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

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Nikita Nelin, Melissa Nocera, Anna Prushinskaya,
Normandy Sherwood, Deb Travis, and Catherine Tung.
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Cover Art: © Will Barnet/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY
Alexandre Gallery, New York, NY
Introspection - 5733, 1972
Screen print on paper 32 1/2 x 41 15/16 in. (82.6 x 106.3 cm)
The Jewish Museum, New York
# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments iii

Introduction 1

**Part One: Becoming**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Letter to Future Me</td>
<td>Ariel Marshall</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking Flight: A Memoir from My Childhood</td>
<td>Rahimah Ahmad</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Rita Khatun</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Silent Statement of a Hijab</td>
<td>Salma Abdou</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T's Culture Limbo</td>
<td>Yang Wang</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manicure</td>
<td>Farnia Naeem</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trying to Understand</td>
<td>Michael Perrin</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing Different</td>
<td>Rafat Amusa</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brownsville</td>
<td>Sherley Bonne-Annee</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College on Hold</td>
<td>Brittney Jackson</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sibling Envy: A Quest for Company</td>
<td>Elisa Renee Libraty</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythmic Ecstasy</td>
<td>Yeva Kosman-Rimskaya</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part Two: Turning Points**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Importance of Questions</td>
<td>Max Feist</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going to College</td>
<td>Georgina Pang</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never Alone</td>
<td>Tremar Yetman</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blindness</td>
<td>Rita Tobias</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charisma McDuffie</td>
<td>Meghan Santos</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Classmate's Story</td>
<td>Ofear Balas</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dual Relationship</td>
<td>Mila Tarantur</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another Man's Treasure</td>
<td>Meira Bennett</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let Those Boys Cook</td>
<td>Andrew Toomer</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Before God, Divided We Stand</td>
<td>Rahima Nayeem</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Three: Changing Places</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaving Town</td>
<td>Samuel Rodriguez Beltran</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sun Is the Same in a Relative Way</td>
<td>Max Temnigorod</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shalom Hacker</td>
<td>Yaakov Hacker</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crossing Over the Language Barrier</td>
<td>Allen Gorbonos</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Little Bite from the Big Apple</td>
<td>Neliya Karimova</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Other Side</td>
<td>Darwin A. Maria Lara</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Trip to Israel</td>
<td>Peggy Hazan</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspirations</td>
<td>Godfred Talaga</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part Four: Raising Consciousness: Responses to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?</td>
<td>Beatrice Baraev</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Sandwiches</td>
<td>Gianluca Randazzo</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Experience</td>
<td>Krystal Burrows</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Mirror to the World: What I Learned from</td>
<td>Mariaisabel Zweig</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Does It Feel To Be a Problem?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I Don’t Create or Define, I Defend</td>
<td>Gregory Witkin</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Nigora Raufova</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Media Fury</td>
<td>Clarissa Marie Ligon</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar and Me</td>
<td>Kiran Sury</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem or Paradox, or Both?</td>
<td>Brian Ghezelaiaogh</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Brooklyn College students of the class of 2014 began their college experience through the pre-freshman reading of Moustafa Bayoumi’s *How Does It Feel To Be a Problem? Being Young and Arab in America* during the summer before the start of the Fall 2010 semester. Once classes began, students discussed Bayoumi’s book and then attended a lecture and reading by Bayoumi in September 2010. Conversations about *How Does it Feel to be a Problem?* 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: BECOMING
Hey kid, how’s tricks?

Guess who? It’s you! Taking my horrible memory into consideration, it probably wouldn’t be much of a stretch to say you have no idea who this is. So I’ll reiterate: It’s you! From the past! This is a letter from your almost-18-year-old self. Read and enjoy!

I know you’re a big shot 20 year old as of yesterday, congratulations and happy birthday! I know it’s a day late, but you know me. I’m always late. I hope you’re not like that anymore. But the point of this blast from the past isn’t to talk about old habits, it’s to celebrate your birthday! Now, I know people usually do the whole “you’re an adult now” gig on a person’s 18th birthday, but really? Between you and me, I don’t really see how being 18 suddenly makes one an adult. All the legal stuff is pretty much the same: still can’t drink, already passed the age of consent for New York. Sure I can get a driver’s license but, well, that’s stupid. I live in New York City. I take the MTA everywhere, and I’ve been in enough car rides to know that driving in the city is pretty much the stupidest thing you can do to waste time and be angry. Aside from lotto tickets, there’s really nothing that makes the 18 milestone stand out as much as everyone wants it to. Hell, the age still has “-teen” at the end of it! It still qualifies as a teenager! That’s why I’m sending this to you for your 20th. Because you can’t say you’re “whatever-teen” anymore. It’s over. You’re an adult now, a Grown-Up. You’re one of them.

So, in honor of your incredible, terrifying, and true beginning towards adulthood, I’d like to give you a present.

Remember Virginia? The lazy months spent inside Mom’s house? Remember Jamie, Christian, and the mattress propped up against the wall? Remember watching Team America: World Police? Remember the bunk bed, and the weeks when you were waking up at 9pm and going to sleep at 7am? I’m sure you have the picture by now.

Now think of the day you got sick.

You saw it was going to rain. Mom had called a little earlier saying she was on her way home from work (Remember the trucking company?) The house was empty, but not in a lonely and desolate way. You were enjoying the solitude, it meant you could walk around without anyone bothering you. Light spilled into the living room, and you could hear the rain tapping on the windows and the walls. While wandering the house, you kept looking out the blinds. You would gaze absent-mindedly and touch the window, feeling the cool glass. Everything was bright gray outside. It was like the old water park in Florida you went to way back when, where everything was brightness, water, and incredible fun.

Perhaps that reminder is exactly why you decided to take off your socks, open the door, and run outside. It was better than you imagined. Not only was it bright and watery, but it was warm. The heat enveloped you and the rain washed you,
That was you. You did that. And you smiled the whole way through.

This is my present to you, Maggie Margarita: The secret to being a child again, the secret to being happy. Whenever you use this present this memory-age isn't going to matter anymore. People aren't going to matter anymore. You're going to be 7 in the water park, 13 in Virginia. You're going to be whatever age you want to be, and all your fears and anxiety are going to melt for the smallest of moments, as the space you move through becomes nothing but a blank plane of existence. Then, and only then, the most beautiful spectrum of emotion will explode within you, and you will be able to fly.

