. The menu is the same for all: two Sicilian slices and a Pepsi. The place is L & B Spumoni Gardens, a family owned pizzeria since 1939 now celebrating its seventieth year in the same place! Located in Gravesend, this Brooklyn landmark continues to produce memories for generations of people who love friends, early summer evenings, and the best pizza in town. I am no exception.

A couple of weeks ago I made a trip there with a few of my best friends from high school. In just a few days, we will be all starting our freshmen year of college, but for now it’s on to one of most frequent destinations to enjoy one of the few days it isn’t raining this summer. To no one’s surprise, the line is spilling out on to the street. Waiting impatiently, my eyes search for a familiar face, a fellow recent grad, a next door neighbor, an unkind ex. As I draw closer to the counter, it’s decision time, one slice or two? Do I leave room for the spumoni? Either way, we’d better find seats in the sun.

After a ten minute wait, I am now next in line and am appalled at what I hear from the patron in front of me. The blonde, blue-eyed girl wearing a tasteful sundress uttered an order rarely heard around these parts: “I’ll have a regular slice,” she said. A regular slice?! Who orders a regular slice? Squares are the only shapes sold at this establishment. “What will it be love?” the man old enough to be my oldest uncle asks. “Two Sicilians and a Pepsi,” I say with confidence. I fork over the exact change, four crumpled singles and a fading quarter.

Balancing my soda with my slices, I rip out a handful of napkins and then a second handful. This is always a messy meal. Maneuvering my way in traffic, I spot my friends through my Dolce & Gabanas. They have a prime location, a round table in the sunlight, with an umbrella just in case it gets too hot. There are few casual eating experiences like enjoying a perfect summer’s day sitting in the outside garden at L & B.

Giggling, gossip, and belly laughter interrupted only by large bites and long sips. We take the conversation seriously, but we all know it is somewhat silly. Between the Chris Brown and Rihanna drama, or who recently broke up in J-14. Knowing these are our last few days of summer, we enjoy the beautiful sunlight beaming down on us while it lasts.

After the last bite had been taken and there is nothing left on our paper plates but a few clumps of sauce, there is an awkward moment of silence. We are all waiting for who will be the first to say it, although we are all thinking the same thing. It is time for dessert; it’s time for a spumoni. Finally, I make the first move; we all get up and head for the line. All of us but one, of course, since
you always have to save your seat or it will be gone before you place your order.

Spumoni—if you are not from New York, you probably don’t know what it is. I once told an out-of-towner about spumoni and they asked, “Does it come in different flavors?” True New Yorkers, especially those from Brooklyn, know spumoni is just spumoni, something that cannot be described, just enjoyed. Sometimes two scoops, sometimes three, sometimes a pint to take home to the family (if it survives the ride home). Every time I get closer to ordering, my number of scoops seems to rise. I can’t blame myself for not resisting. After all, we are talking about an Italian ice cream with layers of chocolate, pistachio, whipped cream and small bits of cherries!

I settle on a large (three scoops) and definitely get my money’s worth. We all lick it down quickly and I feel fortunate to have avoided the all too common brain freeze. Now that I am done, I take a deep breath confirming that I am finally full. The time has come to move on to the next destination, but it is always nice to know I will be back, probably sooner rather than later.

As I walk on by to my car with a smile on my face, I start to think how this is a place that I can always come back to. No matter how old I get, I know I can always return here to make me feel like a kid again, always taking with me a small slice of home. Sure, I may be growing up, but as long as this place is still around I know where I can go to feel young again. Although it can be sad to grow up, go to college, and not see your friends as much, it sure is nice to know that we will all be back here again come next summer and for many summers to come.

Now that my mouth has been watering this whole time (I am sure yours is, too), I want you to know they are located on 2785 Eighty-sixth Street, and just in case you can’t get there, don’t worry, they deliver: (718) 449-1230. Make sure you order the Sicilian slices!
When people ask me about my ethnicity and its traditional foods, most people have dishes like chicken tikka masala and others that are common in popular Indian restaurants in mind. But this cuisine is totally different from that of the that of southern India. Unlike the dishes that are better known in America, those of South India are less influenced by western cuisines. Another difference between these two is the quantity of butter and oil used. Compared to many northern Indian dishes, those of the South are healthier, simpler, and significantly spicier.

The food that I want to talk about is an everyday breakfast dish in the state of Kerala. The food is called sambar, which is usually eaten with iddli. Sambar is like a vegetable soup except spicier, and iddli is an oval shaped cake that is made using a type of lentil called urad dal. They are eaten together during breakfast and are native to only the most southern part of India. In contrast to the lack of authentic African dishes in Barack Obama's Dreams from My Father, the food that I am talking about is actually almost all authentic. The authentic feeling comes from cultural ties that we associate with these foods. Sambar reminds me of my relatives' hard work and their lifestyle, which contrasts greatly with the one I have in America. When I have sambar out of its original context, it makes this dish feel very altered.

My parents are immigrants from tiny village areas in the state of Kerala. The villages in the southern part of India are virtually unchanged in terms of traditional food and customs. The only changes are that everyone has a cell phone and most people are going to college, but other than that, people still wear the traditional munda in the daily setting. The munda is a sheet that men and women wrap around their lower body and walk around in. They are as common and traditional in the southern Indian culture as jeans are in American culture. Everything is so routine and traditional that if any westernized KFC or Chinese restaurant were to poke up in any of the major cities, it would be some exotic tourist attraction or something. Southern Indians tend to ignore other cultures and traditions.

Because of this separation, you can imagine how authentic this food is. The vegetables involved are all homegrown in the villages and the recipes for this simple traditional breakfast have existed since the beginning of civilization in that area of India. The tropical weather there allows people to be almost self-sufficient because of all the different varieties of plants that grow.

In fact, the food is so authentic, that when I ask my parents what the ingredients are they say, “Every vegetable that I can see in my back yard is in my sambar.” When I ask for specific names they say, “Padavalanga, vellerikya, kumbulungya, kovakya, parippa(dal), chaemba chenna.” Obviously, most Americans would never recognize vegetables called by names like that. When I searched the Internet for some type of translation, I found out that things that would go in the sambar
would be okra, snake gourd, lentils, and a combination of other vegetables, mostly native to that part of India.

Here in the U.S. however, the process of making this food is different and therefore not as pure. Because we are no longer in India, these vegetables are no longer in our backyard. These vegetables are shipped from thousands of miles away and are put in our non-authentic, non-stick stainless steel pots and pans. Instead of the Indian men or women waking up early in the morning and picking vegetables straight from the ground for their breakfast, I see my mother pulling out vegetables from the refrigerator and freezer, and hurriedly preparing it before she has to go to work in the morning. The feeling just isn’t the same and it gives the dish, if not a different taste, a different emotion.

Sambar that we make in America, although authentic in content, is unauthentic in experience because the culture and the history that went into the making of this dish isn’t there as compared to when our ammachi (grandmother) cooks it for us. It does not have that special feeling that comes with a centuries-old tradition, but it feels more like an nostalgic attempt to recreate home in a new world.
As a small child, I always cherished Christmas. My friends would gather up Toys ‘R’ Us and KB Toys catalogs to circle presents with a big red pen. Sometimes I would join them, salivating over the glossy pages full of new, exciting potential gifts. But something in my heart wasn’t into it. My mind wandered past the material possibilities of Christmas and instead focused on the edible delights. My head swarmed with images of candied yams, roasted chicken, arroz y gandules, and most importantly, my Grandma’s famous pasteles. Those meat pastries were the reason I loved Christmas time.

Every year, my family would meet at my Grandma’s house for the holidays. Aunts, uncles, and cousins would travel from all over the country just to be there. Luckily, I lived upstairs from her, giving me the advantage of enjoying the sweet fragrance that wafted upward all afternoon. I could smell the mixture of plantains and yautia being mashed together, the meat slowly cooking absorbing all the herbs. More times than once, I offered my novice cooking assistance but was only shooed away with a strict finger. “Get out of the kitchen!” My grandma’s voice would crack with irritation as she clicked her tongue in a foreign language. Though reluctant, I wandered away in the direction of the Christmas tree. If I were careful enough, I would slip a candy cane off the branch unnoticed to temporarily satisfy my hunger and run back upstairs to await the big feast.

As it got later in the evening, my relatives would show up in their best clothing. The men brought the beers, the women brought extra food, and the children kept each other entertained. By now, the salsa music was loud and the voices boisterous. “Ven a comer!” Come eat were my favorite words to hear, especially from my Grandma. Her words reverberated in my ears, setting my legs in motion toward the now crowded kitchen. Piles upon piles of food were loaded unto each plate. (She had a tendency to overfeed people.) I made sure I designated a special spot on my plate to get the delicious meat pastries. Once situated, my family and I would sit around in a circle and eat. Most of them continued previous discussions but I remained still and silent. My main focus at the moment was to enjoy and savor every flavor in the meaty meal.

The flavor and texture of pasteles is unique in its own way. Some say its an acquired taste while others find it downright disgusting. For me, pasteles is rich in flavor, and stimulates nostalgic feelings. For those that never had them, pasteles can be described as a soft, boiled meat pastry. The meat is covered up in a masa mixture which consists of green bananas, yautia, and yuca. The masa is then bundled up in a banana leaf, covered by parchment paper and tied up with a string. In the end, it looks like an edible present! This process can take up to two days to complete and requires an entire family to make.
Most Puerto Ricans make pasteles with their family and use it as a time to connect with their children or parents. Everyone is designated a specific role: someone can grate the masa, another can pack the meat, and someone else wraps up the whole deal. Family stories are told, children learn life lessons, and everyone bonds. In my family, it was a bit different. My Grandma did the entire process alone. It was her time to reflect on her past life in Puerto Rico. I’m not too sure how she made so many in time for Christmas, but her diligence, nimble hands, and tremendous love was felt in each bite. For this reason, this entree was distinctively all her own.

According to my family members, pasteles, or meat pastries, are a traditional Puerto Rican dish. Just to verify, I double checked this fact on the Internet. Most of the ingredients and starter recipes derive from Taino culture. These indigenous people cultivated vegetables such as corn and yuca which are important ingredients for pasteles. Other recipes go back to the African slaves in the mountaneous terrain of P.R. In those areas, green bananas are plentiful and used in the pastry. Even though this dish has traveled around the Caribbean Islands, its origins have resided in Puerto Rico all along.

Even now, as a young adult, I still enjoy the flavor of pasteles. Though the taste varies slightly depending on the cook, I can still feel my Grandma’s love. She had a way with food that made you savor not only the taste but also remember it for years to come. I will never get a chance to eat her food again because she recently passed away, but the moments I did are forever etched in my memory. Thank you for showing me what great food tastes like, Grandma.
PART TWO: CHANGING PLACES

WE MOVED

Troy is the new Brooklyn
Call us for directions. 271-1172

Phil Ma • Maritza Gomez • Arshad Bacchus
Alana Jordan • Randy De La Cruz • Alexander Kopenkin
Romona Heywood • Jawaria Amir • Matthew Purcell
There’s a canoe leaving shore. In the night full of fog. The moon lights a sky, this sky. A mother and child are leaving home. With a paddle for an engine, and innocent thoughts in mind.

Yet, this is a romantic dream. In reality, they descended by car. To a port for aeroplanes and from there they—with big luggage and paper passports—boarded a metal bird, gone to an American nest.

This boy, who up until now—ate candy and red bean ice cream, walked the streets with his mother to zoos, broke screen doors, made bubbles with his mouth—took one deep breath of bile and vomited. Airsick, if there is a term. He was airsick.

A purge, really. Now empty and stable. Ready for a cultural change. A language shift. Being four, this was all ahead along with the bonus of a father. Oh boy, you get to meet your father.

Before you know it, the plane touches down. This boy who is I, the sapling of current tree me, got our luggage (our being my mother and I) and left San Francisco International. He was waiting.

A man in jeans and t-shirt. A modest man with five o’clock shadow. He—this my father I just met—he takes us to a car. Mazda 323. Small. He loads big luggage into the back, and lacking room, makes my seat my mother’s lap.

It is 4 PM and when we get home, the new “Home”—it is 6 o’clock. We go up (our new home being a second story one-bedroom apartment) and food is made. Stomachs are filled. Then, it’s back to the car after being settled in—off to Oakland!

Wouldn’t you know it. Stomach being full, I take one deep breath and vomit. Carsick. I was carsick.

Hmm, this man says and thinks. Hmm. You need something to eat. He steers the wheel. In Oakland, I have my first taste of Kentucky Fried Chicken. I do not remember if it was delicious.

It is 8 PM by this point, so we go home. There’s unpacking. I take a shower and it feels like bullets on my skin. I close my eyes into a sleep.

The next few months go like this: The day is spent around Berkeley with my mother and we visit everything. The night I’m home watching the Three Stooges with my father. I eat Dum Dum Pops minus the cream soda flavor. When it rains, the sidewalk’s made of snails and I can’t help crunching them.

I didn’t really know why, but after those few months we move to U.C. Village; I call it the Village. We get a condo. Second story again. I find a baby bird that very day and it dies two days later. The mother had left it and it wouldn’t eat. I wander around the Village every day until kindergarten begins.

“Your name will be Phil, okay?” My father writes it, registering me. “Phil’s the name of a colleague of mine.” Michael, the kindergarten teacher, insists on Zhifang, but an English name is needed. I can’t even speak English yet.
So this kindergarten. Kin-der-gar-ten. I like it so much I run out of the classroom and get to the street before Michael stops me. He kneels down and asks...something. He speaks in English. I can’t understand him. I don’t like this kindergarten. I don’t know what this Michael is saying. He somehow gets me back into the classroom. Then begins drawing A’s. Then B’s. He’s really good at drawing. I go home later as my first day concludes.

One night my parents aren’t home but I don’t freak. I was used to being home alone when my mother worked. It’s dark outside and I don’t like the dark but I go to the playground anyway. There’s a boy there in the sandbox and he speaks Chinese. We spoke for a bit. J ust playing.

Then he grabbed some sand with his hand and put it in his mouth. I heard the sand on teeth. The sand going to his stomach. You can eat sand?
Yeah. Try it. It’s good.

I claw up some sand and chew it. Hear the sand grind teeth. Feel the sand grind teeth. It doesn’t taste like anything. I lie, yeah you’re right.

It must’ve been late. My mother came searching and found me playing. In the dark, in a sandbox, with a strange kid. I went home but I felt bad. Saw the clock say 9:00. My sandbox friend still there. In the dark. Alone.

Time passes in days and weeks. I go to kindergarten and I go home. I meet dogs and other kids. All the time hanging in that playground.
No.

In my head materializes a word. A sound. A feeling. A visual.
No.

It’s gingerbread man-making day. I’m blasting mine with frosted sugar because I like sweet things. Michael moves by and asks if I want M&M’s.
No!

Okay, and he starts to move on.
No! No! (I meant, translate this to: Yes, I would.)
He gets it. I get M&M’s.

My language skills would grow exponentially from no. As I learned, this culture, this land would grow less alien. As I grew, I would move. The definition of home always changing, forever dynamic. I cannot say my life would have been better in China, had I stayed there, for this life is all I know. This American world is all I know. s
On a beautifully sunny afternoon, a couple of days after my tenth birthday, I was playing softball with some friends. The sun was high, but the cool breeze on my face as I ran from base to base was a relief from the overwhelming heat. I was off from school enjoying what I did every summer in El Salvador, feeling ecstatic because even though I was very skinny and small for my age, I was able to hit a homerun that helped us score the runs we needed to win. The smiling faces and the high-fives from my teammates had me feeling incredibly happy and proud of myself.

So exhilarated from running that I thought my heart was going to jump out of my chest, I went into the kitchen. Thirsty, I reached for the water jug as Mami approached me and said she needed to speak with me. Oh, this didn't sound so good. I think this was the first time she had ever addressed me like an adult. At first glance, she had a serious look on her face that I had seen many times, but very seldom directed at me. Automatically I became very tense because I was a very obedient child who tried to avoid trouble by doing the right thing at all times. I never wanted to be at the end of a good whipping and for some reason I thought this was where this was going.

Frantically, I searched through my mind for some reason that would warrant this look. I began to feel a nervous anticipation at the wrath that could only be heading my way. “Oh Lord, what did I do? What did I do?” I kept asking myself. I looked down at the floor eagerly searching for some clue as to what my deed could have been. “Think, Maritza!” I was wound so tight and all I could do was draw a blank.

Panicking, I started to feel the burning sensation of heat rising into my cheek, I thought I might faint from the anticipation, but I’d never fainted before…. How would that feel? Even better, Mami would feel sorry and whatever reason she was mad at me for wouldn’t matter anymore…. My imagination was getting the best of me. I could feel the wheels in my brain turning. I was thinking way too much.

“Okay, God just let me have it. I can handle it,” I told myself trying to muster some courage. Then I looked up and saw her staring at me: tenderness mixed with determination in her eyes as she sighed very deeply. I began to have confused feelings of wanting to comfort her and fear of what I may be about to hear. I wanted to ask her so badly what was happening, but years of discipline had taught me not to ask questions. I was raised to obey my elders and whatever she said I had learned to accept. The anticipation was burning a hole in my chest. I continued to stare at her, waiting.

She began with a soothing yet casual tone. Like someone who needs to tell something they don’t want to say, but at the same time is trying to convince you and possibly themselves that their words are what you want to hear. At the familiar soothing sound of her voice I started to relax, no longer afraid that I might be in trouble. I
listened attentively as she began telling me that my real father, who was visiting us for the first time in all my ten years, was going back to the United States, and both my sister and I were to leave with him. The plans had already been arranged for us to leave in the next two days. My body tensed and a cold heat started to rise and spread through it, ignited by the realization that my impending doom had finally arrived.

My biological Mother and Father had left my sister and me with my Aunt and Uncle, who I called Mami and Papi (Mommy and Daddy in English) when I was only eleven months old. Mami had ingrained in me for years that I would one day leave for the United States because my parents’ intentions when they left had always been to work and save enough money to reunite us with them. Every time she had mentioned it, I knew it was a possibility, but I refused to accept it as a certainty. Even though I was raised to love my parents for simply being just that, in my heart, Mami and Papi were my Mom and Dad. I didn’t want to think of the day I would head to a foreign land to people who were foreign to me as well. My comfort was here in this house, with this family. This was where I belonged.