All you have to do is go out into the rain and dance.

See you there,

Seventeen and crazy s
We marched down the crumbling pavement in a precise echelon. I wore a green windbreaker and my sister’s, its pink and blue, counter parts. Though our near-identical outfits spoke nothing of this aloud, I knew I was the youngest, the least experienced, the one with the most to prove.

Beside me, my sister Matinah was practically reverberating with glee at the prospect of conquering. Her dark brown eye’s burning with a fire as blue as her attire. Up ahead, my older sister Taqiyya was silent, but it was hard to tell if she was contemplating the challenges ahead or just jaded into silence by the heavy weight of boredom.

Finally, we reached what my siblings and I had christened the “Bronx Park,” as if it were the only park in that borough; and truly, for us it was. The park was surrounded by a simple black gate that spoke nothing of the excitement of what lay within. We strode through the open gates and up the winding asphalt path. It was bracketed on either side by small fields of browning grass, one of which banked down to a shallow river, run off from the Bronx Zoo in whose valley the Bronx Park lay. Down the road, past the fields, lay the playground, bordered by a chain link fence.

In the not so distant past this had been the sole source of wonder for me in the park; its swings that had allowed me to soar dangerously high, its slide that stretched loftily up to the sky in all its narrow glory, one false move and...

But those things I had already conquered. They had served their purpose. As we passed these relics of the past, challenges for us no longer, we barely spared them the shortest glance. Reaching the back of the park, we turned left, until the fence that surrounded the playground halted our progress. Someone had cut a hole in the steel wiring, and we slipped through. After climbing down a jagged wall of rocks, we found ourselves at the first true challenge.

This rite of passage, took the form of a bridge constructed of evenly placed cemented stones, sharp precipices on either side. There was a margin for error but a very thin one. One wrong move too many would not only result in death, but in disgrace. We started across the bridge.

We halted halfway across, and as we stood there contemplating our mortality, none of us glanced at the others. The very action would have been an unacceptable admission of weakness, a yearning for comfort, a declaration of fear. Though I would admit this to no one but myself, I was indescribably grateful of this, for I was... I was afraid of heights.

I was perhaps five when it had occurred, when the seed of fright had been planted. It had happened at a nameless theme park where Matinah convinced me to get on the Kiddie Ferris Wheel. She would have rather rode by herself, but there had been rules against it, impassible even for her. Taqiyya had regarded the ride coolly, contempt for it written clearly on her face, before
flatly refusing to get on, making me, Matinah’s last, and only, option.

I climbed sanguinely into the enclosed car, and almost immediately after the door closed, my sister began to rock the sedan, using her body weight and sheer force of will. I listened with growing trepidation as we rode higher and higher, and the supporting frame began to groan painfully under the pressure of her constant movement.

A frozen diamond of terror settled firmly in my stomach, weighing me down to the seat rendering me unable to move. I clenched at the hard plastic beneath me, until it decided enough was enough and began to bite harshly into the soft tissue of my hands.

“Stop, Matinah, stop,” were the words that formed above the icy stone in my abdomen. And above it they sat, lost and unable to find their way to my mouth.

Matinah finally stopped swinging the ride when the novelty of it wore off, which hadn’t taken too long in real time where the seconds weren’t as long as days. Even once gone, the stones sharp edges had left gashes that time, a poor salve for wounds so deep, had simply grafted the surface, leaving it to reopen when put under the slightest bit of stress.

It was there, years later on the bridge, when I began to feel the sting of fear renewed, which gave life to another dread—dread that I would give my disgraceful secret away by the slightest of trembles.

The halfway mark was a fence, whose girth was a little too broad for the narrowness of the strait on which it stood and whose links had been rusted with age, proving it more ancient than the gate around the park itself. Not so tarnished by the ravages of time were three rectangular signs forged from steel and painted in words the color of my blood, warnings of the dangers of passing beyond this point. To some this fence would have served its purpose, an insurmountable barrier. It could not be climbed over, gone under or through. It had to be circumvented, and anyone brave enough to do this would, for the longest of moments, be suspended over a pernicious drop.

Rising to the challenge, my sisters laced their fingers into the metal weaving of the fence and began to inch along it, and before I could become completely crippled with fear, I followed behind them, but fastidiously. My limbs shook with tremors that made me fear that I would slip and let go. I managed to keep a firm hold and thus made it past alive, immediately putting out of my mind that I would have to face that same challenge again on the way back. I had overcome it, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

Once on the other side, we crossed the bridge in single file, oldest to youngest, the hierarchy. Down below, trees of varying heights looked up at us, perhaps wondering what mere earth-bound life forms were doing up so high.

Finally, we reached our destination, a pool on the cusp of a waterfall. Here youth of all ages swam or, if they were brave, dive-bombed off the cascade. My sisters waded out into the water away from the fall, a battle to see who would go out farthest, the water getting steadily deeper as they went. I entered the water but made no move to follow them. Instead, I turned to face the cliff, and
gauging the distance just right, I started of a sprint towards it, but at the very edge, my bravery demurred and fear pervaded through my body anchoring me down to the ground, preventing me from making the jump.

I had just turned my body slightly to my right, intending to see if my sisters had witnessed my failure, my shame, when a figure surged passed me, stealing my breath as it went. Into the air it flew, blocking the sun from view and rendering me unable to see its features. Framed in a golden light and flying on the gentle wings of inertia, it hung in the air for a long moment, and in that instant, the world fell away behind us. Then it arched regally through the air, down to the waiting river below, slowing time as it went. It barely made a ripple as it entered the sparkling stream as if it were a phantasm.

Proving itself a being of flesh and blood it resurfaced, swimming in steady strokes towards the grassy banks, preparing to reenter this monotonous world. I looked away, fearing its enchantment over me would be broken once it reached land. I allowed the current to inch me forward, before I halted at the edge of the cliff once again preparing to take the dive. Yet, still I could not do it. I couldn’t make the jump. I was rooted to the ground by fear, unable to take flight.

It was years until the bitter taste of regret was gone from my mouth. Today if you go visit this park, you will see that everything has been made child-proof, every edge dulled, heights substantially leveled, and even the waterfall has been robbed of its former glory. Even if I wished to re-script my inactions, there would be no perch to take off from. In that place where I had once felt free, I now feel smothered and constricted, like a tree gazing up at the freedom of flight, with wonder, the sight made bitter by the knowledge that, for it, this feat was impossible.
The sun beat down on the arriving passengers descending the airplane steps, shamelessly glaring into their eyes although it was early January. Among all the squabbling travelers making their way toward the airport’s baggage claim, Rita trailed along behind her parents. She silently listened to her parents’ grumblings about having to trudge across the dusty landing field to pick up their luggage from the terminal for the passengers arriving from another country. She had already visited her parents’ native country Bangladesh five times because they believed that if she wasn’t continually exposed to the culture she will be made “too modern” by the influences in the United States.

Being born and raised in New York City, Bangladesh was always a foreign country to her no matter how many times her parents took her there to vacation. The only reason she looked forward to the trips was because her favorite maternal cousins and aunt and uncle lived there. She loved them like her own parents and siblings and they showered gifts and attention on her because, as the saying goes, absence makes the heart grow fonder.

On the way to her cousins’ house from the airport, her mom repeated the laundry list of things she should keep in mind: talk softly, don’t laugh loud, greet all the elders before anyone else, and make sure you cover your chest—to name a few things. Although Rita was American at heart she had not yet developed the courage to go against her mother’s wishes. How to act and be a good Bengali girl from a respectable family was drilled into her head repeatedly. Out of love for her mother, she made it one of her responsibilities to be the person her mother wanted her to be, even if that person was nothing like herself.

Her experience with the Bengali culture wasn’t a very good one and she preferred the American way of life as opposed to the suffocating rules and traditionally limiting roles of women in Bengali society. However, growing up, being surrounded by Bengali people, she knew their ways of thinking and their perspective on everything, though she far from shared them.

Putting all these opinions in the back of her mind Rita became exactly the kind of girl she wired herself to be around Bengali people—the kind that her mom wanted her to be. This act of being one person—the Bengali girl her mom wanted her to be, while keeping her true self concealed—her American side—was nothing new. It was a part of what she did on a day-to-day basis to keep her parents happy.

As they were all having dinner on the night of their arrival in Bangladesh, her aunt told her, “You know, you don’t look or act like you’re from America at all. In fact, if I didn’t know you, I would think you grew up here!”

For some unfathomable reason the comment really stung. She knew who she really was, and this was all just an act so why should it hurt?
American pride swelled up in her and the contempt and rage at her mother, at her mother’s constricting culture, pounded in her blood. Rita Khatun was an American. How could they say she was nothing like an American?!

In that moment Rita realized how she was seen by everyone and that she didn’t want to be seen like that any longer. She was seen as a good Bengali girl, the kind that is submissive to men, who stays home and gets an education only so she would have better marriage credibility. But she wasn’t that girl. She wanted to be independent, to study and learn for the sake of knowledge itself, to explore the world and to follow her dreams, not slave her life after a man and his family and follow the rules of a society that she didn’t understand or accept as her own.

One simple comment changed everything and in that moment she had an epiphany. Rita wanted everyone to see her as she was. She knew the way they would perceive her if she suddenly showed the American side of her. They would see her as someone good gone bad, a vegetable rotting among the best in the garden, a pity, a shame on the parents for not instilling enough virtues in their child to control her. They would see her with disdain, shun her aside and talk behind her back and ridicule her, all because they themselves didn’t have the guts to be so unruly.

This view of herself as an outcast almost made her want to keep hiding herself forever, in the folds of the layers of her clothes, tucked away in the little corner of her brain, somewhere and anywhere away from those criticizing eyes and tongues.

Seeing herself through those eyes, as if she was dirty, didn’t make sense to her. Is it really so wrong to want to be independent, to live and to breath without feeling like something is holding you back? From then on she stopped putting on an act. The respect she showed to elders was genuine and true but her “American-ness” still shown through. She wasn’t loud or rude, but she didn’t keep her head down either.

It was nice to visit Bangladesh sometimes. Being surrounded by endless rice fields and grassy terrains, one wanted to run and laugh, chasing the cows while getting soaked in the warm rain. But this desire always had to remain caged in the heart; caged in by the rules of Bengali society. Although the streets of New York City were narrow and crowded and the buildings reached up high into the sky, living there she felt her heart expand and fly free, joyous with its freedom to live on its own terms in the land of opportunities and equality—in the land she called home. s
THE SILENT STATEMENT OF A HIJAB

Salma Abdou

During my freshman year in high school, when I was fourteen and everyone around me was doing all they could to blend in with the majority, I wrestled with the idea of doing just the opposite. I began to consider the thought of covering my hair in public, as a religious practice. My mother wore the hijab, and before that, her mother wore it, and before that, her mother wore it, so I was expecting to wear it at some point in my life. It was only a matter of when. Between first juggling the idea to wear the hijab in my mind and finally tying my dark hair back tightly and covering it with a light scarf on a timid mid-May morning, I developed an awareness that I previously lacked—an awareness of the importance of learning about my roots, and identifying with my religious and ethnic background without demolishing my identity as an individual.

The hijab is a headscarf that a Muslim woman wears to cover her hair in public once she reaches a certain level of physical and mental maturity. This point of maturity, of course, varies from one woman to another, and therefore the day I would start wearing it was never marked on my calendar of life. For a long time, I kept expecting that someone would just show up one day and write it in for me. “Start wearing the hijab,” it would say in red permanent marker in one of those squares. But that fantasy figure never showed up, and my calendar remained blank. Frustrating me further was the ambiguous answers I got from my mom whenever I asked her when I should start covering my hair. “When you’re ready,” she would reply. What did that mean? “When I’m ready.” The mystery surrounding the hijab seemed like a riddle that I was trying to unravel. As if I would be worthy of wearing the hijab only if I could solve it.