Mami continued to explain with the same reassuring tone that disturbing news about the ongoing civil war that started in the early 1980s was constantly shown in the United States. Every time my Mother heard of an attack, she imagined that somehow we might be caught in the line of fire. She could no longer stand the thought of her daughters being in the midst of danger. As Mami continued speaking, she sounded like she was pleading with me to understand, and in her eyes I could see the tears she was trying to hold back. When she finished, she hesitantly waited for my reply.

I was stunned. The room started to close in around me, bringing with it a vast darkness that overpowered me and left me feeling cold and alone. Glued to the floor, I stood there with my hands lying limply on the sides of my body. I was unable to move, like I had a tight rope wrapped around me. The thought of leaving in just two days kept running through my head. I was helpless to do anything; I had no time. I had often imagined the day I would be told about leaving while daydreaming upon the branches of the mango trees I would climb when I wanted to be alone. I imagined running away, only coming back when I was told that I could stay, but my plans to leave were never detailed or thorough. I think I knew I could never really leave the refuge of my home. Instead, there I was, standing rigidly in front of the woman I couldn’t live without. I could feel my traitorous obedience forcing me to comprehend, making me accept what I was being told. Courageously, I told her I would go only if she and Papi were coming too. She explained that it wouldn’t be possible, but they would visit soon. Her reply was my undoing; I knew she was trying to comfort me by lying.

I broke through the hold of my invisible rope and threw myself into her welcoming arms, crying shamelessly, pleading with her not to let me go. I told her for the first time that it was she whom I loved and that I couldn’t live without her and Papi. I needed them to be with me. I didn’t
care that I was defying her disciplinary ways by not accepting what she told me; I had to make her see I was right. But lurking in my mind was the thought that the words of a ten-year-old child did not matter. I had been told about having to leave for as long as I can remember. I should have been ready.

We stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, wrapped in each other’s arms, sobbing. She reassured me of how much she loved me and how the best thing I could do was to never forget them. In time, she said, I would see how much of a better life I would have in the United States. I let go of her, tears blurring my vision, I ran blindly towards the backyard. Unsteadily, but with force and determination, I climbed onto the branches of the mango trees. As the breeze caressed my face, I cried freely. I asked God why this was happening to me. I told him I didn’t want to go and continued to cry until I had no more tears to shed.

Suddenly I sensed the creeping feeling of defeat. Searching for a way to cope, I started to look around me. If it’s one thing the war taught me is that there may be things in your life sometimes that you cannot change and the only thing left to do is learn to deal with them. I lifted my eyes towards the bright sun with its warm rays falling over me like a blanket, providing me with a sense of comfort. I looked at the clouds that had always been my friends and confidants and I lifted my small hand and waved goodbye. I ran my hands over the tree branches that held me on their limbs, like a baby resting in her mother’s arms. I whispered to them goodbye, and as they moved against the wind, they waved to me as well.

I finally looked over at the house in which I grew up. The house I had always known to be my refuge from danger, the war, and the outside world. There it was, standing strong and solid, brick by brick, promising me that it would be there if I ever returned. I came down from the tree, ran to the house and hugged it. I walked around the side of it, looking and touching its walls, my frame so small and fragile against their height and strength. My hands tingled from their roughness reminding me of Papi’s beard when I would kiss him goodnight. These walls had supported not only this house, but my life as well. I tried to memorize it. I never wanted to forget this place.

Exhausted from crying, I walked towards a hammock in which I had laid and laughed so many times, swinging with and against the wind. This time I approached it much more slowly, counting the fifty-two steps it took to get there from the house. I ran my hands through the soft material that called with the promise of relief. I gave in to it, wanting it to engulf my body, needing the sense of freedom from my current predicament that sleep would bring. I lay on it and closed my eyes.

The stage has been set for the grave event that is at hand. Everyone knows their part. Even with no rehearsal, the show will go on. The curtains of my eyes are normally drawn to a beautifully green country, where rivers flow undisturbed and birds sing their touching songs. Animals roam free and fishes grow to the fullest. Native kiskadees sing to the rising of the great yellow disc. The sun makes you believe it can be touched, appearing just an arm’s length away. The radiating warmth of the sun brings comfort. Days are generally lit by his brightness, complemented by the blowing winds that snuggle one into chambers of paradise. Luscious pink and red water lilies canopy many village waterways. Mango and coconut trees are found in every yard. Meals are fresh with garden picked cucumbers and watermelons. Houses call you with their own aroma of specially blended herbs and spices and lawns that need not be trimmed, yet still smell fresh. Guyana is a tropical country where anything and everything can grow in your backyard, a country where any scene is captivating. The scenes make trees willingly enter martyrdom so that the land can be remembered forever.

But this day the stage was set differently, with drab and dirty scenery filling every space. Brown skinned people walked forwards, then turned and walked away. They seemed to be of Indian descent with black hair of different lengths. One man’s hair was short and groomed with oil, making it dark and shiny. He was thin and dressed in unmatched clothing. It’s not that he had no sense of style, but that he could not afford to match. His sneakers were decades old, probably even worn by several generations; his shirt was missing a button. Some gazed upwards, looking at a vast, endless sky which brings thoughts of the future. Others stared downward to an emptiness forcing them to remember the past. Being undecided and confused, many pairs of small black eyes wandered to and fro, trying to believe the unbelievable. It seemed like judgment day from afar. People are but restless creatures; they seemed so while the dawn light gently introduced the new day. These early mornings bring gentle, graceful winds, with parting clouds. No one was in paradise anymore. The sun rose higher from his nightly slumber, no longer at arm’s length. He surrendered his warmth to the chilly air that remained from the previous night. The flowers were still shy, and unwilling to greet their visitors. The animals were still asleep. Where has the green disappeared to, a tropical country given way to a desert?

This desert had dark paved roads that lead nowhere. This desert had water in drains that bordered the roads. The water was stagnant and black, polluted by every possible thing. I thought the drains to be opened sewage. To merely look into this disaster was an adventure. It contained bottles of different kinds, such as water bottles, beer bottles, and drink bottles. Wrappers and
plastic blocked the connection and flow.

Two grand walls towered on opposite sides of the stage, creating the illusion of an endless, desolate street made even more isolated and lonely by the walls. Between these heavily guarded fences was a queue of people with mixed emotions on their faces. Poles outside the compound flew distinctively different flags, yet each was seemingly related somehow. The only other thing visible from inside the walls was a neglected mango tree, fruitless and barren and strikingly different from the surrounding structures. There were only two means of entrance, both gates of which were heavily guarded by burly officers and metal detectors, beyond which there were iron doors. The murmuring sound just outside the Star Spangled Banner’s embassy was becoming clear conversation as the tension decreased. As the sun rose higher and brighter, the people became more relaxed. A blanket of order came over the scene as more people joined the line.

We were all there representing the mass of people from Guyana who were trying to escape the difficult life and persecution in their home land. In a country overrun by crime, tyranny, and a corrupt government, peace, trust, and hope had been lost. Migrating from the country seemed to be the only alternative. Guyanese do not hate their country, but are unable to survive on their average income. I personally love my dear land of many waters. My heart still contains a desire to reside there and help my country.

I was dressed differently from the others around me. They were in regular jeans and a t-shirt, while my father and I wore neatly ironed shirts with seamed pants. With an olive green shirt complementing my complexion, we showcased a set of U.S. $50.00 Parker pens in our pockets. We stood at attention, keeping our voices low. Looking back now, I realize how unnecessary it was. I testify that New York, the United States of America, is much more unmannerly than Guyana. Our hair was like freshly cut grass on a spring morning; we had neatly trimmed nails. With sparkling eyes and “baby’s bottom” shaves, confidence flowed through our arteries to our limbs, and returned to our hearts through our veins. One could learn his body chemistry if he stopped and listened, since in the moment all our senses were heightened.

The worst was yet to come. I thought to myself, “Are these white people gonna eat me? Suppose they don’t give me the Visa; what are we going to do? How does one sue the American Embassy, the most prestigious embassy of all?” Not only were they Americans but they were diplomats, soaring above the laws of Guyana. Everyone there was afraid of the Americans. As far as everyone was concerned, destiny rested with the counselors and their decisions. The counselor’s mere words may make you or break you. An oxymoron of respect and insolence, hope and fear, lust and hatred, all resided in the chambers of the applicant’s heart. I overheard a ruffled up middle-aged man in an unmistakable Caribbean accent, “Yuh gotta lie to them sometimes, deh nah guh no.” His comrade replied, “ No yuh rass yuh cant do dah. Them people gat computa fuh find out d’ trut. Mi nah no wah nahsense yuh telling me. Like
yuh want me to get leff hay???

While standing on line I met some people who said they knew me, and I tried to start a conversation. Being the inquisitive person that I am, I boldly asked one of them, a charismatic and poised woman, “Who sponsored you, Ms. Khan?” With a confident voice, she replied, “My daughter, she has been living in the States for a while.” I continued, “You are probably curious about my situation. Well, my father’s mother sponsored me. Our wait was for about ten years to get a simple letter from the embassy. What about you? How long did you wait?” My gaze returned to her from looking at the guard, just to find that she was no longer there listening.

As I stood alone, I drifted into my own isolated realm. My inner conflicts disappeared with the convergence of my heart, mind, and soul. This new coalition brought many enchanting thoughts, worthy of pursuing. Prevailing over all was the unquenchable desire to liberate my fellow country men from further persecution. I want smiles to be given freely, and greetings to be responded to with enthusiasm. I am willing to work toward making Guyana a country where people would never want to leave. It could be a place where the people would give birth to their children with no regrets, and where those children could grow up to be model citizens. This should be the case not only for Guyana, but for the rest of the world, too. My intentions are strong. My isolation came to an end with an oath to myself, promising to work without rest until Guyana is once more the garden paradise of the Caribbean.

Coming back to my conscious state I realized I was now at the back of the line. The further back I am in the immigration line, the closer I am to my country.
The train is rocking back and forth. I look out the window, and my body sways to the rhythm. The seawater is blue, I can see it clearly; it is right under the train. Even though the train doors are tightly shut, I can still smell the ocean. After four years of living in Far Rockaway, the ocean breeze has always characterized my neighborhood. He is the first one to welcome me home, the last one to send me off as I go to school. The ocean breeze always has a sweet smile for me. The only other memorable thing about my neighborhood is the gigantic tree in front of my house, my savior from the sun as I sit on my porch.

When I sit on my porch, I remember Guyana, always Guyana. I remember my grandmother’s house that was far from the sea but close enough to smell it through winter and summer. On hot days you could smell the seawater wherever you went inside the house; Granny always kept the windows open in summer. At night a chorus of grasshoppers sang you to sleep whether you wanted them to or not.

Technically the house belonged to my grandfather but he was forever working in his shoe shop, which was set up in front of the yard, so Granny ran the household. Her house was made of wood that lost its luster after the many years of relentless rainstorms and violent winds. My grandmother watched Indian movies from the beginning of the day to the end. The house had a bright red zinc roof, which is common in Guyana.

The roof was what made the place so memorable. The rain in Guyana falls hard, especially in the months of June to August. With zinc roofs the rain drops sounded like a kid hitting an empty pot with a wooden spoon. That seems so strange to me now, as I look out at my neighborhood in New York. When the rain falls I don’t think of a rambunctious child playing drums on his mother’s kitchen pots. In the nights when I go to sleep, I hear police sirens, late night trains pulling in, airplanes swooping low above my house as they prepare to land at JFK. I think of whether I should be where I am now. Should I be here in America, or should I be back in my grandmother’s house listening to the rain fall and watching her perform ordinary tasks like sweeping the hardwood floors?

My mother brought my older brother and me over to the States when I was five. I thought we were just going on a small vacation and were going back to Granny’s house next week. It took time, but I finally understood I was going to stay in the weird country with the cement sidewalks that looked nothing like reddish brown dirt paths, a distinct marking of how the countryside was in Guyana.

My first experience living in America was living with my Aunt Gillin. She was sixty at the time. She lived in a three story building. In the front lawn there were three cars: a yellow lady bug, a green Oscar, and a black Toyota. None of them left the yard. Grass had grown around and into the tires. My aunt cooked us hot meals. The hot meals were
traditional Guyanese cuisine; my favorite was fried plantains and eggs. She would lightly sprinkle the salt on the plantain; plantain tasted good when ripe, because it was sweet. I remember my aunt not for her cooking, but because she always wore a golden head wrap around her hair. It was a mixture of gold and orange. She wore it when she cooked and cleaned. I do not know if she had more than one, I just cannot remember her without the golden head wrap, like how I cannot think of Guyana without thinking of zinc roofs and rain. On rare occasions my mother would buy two-dollar calling cards and called her mother. In hushed and hurried tones we talked.

“Lanzos (calling me by my nickname), how you ma?” My grandmother’s voice cracked in the static; I heard an Indian song in the background.

“Granny I’m fine, how are you?” The phone gave a click. For one minute I thought the phone would cut off, but then her voice drifted in.

“Living.” The operator announced there was only one minute left, I told my mother and she removed the phone from my hand, uttering a few words before hanging up.

In the background, my Aunt Gillin washed the dishes in the sink, her dark hands scrubbed the stains off the blue plastic plate; pausing she turned her mix matched eyes towards us. “The card only lasted for four minutes, Sharon.”

My mother, Sharon, nodded and prepared to go to bed; work was tomorrow. My Aunt Gillin shuffled to the orange couch in the living room, threw in her eye medication that continued to turn her right eye sky blue. When they all went to bed in Aunt Gillin’s one-room bedroom, my mother called to me to the room. I took one last look as the news reporter began to talk, the American flag hung in the background.

I started school in the Bronx. There was one girl in particular who decided I wasn’t good enough to be in the kindergarten class with her. She would ask me questions, and as I answered, she asked, “Why can’t I understand your talk? Why do you talk like that?” I became conscious of our differing accents. Late nights my mother would ask me how school was. I started, “Well today dah teacha ask we to bring we best toy. I tek Brown Bear.” My mother would smile and say firmly “Speak properly, you’re not in Catherina.” I understood that everything had to change; we were in America now. I said my sentence again “Today the teacher asked everyone to bring in their favorite toy. I took Brown Bear.” My mother would smile again and ask, “Was it fun?” I nodded my head.

We left my Aunt Gillin’s house a year later, before Aunt Gillin returned to Guyana wanting to spend the rest of her life there. That was where we went for her funeral service. She had a stroke after falling asleep under the hot Guyana sun; her body could no longer sustain the heat after living in America for twenty years. When I heard of her death, I had to wonder: Would that happen to me?

We moved into a four-story apartment building in Brooklyn; the building was unpainted, and it was across from a playground and two schools, one Jewish the other public. The Jewish school owned the playground, but the public school (P.S. 161) had an empty lot in the rear of the school. The lot was large, vast, and cement. I later
learned that each day that classes would line up there and wait for their assigned teachers. We all stood in two straight lines with our feet smashed together. I scanty remember the typical day in my elementary school in Guyana, recalling the grassy piece of land students ran around. There was a large ditch in the back of the school; in the ditch was a dried up kiamon (a cousin of the crocodiles and alligators). That school was like a warehouse with chalk boards and desks.

Across from our new home there was a brick house designed with pink and white cobble stones; there lived my Aunt Monica. Aunt Monica hugged me roughly. I inhaled her scent; it was lavender and Pine Sol. Her hair was black and wavy, falling down her back. Many times she would tease me, “My hair is long just as yours.” She would then take her hair from the tight bun and let it fall past her shoulders. She would cackle loudly as we stood next to each other comparing hair length. She would joke with me; she was radiant. My Aunt Monica and I were never close, sadly. We just talked pleasantries. It was like the awkward relationship between Guyana and America, in my mind.

As I became a teenager, my mother and I would argue. “Mom, but why can’t I go over to Kristin’s house?” My mother jabbed the remote control button as if she pictured it was my forehead instead. “Girls are supposed to be in the house.” Kristin was my classmate from elementary school; we became best friends through the year. Tomorrow was the Fourth of July and she invited me to a barbecue and a sleepover. My mother agreed to the barbecue but waved off the sleepover, not even considering it as an option. “Mom, didn’t you ever have a sleepover with the village girls?” My Mom jabbed the remote again. “No, your grandmother never let us sleepover anyone’s house; girl children are not allowed especially.”

These tense conversations pointed out one thing: I was caught in America. Trapped in its fishing net, I was that fish gasping for an air of identity. Whenever I visited Guyana the elders would say, “Good Morning,” and I would say, “Hi.” The elderly person would then lecture me on rudeness. I never understood the importance of the small customs like greetings, but with time I understand. My grandmother immigrated to the United States two years ago and she has taught me our cultural customs in these two years. Each day I am learning more about what it means to be Guyanese. I understand the importance of tradition in her eyes now.
THE BEAUTY OF MY TRIp

s RANDY DE LA CRUZ s

Living in the States all my childhood had dampened my thoughts of being in other places. Being born here in Brooklyn, I was accustomed to the dirty, gum-stained, shit-littered streets, the ones with the horrible scent lurking out of the trash left outside ghetto apartments. As a young teen I faced this morbid painting everyday when I stepped outside my house. I was always trying to find ways to turn my current surroundings into something of interest.

I spent my summer vacations here in Brooklyn. My mom was a sweat-drenched, hardworking, single woman who had only amassed a sum of money enough to keep my sister and me living under a roof and able to carry pocket money to school every day. She occasionally saved enough money to take us out and shop for basic necessities: clothes, sneakers, school supplies. So that’s how it was until my mom saved enough money to plan a trip to our country: the Dominican Republic. I had heard the detailed stories of my cousin’s visits to my country. Their stories always took hold of my ears: palm trees, clean beaches, and endearing family members. I hadn’t been to my home country, but it sounded like a scene promising to deliver transcendent pleasures to my eyes like a beautiful painting.

My mother carried traditions from her country and made them ours. Sunday mornings for breakfast she would boil and mash some plantanos. This in our country is called “mangu.” She fried eggs along with sachichon and occasionally cooked yuka as well. She’d also shake up some of our native drinks: “morir sonando” was one of those, which translates to “die sleeping.” It is made of freshly squeezed oranges mixed with milk and sugar and shaken well in ice. My mother also explained to me how baseball was probably the most popular sport in our country. There are a number of Dominican players who came from the country and played in Major League Baseball. Watching them on TV was inspiring, so baseball became my hobby. These traditions, along with many others, brought me closer to my culture. I had been taught that the Dominican Republic was my home country, and I couldn’t wait to embrace it.