I knew that I could have saved myself the trouble and simply announced that I wanted to start wearing the hijab, and just do it. Many girls did that. However, when I asked these girls why they had decided to wear the hijab, they would shrug their shoulders and say something along the lines of, “‘cause it’s a part of our religion.” Their reply was very matter of fact. Being the stubborn and critical person that I am, I was never satisfied with their answers and went to search for my own. I began looking for answers in the most obvious place: the Qur’an. I rummaged through the Muslim Holy Book for the passage about the hijab, read it, and reread it. It sounded convincing. The hijab was an act of faith. A way to show my love for God and my belief in His words. Maybe it was a lot simpler than I had thought, after all.

After the religious aspect of wearing the hijab had been settled, it seemed as if I was ready. I was standing in front of the mirror one night, trying one of my mom’s scarves on just for practice. Taking the light scarf and wrapping it around my head, I observed how it framed my face. While looking at my reflection, I had a thought that had never occurred to me: there was a social side to covering my hair. This is the first
thing people would see when they looked at me. In some cases, it might even be the only thing they would see. Until then, I had viewed the hijab as something purely religious. And while it is essentially purely religious, it wouldn’t be for me living in the United States. The first thing people would know about me when they first met me would be that I am Muslim; not that my name is Salma, or that my favorite flavor of ice cream is chocolate chip mint, or that I love reading The Great Gatsby. The realization that there was more to it than just what I read in the Qur’an was like a sharp blow to the stomach, and its impact thrust me back to square one.

Square one was scarier the second time around. Confusion, Questions, Uncertainty, and Worry stood at each corner, closing in on me. How would wearing the hijab change my everyday life? When I met new people, would they make assumptions about me because of it? Would they think I was ignorant? Would it make me less American? Was I willing to make the sacrifice and take on the consequences of my decision? Would the hijab make me vulnerable to spiteful comments made by random people on the street? Was this simple religious act worth all the trouble that it was causing me? I wanted people to see me as an individual with my own identity, my own likes and dislikes, and my own flaws. I didn’t want to be characterized through stereotypes, by a group’s likes, dislikes, and flaws.

My decision ultimately came down to choosing between two different lives. The first was an easy life: I would be barely noticeable, and blend in with the people around me. The second was more difficult and made me more vulnerable. I chose the latter. I chose to act on my faith. I chose to wear the hijab. Why? Because in the easier life, I would be so unnoticeable that I would eventually fade away. I would have no courage to announce my presence. In wearing the hijab, I would be making a statement: I am Salma. I am not afraid to act on what I believe. I am wearing the hijab because I am expecting you to judge me based on my personality and character, not the way I look. I am strong and independent. I am Muslim, but that doesn’t mean that I am not American.

With that, I began to wear the hijab on a Monday in May. The first time I wore it was to school, where I would see just about everyone I knew. Whenever I walked past anyone, I would wonder what he or she was thinking about me. I wanted so desperately to know whether or not I was being judged based on my hijab. People at school reacted differently. Some people asked questions. I gladly answered them, taking the opportunity to correct their facts about the hijab. Others chose to pretend like there wasn’t anything different, perhaps afraid to offend me.

The hijab becomes a part of me more and more with each time I wear it. I make it a point to do little things that might show more of who I am, in order to make people look past the hijab and the stereotypes associated with being a Muslim Arab. I greet bus drivers with a friendly “good morning” and thank them, no matter my mood. I hold doors open politely for strangers, even if I am in a hurry. I see myself as a flag-bearer for Islam. If people look at me, and, based on what I say and how I act, paint a picture of what a Muslim person is like,
then I want to be the person holding the brush that makes positive strokes.

It is now almost three and a half years since I began wearing the hijab. I have encountered both positive and negative reactions. Each positive reaction reinforces my belief that the little things I do can actually change the world, or at least a small part of it. And each negative reaction is a reminder of why it was important for me to wear the hijab and how there is still so much more work to be done. Until today, my initial fears about the impact the hijab would have on my social life have not yet subsided. They are still inside me, teasing me and looming over me every time I make a new acquaintance. I don’t think they will ever go away.

So, what does it mean to be “ready?” It means knowing all the things I know now, but didn’t back then. What was the answer to the riddle? The silent statement of a hijab. The silent statement of my hijab. Hearing it, when no one else can hear it, and wanting to embody it with every inch of you, in order to make them all listen.
You may think that people from another country encounter feelings of being in culture limbo more frequently than people who were raised in America. However, T’s story has taught me differently. In her family, her grandmother from her mother’s side often shows hatred towards her father because of his heritage. Even though T loves her grandmother, she can’t stand that her grandmother whines restlessly about the past and about the negative things that her dad has done.

T was born in Brooklyn, and raised in the Bedford Stuyvesant area. Half of her heritage comes from her father, a Trinidadian. In Trinidadian culture, they eat roti, a kind of wrap that usually has vegetables, fish or meat in it, and they listen to soca, which is similar to soul music. Her father used to sell fruits for living. He is also a technician, fixing pipes and electronics. The only thing that T doesn’t like about her father is that he had committed crimes.

This also is the reason why T’s grandmother dislikes her father so much. Her grandmother, a Jamaican, insists that Jamaicans can never get along with Trinidadians. Her prejudice makes her think that all Trinidadians are like her son-in-law, likely to commit crimes. She discriminates against Trinidadian culture. “Even when I eat a roti,” T innocently said, “my grandmother shows me a face of disgust, looks like saying ‘eww.’ Soon, I put it aside.” What kind of food you eat does not determine what kind of person you are, but T feels pressure from her grandmother’s prejudice.

One night, T was doing her homework when her brother randomly mentioned some positive memories of her father, which warmed their hearts. Their grandmother sat beside them and heard their conversation. “Boy, did my grandmother flips out!” T said. Her grandmother ranted on for fifteen minutes, talking about their father’s history, emphasizing only the negative impact and bad influences that he had on the family and how many problems he forced them to face. At that time, T’s heart was hurting a lot. She loved her father, although she did not have much of a memory of him, since her father passed away when she was four years old. T listened while her grandmother kept whining; she didn’t say a word because she knew they were the facts. She didn’t want anyone to talk about her father’s past, but she couldn’t do anything: “I know she’s just telling the truth, only the truth. So again, I put it aside.”