I made my trip there; patiently I waited to arrive and thrive in the wonders that would define my country. I indulged in playing my Gameboy on the plane as I waited, but my mind was still on the thought of landing. So after three hours of boring flight time, our plane hit the ground, and fumbled into a smooth glide before finally coming to a stop. My family and I grabbed our belongings and stepped down the stairs; the event was cinematic, like a flash before my eyes. The humid air smacked my face as if it were solid matter. The air was thick and wasn’t circulating through my lungs well for some time. As my body was adjusting to the environment, my mother and sister searched for our native relative. I met my mother’s cousin, José, who helped carry our luggage to his car and drove us to where we would be staying.
The Dominican Republic was everything my cousins said and more: the palm trees gracefully danced against the light, comforting breeze. The beaches were marvels with glistening, translucent, and warm water inhabited by small creatures. An embracing family of cousins awaited our coming, welcoming our company into their home. During my month there, I had stayed at my mother’s cousin’s house (my second cousin). They had two houses, really. The house in which we first stayed was a one-story building along a really busy street where the relatives did business. It was known as the local flower shop. The other was a ranch in a poor section of the Dominican Republic. There they grew a tropical fruit, Chinola; red when ripe, this fruit wasn’t eaten but savored by drinking the juice from the seeds inside.

The ranch was a painting of its own. The dirt outside the ranch house was a burgundy red and turned into a thick mud that seemed like quicksand. Their house was a two-story building. The second floor had an outdoor patio that held a beautiful view of the outlying landscape. Down the huge red hill was their chinola field; a vast plantation, the length of it covered in barbed wires to keep out thieves. They also grew platanos and owned a couple of banana trees as well. In the back of their house were wild turkeys that retreated when I chased them and clucked loudly as if in laughter when I gave up. They owned a couple of donkeys: lazy animals that weren’t as energetic or lively as the ones I had seen back in New York at community fairs. They owned a Labrador whose golden fur was dulled from long days (perhaps months) without a bath.

I loved that ranch. It was a joy to wake up every morning to this scene. Such a comfortable environment it was. One night when I slept at the ranch, my cousins proposed the idea of building a campfire. My younger cousins and I went around gathering big sticks of wood and stacked them into a three-foot high pile while the adults spoke amongst themselves. It was clear that my cousins had built a fire before. I watched them as they arranged the sticks into a circle. My uncle squeezed the gasoline onto the pile. With a couple tries at lighting the wood, a flame caught hold at the center and quickly grew. The radiance of heat from the campfire lashed at my face at first, but it kept me warm against the cool nights that fall in the Dominican.

These memories of my country I hold onto strongly. It was the experience of a lifetime. A journey to the Dominican Republic was a mere dream before I went. The fact that it became reality made me realize that there are so many more places to explore. I had a burgeoning curiosity: I became eager to visit new places, whether that place was somewhere in Brooklyn or another country, I almost never gave up the opportunity to go somewhere. I had let go of the negative feeling I had toward being where I was. In a sense, I looked at my home in Brooklyn for its beauty: seeing how I spent those really hot summer days, light-clothed, with the sun piercing my freshened skin as I ran through the spray of open fire hydrants. The winters: looking out my window on the night of a snowstorm, the snow gently clothing the streets. I imagined myself treading the snow and picking it up, crunching...
together a ball, while at the same time, hoping the schools would be closed. Or my trips to the City, aside from the rude pushes and shoves, I enjoyed tilting my head back at the foot of a tower and admiring the vast mass. This was the beauty I looked for everywhere I went.
Outside it was dark and raining heavily. I could see nothing except raindrops on the surface of the small airplane's window and scary thunderbolts in the sky. Our plane circled endlessly above John F. Kennedy Airport while waiting for permission to land. With each new flash of lightning, tension amongst the passengers grew. This being only the second flight of my life made me extremely nervous.

As an incentive to do well in high school, my parents promised me a trip to a destination of my choosing. After earning top grades in my class, it was decided that I would spend the summer vacationing in Bulgaria. I was to join a select group of other young men attending a private summer camp. When the day of the flight finally arrived, my excitement was difficult to contain.

During the three weeks I spent in Bulgaria, I discovered that everything was different there. It was a completely different country with strange but very friendly people. For one thing, they spoke a language I didn’t understand. I was forced to communicate using only my hands and facial gestures. It was a very strange and exotic feeling. Bulgarians had their own customs and traditions that were completely foreign to me. For example, when they wished to say “no,” they nodded their heads and they shook their heads from side to side to agree. This experience proved to be completely eye-opening and it inspired within me a desire to travel the world. I never expected to be so influenced by this journey.

Upon completing high school, I did not forget my longing to see the world. As a child I always dreamt about what I would be when I grow up. I truly believed that anything was possible. As I got older, the harsh realities of life slowly dawned on me. I realized that it was unlikely I would ever be a movie star or astronaut. Despite receiving my diploma and graduating with good academic standing, a deep sense of sadness remained inside me. Many of my friends were moving on to universities across the globe. My girlfriend, Katya, was moving to Sydney, Australia. I never felt so alone.

Three years passed by as I worked and studied but life had become monotonous. I was desperately trying to find anything that could cheer me up and I remembered my dream from childhood, to travel. I felt that it was an appropriate time to change something in my life. One day, on a whim, I asked my friend, Alex, if he wished to see the world with me. Without hesitation, he answered, “Absolutely!”

My mother's cousin had been living in New York with his family for the last eight years and I asked him to meet us at the airport. We were never close and I hadn’t seen him in over ten years. I spent the entire flight trying to remember what he even looked like. To make things worse, my friend Alex was on a different flight than me, so I didn’t even have his company.

Finding my uncle in the airport would be difficult considering I had no idea what to look for.
I was also a little bit scared because of the heavy rain. Our arrival was delayed and I worried that my uncle may not even wait for me. On my own, I didn’t know where to go in this new city and new country. I began to panic. Our plane circled for nearly an hour and a half. Finally we landed. First I found my friend and after I was surprised when I saw a person who looked exactly like my uncle. We immediately recognized each other.

When we got in the car, Uncle Sergey turned on the Russian radio station and both Alex and I were shocked. Our shock continued when we arrived at Sergey’s home and dined with his family. All the products served at the table were from Russia. Then, before bedtime, we decided to watch some television. Alex turned on the TV and we saw Russian news on the Russian channel about our hometown. I had a very strange feeling that we were not in New York, but in some different place in our native country. I didn’t like those feelings because I was looking for sudden change in my life and I felt like it didn’t happen.

The next morning my relatives weren’t so kind anymore. They gave us a map and newspaper and said that we had one week to find an apartment and work. This was difficult to hear as we had less than one thousand dollars in total. We immediately started searching the neighborhood for signs of “Now Hiring” or “Help Wanted.” On that very day we found a job in a nearby restaurant. The next morning I was standing on the summer terrace of the restaurant wearing a shiny white shirt, black pants, burgundy apron, and a matching tie. I had no idea what my job entailed and I simply smiled back to customers who asked me questions like, “How do you serve escargot?” I spent twelve hours at the job on my first day. I was a busboy. I earned a total of thirty two dollars on that day and quickly converted that into Russian rubles in my head. I realized that it was very good money for one day. I was so proud yet so tired.

Summer was ending and I realized that I didn’t want to return to Russia. Alex and I rented a big, well furnished basement in a private home. By now we were earning far more than thirty two dollars a day. We also met many new and interesting people and were making some great new friends. The most important was that we understood what the “American Dream” was and we liked the idea. I compared opportunities very often. I knew what was waiting for me in Russia and I didn’t want to live my life that way. On the other hand, I didn’t know what was waiting for me here in the USA, but it was unpredictable and interesting. I always thought about my trip in the sense of a great adventure. Every day brought something new in my life. There were new people, new friends and new opportunities.

Three years passed quickly and I didn’t see my parents or old friends. Often I felt an emptiness deep inside me. So many changes occurred over this time. I’m no longer living in a basement and I don’t work as a busboy. I have a good apartment in a very nice neighborhood. I went the long way through my career. I was a busboy, food runner, bar back, bartender, and waiter, and then became a manager’s assistant. Now I easily can run my own restaurant with the knowledge I have gained. I enrolled in Brooklyn College and have some grandiose plans for my future. The funny thing is
that sometimes I feel my life has become a monotonous routine again. It makes me laugh when I think that I’m the kind of person who needs to change his address every three years. I’ve become settled and calm, but every time I hear about an adventure, my eyes shine and my heartbeat quickens. When I feel sad and tired, I always remind myself the reason I first left home. I always remember my childhood dream to travel and visit different countries, and Bulgarians who nod their heads to say “No.”
“Wake up! Wake up!” The loud voice of my mother reverberated in the early morning stillness. Early before the morning dew glistened the grass, I was awoken by the life-shattering sound of gunshots. Through the thickness of accents and voices, I found hers. My mom, so young yet strong and wise, pierced the night with her cry along with my sister's scream. Like a solemn hymnal in church, their voices resonated in the still air. Then I saw my father in my sister's arms dying, fighting his last fight, to hold on to the gift God bestowed upon man: life. After his death, I was in a period of melancholy and was slowly losing my virtues and identity. However, my father's death and the hurtful judgments I faced when I moved to the United States taught me to love myself regardless if others did not accept me or my background, and embrace my culture, appreciating the potpourri of my newly adapted American life and that of my birth country Jamaica.

As if Daddy's death, coupled with immigrating, was not enough of an heartache, I was soon told by aunts, uncles, and cousins that my accent was too thick. "You should not speak Patois in school or else you will have no friends and the kids will all laugh at you," they all buzzed in my ear. What with no prior knowledge of attending schooling in the States I could do no more than assimilate. Though English is my country's official language, we speak broken English. Some words in our dialect are adopted from our African ancestors: words like gweh, leff mi, and galang. I was not only accustomed to, but used to communicating, in our dialect only. I would now have to hoard it away for six hours a day, five days a week; more if my family were to go for an adventure in the city.

I still remember quite vividly reading in school. I always loved to read aloud, and one day in history class, instead of saying “geography,” I pronounced the word “geo-gra-fy.” My teacher Mr. Watterson immediately corrected me as the classroom erupted in a volcanic explosion of laughter. I was so embarrassed, like the time I told my friend her hair was “tall” when she innocently lectured me on why hair cannot be tall but long. Though I excelled in English, I couldn’t understand why I had to change the way I spoke and looked to fit into this spectrum of conditioned minds. These incidents amplified the cultural differences between me and my American counterparts.

On another occasion, my family and I were at church when a strange and boisterous man became enraged at my mother for something so simple and miniscule I managed to erase the cause from my memory. His words, though directed to my mother, whiplashed me as he berated her on why she couldn’t speak proper English. “She came to this country so she needs to know how to speak ‘American’ or else she needs to go back home to her country,” he exclaimed. “That's the problem these days; we let them come here and live, and they don't even have the audacity to try and blend in,” he sputtered in his Southern drawl. His words
spoke volumes as I subconsciously knew that his outburst was the thought of many others as they listened to how I communicated with other Jamaicans.

In addition to negative personalities of strangers—the grimace at the thickness of my dialect, and annoying stares—there was the sudden change of attitudes among my immediate family. The amiability and smiles soon left their faces, and too soon were replaced with scowls. The polite requests they had made of my mother transmuted into harsh demands. We became scapegoats for their problems, and pretty soon we had to move again. In totality, we've moved eight times in eight years and are currently in the process of moving again!

I don't wrong my family for instilling in me such teachings about assimilation; however, looking back, I've realized that they've failed to tell me a vital thing about adaptation and “belonging.” Although life is easier if I conform, I should always hold steadfast to my culture by not forgetting the pain, struggle, and love of my country. It is my culture, customs, and relationships that molded me into the young woman I am today. Although I was not an outcast at school, I sometimes felt like a loner. Perhaps if it were more strongly inculcated in my young mind that I could indulge in the fads and materialistic charms of the “New World,” I may not have so much “like a foreigner.” If I had felt more comfortable in those classrooms, I would have been able to share some of my country’s beauty and history with friends.

Simple jokes about Jamaicans—how we all smoke weed and curry our food—I perceive as harmless. However, there are those rare occasions when these guileless jokes bolster the stereotypes perpetuated by the norm, and it results in my frustration. It is then that adages my mom so often pronounced like, “Yuh muss be proud ah weh yuh come from,” empower me and allow such follies to erode, becoming mere muses I sometimes use as my own when I am in a humorous mood and want to make fun of myself. It is from these experiences that I have grown and dispelled the prejudices against me.

The problems and losses that my family and I have faced have only made us stronger. The feeling of wanting to belong which Obama hones in on in Dreams from My Father is what drives some of my impulses. I too am on a daily journey of learning about my likes, dislikes, and knowing my self worth. Although I miss my country and family, I have made America my new home, whilst still enjoying life as a Jamaican. s
The plane landed on American soil on Sunday. I was enrolled at Middle Town Middle School on Monday. Everybody there seemed an alien to me, and to them I must have seemed an even stranger alien. I was uncomfortable in my new surrounding, and my classmates did not help the matter. They asked questions—bizarre questions. “Have you ever ridden in car?” I had never ridden in anything but a car. “Have you seen Bin Laden?” I had only a vague idea of who the man was. “Why do you have a British accent?” Because Pakistan was once a colony of Britain and therefore everything is taught the British way. “So . . . Pakistan, did you live in a house made of mud?” No. I lived in a six-bedroom house made of cement. They stared at me, and I stared at the pattern on the wooden floor.

This unfamiliar land with its wooden floors seemed an alarming, disturbing place despite the lush greenery and the unpolluted environment. Matters became even worse when the next day a boy asked, “What’s up?” and after a little hesitation I replied, “The sky.” The laughter, oh God, the laughter. Children, I learned, are cruel in America. After that incident I kept my head down and spoke only when spoken to. Of course, I become very lonely, very fast. I was an energetic, loquacious child and soon was determined to make friends. Students were rude to their teachers in America, so I went from taking a teacher’s word as a sacred law to mocking them like everyone else. I went from spelling words the proper way to dropping the “u” from color, even though my hand twitched every time I did this. I went from abhoring the sun to exclaiming, like everyone else, “What a lovely day. The sun is out.” I went from thinking what a boring game baseball is to expounding on all of its non-existent merits. I learned to “fit in.” I made friends. Well, I did not make friends, but a girl who looked like me made friends. I hated that cheap imitation of myself, and as I had created her, I hated my self. I felt like even more of an outsider than I had on my first day of school.

One day a girl commented on my spelling of “center,” which I had written as “centre,” and I exploded. All my frustrations came spilling out. The horse had been lashed one too many times and there was no stopping its descent down the steep mountain. After that incident, the few friends I had made gave me a wide berth and when my parents announced that we were moving the New Jersey, I was as satisfied as a well-fed cat. I was enrolled at Grace Middle High School and thankfully wasn’t the only brown-skinned person in the class. Even more thankfully no one asked me intrusive and ignorant questions.

Fortunately, this time I decided that having no friends was better than leading a nightmarish existence of pretense and lies. I was going to just be. I have rarely ever made such a wise decision. When people asked me questions, I replied truthfully. I had lived in the sun my whole life; I did not like its sharp rays. “No, it is not a
lovely day because the sun is out.” “Actually baseball is a cheap imitation of cricket.” It felt so good to be honest. I no longer had to keep a mental tab of my sins. I was certain I would alienate my classmates by my honest but blunt opinions. I was wrong. To my great surprise others found my thoughts interesting and fresh. I had decided to just be myself, and it was working out wonderfully. Despite being so different from my classmates, I finally belonged. Everyone is allowed to have his own opinion and at least in this matter, I am just like everyone else.

At that time, when I was busy learning that America wasn't such an awful place after all, if someone had told me I would have something in common (except the number of chromosomes we had) with the president of America, I would have guided him to the nearest drug rehabilitation center. It is a good thing that the aforementioned event did not occur because Barack Obama and I do indeed have some similarities. We, Obama and I, were both pretending to be someone we were not. He was a black boy brought up by his white grandparents and mother and was therefore rightfully confused. Was he an African American or was he a white man? While he did not understand which world he belonged to, the white or the black, I did not understand whether I should be myself or who I was expected to be. I had to accept my roots, while Obama had to find his roots. In Dreams from My Father, Obama writes, “Where did I belong? . . . If I had come to understand myself as a black American, and was understood as such, that understanding remained unanchored to place.” That place that anchored him was Kenya. There, Obama meets his extended family, learns about his father, his ancestors, and finds some measure of peace. He spends time with his family and learns, “It wasn’t simple joy that I felt in each of these moments. Rather, it was a sense that everything I was doing, carried the full weight of my life; so that I might finally recognize myself as I was, here, now, in one place.” The letters his father wrote to American universities become his inheritance. His father’s pain becomes his pain. His brother’s struggles become his struggles. His stay in Kenya allows Obama to add brown to his white and black worlds.

Through my experience at Middle Town and his in Kenya, Obama and I came to realize that a person cannot forge himself into a whole man by leaving his past behind. I came to belong by learning that by denouncing my rich heritage and my staunch morals, I was losing my identity. On the other hand, Barack Obama had to find his identity. Obama writes, “incompleteness of my own history stood between me and the sites I saw like a hard pane of glass. . . . I had been forced to look inside myself and had found only a great emptiness there.” That emptiness is filled by his visit to Kenya. I came to accept and embrace my past, while he learned of his past and found it fulfilled him. He has found his place and so have I. Now when someone asks me, “What’s up?” I laughingly reply, “The sky,” and he laughs right along with me. s
I still remember the warm April day I arrived at the Surf Shack restaurant in Amagansett, New York. I remember driving from the train station to the large, two-story white house situated on the seemingly endless Napeague Stretch between the Atlantic Ocean and the Long Island Sound, anxiously waiting for the surprises and new experiences I would have in the coming summer. As the taxi cab slowly pulled into one of the two oversized gravel parking lots, I caught a glimpse of the bright yellow and blue sign above the empty restaurant’s entrance and thought to myself how absurd it sounded to call this behemoth structure “a shack” when compared to the actual surf shack and board shop next door, a building merely a fraction of its size. I paid the driver, who kindly wished me luck and proceeded to unload my luggage onto the spacious wooden front deck facing the beach across Montauk Highway. Napeague is a very quiet and peaceful place, and the sound of cars whizzing by on the highway was my only reminder that I was still only five miles from the rest of the busy Hamptons towns.