After all these years, T learned to forgive both her grandmother and her father and to be less judgmental. She told me, “Although people do bad [things], they always have good in their heart.” She believes that her father was indeed a good father, and forgives her grandmother for always making personal judgments about him. T learned to let go of the past. At the end of our conversation, she humorously said, “Life sometimes forces you to learn to do the things
that you don’t want to do.” Even though it is never easy for T to hear negative comments about her father, she is now able to understand her grandmother’s intention to protect the family, and is able to accept her.

For a long time, T couldn’t embrace in her Trinidadian culture because of her grandmother’s criticism. In this sense, T experienced her own form of culture limbo. However, overcoming difficulties makes you understand more about yourself and the ways that others feel about you. When you are in limbo, you may feel awful, but once you step outside of it, you will feel you have become another person who is more like the true self you always wanted to be. In the end, you may even gain more confidence and become a stronger person inside.
It was a usual Thursday night in my Brooklyn apartment; I had been arguing with my mother about when I would return to my parents' house. Finally, I found the courage to hang up on the one person who could ruin my day without even trying. It had been exactly two months, three days, and fourteen hours since I escaped from my prison-like home in Yonkers, and now my parents were calling me back for parole hearings.

In order to relax and forget about my parents and their usual drama, I decided to paint my nails. This was one of the few things that helped me unwind. No one could tell me how or when to paint my nails; it was symbol of my individuality.

As I turned on my laptop to search for an intricate design that I could create, I found myself reminiscing about my childhood, when my mother would sit me down in the living room and paint my nails with one of her bright red nail polishes. I would show them off to all of my friends at school, some of who were even not allowed to wear nail polish, let alone bright red; it made me feel very grown up.

Now I was grown up. I had moved into an apartment and was taking care of myself. No longer did I need my mother to cook my food and wash my clothes. Nor did I need her permission to go out with my friends on a school night, or any night for that matter. I was finally free. All of my childhood fantasies, of moving out at eighteen and becoming an independent adult, had finally come true.

I browsed through about six pages of Google Images and came to the sad realization that I had already created most of the designs that I found online. Perhaps it was time to create my own design; after all I was an adult now. I should no longer have to rely on other people's ideas to create a masterpiece on my cuticles.

With that thought, I pulled out a pen and some paper and began sketching possible designs. While at first the designs were simply variations of the pictures I had seen on Google, I eventually added my personality and style into the sketches. After about an hour of drawing, I came up with three possible designs that would not only make my nails look attractive, but would also hold some sort of meaning.

The first was a martini glass; it was meant to remind me that even though homework and tests were important, I needed to remember to enjoy myself. I would create it with white nail polish on a hot pink base coat. Of course, this was not the sort of design that my mother would approve of, but I was no longer in her house, so her rules no longer applied.

The second design I created was a simple flowered design that I would make with a red nail polish over a clear base coat. The small flowers making up the design created a look that was both childlike and elegant at the same time. It was the
sort of design that my mother created for me when I was little girl pretending to be a princess.

The last and the most challenging design was a very intricate leopard pattern; it would be brown, golden, and yellow. This design seemed to be the most mature-looking, because I had never seen anyone my age wearing it. Such a complex and sophisticated pattern would no doubt symbolize my transformation into an adult.

While I originally wanted to create all three designs, the more I thought about the meaning and implications of each design, the more I realized that only one of them could truly capture my attitude towards myself. While the martini glass was a symbol of the fun I intended to have during my college experience, I did not intend to spend the majority of my time attending parties. The flowered pattern, although it was very simple and graceful, would inevitably become a constant reminder of my attachment to my over-bearing mother. Thus, my choice was simple.

I went to my drawer to get the yellow, brown, and golden nail polishes I needed to create my soul-capturing masterpiece. But when I opened the drawer, I did not see my nail polish box. I cursed myself for leaving it at my parents' house; how could I have forgotten something so important? Once again, they had crawled into my life and taken away my individuality.

As I crumpled up the sketches I had worked so tirelessly on, a small purse with a dragonfly on its bottom-left side caught my eye. My mother had filled it with jewelry and makeup that she thought I would need while I was living on my own; since I had no interest in painting my face, I had never bothered to open it. As it hung by a hook outside my closet it beckoned me to open it and look for the nail polishes I needed.

While I was sure that my mother would never have given me any of her expensive brightly colored nail polishes, my legs continued to move towards the purse and my hands proceeded to empty its contents on my bed.

Convincing myself that my mother could not possibly have given me the colors I needed, I began to mentally list colors that could be used as substitutes for the brown, golden, and yellow for my design; most neutral colors could be use to create the elegant look I wanted.

As I shifted through the sea of make-up brushes and earrings on my light-blue Minnie Mouse bed sheets, I began to fear that my assumptions about my mother were correct, and there was no nail polish at the end of the eye-shadow and lip stick rainbow.

Then, suddenly my foot touched a cold glass tube that had now rolled under my twin-sized bed. When I bent down to pick it up, I found not one, but two nail polish bottles! Red and clear: two colors that could not possibly be used to create a stylish or even moderately appealing leopard pattern.

The only option I had left was coldly staring at me down, almost daring me not to paint my nails. As I unscrewed the nail polish bottle and began applying a clear base coat, the metallic smell painfully entered my sinuses, reminding me of the freedom I was giving up. As I tasted the bitterness of defeat, I could also feel the distinct comfort of childlike innocence consume me. Perhaps a simple
flowered pattern would not be as terrible as I imagined.

When my work of art was finished, I realized that a leopard pattern could not possibly compliment my nails the way the red nail polish and the next day, I showed my flowered design to all of my friends at school, most of whom did not even know how to create such a beautiful design.
Before, race was things like NASCAR or a lap to the swing set and back, an insignificant word at most. It was something we did, and perhaps something we identified ourselves by to a degree, but never was it the sole factor for my friends and me as eight year olds. For several of us, though, the larger question of race became the single question we wanted answered at the time, a consuming force without a seemingly equal and fitting answer. I had some grasp on the concept of race already, knowing I was a different race than some of my friends, that people belong to different races. I knew I was Irish and many other ethnicities, having been to Ireland a few times at that point in my life. Yet, I did not understand all the things that race could mean to people. I was not aware of the pride many took in it, or the shameful things done because of it. I became aware in the third grade, when I began asking the curiosity-driven question “what is a hate crime?”