I quickly surveyed the perimeter of the restaurant’s property: the large back patio littered with several round, heavy tables and boxy wooden chairs which had been carelessly left out from last season, the decrepit back shed, a shanty of grey wood and peeling green paint, its doors hanging from rusty old hinges, and the picture perfect view of the Long Island sound, a busy harbor of sailboats gliding across the deep, dark blue water. I felt very much at home here, which was good considering I would be living above the restaurant for the summer with the rest of the staff. I took my first deep breath of the salty, moist air, faintly perfumed by fresh fish, which I would become so fond of in the coming months. I sat down in one of the abandoned chairs on the patio and closed my eyes, settling into my new environment for a moment before I began unpacking. As I sat there alone under the hot sun, I could barely isolate the gentle swishing sound of ocean water crashing onto the soft sand across the road. The rhythmic sound of the waves was entrancing, each one like a wave of calming white energy washing over my soul and renewing it. All of these feelings instantly reminded me of the Caribbean island St. John, where I had been living for a few months only days prior to arriving at the Surf Shack.

Suddenly, I was startled back to consciousness by a booming male voice drawing closer to me. “My man!” said the voice, and I opened my eyes to find a stocky figure of average height standing over me in khaki shorts and ripped white undershirt. “I’m Alex,” he said, “and you must be Matt, my new chef.” I stood up quickly, brushing myself off and preparing to make an introduction to my new boss. He reached out to me with one of his big, heavy hands open for a handshake and I obliged, his bear-like paws crushing my narrow fingers. “It’s a pleasure meeting you, Alex, and I’m looking forward to working with you this summer,” I responded,
sizing up my intimidatingly wide employer. He took me inside the restaurant, where I was greeted by a rush of cold air which was stark in contrast to the soothing heat of the sun. The restaurant must’ve been renovated, the odoriferous dining room drenched in the fumes of fresh paint on the walls and dark lacquer on the long, U-shaped bar in the center of the room. Walking around the inside, I could feel the grit of sand and dirt under my worn sandals, which produced an orchestra of scraping and sanding sounds when I scuffled my feet over the beautiful new pine floors. I tried to absorb as much as possible from this introduction to my new digs before Alex interrupted me to say we would be opening tomorrow for dinner and I should begin preparing the menu tonight.

He helped me bring my bags to the back of the cavernous restaurant and out the back door, which led to another set of stairs going up to the second floor and the staff housing. My room was a small, six-by-twelve shoebox shaped bedroom with one window, an open closet, vintage mattress and a noisy air conditioner. The white wainscoting walls were modestly decorated with old surf posters and memories of the restaurant’s previous seasons. There were off-white, stained sheets lying half on the bed and half on the floor which had clearly been forgotten about for months after their owner had fled from this place. After unpacking hastily, I threw on a chef’s jacket and pants and returned downstairs to begin working.

I walked into my new kitchen to find what remains as the largest and best equipped workplace I have ever worked. It was a large room with dusty white veneer walls and cold stainless steel work surfaces and appliances. In the corner stood an old, noisy dishwashing machine which hissed and spat like a caged animal when it was loaded with dirty dishes. I could hear the gentle hum of the convection oven on the other side of the room, which patiently awaited my confections and creations. After taking a quick inventory of products and equipment, I stepped outside for a hurried cigarette. I was already enchanted by the sensory magic of this place: the dull moan of foghorns on the water, the screeching of hungry seagulls circling above, and the feeling of freedom I had found here.
PART THREE: THE VIEW FROM HERE
“Why you so white if you’re Spanish and black?” my friend Chelsea asked.

“I don’t know...” I said. I was secretly agitated that I was being asked this question for the millionth time, but more annoyed at the fact that I didn’t know myself. What was worst was that I was secretly ashamed that my skin was so white, while everyone else in school had these beautiful, healthy-looking caramel and dark-chocolate complexions. Why did I have to be the odd ball in the bunch? The ugly white duckling of the school?

“Well, do you speak Spanish?”

“No,” I sighed, looking down at the table.

“See, you gotta have some white in you. I mean, c’mon. Look how white you are.”

“No, I’m just really light-skinned.”

“But your skin is white, so that means you’re white.”

“But I’m not white. It’s just skin and that doesn’t mean I’m white!”

This was only one of the many incidents that happened to me at school when I was younger concerning my ethnicities. Everyone was so confused about what I was, but I couldn’t blame them because so was I. I understood how my situation might have been puzzling to them. Most of my classmates had come from neighborhoods where if you’re black, you had dark skin; if you’re Dominican, you’re dark skinned but not darker than the blacks; and if you’re any other kind of Spanish, you’re light skinned, but not lighter than the whites. I knew I had Dominican and black, but was puzzled about why my skin was so fair. Was there some other part of me that I didn’t know about?

It turned out there was. I was not even aware of my Irish heritage at the time. My mother had kept that information from me when I was very young to hide the embarrassment and ire that she had for my great-great-great-grandfather, who was Irish and very racist. She even tried to hide it from others by not acknowledging the name Lynch as a last name, but by making my last name L’Cabrera. Being kept in the dark as such, I went through most of my younger years confused about my heritage and abhorring myself for it.

Between the ages of eight and fourteen, I had been having this internal battle. My Irish, Dominican, and African-American side had been fighting to the death to see who would conquer me. I was extremely confused about which ethnicity I should portray, more or less, and the stressful conditions in which I was going to elementary and middle school did not ease this bewilderment.

I started attending the Ella Baker School in New York City in 1997, whose students were predominantly African-American or Spanish, on East Sixty-seventh Street between First and Second Avenue. The first graders were not so much divided by the race that you identified by; more so it was about if you liked Power Rangers over Ninja Turtles, or Barbie over My Little Pony.
But by the time I got to second grade, everything started to get complicated for me. Who you associated yourself with did not only depend on the type of television shows you watched or the toys and games you played, but it was also about “what” the person was. In all my years of attendance at the Ella Baker School, every time a child who appeared to be white entered the establishment, they were always the first ones to be picked on and teased. I was no exception. When I started second grade, I was the fairest-skinned person in school.

I cannot say I remember the exact moment where the bullying started for me, but I do remember that it started in Abby’s second and third grade class on the second floor. It was a relatively small classroom with small tables and small chairs to accommodate us. In the far center of the room, closest to the windows, was the rug area encircled by small bookcases where the class would sit to have discussions about that day’s schedule. On the left wall of the classroom, closest to the door, were rows upon rows of cubbies with drawings and nametags taped to the front of them to identify who owned what cubby for the year. I remember one specific name of the person who was my main oppressor (though not the only one) written in blue marker. Amar Phillips. I remember his name because out of all the people that bothered me, he was one of the only kids who ever got physical. Amar used to make fun of my skin and say many obscenities to me. He would push the chair back I was sitting in so I could fall and I would get in trouble for disrupting class (I was much too scared to tattle-tale). He also broke my pencils and knocked down my books. On a few occasions, Amar would go as far as pulling my hair until headaches started—or sending me home with a black eye. All this because I looked different than everyone else.

Although I never got hit again after that because my mother stepped in and addressed the situation to the principal, the verbal assaults still occurred well after second grade. I was still getting picked on, still getting called names like Michael Jackson (meant in a negative way, in reference to his pale white skin and skinny small nose) and White-Out. I had tried analyzing what it meant to be black, or how could I be more Dominican without any success. It wasn’t until the sixth grade, though, that I had finally had enough of all the insults and had my first breakthrough.

We were in the second floor gym. The room was filled with echoes of bouncing basketballs, stomping feet, and screaming children. Our gym teacher, Luis, had prepared for us to play dodge ball and broke up all the sixth, seventh, and eighth graders into two groups. While I was walking to my assigned team, I saw one of the eighth grade girls, Sophia, look at me and snicker. I acted as though I didn’t notice anything and continued getting in position to begin the game. Out of the blue, she turned to me and yelled out, “Paper!” All of the eighth grade girls began to laugh in unison with her and I could feel my face getting hot with embarrassment. Every time I so much as looked in the direction she was standing in, she would call me Paper with a condescending smirk on her face. How I loathed her!
A couple of weeks after this happened, Sophia continued to call me that wretched name and I was getting more irritated and angry with every “Paper.” Around the same time, my sixth grade teacher, Susan, was covering the civil rights movement because it was Black History Month. We were in class one afternoon and Susan was teaching us how during the civil rights movement, many Caucasians were racist toward African-Americans and would call them horrible names like “nigger” or “coon.”

“Many people, although it wasn’t right or fair, were very discriminating and hurtful towards black people,” stated Susan. “People are afraid or nervous around what they don’t know. Has anyone ever had an incident where they’ve been picked on or been bothered because someone didn’t like something about them? Has anyone felt like they’ve been treated unfair by another person?” I looked around the room. Nobody was raising a hand. I wanted to speak up in class and explain my scenario. However, I was so nervous. It felt like I had a bunch of butterflies flapping their wings in my stomach at 100 miles per hour. My hands started to get sweaty as I anticipated raising my hand. “Everyone will probably just laugh at me or look at me funny,” I thought to myself. Then I thought again about how Sophia called me Paper during gym and every other time after that. It had filled me up with enough resentment towards her and anger that I got the courage to raise my hand.

“Nayo,” said Susan, calling on me. The whole class was looking at me now and I had considered for a minute telling her that I’d forgotten what I was going to say; but I’d figured if I was going to embarrass myself, better I do it by expressing what was on my mind than being quiet.

“Well, I had a time where I was picked on because I was different,” I replied shakily, and started telling the class about what had happened at gym, how I got called Paper, White-Out, and other horrible names. By this time, I was no longer nervous, but I was filled with a new sense of accomplishment. I was finally getting this weight off of my shoulders that had been there for so long.

“I’m tired of people calling me names. I’m sick of it. People say racism is over, but it’s really not. People still have that hate in them and I don’t know why. What have I done to anybody? Nothing. I want people to stop calling me White-Out and stop talking about my skin. I know what I look like. And you now what? There’s nothing wrong with it. One skin color is no better than the next. I want people to stop looking at me as skin and look at me for the person that I am. We’re all different on the outside, but the same on the inside. I am who I am and I can’t be nothing else.” When I was finished, I was wary about the effect my story was going to have on the class. On the contrary, my teacher smiled and my class started applauding.

“Dang, I didn’t know that. That’s maad messed up,” one person vouched.

“Who called you Paper? Let me know so I could tell them to stop,” another defended.

For the rest of the class time, people continued to ask questions and make comments about the discrimination I had been enduring. My classmates were giving me verbal support and hugs left and right, and I was overwhelmed. It felt
like that ball of anger that was inside me for so long died and blossomed into this blissful orb that swelled and glowed within me.

After that I never wished I was another color other than what I am and I began to define myself for my characteristics, not according to the amount of melanin in my skin. When people asked me what I was, I would tell them, “I’m human.” When I got old enough to fill out my own paperwork, I stopped writing my last name as L’Cabreja and began to acknowledge my Irish ethnicity by writing my full last name, Lynch-Cabreja. I am proud to be of Dominican, Irish, and African-American heritage. Even though it took me so long to realize it, I’m glad I learned that I never had to pick between any of them and I learned to accept and love the way I look. Besides, it’s just skin.
I live in a ghetto hood. No, that is not my lack of grammar, where I live is ghetto and there is nothing neighborly about it. It is just the hood, end of story. I won’t get abstract and try to define the “hood” in mind-bending ways. The hood is simply high crimes, low income, gang banging, teen pregnancies, and drug dealings. Parks with glass bottles sprinkled all over the floor, schools with asbestos and poor ventilation, rivers drowned in toxins, and air so polluted, it’s our claim to fame, or rather infamy. I’m talking about the South Bronx.

I’m not here to present another sob, another melodramatic reminder of the difficulties of living in this concrete jungle. I am here to enlighten you on the beauty that lies within the “ghetto-ness.” Like any other jungle we have our nature. From the blades of grass that slip through the cracks of the pavement to the roaches and rats that insist on living right in our homes, there is a constant struggle between who is the king of this jungle. Man versus nature, the untold hood story.

I am no gangbanger, but I do face some harsh confrontations with gangs, gangs of pigeons that is. I used to be “down” with the pigeon crew. Of all the nature that surrounded me, I would have to say I adored watching the pigeons. They would hide under all the junk in my balcony and make a nest. I would follow each one’s development from egg, to birth, to the big day when the pigeon begins to fly. Granted, pigeons are nasty, feisty little creatures; I was so fascinated at the sight of them that I would bring out birdseed and breadcrumbs to feed them. I would even incorporate them into my scenery when I played with my Barbie dolls. The pigeons and I had some good times.

However, no bird could ever replace my two pet finches, Peachy and Chris. They were beautiful and unlike any other birds I had ever seen. Peachy was snow white with a bright scarlet beak. Chris was a Zebra finch with grey feathers covering him up to his belly where a spot of white feathers mixed in. On his wings he had a thin strip of orange and black feathers with tiny white polka dots, truly captivating. They were tiny little birds that didn’t do much, but they kept me company. Any time I was home alone they served as a watchdog for me, chirping frantically when they sensed someone around me. Boy did I get away with a lot of mischief. I was consistent in feeding them and cleaning their cage. I would even feel bad for seeing them trapped inside that cage the way I was trapped inside my apartment. Still, just as my mother kept me inside to protect me from the dangers of my neighborhood, I kept Peachy and Chris in their cage to protect them from the wild. From my pigeon observations I could tell it wouldn’t be easy for my feathery friends to fend for themselves. I loved them and only wanted the best for them, but the urge of giving them liberty never escaped me.

One day, I brought Peachy and Chris out to the balcony so that they too could enjoy the outdoors with me as I sang songs and blew
bubbles in the air. I even filled up my Barbie Pool Party set with water and brought Barbie and Ken out for a dip. It was a bright beautiful day and I remember it clearly. But no beauty in nature could save me from the horror I was about to face. I went inside to get some more bubbles to blow and as I came back I saw my poor tiny birds being attacked by a bigger pigeon for their seeds. The pigeons knocked the cage, attacked my birds that luckily got away, and ate the birdseed. I never saw my birds again, but what I did see was the animal instinct in the pigeon’s eye. I no longer look at pigeons the same way.

And so the gang war began. I fought for the rights to my balcony. I fought in honor of Peachy and Chris. I wanted payback for all the times they had ever pooped on my dad’s windshield. I had already lost my birds and I was going to be damned if I lost my pride. I would fill up spray bottles and turn the knob to “straight” and squirt every pigeon in sight. I felt great joy when I saw them coo away in fear. I would scare them just so they would know I ran the block. But I was outnumbered. They knew which windowsills were too far for my spray bottles to reach. Their natural instincts sensed when I was about to harm them. They knew when to fly off, only to return with two other pigeons that looked ready to attack me back, and sometimes they did. I may have been more intelligent, but they knew the land better than I did.

But how? Did man himself not create this city? Did he not pave these streets, build these buildings, and sustain this neighborhood? This was my land, my home, and they were just useless birds attacking other harmless birds and pooping everywhere. Years later it hit me that humans did not create this, we destroyed; granted, pigeons don’t belong in the U.S., the only reason they are here is some guy’s fault. Just like every other man in the hood, they are just trying to get by. Just like the thug who robs an elderly woman at the train station, pigeons robbed my birds because at the end of the day, that old lady can make that money back, and my birds (had they not escaped) would have gotten their serving of seed regardless. But does that make it right?

The way the hood is categorized, takes away our sense of entitlement to interact with nature. In fact, most people in the hood fear nature. I could never picture a Crip hiking in the mountains or a drug dealer setting out to go camping. Most people in the hood can’t even afford to travel in the first place. So why can’t we enjoy the wilderness we’re entitled to in our own backyards? The bit of nature we do have, we appreciate.

No, I still don’t like pigeons. I feel comfortable knowing that I don’t. And yes, I do mess with them from time to time when I see them picking on little birds. But I do understand where they are coming from. I can see that in the end, it isn’t that man is against nature, but that there is something greater than the hood that is causing the conflict. The pigeons want to enjoy Bronx River just as much as I do. The mice want to run in an open field just like the kids on the corners selling drugs do. The hood never gains from what the final product is. We are just space for the factories to be built and to dump on. This jungle may be concrete,
but we do as much as we can to simply survive. The flowers are a sight for all sore eyes whether they be those of men or animals because the result is man is a part of nature and we all have the same visions for our wilderness. We need to come to an agreement with every living thing with whom we share our hood so we can fight for the conservation of our home together. The war is over, pigeons—I surrender.
Clear blue sky filled with tiny patches of colorful kites tethered to manja, the thread-like kite string. All eyes looking up anxiously at the battle of hundreds of kite-flying enthusiasts spreading for miles across the city rooftops. Music is being played loudly on the streets below and food vendors are avidly serving rows of customers and enjoying the moment at the same time. Among the vendors are kite sellers, lined up along the side of the street, showcasing many different kinds of vivid colored kites. Every few minutes you can hear the roar of the younger kids who aren't flying the kites, dashing through the streets and alleyways in order to get the floating kite, still high up in the sky, which was cut off its string. They are called the kite runners. Looking across the roof, you can see smiling faces, neighbors joyously chattering, and elderly sipping tea while reading the newspaper. Today is basant, or the annual kite flying festival.

Basant is native to Pakistan and some of its surrounding countries, most notably India and Afghanistan. It is a yearly festival to celebrate the arrival of spring. The colorful kites are supposed to represent the trees and flowers which will blossom over the next few months, displaying the stunning beauty of nature. However, over the decades, the real meaning of the festival is remembered by few people, if any. Nowadays, people just enjoy the music, food, social gathering, and undoubtedly, the flying of kites. Even though natives don't celebrate basant for its original purpose, we still consider it an authentic and pure Pakistani festival.

It has been tied with Pakistan's culture since the time the country was founded, although it wasn't celebrated widely in the past. The reason I find this festival to be authentic is because we still fly kites. Without kites, basant would be nonexistent. Maybe that's what basant was meant to be about from the time Pakistanis started to celebrate it. In the future, if the festival is changed, we can be sure that one thing that will remain intact to this festival is the kite flying.

I’ve been in America for more than seven years, and I’ve yet to see any Pakistani celebrating basant. This is another reason I think basant is authentic; it is celebrated only in South Asia. Pakistanis residing in United States have brought over many of the native traditions, but this isn't one of them. You can only find the true atmosphere of basant in Pakistan. I find this to be a good thing because I’m afraid basant might lose its meaning like other festivals brought here to America. For example, Eid, a religious festival, is very different in America than it is in Pakistan. The main reason for this difference is because we don’t have our friends and families to enjoy it with here in America.