It was the average evening for my family at six o’clock that night in March 2000. The members of my family were home from their individual life-wasting activities. My brother, Greg, and I were home from school, Dad was back from a business trip, and Mom was home from the errands of her stay-at-home mother life. It was one of those nights where we decided to watch the news together, an occasion. Dad and I hoped to find the sports news. Greg wanted the latest news on some car of the day. Mom simply wanted to know what was going on in the world that is New York. This night, we watched both the six- and seven-o’clock news reports as a family, and I began a journey on a path toward awareness. The NBC anchor of the day was Tom Brokaw, a graying man with a stern voice. It was in his report that the topic arose. “A recent string of hate crimes...” At the lack of familiarity with the subject, all I could do was pay attention. What is a hate crime? Were not all crimes done out of some level of hatred for something? Even I, of only eight years at the time, had some juvenile idea of hatred. I followed on with the news. A man, a white man, had killed a delivery boy, a Chinese delivery boy, and the police were investigating it as a hate crime. According to the report, these crimes were on the rise again. I still did not get it. I knew myself to be like this accused murderer, a white male in New York. I had Chinese friends, best friends. I was not about to kill them, so what made me so different from this man?

Days passed and I wrestled with a level of misunderstanding that I had never faced before. I knew what I had to do. I had come home from school and prepared the dinner table. It was here at the dinner table that I knew I could bring my curiosity to my family. “What is a hate crime?” I asked. The question seemed liquid with a smooth, interrogative flow. I noticed the slightest change in my father’s facial expression. My mom went to speak, but her words were not there. “Well, Michael,” my father answered, “a hate crime is something someone does to someone else when
they do not like them for some reason?” “Like race or religion,” my mother added. This answer would have to do, for now.

The playground at recess became the network by which my curiosity gained momentum, where it grew. I began asking my friends if they had ever heard of such things as hate crimes, if they knew any more than I did. The usual response was that they, too, had heard of these things on the news. At the time, hate crimes were just a thing, not the terrible events as we would come to know them. My friend Reed began telling me about how his neighbor got beaten up once on his way home from work, and that it apparently had to do with the fact that he was black. Again, I could not grasp this concept. I had African-American friends. The next logical step was to take it to Mrs. Robbins, our teacher. I learned everything from her that did not learn at home, so why not ask her this question?

The next morning, at a quarter past eight, I marched into room 115, and asked Mrs. Robbins my question. “Why do hate crimes happen?” That look a deer gets in headlights came over her face. It was not that she could not answer the question, but never had she seen it coming from one of her eight year old students. “Michael, hate crimes happen because some people are not tolerant people.” Tolerance, finally something a dictionary could tell me about. I asked her to explain it in different words, and she said that these acts had to do with people discriminating against other people. Discriminating: another visit to my class' dictionary. I began to draw my own conclusions on the topic of race, but they began to sound too much like the definitions of the words I had looked up. I went back to my teacher and asked “Will we ever learn about this sort of thing in school?” The answer was something of a “not exactly.”

My line of questioning had made its way from our teacher to our principal, Mr. Wall. It was from him that all third graders received the Heritage Assignment, as it was called. We were tasked with researching our respective heritages, and perhaps some facts about one of our ancestors. My question had brought about some results, or so I thought. I went to school the next day an Irish, English, Lithuanian, German, Swiss, Swedish, and Native American boy, with a German Duke six generations back prior on his family tree. I learned that I had German ancestors who fought against the Nazis, and an Irish cousin who was a race car driver. With the assignment shared, I came to see the diversity in my classroom. I suddenly saw people who had parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents who immigrated to the United States. I learned that one of my close friends had emigrated from Pakistan shortly after his birth. I looked around the room and began to understand, in my own way, what race was. I noticed the pride many took in their heritages, exemplified by my classmate Victoria joking about how her countries all had good soccer teams. Was this pride the cause of hate crimes? Did pride make people do things that made no sense? All I had at the end of the day was questions.

My first major experience with race was not a personally harmful one and actually had very little to do with race. My school, trying to maintain some semblance of status quo and political
correctness, avoided the issue. Academia's fear of breaking from political correctness cost me a definitive answer to my question, as if one existed. I came away from the experience more confused about race than before, but it was this confusion that led to a great curiosity about why people do the things they do. I began to ask myself why people could kill one another due to some seemingly stupid reason of race, religion, or sexual identity. It was the experience that pushed me into an academic pursuit of the answer to my question of race, reading more into discrimination in history. People like Rosa Parks, Fred Korematsu, and Malcolm X became personal topics of interest, as my school had left me with curiosity and no answer to it. I was left with no answer, but rather with my own pursuit of one. This would have to do, for now. s
In many ways I am just your typical black girl. Hip hop and R&B music basically define my day-to-day life. I enjoy an ice cold piece of watermelon on a sweltering summer evening. The volume of my voice fluctuates parallel to my mood. And I can double dutch with my eyes closed and my hands tied behind my back. However, I have a hidden talent that you would never be able to guess. On occasions, I love to pick up my French horn and play a tune or two. You probably would not be able to tell that I am crazy about orchestral music at first glance.

To some we are known as the “band geeks,” to others we are known as the “cool kids.” In my old high school, the music kids always received the highest merit, were the most active of the student body, were involved in clubs and student government, and were the star athletes. How did a girl like me wind up categorized with this particular group of exceptional kids? Well, I picked up my very first musical instrument ten years ago, when I was in the third grade and eight years old. As part of the recruiting process, each third grader was to choose the three instruments that they wanted to play the most and after trying each instrument out, the student was to choose only one. My three choices were the clarinet, the trumpet, and the saxophone. After trying out all three, I decided to go with the trumpet. I chose the trumpet for all the wrong reasons, however. It was the easiest to assemble and, in my opinion, the easiest to produce sound with. Playing the trumpet came naturally to me; so naturally that I never felt the need to practice.

I went an entire four years without practicing and I did just fine. But by the time I was in eighth grade, I was ready for a new musical challenge. One day, while in rehearsal, my band director asked for volunteers to learn to play an instrument that was not offered to grades seven and below for the upcoming winter concert. Like the eager thirteen year old I was, I shot my hand up without hesitation. The director went on to say that the instrument was called a French horn and that the pieces needed to be prepared in three weeks, in time for the winter concert. When I initially volunteered, I had no idea that the concert was merely three weeks away. My heart sunk. What did I just get myself into?