On the other hand, immigrants often assimilate into American culture. For example, eating turkey on Thanksgiving or enjoying the fireworks on Fourth of July are some of the American ways of living. I never even knew that a turkey was a bird before I came to America; I just
thought it was a country. Being able to celebrate American festivals with our neighbors and community fulfills that true meaning we lose in our native festivals. So we lose something but we get something else.

In my opinion, traditions are best preserved in their authentic state in the region where they originate. Authentic basant can only be found in Pakistan. Likewise, the true meaning of Thanksgiving can only be found in America. This is something we can’t change. I truly believe that pure authenticity in America doesn’t matter because America is diverse country. It is the root we trace back to our homeland that defines how authentic we are, not the compromises and changes we have to make to adjust to our everyday life in a different country. No matter how diverse a country or environment might be, it can’t change the culture and tradition that is naturally engraved in our hearts. I hope the next generation of Pakistanis will keep those kites soaring high above the clouds!
When I first received the complimentary book, Dreams From My Father, from Brooklyn College, I was quite annoyed. As the Brooklyn College English Department informed me in the accompanying letter, the book was mandatory for all English 1 courses. “Of course,” I thought cynically, “Not only am I enrolled in such a liberal institution, but I also have to read liberal preposterousness written my oh-so-liberal president, with whom I already whole-heartedly disagree.” I anticipated an unbearable, bothersome, and frustrating experience. Nevertheless, I tried my best to clear my head of my many biases and pre-conceived notions, even if purely for my own benefit, to make the book a bit more bearable.

I found myself pleasantly surprised at the outset of the book. Already in the first chapter, the book was reading like a novel with less of a political agenda than I had expected, and it was easy to become engrossed. I especially enjoyed learning about the background of the president of my country. Albeit extraordinarily ignorant, I had always assumed that Barack Obama, like many of his predecessors, came from an affluent family who could afford to provide him with opportunities that set one on the road to presidency. I was shocked to learn that Obama grew up fatherless with an unconventional childhood (living in Indonesia, for example), and surrounded by less-than-reputable influences (hoodlums and drugs). I gained a lot of respect for him after seeing how he extracted himself from the quicksand of apathy and substance abuse at Occidental College, starting fresh and ditching old habits for better, more productive ones at Columbia University.

After reading about his rocky road to success, I saw Barack Obama in a new light. It was more than his humble beginnings, though that certainly played a part in my new outlook. It was the fact that Obama so easily could have not continued to try, to care, to feel. He could have let himself be sucked into the beaten-down attitude and given into failure and mediocrity because he was a victim of racism. Rather than feel sorry for himself for too long, Obama took his frustration that built up at Occidental and channeled it into a more constructive role after Columbia, as a community organizer. Instead of quitting life because of the injustices that pervaded his upbringing and surroundings, he fought against them. So desperate was he for change that he left his promising job in the corporate world to take on a less lucrative, more taxing job as a community organizer. After his early years in Chicago, Obama did not make a lot of progress; instead he faced considerable resistance and difficulty. Yet the lack of resounding success was certainly outweighed by his resilience in his commitment to helping others. This dedication highlighted for me Obama’s strength of character and strong moral compass.

Have my political views changed from reading Dreams From My Father? Definitely not. The
book was a memoir, not a political tool to make me rethink my core beliefs. My perspective on Obama, however, has been considerably altered. Even with my skeptical reading lenses, I could not help but admire Obama's inner strength and goodness of character. I may be trying too hard, fitting Obama into my quaint little “American Dream Success Story” box, but I was simply enchanted by his story. After I read about how Obama overcame the obstacles in his life, he became a much more able president in my eyes. Still, I cannot help but wish he were a Republican.
When I was in the fifth grade, my dad brought a pair of peacocks as pets. At the start, I was afraid of going near the peacocks, but slowly I felt myself attracted to these creatures. I used to feed them with my hands, and when they picked at the grains, their beaks tickled me. I slowly built a relationship with these creations. If I had not been courageous at that time, I would not have been able to get close to them.

After a year, my father made a separate room for the peacocks to go at night. When I was in sixth grade, the female peacock started laying eggs. After twenty-two days, the female peacock stopped coming outside. When the female peacock stopped coming outside, to quench my curiosity I went inside and saw her sitting on her eggs. I rushed to my mom and told her that the female peacock was going to break her eggs. My mom giggled at my innocence. This was the first time that I observed nature closely. My quest for knowing things started from this point, when I asked myself why this bird was sitting on the eggs. I asked my mom and she told me that in a month, baby peacocks would hatch from the eggs. I was very fascinated by this fact, so much so that every night I used to think maybe tomorrow would be the day. I also used to question myself, “What will a baby peacock look like?” I began drawing an imaginary picture of a baby peacock in my mind.

I remember when the female peacock used to go out for food and I used to watch her and observe her eggs. Sometimes I would shake the eggs gently to check if the babies were inside. I marked the eggs with a marker so that I could tell them apart. In other words, this was to be the first experimental study of nature without my even knowing the scientific method.

During this childish scientific observation, I found that the position of eggs had always changed by the time I saw them the next day. I could not understand this until we bought an incubator. At that time, many questions came to my mind. Despite being a child, one day I asked my mom how a female peacock lays and hatches eggs. She told me that the couple sits at night and prays to God and God gives them babies. Moreover, I also asked if it is the same with human babies, and my mom replied by nodding.

I remember that at night I used to take a flash light and shine light on the peacocks, secretly, to see whether they were praying or not. I also used to ask why the peacock hatches dozens of babies and why humans pray for only one. Anyway, these were the questions and curiosities of a child.

When we bought an egg incubator, we simply put the eggs inside the incubator. The incubator is a machine that gives heat to eggs and moves them after a set time. This is done so that an egg can get the heat from all its sides in order to hatch. After seeing this I found myself interested in science because I learned how humans copy nature, and this fact fascinated me the most. This was the first time I realized that eggs neither grow...
on trees nor are they manufactured by humans; nature produces them.

* * *

Two years ago, I received an award that allowed me to do work on an independent research project in the physics of thermodynamic at the City College of New York in summer of 2008. As an intern, I was assigned to a mentor, Dr. Hernán Makse. During the interview, he asked me several scary questions: What degree do I have? What computer programming do I know? What are my previous research projects in this field? I said to myself, “I am a high school student and they are thinking something else.” When I clarified my position, he said, “I thought you are some guy who wanted to help us in our research.” Then he took me to another mentor. This mentor asked me many questions to check my knowledge of science, and at the end of that day he said to me, “You can do whatever you want to do, just don’t break any thing.” I thought, maybe this is what people think of high school students: that they are careless and irresponsible.

I used to go to the lab leaving home at 9 A.M. and coming back around 5 P.M. My mentor treated me like a college student. I was working in the granular material lab and my research was on studying packed spherical granular materials in three-dimensions. I spent one year doing my research, and this was the first time I realized that spheres have been packed in nature in the form of grapes, seeds, and many more things, but I had never pondered on how they were packed.

When it came to researching the three-dimensional part of the study, a strange thing happened to me. One day I was sitting and a sudden thought came into my mind, about how some insects match themselves to their surroundings to deceive their enemies. I studied this fact more deeply and created an optical illusion where spheres made up of carbohydrates were invisible in a dispersed liquid. I competed in the New York City Science and Engineering Fair (NYCSEF) in 2009 and received the First Award in Physics Research. I then entered the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair (ISEF) in Nevada, where fifty countries were represented. I was one of the nineteen students chosen from New York schools to represent New York, and in the history of my high school, it was the first time a student had competed in the Intel ISEF. Now if I look back to my childhood experiment, I can see how those peacocks really made me a close observer of nature.
FALLING FROM STARS

Sarah-Meira Rosenberg

If only he had never said that. I may never forgive him. The words keep coming back to me just when I think I’ve put them aside for good, but more vivid than the words are the sensations that accompany them, the indignation, exasperation, and frustration, which all fracture into glistening shards of anger that diffuse into my bloodstream and wait there, latent, until something triggers my recall and they all rush to my head, fresh and scalding as the day we spoke.

I’m overreacting. Of course I am. There are a thousand and one reasons why this shouldn’t bother me the way it does, but it does. Naturally, I couldn’t find a way to explain it to him, and I wonder if it can even be explained.

You see, I find inspiration in odd places. Places most people would never think to look. And by “inspiration” I don’t mean a sudden flood of creativity (though that often coincides)—I mean the old-fashioned kind. “Divine” inspiration, if you will. That spiritual fluffy stuff that nobody in modern society likes to talk about because it can make you sound like such a kooky mystic. Anyway, that’s the kind of thing I find in strange places.

So I guess it figures that when I go and spend a year in Israel, the holy land of my heritage, exploring my roots, studying and learning about various Judaic texts and approaches from 8:30 AM until 10 PM—knowing me, I guess it figures that the most inspiration I got all year—that high-flying, walking-on-air, makes-God-so-real-you-can-feel-Him-in-the-oxygen-you-breathe kind of inspiration—came from, of all possible things... Star Trek.

I must be out of my mind. Understand, though, that I’m not saying the other things, the more usual things, didn’t inspire me. Throughout the year, I did have moments in classes or while studying on my own when I was astonished by new angles on old problems that I’d never considered. One teacher in particular—I’ll call him Rabbi X—consistently amazed me with his keen observations and sharp insights, which always came infused with his trademark English cynicism (“Well, of course you’ve got to get the latest iPod, but next thing you know, they’ve got a new model that’ll make you breakfast and pick your nose—what’ll you do without that?”) and a single-mindedness that often cut through the B.S. most teenagers spew in the face of authority (“To beat the system and cheat yourself—only a child could consider that ‘winning’”). I seldom reach out to rabbis, not even to my own father who I’d say is quite a good one, but I arranged several meetings with Rabbi X and found that I could speak to him about religious difficulties without feeling like some spiteful blasphemer. He’d had similar struggles in his youth, he told me during one of our lengthy discussions, and he recommended some excellent books, which helped me with questions I’d asked as well as some I hadn’t yet gotten around to asking. After years of assuming my religious growing pains would haunt me all my life, I’d finally turned a corner.
But nothing hit me like this. As I think back and try to picture myself and my brother leaving the theater at Jerusalem’s Malcha Mall, I feel certain that at least a 250-watt glow must have been radiating from every inch of my skin, illuminating the entire darkened parking lot. I couldn’t wipe the smile off my face. The world was suddenly lit like never before, and I... I felt... unlocked. Like there was a piece of my heart, a crucial bit of my soul, that had always been sealed off behind iron doors that had now sprung open, and all of me could breathe for the first time. It was the most thrilling, dizzying, incredible feeling. An inexplicable, completely unexpected expansion of all horizons that comes only when story, character, acting, humor, music, color, light, shadow, old, new, chemistry, and electricity converge at their finest to reveal truly miraculous possibilities. I had never felt as blessed to live in this world as I did that night.

And he went and crushed it. Him, of all people. Rabbi X.

He didn’t know what he was doing; there was no way he could have. And I really should never have brought it up in his class the next day, and once I did, I should have seen what was coming. But I was still completely in the grip of my movie-induced ecstasy, when the joy is so strong that you want to jump up and down like a lunatic and shriek: “Omigod, I just saw the best movie on the face of the whole frikkin’ planet; I don’t care if you’re about to find the cure for cancer— go see it now! Now now now!”

Compared to that, my declaration at the start of class— “I saw Star Trek last night; it was awesome!” — was relatively tame.

“Star Trek?” Rabbi X repeated, in a tone of unmistakable scorn. “What rubbish!”

“It is not!” Knee-jerk reaction. Shouldn’t have said it. Should have just laughed him off and let it go.

“Of course it is. What possible value can there be in watching Captain Kirk fly his spaceship alongside a man in prosthetic ears? You might enjoy it, but it’s rubbish. Waste of time.”

And just like that, the iron doors slammed shut over my heart.

It should have just amused me, his extremely British dismissal of “Captain Kirk.” Okay, it was all right if it annoyed me a little, the lack of understanding, the off-handed write-off. Still, I knew he was an opinionated man, especially when it came the superficiality of pop culture, about which, admittedly, he's usually right. Anyhow, it was just one man’s opinion. It should not have thrown me.

But I respected his opinions intensely, and it did throw me. I sat in my room that evening, trying to get the exchange out of my head, with no success. I felt so small inside, sick and deeply hurt, and I didn’t know why. And then I started to cry.

That cleared it up. I grabbed a notebook and began to write frantically, in an attempt to decipher my own thoughts. But at least I knew what I was feeling; only one emotion makes me cry. I was furious. I was livid. I was so incensed I could barely see straight. How dare he say that to me! How dare he ruin my wonderful night, how dare he slash my inspiration down to nothing, how dare he try to make me regret the best-spent time
of my year, how dare he plant that seed of doubt
and sully the perfection that had so dazzled me
less than twenty-four hours before.... Didn’t he
know that he was a spiritual guidance counselor
telling me that God could not be found precisely
where I’d found Him?

Never mind that he couldn’t have known
unless he’d been inside my brain.
I tried to forget it, couldn’t, and decided
I’d simply talk it out with him at our next
conference. But I think I only made it worse for
myself.

“I didn’t say there was something wrong
with it,” he said when I told him his attitude had
bothered me. “It’s a diversion, there’s nothing
wrong with that. Everyone needs a diversion, but
at the same time, you have to recognize it for what
it is. It’s rubbish. You can’t honestly believe there’s
something more than that.”

“I disagree,” I replied quietly. “I write novels in my
spare time. If they’re all just diversions, wasting
time—”

“That’s different. If you’ve got a talent, you’ve got
to develop it—”

But that didn’t make sense either. If the product
was nothing but time-wasting rubbish, what did it
matter if I produced it or someone else did?
“I think there’s more, but I didn’t come here to
argue—”

“Go on, tell me one thing you can learn from a man
going like this.” He made the iconic Live long and
prosper sign with his fingers, except he mistakenly
held his palm down instead of outward. “You
know where they got this from, by the way?”

“Yes, straight from bircat kohanim.” Leonard
Nimoy had seen the priestly blessing performed in
his synagogue and incorporated the archaic hand
gesture into his character. “But that’s not what— I
could give you specifics, but—” Was there any
point saying that Spock was not “about” some
hand gesture or pointy ears, how he represented a
collision of worlds on so many levels, alien culture
meeting human culture, the eternal conflict
between the intellect and the emotions, the
struggle for balance— Rabbi X had clearly not seen
any Star Trek in years; he knew the buzz words,
one of the nuances... “I guess I’m just saying that
everyone has soft spots and you hit one of mine.”

We left it on that note, and I thought I’d
just move past it. But I couldn’t. It hung in the back
of my mind, surfacing whenever I saw him,
nagging me, reminding me that I hadn’t been able
to get through to him, how I disagreed so
thoroughly with his narrow view of this issue, how
dead wrong he was.

Like a cancer, it began to spread, infecting
my perceptions of him in ways that were irrational
but unshakable. If he could be so wrong about this,
who was to say he wasn’t wrong about other
things? Sure, I’d seen eye-to-eye with him on
practically everything up until now, but who was to
say that meant he was right? Everything I’d ever
learned from him was suddenly cast into doubt,
and no matter how many times I tried to tell myself
that his opinion on Star Trek had nothing to do
with anything but his opinion on Star Trek, nothing
he said from then on went in the same way it once
had.

By the end of the year, our relationship
felt very strained to me. In those final two months, I reached out much more to a different teacher I admired, who, among other things, frequently quoted from classic literature and movies in the course of his classes. From Rabbi X, I grew distant, and I wonder if I’ll ever feel compelled to close the gap. If only he had never said that.
I had never felt more like an outsider than when I tried to rediscover my Jewish identity. I come from a secular Jewish family from the formerly Soviet Belarus. Piety had died with my great-grandparents because of the pressure to assimilate and the unending tide of anti-Semitism. Just as Barack Obama writes about the “fear” of being an outsider in his Dreams from My Father, I felt like an outsider in the Jewish world, where religious Jews would not even know I was Jewish and secular Jews would not understand why I felt unhappy.

I was born with a guilty conscience. I knew we were Jewish, but I wondered why we did not dress like traditional Jews. Soon I wondered why I was not more “Jewish,” especially after I turned thirteen and had my bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage. Even though anti-Semitism exists in the U.S., it is not legal as it was in the U.S.S.R. Because I did not take advantage of this, I felt guilty. Nothing stopped me from being more Jewish, except paranoia and the opinions of a few extremists, but for some reason I was not taking advantage of this, I felt guilty. One incident in particular epitomizes my insecurities. One day, a friend invited my family and me to go a Chanukah party at his local synagogue. However, the neighborhood had many synagogues along the street and we accidently tried to enter the wrong one. This synagogue was an affluent, American one. The guards did not let us in, because they figured we were secular Russian Jews from the way we acted and dressed.

One of my mother’s co-workers was a rabbi. I decided to join his synagogue to see what the religion that I thought about often was really like. At first, my feelings of being an outsider were intensified. I felt embarrassed for knowing how to read Hebrew, but not even know the meaning of what I read. I felt embarrassed for not wearing four cornered garments with strings called tzitzis. I felt embarrassed that I was carrying a cell phone around on the Sabbath when carrying objects outside of a private residence was not allowed.

However, throughout the various Sabbath services I have attended, I have met people who accept me for who I am and admire my efforts to rediscover my heritage. I have even met a distant relative who had made this return. There are various types of Jews out there, some with long sleeved shirts, some without, some with large hats, some with just skullcaps, but there was no hatred there.

My experience is similar to that of Obama’s. He too comes to feel like he belonged when he joins a house of worship, that of
Reverend Wright. He realizes there that hope was more useful than relentless anger for black people. Just as he remembers feeling mortified by the black person who tried to peel off his skin in Life magazine, I heard stories about relatives who changed their names, which carry importance in Judaism, to more traditional ones. Similarly to how Auma and he are rejected by a Kenyan restaurant for not appearing to be rich American tourists, I was rejected for not appearing to be strictly Jewish by a synagogue. Just as blacks sometimes discriminate against their own race, so do Jews.

I have learned to think less about how strictly I follow Jewish law, though I try my best to follow it. As Obama's half brother tells him, “What's certain is that I don't need the stress. Life's hard enough without all that excess baggage.” Similarly, by the end of the book, Obama also feels more comfortable with himself: “I find myself modestly encouraged, believing that so long as the questions are still being asked, what binds us together might somehow ultimately, prevail.” We have both tried to use our anger for something more useful.

Religious Jews may consider me to be heathen and secular Jews may view me as my becoming extreme, but I feel comfortable. I do not feel like an outsider, after finding my place in society and after finding people who support me. s
Prypiat is a city near Chernobyl, which was abandoned in 1986 due to the nuclear fall out from the Chernobyl Power Plant. I visited the city briefly in 1998 with my parents and the necessary guide who gave us a tour. The city was surrounded by police, which made us scared. They don’t go in, and yet we were going straight into the heart of the city. It might not be a good idea to stick around Prypiat too long due to the radiation. This was truly a scary and uncomfortable place to be because it is a modern ghost city with empty buildings everywhere. Most of the former residents’ belongings were still on tables and in closets, as if the people just went running for their lives. Nature has taken over the place; vines were growing inside apartments and trees sprouted from buildings. In open places, the air had a surprisingly clean smell because of all the vegetation. But in and near the buildings, there was an overwhelming smell of decay and death from everything that had been left to rot. There was an abandoned Ferris Wheel which creaked and groaned as if crying in pain and misery. It is a good thing I’m not frightened by clowns or amusement parks, because the Ferris Wheel combined with the already scary feel of Prypiat would have totally pushed me over the edge and I would have panicked and become hysterical.

Surprisingly I don’t recall hearing any birds or seeing squirrels or other small animals that you usually see in the cities. There was a rare crow sound once in a while, and that’s about it. Otherwise, it was silent. It really made me wonder: Where did all the animals go? I could see an occasional insect but very rarely; perhaps their instincts told them to leave that place. It’s a very strange place to be in. It felt supernatural and I felt uneasy, as if I was being watched. These feelings came from isolation and paranoia, knowing what happened so close to the city. The city was completely dead and abandoned, and yet it felt alive in a way. It was as if the city was watching us and creating a connection with us, since we were the only people for miles. The worst and yet most exciting part of the visit was the uneasiness in the air. I could smell it, and almost taste it. I felt completely naked and vulnerable because of this feeling. The hardest thing was trying to imagine people going about their lives when they heard a military signal and they had only minutes to evacuate. It’s almost as if those strong feelings and emotions of loss were captured by the city and were kept prisoners in that forsaken place.

Prypiat is a very hard and tough place to be. It drained me emotionally and physically. It felt strange, uneasy, and haunting to be there. I was intrigued and captivated by that city, because it is very mysterious and almost magical. I wanted to know what happened there and how it must have felt to all five senses to be there during the panic, and the scrambling. It was very hard to get rid of the feelings and sights of the place. It was as if the city wanted to go with us, and wanted to be remembered.
There’s something magical about being in a park. Perhaps it’s the sea of grass or the forest of trees that give parks such a mystical feel. New York City is no stranger to large, beautiful parks, and having lived here for the majority of my life, I’ve been to plenty of them. Central Park, Washington Square Park, Prospect Park, Flushing Meadows Park, Battery Park—I’ve been to them all. While all of these parks and the many others that are sprinkled around New York are unique and special in their own way, there is one specific park that has completely enthralled me and found a way into my heart unlike any other place in the city. Situated in downtown Brooklyn is Fort Greene Park, not only my favorite park in New York, but one that holds much of my past.

The first time I truly explored Fort Greene Park was in my junior year of high school during photography class. Once all of the dirty snow melted into nothing and the colorful flowers began sprouting out ready to be seen again, Mr. DePinto would gather the class in the third floor hallway of Brooklyn Technical High School. Together we would all exit the building and cross the street to the DeKalb Avenue entrance of the park. Each day that we would go to the park, we would have about thirty minutes to take pictures of our surroundings. I remember a lot of the kids in my class who would use this as an opportunity to slack off, and I never understood them. Unlike them, I always took advantage of this time, taking pictures of everything and anything that I could. The photographs ranged from tall, leafy trees to gorgeous, blooming tulips to happy, smiling children. With the swift click of a single button, I unknowingly captured what was to become my favorite part of New York City.

Throughout the next year, Fort Greene Park became a prominent part of my daily routine. I had two accomplices who enjoyed the park almost as much as I did, Fanny and Ginny. Fanny, with her long, black hair, golden complexion, and forever changing eyes, constantly had a large grin plastered on her face. I always admired her confidence and positive attitude. Ginny, on the other hand, had dark brown hair with visible strands of purple, deep brown eyes, and smooth bronze skin. Her bluntness and forwardness never went unnoticed. And then there was me, the quiet, shy girl with a frown etched on my face most of the time. We were unlikely friends, but I guess that was the beauty of it. We balanced each other out and brought out the best in one another. I didn’t have any classes with them apart from lunch, so I always looked forward to the ring of the final bell indicating that the last period of the day was over.

Most days, when the weather was nice, the three of us would head over to Fort Greene Park to relax after a long day of school. Before doing so, we always took a short trip down DeKalb Avenue to our favorite corner deli where we would pick up sandwiches, sodas and snacks. With the food in hand, we would walk back the two blocks to the entrance of the park. We would stroll quietly
through the length of the park until we reached the other end which had a few scattered picnic tables that we would sit on. As we ate our sandwiches, we would talk about how our day went and possible plans for the following day. Many times, we would play basic card games such as Chinese Poker and War. Other times, we would play a card game called Phase Ten. A single game of that would last at least two hours, but we didn’t care because it kept us entertained.

Every so often, when it was exceptionally pleasant outside, Fanny would bring a large blanket and we would lie out on the bright, green grass under the sun. I remember one warm day; the three of us were sprawled out across the blanket. I had rolled up my leggings up to my knees in an attempt to tan my legs. Fanny and Ginny were both wearing shorts and had already slathered their legs in tanning oil. I was lying flat on my back, looking up at the sky which was a gorgeous shade of blue and scattered with passing clouds. I squinted to get a better look at the clouds. “Hey, look that cloud over there looks like a butterfly,” I said pointing above to a cloud that had caught my attention.

“Where?” Fanny asked opening her eyes and adjusting them to the sun.

“That one right there. Look,” I repeated, still pointing to the cloud.

“I see it,” Ginny said, getting into a seated position.

Fanny looked again. “Oh, yeah. I see it now,” she said, nodding her head.

“Isn’t it interesting how our mind always sees things in other objects?” I remember asking them, pondering the question in my own mind.

“I never really thought about it like that,” Ginny answered with a shrug of her shoulders.

Fanny sat up, too, but had a different question lingering in her mind. “Can you guys believe that we’re going to be in college soon?”

I sighed because this same thought had been overpowering my mind at the time. “Honestly, I really can’t. It scares me a bit, you know, starting over again, not being able to do exactly this every day,” I answered looking over at my best friends.

“Vicky, you worry too much. It might be weird at first, but you’ll be fine. I’m actually kind of excited,” Ginny said.

“Yeah, I can’t wait to finally be free,” Fanny said.

I gave them a small smile. “You guys always were one step ahead of me,” I said as I turned to lie on my stomach. Nothing else was said that day other than goodbye when it was time to leave.

Looking back at all of the memories now, as much as I loved the times I got to spend with my best friends, I think my favorite day at Fort Greene Park was the one spent alone. On one particularly cold January day, I had not wanted to go home after school. Fanny, Ginny, and anyone else that I wished to spend time with were busy that afternoon, so I embarked on my own journey in Fort Greene Park. There had been a blizzard that morning so the park was covered with pure white snow. As I entered the park like I did countless
times before, the view captivated me. Never had I seen such beautiful scenery. Every branch of every tree, every bench, and every stem of grass was completely sheltered by the snow. There was not even a single footprint apart from my own. The sight was truly stunning and I felt as if I was in an authentic winter wonderland. I walked around the park until I reached the playground, specifically the swings. The swing seats had a thin layer of snow on them so I used my glove clad hand to clean it off. As I sat down on the swing, I was thankful that I had worn wool tights underneath my jeans that morning. It was difficult to get a good start on the swing but once I did, I had the most amazing feeling. Swinging higher and higher with each push of my knees, I could see the park in its entirety. I felt so peaceful and serene, almost unreal. But it was as real as could be. Soon I lost my balance and fell face first into the snow. It hurt a lot, and in any other situation, I would have started crying like a child. Instead, I embraced the pain and slowly got up into a seated position. I guess it was my surroundings that made me brave or maybe it was the fact that there was no one to help me even if I were to cry. Whatever the reason, I felt fearless, like I could do anything. I sat there in the snow for a while until the sun began to set and it was time to go home. I stood up gradually, the pain only a distant memory. I walked out of the park with a new-found courage.

Sometimes, when I'm feeling lonely and stuck in the past, I close my eyes and try to relive my beloved high school years. However, with my eyes shut and my mind free, it never seems to be the classes, the hallways, the homework, or even the exams that I see. Rather, it's all of the moments that I spent and all of the memories that I made across the street from school at Fort Greene Park that vividly play out in my head. The park was always an escape for me; a place that calmed me like no other. I felt safe and stress-free whether I was lying on the grass looking up at the sky above or swinging high on a swing looking down at the ground below. Fort Greene Park truly became not only my little corner of New York City, but also my little corner of the world.
Back in 2001, my family had decided to move out of the city. The five boroughs of New York were all I knew and that was good enough for me. “Moving to Westchester? Mom, are you serious? How could you do this to me? What about my friends? Are we going to be living on a farm?” I was filled with a million questions and didn't really know what to think of this catastrophic news.

December 10, 2001, was the first night we slept in the barren home. I attended a new middle school, in a new neighborhood, with a new smell, in just a completely new life. In school, I completely stood out from my classmates. I wore old sneakers and ripped jeans. All the girls in my class had freshly polished fingernails and seemed overly dressed for sixth grade. I hated it; I wanted to go back to The Bronx where I was known on my block and accepted. As an eleven-year-old kid living in a strange place, I felt completely lost. My parents thought they were giving my brother and me a better life, but I despised them for taking my old life away.

As a kid, I was never a fan of change, but this was so major that I refused to even speak to my parents. I was a city kid; how could they move me into this disaster? I kept hearing how lucky I was from my family, and even my friends from back home that I kept in touch with. It seemed like everyone around me noticed how great of a place I was living in but me.

It was already February and I still couldn’t forgive my parents for what they had done. For months I had tried to think of a scheme bad enough for them to regret their decision and move back to The Bronx, but regardless of what I did, nothing worked.

I will never in my life forget this day; my parents went out for the night and I decided to stay home alone. I watched TV all day and had daydreams of living in my old home. I showed my parents in every way that I despised them for moving, but nothing compared to what I did on that day. I walked around the house, took deep breaths, was panicking, but I once I had my mind set, I did what I had to do. I took my mom’s car keys off the coffee table, ran downstairs to the garage, and started the car. I couldn't even see over the steering wheel. I put the car into “D” and drove right into the wall of the garage. The house was barely two months old. It was beautiful and brand new, and I had destroyed a little piece of it.

I quickly turned the car off and began to cry. I sat on the cold concrete garage floor, staring at what I had done and continued to cry, harder and harder each second.

Despite the hurt I had for living here, the physical damage that I had done that day will never be forgotten. I had broken a piece of my family’s home. One that my parents had been working so hard for day and night to give my brother and me a better life. As an eleven-year-old, I never understood that.

With time, the damage in the house was fixed. And the emotional damage my parents dealt
me with the move slowly fixed itself as well. I quickly learned to appreciate what I had, and learned to value everything I own. All of my possessions from that day on doubled their value. As I grew older, I cherished my belongings and worked extra hard.

There are times in a person’s life where a specific moment occurs and you just can’t help but always hold on to that memory. I was a crazy eleven-year-old who crashed a car into my brand new home, but the experience and life lesson taught from that day, will be one I take with me forever. 
I No Longer Stay Aside

Nuruddinkhodja Zakirkhodjaev

My son Benjamin’s autism had a profound impact on my life. My wife Dilya made all the decisions about Benjamin’s treatments until she felt overwhelmed. She gave up, and I realized how vulnerable our son was and what would happen if I stayed aside. This year Benjamin turned six; Benjamin cannot stay home anymore and has to go to school. Even autistic children must attend either special schools or special classes within regular schools.

“Benjamin is starting in a specialized school and you will finally have time to go to college,” my wife assured me. I just nodded as I usually did. What a great freedom. I’ll go to college and hopefully sometime get out of this dead-end, I thought. Did I not see the kindergarten teachers had difficulty dealing with Benjamin’s tantrums? Of course, I did. I believed that some special school would control Benjamin’s behavioral issues because my wife told me so. I did not have my own opinion.

On a nice September morning, I accompanied Benjamin on his first day of school. I remember when my Dad took me to my first school day many years ago. I was also just six. On this important day, I wanted to be with my son. Within the first five minutes we got into trouble. Benjamin, maybe surprised by the new environment or the language, bit the teacher. The assistant principal and teacher were furious; they should have been. Benjamin behaved the same way for the next couple of days. Therefore, by the end of the first week at school, the assistant principal set a discussion meeting for Benjamin’s parents, teachers, social worker, and the school doctor.

Back at home I related the news to my wife. As usual, I expected my wife to take the lead and solve the issue on her own. “I am not going to Benjamin’s school at all. I do not care what will happen and cannot fight,” Dilya said, suddenly. The meeting had been set already and at least one of his parents had to show up. As I came to the meeting, I was about to surrender and agree to whatever the assistant principal would propose. That day, the school doctor and the social worker could not attend the meeting and we rescheduled it for the next day.

I became aware how vulnerable and small Benjamin was. No one else but me was about to support Benjamin. I sensed that all his behavioral issues were unintentional. He just could not control himself. It took me a few hours to decide that I could not leave Benjamin defenseless. At home, I asked my wife about Benjamin’s rights and the school procedures. The law was still on Benjamin’s side. It was not easy to dismiss or reassign Benjamin to a different school. Surrender was not an alternative anymore. I could no longer stay aside and just had to fight for Benjamin.

During the first two weeks of school, I stayed with Benjamin in the classroom until the school got a one-to-one bilingual paraprofessional for Benjamin. Nothing seemed to alleviate
Benjamin’s behavioral issues. At the end of September, I made an agreement with the assistant principal to take Benjamin out of school. I would be bringing Benjamin for half an hour to school to maintain attendance till Thanksgiving. Afterwards, I would take him to the North Carolina Children’s hyperbaric center to get an oxygen treatment. Hyperbaric oxygen treatments helped some autistic children regenerate nonfunctioning brain cells and remove heavy metals from the brain. I would provide all medical papers related to Benjamin’s absence from school for about a month. We would return to school right before Christmas and I would officially withdraw Benjamin from school and send him abroad to his grandmother by New Year. I felt uneasy with this agreement, but I had no better choices.

In late December, while Benjamin was finishing his oxygen treatments, I noticed the progress that other children had after the same treatments. Therefore, I decided to come again to North Carolina for the treatments after Christmas. Back at home in Brooklyn, I faced confrontations with the assistant principal. I breached our agreement because I wanted Benjamin to maintain school attendance a little longer. To make things even worse, my wife was against continuing oxygen treatments. Benjamin’s behavior did not improve after one month of treatments, and I could not prove that additional treatments would make a difference. I saw the progress that other children had made and decided to continue treatments despite all the resistance from my wife and the assistant principal. I planned to do just one more month but then decided to get a third session of treatments.

The third month of treatments was especially exhausting for me and Benjamin, both physically and psychologically. The daily oxygen sessions depleted us of energy. Benjamin had a fever almost every night because of the oxygen treatments. To make things worse, I lost my best ally: my wife was strongly against our second and third trips to North Carolina. Our treatments finally ended. Benjamin and I came back to Brooklyn in March. Everyone saw a tremendous difference in Benjamin’s behavior. He did not cause any problems. On the contrary, other children started to bully Benjamin.

Those seven months from September to March had a big impact on my life. I learned to make my own decisions despite strong opposition from the people closest to me and sometimes relied on a gut feeling in the absence of strong empirical support. I became empowered, and acquired a strong belief in my character, will, and firmness. At the same time, I started to understand Benjamin’s world differently. I do not complain anymore. I am on a long journey embedded with many obstacles. I resolved many problems in the past and will continue to do the same in the future. Finally, I am now the person who can make independent and sound decisions concerning Benjamin. I no longer stay aside and I am happy.
When I look at the past, there were always moments that stick out in my mind. Some things I want to remember forever and some I wish would disappear. For example, there were moments where I felt I couldn’t go out without my brother having to embarrass me. My mind has suppressed memories that have to do with my brother and my childhood. My brother changed my life. He helped me discover things about myself and what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, but there were also times where I thought he changed my life for the worse.

My brother, Dennis, was born July 19, 1994. It was a day that will remain etched in my mind. I can still picture the hospital room that my mom was in. I sat in the chair next to her bed. I looked down and this small little person was in my arms. As an only child until this day, I can almost remember thinking that this would be the person I would play with and eventually share all my problems with.

Dennis was such a happy baby. He had a smile that could easily make your frown upside down. Today I look at old pictures of him and me playing together on our red tricycles. He was in his diapers and I was in my pajamas. There are pictures of us on rides together, smiling with lollipops in hand. He was such a happy baby, but one day all that changed. It was as if someone had flipped a switch inside of him. When you called his name, he wouldn’t turn to look at you. He wouldn’t smile or laugh. He would no longer babble or talk. He would barely speak. He would say at most two words. He would also beat himself up physically. He would hit his head and bang his head against the wall and throw himself to the ground. It was as if someone had ripped his spirit right out of him. Who stole my brother?

My parents had no idea what to do. They had recently moved to the United States from El Salvador in 1988 and they had never seen or experienced something like this. It was very out of the norm for them and even for myself. They hadn’t pictured coming to the “land of opportunity” and having a child who had something wrong with him. My parents took my brother to many different doctors. Some doctors said he might be deaf and that’s why he wasn’t responding when called. Some said he was just misbehaving and that we should restrain him by grabbing him from behind, holding down his arms, and crossing our legs over his. My mom says that whenever she did this to him, he just became afraid of her. What kind of doctor says that a child is just misbehaving; prescribing that you should just discipline him with restraint? My parents took him to so many doctors and I was often left home with different family members. I didn’t like being left at home alone without them. I felt as if they had just left me behind. I would ask what they were going to do to him and my mom told me once that he was going to get an MRI. At the time, I thought they said limo ride, so I thought why does he get to ride in a limo with a doctor? Of
course at the time I didn’t know what it really was. When older, my mom told me the story of Dennis getting an MRI. She said they wrapped him as if he were a mummy, and you could only see his little face while his body went into the tunnel. She said that he almost looked dead to her and she couldn’t even bare to look at him in this state.