Practice makes perfect, right? I crammed that idea that we have all heard over and over into my head to convince myself that I could play the French horn well enough in only three weeks. So, for the first time ever, I practiced. Having never practiced before, I was not really sure how to go about it. But, instead of asking my director for help, I practiced until my lips were numb and until the sound of a French horn continued ringing in my ears long after practicing. After a week of this practice boot camp that I had created for myself, I decided to tell my director that I no longer wanted to play the French horn. One day after rehearsal I sat down with my director and said to him, “I think you should choose someone else to play the
French horn. I just can't get it right."

He responded, “Well, have you been practicing?”

I then said, “Yes, of course. Practice makes perfect, but I am no where near perfect.”

He went on to say, “Well, that is where you are wrong. Practice does not make perfect. Perfect practice makes perfect. I wish you would have come to me from day one. How else did you expect to perfect an instrument that you have never even heard of on such short notice?”

Immediately following our talk, I had my first real practice session. Obvious progress was made after just one “perfect practice.”

Five years later, I’m a senior in high school, the leading French horn player for the high school Concert Band, the Wind Ensemble for gifted musicians, and the student appointed Drum Major for the Marching Band. I never saw myself being in band and actually enjoying the classical and contemporary music that we played like Bach and Copland. The same girl who serenades in Hip Hop and R&B music, enjoys an ice cold slice of watermelon on those warm summer nights, and can be heard from blocks away is also known as one of the best French horn players in Suffolk County. African American French horn players are rare. Female African American French horn players are even scarcer. I am not too sure what made me unique. Maybe it is because of where I grew up and the influence those people I grew up with had on me. Or possibly I saw an opportunity to be different and break a stereotype that I have been forcefully put into by society. Whatever the reason, the hard work definitely paid off. I guess I'm not just your typical black girl after all. s
“You ain’t ish in ball!” The husky voice of a tall, slim boy said as he got down from the metal rim. “Nah Imma get you with a lay-up next time Brah, you trash too,” replied the other boy. These were the kind conversations between teenagers that I used to hear growing up on the basketball courts of Van Dyke Projects. Basketball is the favorite game of most of the boys living in Brownsville. At the age of twelve, I remember being one of the few girls in the neighborhood that looked up to basketball players instead of video vixens. I wore jerseys of MVP’s such as Shaquille O’Neal from the Los Angeles Lakers, Tim Duncan from the San Antonio Spurs, and Kevin Garnett from the Minnesota Timber Wolves. My favorite MVP was Allen Iverson from the Philadelphia Seventy-Sixers. Although he was one of the shortest players, he had the best jump shots, three pointers and his jerseys matched with my favorite Air Jordan’s. I always got my hair braided just like him, from zigzag shaped cornrows to fish scaled braids. Sometimes, when I felt lazy, I had my hair in a big ponytail with a curly puff that hung from the end.

Every so often, I had to dress like a boy to in order to get boys to play against me. Under tall, graffiti painted buildings and on the faded court floors, I played. Bouncing the ball against sweat and blood dried cement, I always showed tricks I could do to spice the game up. It felt great because I was later known as Tareek J r. or Iverson. Tareek was my older cousin. Like most teens in Brownsville, coming from a broken home meant mainly one thing: exposure to gangs, drugs and violence. Although he was one of the trouble makers, I viewed him as a loving and caring role model because he made sure my younger brothers and I stayed out of trouble’s way. I wanted to be like him. He taught us how to catch, shoot, upgrade our handling skills. My mother did not really approve of me hanging with Tareek because of his behavior, but I didn’t listen and hung out with him even more. One day, playing basketball with him, he accidentally shoved me and I fell. At first I felt a sharp pain in my arm, but brushed it off for a few minutes because I just wanted to win the game. “Iverson you got a buck fifty on your arm, shawty that stuff look nasty.” One of the neighborhood boys who happened to walk by stopped and watched my one on one game. I then quickly glanced at my elbow and I saw the deep cut. Tareek and I discussed how we would let my mother know what happened without telling her exactly what happened. Then we rushed to the hospital.

At the hospital my mother kept asking how I fell; I told her I was trying to dunk. “You always are trying to be like some boy, put a dress and some heels on for once.” I didn’t answer because I knew it would lead to arguing. She finally left the room, and I felt relieved. My mother always wanted me to be this “Barbie doll girl” that’s always at the mirror—watching for makeup smudges, or always brushing her hair. “She just never gets me,” I thought, and it made me upset.
The sights of the needles, scissors and smell of rubbing alcohol also made me uncomfortable. Tareek came into the room and started making jokes as always. We talked about the neighborhood girls he messed with and how he thought it was almost crazy that I didn’t want to be in a video dancing in miniskirts behind a rapper like Cisco. But then I realized that Tareek was being serious for the first time. We talked about seeing girls walking around in our neighborhood looking for their baby father’s and police frisking innocent African American boys. Brownsville had a reputation as one of the most violent neighborhoods in New York City. Just making it to high school without dropping out or getting pregnant was a miracle.

Tareek told me that he thought it was great that I was going to school, getting good grades and best of all, playing ball. I discussed with him how I didn’t agree with my mother’s idea of a girl “wearing skirts like a lady.”

“That’s the stuff we guys into; unless your mom want you to get preggo she should just respect your decisions on how you are her baby girl,” he said as he looked at my elbow. “I know right,” I replied to him. “But your mama is right though about going to school, and you don’t always have be this tough girl. Just keep that brain in your head right and don’t end up like these fast girls or big homies on the block, or even like me.” I internalized what Tareek said because I he saw that he had seen potential in his little cousin. He could see me. We even shook hands promising that I would stay on track in school. Hearing those words coming from a person like him made me determined to make it to through high school and play ball. I wanted to be me; a graduate of middle and high school. I got four stitches that day on my elbow. I went home thinking about what Tareek and I talked about. It was ironic that the one person my mom wanted me to avoid made me the person she is proud of today. My mother eventually moved from Brownsville to East Flatbush. Tareek was killed about a year later by a bullet because of gang affiliation. It became hard to hang around my old friends because they were moving towards paths I tried to avoid. I look back and think, “if it weren’t for you cuzzo, I probably wouldn’t be me: Sherley, the ball player, current graduate of Erasmus Hall High School, and college student.”
The day after my high school graduation was my first day of work. While all of my friends were planning for the summer to be the best one ever, I was preparing it to be the longest. After high school, came college, but for me attending college had been put on hold. My family needed the money and it was up to me to step up.