Finally after all the tests and agonizing wait, the doctors finally gave my brother a diagnosis. It was autism. At the time, autism wasn’t heard of as much as it is today. We were absolutely clueless as to what it was. They told us he would have learning disabilities, speech delays, and a lack of social interaction. He was going to be like this forever. I was about six years old at the time, and as a result, I still couldn’t fully understand what was going on with him. I thought that my parents were focusing all their attention on him and that I was put on the backburner. In a way I sort of was, but that was just because I was the child who was going to be able to experience everything in life unlike my brother. My parents realized they didn’t have to worry about me because I was going to be alright.

My parents did see that my brother’s autism had affected me. One day they told me that they were taking me to a psychologist. Of course I didn’t want to go. I thought, “I’m not crazy. Only crazy people go to those doctors.” Now I realize that it’s not crazy people who go to psychologists. A lot of people go to them even if it’s just to talk someone. I can remember the room perfectly. There were toys and games. It was as almost as if I was just going for a play date. I honestly have no memory of my visits with the psychologist. I guess it’s something my unconscious mind refuses to remember.

I can honestly say that during my childhood, it was as if I had hated my brother. It sounds horrible, but it’s the truth. My family and I didn’t go out a lot because we were afraid that he would have a tantrum and create a scene. The looks that people would give us were so full of judgment and criticism. Their expressions said, “Why can’t you just control your child.” This was the hardest on my parents. People can be so cruel and my parents despised the looks of misunderstanding we would get. I guess my parents figured it would be better for us to stay in where no one would judge us. I will always remember one time when my dad took Dennis and me out for lunch. We went to McDonald’s. We ate then we played in the indoor playground. My dad had to use the restroom, so I had to watch Dennis. This meant wherever he went, I had to be one step behind him. He went throughout the whole playground. He ran past a little girl and accidentally knocked her down. The girl’s dad grabbed Dennis by his arm and would not let go of him. Dennis pulled to escape from his grasp, but this man would not let go until Dennis apologized. I couldn’t even speak. I was in awe as to what was happening. The little girl’s mom was just telling him to let go of Dennis. My mind couldn’t comprehend what was going on, and I just wanted my dad to come back. I remember my dad coming back and he saw what was happening. My dad apologized to the man and told him that Dennis had autism and was not like other children. It was the same situation every time. We always had to explain
what was wrong with him to other people, otherwise they couldn’t understand. They would think that he was just a brat. There was a point where it got repetitive. I would have to explain it to my friends, but I always thought they wouldn’t understand, so I never really mentioned it to them. Only recently I have been able to tell people about my brother’s autism without getting a large knot in my throat.

It is hard to know that the rest of my life will always revolve around autism. It’s never going to go away. When my parents pass on, I will become solely responsible for him. I will have to dedicate my life to him. I will always have to think of him before myself. It’s also hard to realize that he won’t have the same life I have. He won’t be able to go on a first date, go to see a movie with friends, or even have long conversations on the phone with a best friend. Even though he doesn’t really have the ability to make friends, I know that I am his friend and I will always be his friend. Now that I am older and more mature, I finally have come to terms with my brother’s disability, and I now understand it. I wish I could take back how I acted when I was younger, but I now know that at the time I was young and didn’t really know any better. My brother’s autism made me into a mature and strong person. I had to learn to think in a mentality that was above my years. Because of these experiences, I could face any problem because I have been able to face this and live through it every day.

My brother has been a great inspiration in my life. He has inspired me to try new things such as volunteering in a recreational camp for individuals with disabilities, which is where I realized that I want to help people that have disabilities for the rest of my life. I wanted to become a special education teacher, but I decided to go with speech pathology instead. I feel that if I became a speech pathologist I could assist all sorts of people, not just people who have mental disabilities, but also people who have speech disabilities ranging from a small speech impediment to people who have a speech delay. I also want to take the skills I learn and use them to help my brother. I want to help those who have difficulty expressing their thoughts and ideas verbally and help them find a voice and a method of communication, and ultimately their own selves.

I am hoping that those who read my story will be able to become more open-minded to the world of autism and to not be so judgmental. I also hope that those who have siblings, family members, or know someone with autism will read this and know that I have gone through similar experiences that they have gone through, and I hope that they find hope in this story or that they could possibly find themselves in this story.
The alarm went off at 5 AM, ringing my eardrums, the noise resonating as if I were standing in a bell tower. The snooze button was not working, causing a continuous annoying noise, forcing me to awake from my lazy sleep. My mom sprinted into my room like a leopard chasing prey, and made sure I was awake. “Come on Marcus, today is the day!” She shouted as she was panting for breath.

Upon opening my door the aroma of freshly brewed coffee rushed inside my room like a thick smokescreen. The brisk smell of hazelnut flavored coffee filled my nostrils, and introduced me to the eye opening rush I needed that morning. I had slept with my clothes on in all excitement the night before, so my only goal was to leave the house on time. As I exited my room still clearing my dry eyes, I could feel the adrenaline-pumped vibe within the house, everyone rushing to leave on a voyage.

As I made my way downstairs to brush my teeth, I sensed the transition from the noisy anxious environment upstairs, to the calm downstairs. Suitcases scattered the first floor like an airport waiting area, and the smell of coffee was getting stronger and stronger. A dark early morning sky shone very little light through the windows, making it very difficult to see, causing me to trip several times until finally finding the light switch.

While walking to the kitchen, I felt an eerie silence surrounding me, the creaking wooden floor, the dim morning light, and the irresistible smell that was attracting me to it. I poured myself a cup of coffee in my travel mug, and gathered my bags to leave.

As I tried to make my way outside to the car service, I witnessed my dad going through a self-made vacation checklist, “All windows and doors locked, check! All cars in the garage, check!” I laughed while carrying my suitcase outside. It was a beautiful morning, the ocean mist flowing with the wind, boat horns heard in the distance, warning others of their location. The trees were just beginning to grow fresh green leaves, and the sun finally beginning to rise and shine down through the leaves. I remember the big yellow letters “Fast Car Service,” imprinted the side of the minivan, and the driver leaning on the car smoking his cigarette. “Good morning, young man,” said the driver with his heavy Russian accent, “Good morning, sir,” I answered while handing him my belongings and leaping into the front seat. The car reeked of cigarette smoke and hadn’t been cleaned in what seemed for ages; it seemed ironic to me when there was a sign posted on the dashboard: “Hey You! No Smoking!” As I waited for the rest of my family to leave the house, I listened to the radio scanning through the stations when I heard the song that caused my immediate flashback: “Wildwood Days.”

I was five years old when my family vacationed on the Jersey Shore. My father came up
with the brilliant idea of taking a short boat ride from the Jersey Shore to Maryland, extending our vacation by a few days. We were excited to prolong the fun away from home. As we pulled up to the dock waiting in line to park our car onto the ship, I had no idea what was in store for me. As the boat disembarked, everyone aboard was excited except for me; something felt wrong in my gut. My parents noticed my despair and brought me into a colorful room reserved for children. It was filled with toys and playground equipment. I remember holding onto one of the playground toys while the ship rocked like a seesaw, back and forth, taking me on a ride that I did not want go on. I grasped a toy and stayed in one place for the duration of the three hour journey, crying, trying to avoid the inevitable vomiting.

Eight years later, I was sitting in a van, overexcited once again to go on a seven-day cruise, a second chance to disprove my sea sickness. “Slow Down!” my mom exclaimed to the driver, who was speeding to get to the pier on time. I was in my own world, finding a rhythm in the bumpy road, looking for any brief sight of the ship’s tall smokestacks. “There she is!” I screamed in excitement, tearing through the city’s backdrop of skyscrapers, to see the dream come true, the Carnival legend.

She towered over me, like a human standing in front of an ant. “It must be at least thirty stories high,” the driver said as he was taking our luggage out of his trunk. The sun finally began rising in the morning sky, as I continued to look up at the ship’s grandeur. The boat was tied onto the cement pier with tremendous ropes wrapped in a knot that seemed irreversible. The ropes that looked thin from far were the thickest I had ever seen; it seemed impossible to grasp the rope with one hand. As I walked with my luggage to the entrance, I was just looking over my shoulder at the ship that seemed to never end, spanning more than 1000 feet in length. Gazing at such a big ship, with a capacity for more than 2,000 people, reminded me of my youth, listening to my grandfather’s stories of his journey to America.

As a young boy, I would visit my grandparents in the summer when I was off from school. I would sit in the blazing hot kitchen, with a fan circulating the hot air around myself and my grandparents. Like a room stuck in time, the entire kitchen was vintage, stuck in the 1950s. Wooden chairs bound with leather, a refrigerator, the first of its kind without the use of ice, and a stove that looked like an army tank. The walls were papered with a multi-colored wallpaper, and reflected various colors in the kitchen as the sun glistened through the windows. The laminate wood floor made a high pitched squeak as I pushed my chair closer to the table. My grandmother, an average-sized woman, always had her hair in a perm. It wouldn’t matter how old she was, nor what time of the year; she would always beautify herself. She would stand looming over the stove as I sat at the kitchen table with my grandfather.

My grandfather, named Nathan, was an elderly-looking man, full of silvery gray hair all over his chest and arms. I remember my grandfather would get mad when I played with his gray-haired toupee whenever he fell asleep at the table. I still remember his modesty, and the aura he had while
speaking. He never boasted about his wisdom, but it was clear from the stories he told. I thought of the time when he told me about his journey to America from Austria. “It was pre-WWII,” he would begin, “And our family was noticing Hitler’s rise to power; that was when we knew it was time to leave home.” “It was terrible Marcus!” he would yell suddenly in the middle of the story, to keep me paying attention. His extraordinary storytelling skills brought me into his world, into his shoes as a young boy on the run with his family in Europe. My grandfather’s parents were rushing to book tickets on the ship that would take them on a transatlantic voyage to America, a seven-day journey. They purchased the last tickets, just enough for the entire family to travel, and thus escape the forthcoming terror. My grandfather and his family were carrying suitcases containing their lives, culture, and beliefs, onto a horse and buggy heading to the pier. Upon their arrival, my grandfather, then a boy at the age of five, was unable to stop staring at how big the ship was. “I could still see the ship made of iron, and smell the aroma of burning coal from the ships towering smokestacks,” he would tell me retaining the same face, seventy years later, full of awe and desire to board the ship. “I remember running with my small legs looking at the gigantic ship at my side, and counting the bolts as I sped parallel to the never-ending ship toward its entrance.”

A loud bullhorn awoke me from my reminiscing, alerting all the passengers on ground that it was time to board. I took every step with passion; I thought to myself I am walking on to a journey on a ship with a destination just as my family did such a long time ago. A ship of dreams, a ship that will take its passengers to a better place, a destination of happiness and freedom, for however long it might be. “Welcome aboard, sir, here is your map, and enjoy your stay,” said a tall man dressed in white uniform with blue pants. I entered the belly of the largest fish swimming the ocean, and the only thought that went through my head as I was surrounded by fine architecture and grandeur was, “If only Grandpa was here to go on another journey to paradise.”
Happiness is the word I remember when I hear the word Christmas. It was Christmas Eve, and my cousin Nattalia, my sister Tessa, and I were dressed in our cotton nightgowns. Snow was falling and there was about four inches on the ground already. The nightgowns were so itchy but they pleased my mother so much that we kept them on. We were all in bed, lying in the dark.

All of a sudden Nattalia’s mother burst into the darkness with the light from the hall and said, “Come, come see Santa.” I knew there was no such thing as Santa and was trying to persuade Nattalia just before we fell asleep that there was no such person. The three of us jumped out of bed and ran down the stairs to find Santa Claus in his rich red suit near the tree. “Ho-Ho-Ho, Merry Christmas!” Tessa held on tightly to my aunt as Nattalia and I walked forth slowly. I looked at Dad, as he was smiling, and then back at Santa.

After Santa gave us our presents, we said goodbye as our aunt escorted us upstairs. She then told us to look out the window to see Santa leave. We had seen a twinkle and Santa’s sleigh go across the sky. I was confused about whether or not Santa was fake. I tried to put my hand out the window. My aunt pulled it back quickly and then closed the window. Nattalia turned and gasped, “See—I told you he’s real!” I understood that she was so happy and innocent, and I didn’t want to ruin that. I wondered if this was why my parents lied to me. It wasn’t a horrid thing. The reason was to hold onto something special. It was this special experience that made Nattalia happy. That is the feeling that my parents valued as precious and wanted to hold onto by lying.

I waited for my aunt to think we were asleep to go downstairs. I saw mom and dad downstairs laughing. My mother noticed me and asked if I wanted to open my present. As I sat down taking off the wrapper, I saw the china doll that had been hiding in my parent’s room high on a dresser. I had known that Santa was fake, but it was still strange that my parents lied to me with a smile. I was beginning to understand that innocence could be a wonderful thing, while it lasts. I looked towards the cold fireplace where the stockings hung, full of little toys. I then caught sight of the snowy footprints on the carpet floor that led to the back door. The magic of Christmas didn’t leave; it just became something different.

What truly made me adore Christmas? I remember sitting at my desk at California Avenue elementary school a few days before Christmas vacation. I was so bored and couldn’t wait to go home. My father would always be working from the morning to the night so I would never see him until the weekends. Images of Christmas blew through my mind. I was getting anxious for that special night when the family would get together—the morning when we’d wake up early and run down the stairs to check the stockings—the feast for breakfast—followed by the presents and kisses. I just couldn’t stand sitting there, anxiously. My teacher then signaled us to be quiet.
and said, “Now class, today we have a special treat for you all to enjoy the holidays.” He turned around to the door and made a hand gesture for someone to come in.

The door opened and a group of fathers walked in, including my father. Even as a kid, when I got surprised, I sat perplexed and stunned, staying in the position I was in for a good while. This was an event that I would have never imagined to come true, “How was my father able to come in when he’s always working?” I was still stunned and looked at my father. He had the smile that said everything is okay and great. He could calm a dying man into his death with that smile; that’s how powerful it is. He may be serious when he has to be, but he knows how to have fun.

Followed by the smile of happiness was the wink of enlightenment. He gives this special wink when he really surprises someone or tells a joke. And yes, he did shock me. I felt special. I had a rush of happiness. Being a little kid, it amounted to my pinnacle of happiness. The fathers lined up against the blackboard. As some folded their arms or stood crooked, my dad had his hands behind his back with the smile on. Some kids would have been terribly embarrassed to have their father come to class. I, on the other hand, was happy and grateful.

The teacher then explained, “The fathers are here to wish a merry Christmas to us all. And a one and a two.” The fathers then gasped and started to sing! “Can my father shock me any further? Yes, he’s going to sing.” They all started to sing “Merry Christmas” and “Deck the Halls,” but most of it was a blur to me. I was just so stunned and filled with happiness. I just wanted to hug my father so tight and laugh, laugh out all the excitement and happiness that had built up.

After the fathers sang their songs, they started to walk outside. I couldn’t let it end like that, I asked my father to take me home. I wanted to go home so badly so I could tell him how happy he had made me feel. But he always had my education set as a priority and said that I should stay in class. He had given me the best gift for Christmas. It wasn’t a toy, but it was simple. So simple but something that many find hard to give. I was so joyful that I was counted as being special, special enough for my father to take time off and make me happy. Happiness fulfilled me. My father took time from his day to tap me on my head and say: by the way, I love you. That meant the world to me. No amount of money could ever replace that gift. That’s what makes me adore Christmas, that wonderful feeling inside of happiness and being made to feel special.

He gave me a kiss and then walked out the door, not knowing how happy he had just made me.
The notion of reciprocity has always been inherent in Chinese society. Parents create a nurturing environment for their children, protect them from harm, and in their children’s best interests raise them to become promising adults. Similarly, children in turn are expected to obey their parents, excel in everything they do, and support their parents in old age. While many challenge the notion, I believe my conscience would prick me if I were to believe otherwise.

My parents raised me shrouded in their safety net of love and warmth, unconditional care, and giving. Today, twenty-three years since being brought into the world, I am all set to do well in my final leg of school, take on a job in the finance industry, and ensure my parents’ retirement becomes a wonderful old age, free of worry and full of love.

Growing up, I never had to worry; food was always on the dinner table, clean water ran from the tap, and air-conditioning shut out the sweltering tropical heat, keeping the air at home cool and pleasant. The house I grew up in was of beautiful brick, painted in white and adorned with dark-wood doors and windows. The house was in Singapore, where social unrest is nonexistent and the only thing close to a natural disaster was the year-round ninety-degree heat.

My family is a traditional yet liberal one; while Chinese New Year meant kneeling before my parents to receive red packets, they were as generous in their red packets, as were they to pay for my first tattoo, something atypical of traditional Chinese parents who scorn the sight of tattoos. Whether it was three weeks in an incubator due to infant jaundice, or two weeks in the hospital due to a leg injury from falling off a skate ramp, my parents have always been there for me.

The love and concern I have been showered with is a far cry from what my father had been through as a child. He grew up lonely, with parents who worked as domestic helpers and were rarely home. While other kids at school packed food from home, he had nothing. He fended for himself since he was young. Years of hard work and dedication to the ones he loves have made it possible for me to live in comfort; many blessed children today take their situation for granted.

I lived much of my childhood oblivious to sufferings around the world; my first exposure to the real world came from a trip to Thailand when I was ten. Children—some lacking limbs, others with deformities—filled the streets of Bangkok begging for both food and money. I was shocked, like a fish out of water, taken out of my comfort zone and put into a place so oddly different from what I had been used to.

My mother used to say, “Count your blessings, son. Have you imagined what it’d be like if you were the one on the streets instead?”

At nineteen, I watched my best friend break down at his mother’s funeral. While recovering from the loss, Alex went through a
period of denial and grief. He hated himself for always being out late at night, keeping his mother awake while she waited for him to return. He hated himself for many things, many of which he would never be able to change because of his mother’s demise.

“Life is fragile; treasure what you have,” Alex said to me at the hundred-day anniversary of his mother’s passing.

Inculcated in me is a sense of belonging and responsibility toward my parents. I have been trained to not take things for granted and be appreciative of what I have. While the corporate world awaits, I have set my mind on working hard in college now, getting a stable job thereafter, and supporting my parents through their retirement, giving them all the love and financial support I can; perhaps even more than what they have given me.
My mother grew up in an irreligious home and did not have a comprehensive Jewish education like me and my siblings. Her Jewish education consisted of going to a Sunday school. Her upbringing, combined with her dyslexia, meant she could not read Hebrew very well. Recognizing her need to improve her kreah (reading in Hebrew), my mother asked for help. “I’m asking for your help. Over the summer could you please help me increase my fluency in Hebrew?” I agreed to do it. Over the summer I helped her a few times, but not very often. As we both worked, we couldn’t finish the lessons, so they would have to continue throughout the year.

She came home from work one day carrying some kreah sheets, with large and easy words to read, that she copied from the first grade teachers. Last Sunday, the day before Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, I was lying on my bed. I wanted to read and do homework and clean my room and sleep. The next day was a fast day, the second one in a week. I knew I would be asked to help, but I didn’t want to cook or clean or do kreah. My mother knocked on the door to my room and entered. She carried a small stack of papers. I knew those papers; they were the first grade kreah sheets. I looked at it and my heart fell. I knew she wanted help and I didn’t want to give it to her. She looked at me and asked “Keren, can you help me now or do you not want to?”

I did not think. Maybe she really needed my help; maybe I can give of myself to help her. She’s my mother. But I didn’t think. I did not want to help. I was lazy and selfish; I only wanted to laze. And so I snapped out. “No I don’t. I don’t want to do anything. Leave me alone! I don’t want to help you.”

She looked at me and turned away to try on her own. She came back to ask my help again for a specific word, and again I snapped. She left me, left me alone to think. To think about what I did. I hated her for asking me to help. Why can’t you just leave me alone!

Thinking about it, I started to feel guilty. I acted like a self-centered thirteen-year-old: a selfish, spoiled snob. I stared at my room. It stared back at me. The books my mother helped me buy, my laptop she helped pay for, the clothes she bought me. These things spoke to my mother’s goodness. My mother helped me my whole life. And when she asked me for help, I refused to help her. I refused to help my own mother. I know my mother is dyslexic. I know she needed my help to help herself. What type of person was I, that I wouldn’t help my own mother? Did I want to be a selfish person my whole life? Could I live with myself if I was?

No I couldn’t.

I couldn’t live my life like that, not helping people who gave me so much. They helped me and now they needed my help. But I don’t like to be asked for help. What could I do to overcome my nature? I decided to take the initiative in helping my mother. Offering to help my mother instead of
waiting to be asked would give me the freedom to help when I wanted to, on my time. If I offered to help she couldn’t impose on me.

So I did.

Four days later, on Thursday, I picked up my Sefer Tehillim, the Book of Psalms. I picked that because it has emotional significance for me. I try to complete it bimonthly. Before I went to my Thursday classes, I walked to where she works. It was on the way, no inconvenience to me. She took ten minutes off. We sat down together and read through three chapters, 130 and 131, two short ones, and 146, a longer one that’s said everyday in morning prayers.

It worked perfectly. She practiced, I helped her, and I did not feel imposed upon. Then that night we had to put up the schach, the roof of the sukkah. Instead of waiting to be asked I went outside and helped her put up the schach. (We use long sticks of bamboo.) After we put the schach and the lights up, we went inside.

Humans can be selfish and lazy. We do not always like to be told what to do. Moreover, when we are asked to do something, we instinctively say no. But people are inherently good. If we want to overcome our selfish nature we must go out and volunteer our help. When we learn to love, or at least like helping others, we will be able to overcome our inherent selfish natures.

* * *

Hebrew is a Semitic language, not a romance language like English, French, and Spanish. The Hebrew alphabet is called the Aleph Bais and is very different from the alphabet romance languages use (אַבְגָּדְהָוזָחַטָכֶלָמָנָסֶעָפָצָקרָשָתָ). When you read Hebrew you move from the right to left. Also Hebrew does not have vowels in the ordinary sense. Instead under each letter are nekudot (literally points). These nekudos are points or dashes or both which inform the reader which vowel pronunciation to use. My mother’s school taught her to read the nekudot in a different manner than that which is taught in the Jewish day school I went to.

In the fall there are three Jewish holidays. Rosh Hashanah is the celebration of New Year. Yom Kippur is the Day of Atonement, a fast day. And the last one is Sukkos where we eat and some people sleep in a hut for seven days. The walls of the sukkah can be made out of wood or canvas or other materials. Specific rules also apply to the roof. It can’t be made out of metal. People usually use wood, bamboo, or leaves. Whatever you use, it is called schach. We use sticks of bamboo more than seven feet long, taller than our sukkah. You can’t hold it straight up or it messes up the roof. Also there has to be more shade than sun inside the sukkah. Since the roof can’t keep out the rain, you are allowed to put plastic over it.

My mother grew up in Kansas City, a city on the border of Kansas and Missouri. She went to school there, but did not have an easy time. My mother is dyslexic. It is hard for her to read. Throughout school she was labeled as a dumb child because she could not do her homework well because she could not read well. My mother grew up in an irreligious home, a home that did not put a great emphasis on learning the Torah and fulfilling all the mitzvahs. My mother did not have the comprehensive Jewish education that I and my
sisters and brother had. Instead she went to Sunday school for her Jewish education. As a Sunday school, they adopted the secular Israeli pronunciation of Hebrew, which is different than the pronunciation taught to Jewish day school children. She wanted to learn the pronunciation we learned in school. Also, because it was only a Sunday school, they did not have the time to teach her to read Hebrew properly.
It is truly remarkable how, at the correct moment, certain words can mean so much more than they had ever meant before. I was sitting on an El Al flight from Tel Aviv to New York, going back home in the middle of May for my cousin’s funeral. Listening to those words against the simple backdrop of an acoustic guitar I thought about everything that had happened in the past eight hours and about the situation I was currently in. It was then that I came to the realization about where I was going: I was on my way to the place where I would achieve a purpose by performing the most important thing I had ever done. I was going to attend my little cousin’s funeral. Those words were so powerful then because they were true. I was standing at that station waiting for that train with my cousin on it ready to leave, never to be seen again.

It was seven in the morning when my rented cell phone rang, waking up one of my roommates and myself. “Oh Adam, it’s worse than when Grandfather died,” said my mother the instant I picked up. Rushing from my dorm room I quickly went to the bathroom and closed the door, in an attempt for privacy in what I already knew was going to be a painful moment. “What’s wrong? What happened?” I said, while in my head I tried to guess which one of my relatives had just passed. “Mikey died,” my mother replied in between sobs, and during what could have been no more than a few milliseconds, my world collapsed. Mikey was the nickname my mother called my father; for one brief infinite moment I had thought my father died, until my mother said, “Our little cousin Mikey died.” To this day I still feel ashamed of that first emotion I felt when I heard the news that my cousin was dead: relief. Relief that my father wasn’t dead, that he was still alive and it was someone else who had died. “Adam, we need to know if you want to come home for the funeral,” my father’s voice said over the quite audible sounds of my mother’s sobs. “Absolutely,” I replied instantly, my own voice beginning to crack from the effort of restraining my own tears, “I have to come home for this.”

My cousin, Michael Benjamin Sclawy-Adelman—aged seventeen years, eleven months, and fourteen days—had died. He died two weeks shy of his eighteenth birthday, the birthday he shared with his twin sister. He died one month prior to his high school graduation. In the fall he would have attended the University of Florida on a scholarship, not as a freshman but as a sophomore due to his plethora of stellar AP scores. His death was an absolute tragedy, not only because of the timing, but also because it was preventable. That Saturday, May 9, 2009, my cousin Michael was on a twenty-mile hike where, upon completion, he
would receive his Eagle Scout badge from the Boy Scouts. He was with a group of other boys trying to earn their own Eagle Scout badges and two Boy Scout troop leaders who over the course of their own careers had completed this hike more times than they could count. Midway through the hike, my cousin began to feel ill, but they pushed on. When he could go no further, one troop leader stayed behind as the rest rushed forward to the closest park ranger outpost at the end of the hike. After reporting that my cousin was sick, the park rangers immediately lifted off in a helicopter to rescue my cousin. However, the troop leader forgot where they were left behind. Having performed this hike countless times, the troop leaders had earlier decided not to bring his GPS tracker on the hike, which made pinpointing his exact location even more difficult. It took an hour and a half to find where they left my cousin, an hour and a half too late because by then he was already dead.

Half an hour after my early morning wake-up phone call I had a flight booked. I set about to ready everything needed for my trip back home. It’s strange how efficiently one can work when your mind makes an effort to concentrate on a single thought in order to block out another. Pretty soon after I was packed, I decided to make myself a playlist to listen to on the plane ride back. I picked only songs I deemed appropriate for the current situation, but even as I picked the songs I just didn’t realize how fitting they truly were.

On the plane I sat there dazed. If the flight attendants offered me food, I ate it. If I needed to use the bathroom I got up and walked like a zombie towards the restroom thinking nothing at all except for the task at hand. At some point or the other I finally started to hear the music playing over my headphones. I began to wonder about the purpose of my life, the purpose of my cousin’s life, but I had no answer to either. The only conclusion I could draw was that up until that point my life had no purpose, but my intuition told me that was wrong. I did have a purpose, and I knew that I had lived my life with a purpose; I just had not realized what it was yet.

Throughout the cab ride to the airport I sat quietly staring out the window at the countryside of Israel. I may have been looking but I certainly was not seeing. My ears probably heard my taxi driver speak Hebrew, his voice coarse from the years of smoking cigarettes, just like the one he was smoking then that my olfactory senses probably picked up. My senses performed their duties but none of it reached my brain. I guess I was in complete and utter shock. At the airport the lines for everything were short, but even if they were long, I doubt I would have felt the difference. I just sat by the gate, where in my numbed state I must have been oblivious to the other passengers possibly passing by. It wasn’t until my phone rang enough times to bother some man sitting close by who decided it was his duty to tap me on the shoulder and wake me from my reverie. I looked at my phone and automatically I began calling back the many people whose phone calls I had missed. When I spoke to my other first cousin, Tali, she told me something that later I would replay in my mind many times. She told me, ‘Elizabeth (Mikey’s twin sister) is telling all her friends, ‘All my family is
flying down here from New York, one cousin is even flying all the way from Israel!"

After failing to deduce any satisfactory conclusions I returned, albeit to a lesser degree, to the semi-vegetative state I was in before. However, this time my senses did relay information to my brain, although maybe it was only my sense of hearing that penetrated my fog. I heard every word of pain Elliott Smith sang on his album. I may even have contemplated them on a subconscious level, but it was not until the opening lyrics (reproduced at the start of this paper) of Elliott Smith’s “The Biggest Lie” did I begin to think real conscious thoughts. I thought about where I was going. I was going to my cousin’s funeral. Going home to be with my family as we lowered the remains of his body into the ground. Only after repeating this and what my cousin Tali had said in my mind many times did I finally realize the purpose of my life.

My Aunt Judy and my Uncle Howard weren’t very religious Jews so they didn’t carry out the burial to a religious tee, but it was better that way. Instead of burying Michael the day after he died, as per religious custom, my aunt and uncle decided to bury him the Wednesday after his death in order to allow all the family members to get to Florida in time for the funeral. We all spent the day before the funeral in my aunt and uncle’s house, remembering Mikey. At one point or another someone asked me if I was willing to put together a eulogy to read at the funeral. I said no because I knew that any attempts to write a eulogy would be futile; there was no way I could think of the words to say. If you asked me today to write a eulogy for him, I could do it, I could write what I wish I could have said then. We all felt what I could have said, what I wanted to say but those words just didn’t exist then.

Next day the funeral was exactly as we expected it to be, awful. His entire senior class showed, all 800 students. The school board wouldn’t approve spending for the transportation to the funeral, so the principal paid it completely out of his own pocket. Many people spoke about Mikey, including my mother and one of my other cousins. Everyone cried. The procession to the funeral was over a hundred cars long. At the cemetery the rabbi spoke a little more, prayers were recited, and then Mikey’s coffin was lowered into the ground. According to Jewish custom the aggrieved family is supposed to bury the body themselves. Every single person at that burial, mostly non-Jews, made sure to bury him. Orthodox custom states that the family should completely bury the body, but since my aunt and uncle were not Orthodox, the act of burying my cousin was mostly symbolic; his coffin was still visible under all the dirt. The cemetery workers assumed the burial was over and brought in the tractor to finish the deed. However, my family, along with my other cousins’ family, consists mainly of Orthodox Jews, and we were going to bury him as per our custom. For the next half an hour we dropped pile after pile of dirt on his coffin in the hot Florida sun. Even if we were not Jewish, I believe we would have buried him ourselves anyway. Nothing about his death was easy, so why should his burial be?

For the next few days we stayed with my aunt, my uncle, and Mikey’s twin sister, Elizabeth.
We all grieved together, we all wailed together, and eventually we would all heal together, just not then and not even now. After all that I knew, the deduction I made on the plane was correct.

Sitting there on the plane listening to music, thinking over and over about everything, I was finally able to figure out the purpose that earlier had eluded me. My purpose was to live, to live my life and be a part in the lives of all the people who were in my life. By attending this funeral I was fulfilling my purpose, because by being there I showed my family that they gave meaning to my life, that Mikey gave meaning to my life, and I was going to honor that meaning he gave me by traveling as far as needed to be at his funeral. Our purpose in this world is to give meaning to other people’s lives by living in it, and they reciprocate by living and giving meaning to our lives.

I realized this on that plane ride, but the idea wasn’t complete. I had all these thoughts floating in my head but I lacked that one unifying thought that would bring it all together into a single idea. Just as before, music provided the answer. The plane began to descend as I listened to the last song on my playlist. When I heard the last line of that song, it was as if a jolt of electricity entered my mind, solidifying my thoughts into one idea. Those words became the tagline of what in my mind was the purpose of my life. I repeated those words over and over in my head and then, just once, out loud I said “Cause with my family we know where home is, so instead of sending flowers we the roses” (from “Roses” by Kanye West).
“Where’s my cell phone?” Maryam asked as she zipped her suitcase. Although it hadn’t hit me yet, I would soon be left to face the absence of my sisters at home, a loss larger than I’d ever before experienced. Maryam and Sarah, my two eldest sisters, were all over the place; it was the day of their double wedding. It was a day that changed my life forever, the day my family grew infinitely smaller, the day my sisters, whose cares, hopes, dreams, and daily struggles always intertwined with mine, were wrenched away. I didn’t realize what was ahead of me, or the new part I would soon be assuming. I was aware only of the excitement and happiness of a day that I had been looking forward to for a long time. All nine members of my family moved in different directions, each with his or her own frantic agenda. Mine included a call to Maryam’s maid of honor about the bridesmaids’ bouquets and a stop at CVS for pantyhose on the way to the hairdresser.

Merriment grew as the big night came closer to reality. Impossible to make order out of the chaos; we all got to the wedding hall in the cars of different relatives and our prompt arrival was accomplished only by our single-minded desires to celebrate. I entered Oriental Manor in my bridesmaid gown, then greeted guests and got squeezed by so many Egyptian housewives who decidedly proclaimed to me, “You’re next, Fatema!” At which my sober answer of “Tant, I’m fourteen,” fell time and again on deaf ears. The commotion blocked away all but the moment.

Finally, my two sisters glided into the reception room in their long white dresses, not with my father’s protective arm around them, guiding them to their seats, and not holding my mother’s hands, she instructing, “There’s so-and-so’s mother, smile big, girls.” Instead, their white-gloved hands held the forearms of their new husbands, and despite the fact that 400 guests crowded the room that day, drums beating, Arab women trilling, they each looked as if they were in some other world, a world of two.

Finally realizing that they were leaving, a small feeling of distress ran through me. How was I going to survive without them around? I needed their constant care and guidance to continue my life. I tried to hold back my tears till I was back home in the privacy of my room, but the emotions were quite powerful. I hugged my two sisters tightly. Soon, they drove off with their husbands to their honeymoons, each in different directions. I thought about the fact that things would never again be the same. Of course I was happy for them, but I could not shake the sense of loss that had overwhelmed me. My shrunken family entered our minivan easily. Nobody’s elbow pierced my ribs, nobody had to hop over me, stepping on my feet on the way in. Tears continued to rush down in steady streams on either side of my face.

As we walked up the stairs to our home, my family was talking about the wedding, asking such things as who was there, who was not, and who was that guy dancing so skillfully to the Arabic
beat while twirling a cane? Only I was silent, still in shock. The thought of Maryam and Sarah not being a part of this group stunned me.

Maryam and Sarah were two of the most helpful people in my life. When I returned home from a long day at school, Maryam would be there to help me with my English assignments. And Sarah explained scientific concepts in such a way that I will never forget. She helped me prepare for exams even before she took care of her own things. I remember the time I had my biology regents exam. Sarah and I stayed up till late in the night solving problems and eating butter pecan ice cream. Maryam took me shopping with her friends sometimes, and if Sarah were required to visit a museum or see an orchestra concerts for one of her college courses, she would take me along. “To educate you,” she would tell me. Also, Maryam liked to cook delicious deserts all the time and always helped my mom with the cleaning, leaving me worry free. They were the my sincere advisors, my role models, even my heroes. I could not imagine dealing with my daily life without having them there to cheer me on through my childhood. These were the thoughts that haunted me in the dark void of that first night.

The next morning, I rose to a very messy house. Sarah was usually up bright and early magically getting things under control. But not today. My other siblings were still sleeping from the exhaustion of the wedding. I slipped past my parents' room and found them sound asleep. My mom, who spent last night fluffing my sisters dresses and tending to just about everything else, looked exhausted. Her black beaded evening bag rested on the night stand and her right arm draped to the floor. Soon she’d be woken by the demands of my four- and seven-year-old little brothers, and her mind would get busy on what to feed us all.

Suddenly, a surge of energy rushed through my body. Without really thinking, I was running around washing tables and picking up tags and packaging and wedding favors. I felt responsible for getting things together. “Good Morning,” my mom muttered as she stumbled out of bed, not noticing the effort I had put into cleaning the house. Somehow, that did not really matter. This was my way of adjusting to the new situation and it made me feel better. Life went on and I took on a new role in our household.

I still see my married sisters, of course, just not as often. There was the time they both came back from their week-long honeymoons on the same day. My parents decided we would have our first get-together. My sisters looked radiant and very happy to see us all. We sat together around the living room, my two brothers were upon Maryam and Sarah’s laps. Maryam smiled as she handed me two red Jamaican maracas with black designs. “Mohamed had the man carve your name on the handle, see?” Maryam informed me. “Oh wow!” I said looking at my brother-in-law, “Thank you.” Mohamed nodded, blushing. My family wasn’t getting smaller after all, I realized, it actually had grown much larger.
YOUR WORLD. YOUR PAPER.

READ

the ONION

AMERICA'S FINEST NEWS SOURCE

MORE