I remember the day my brother got his acceptance letter in the mail to one of the country’s best boarding schools. It was in April. I had started receiving my acceptance letters also, but I had been happier for him. My whole family had been happy for him. He was going to get the chance to do something that no one had ever thought was possible. With his acceptance letter, the school also sent the breakdown of tuition and student fees. We discovered that it would cost more for him to attend the school one year than for me to attend a CUNY school for four.

I was saddened by the dilemma. My brother and I knew that getting a good education was what we had to do in order for us to be successful, but we also knew that it would be impossible for both of us to attend school that year. My mom had a good paying job but it wouldn’t be enough to cover both tuitions. It was unfortunate, but my family had a decision to make.

I was excited and ready for college. I was ready to learn new things, interact with new people, and embrace what college had in store for me. I was ready for the long hours studying, and the weekend parties. Going to college meant a lot to me. When my brother got accepted to boarding school, I knew he had the same feelings toward attending. We had an opportunity to do something no one in my family had ever done. No one had ever been to college and no one had ever been to boarding school. But we couldn’t do both.

According to both schools my mom had made too much money to qualify for financial aid. This hurt my mom and I knew this was a stressful situation for her also. What parent wanted to tell their child they couldn’t go to school? It just didn’t make since but it was what we were dealing with.

After thinking and praying, long and hard, I knew I had to let my brother go to the boarding school and put attending college off for a while. He had only two years of high school left and he was going to have the chance to finish them at one of the best high schools in the country. I couldn’t deny him that because I wanted to go to community college. I knew he can go on to do bigger and better things with the experience, and my sacrifice would someday pay off.

I was graduating high school that year. June came and all of my friends were talking about what colleges they were going to and what they were going to be majoring in. I wanted to be part of those conversations but for me college had been delayed. My decision was appreciated by both my mom and my brother, but my friends just didn’t understand.

My mom never came out and said that I should get a job, but I knew that if I could help her
with money it would lessen the load on her. The day after graduation is when I started my new job. I didn’t spend the summer at the beach or at pool parties. I worked for my family and it was all worth it.
“And I’m going to put two more bows in your hair if you’ll sit still!” The blond one said to the little brunette girl.

The smaller one made a face. “I don’t want to play the baby anymore!”

“But it’s more fun when I’m the mommy,” grinned the blond capriciously.

The brunette pouted.

“Come on, I’ll let you try on my new princess dress if you play the baby this time!”

The smiles that lit up their faces beat my covetous heart to a pulp.

I always wanted a sister.

“You do not want a sister!” My mother would laugh whenever I brought up the topic. No more than six or seven years old at the time, I’d sit in front of Mom, my legs dangling off of the kitchen chair as I’d petition her for a little “living doll.”

“I’ll dress her up, and you can take pictures of us.”

“Imagine having to share all of your clothing, all of your toys. Everything that I get for you, I’d have to get one for her too. You can’t even share with your friends.” She’d chuckle. “No, it wouldn’t be a good idea.”

Oh, no it would be a perfect idea! I would think as I played by myself in the yard. I was mostly by myself when I played...

Being an only child never seemed like much fun.

My grandmother was someone for my cause. “Kathy, why don’t you have another little one for Elisa to play with, a sister perhaps?” She never stopped cajoling my mother about having another child.

“Because every time I think of the word ‘Sister,’ I picture two decapitated Barbie dolls in the floor of a cab on Christmas day, and a pair of roller-skates being hurled at my head, leaving behind a bloody gash in my right eye!” My mother would reply, flicking her polished fingernails in dismissal.

My mother had a sister, my aunt Lisette. Lisette is two years older than she is. They never shared anything (willingly, that is), as my aunt would always get the new clothes (being the older sister,) and my mother the ill-fitting hand-me-downs. Lisette got the older cooler friends, better boyfriends, and nicer gifts; my mother got tattered books, a broken bike and a perpetual pout. My grandparents also favored my aunt as she was epileptic in her early childhood, and denying Lisette anything her heart desired might lead to a seizure.

“Around my sister, I was invisible,” my mother confessed. “I just don’t want that for you.”

Well, I still didn’t buy it.

My dad didn’t have much contribution on the subject of a sibling for me, but I suspected he always wanted a son. He is the kind of man who likes to go fishing and show off his antique gun collection. My father taught me softball when I
was little. Yes, he always wanted to take me to sports games. When I got a male kitten for my eighth birthday, Dad cooed, “Awe, he’s the son I never had!”

Oh gosh. What if I ended up with a brother? I suppose one couldn’t quite order the sex of a sibling like mail-ordering a set of kitchen plates. “I’ll have the red ones, not the blue ones.” Perhaps if my parents had another child, it would be a boy... Well, that might be okay.

No. The image of a football clapping me upside the head didn’t allow that fantasy much longevity. Besides, the only little boys I ever knew had very smelly socks!

A sister was in order. Most definitely.

I had so many plans for what we would do, my sister and I. We would play dress up, we’d play house (I’d get to be the mommy.) We’d play music and sing sensational sisterly harmonies. I could see us shopping, staying up late and talking, planning our lives together... She would be my precious gem. I would be her role model. She’d love me unconditionally, and best of all, I’d protect her absolutely.

But, what if she got my grandfather’s brilliant blue eyes, instead of my plain brown ones? What if she was far more talented, and didn’t have the incessant craving for ice cream that I had? What if she was allergic to peanut butter, my favorite snack? What if she was skinny as stick and could sing like an angel? What if she was far more popular than I? How would I feel then? I began to have my doubts about this whole sister business.

Yet despite my growing doubts, I silenced them. The fantasy was too precious to abandon. Somehow, my sister would be just right for me. I held on to this idea for much of my childhood, often feeling deprived when visiting with my cousins and indulging in my self-induced loneliness.

When I reached my adolescent years, I gradually, unconsciously abandoned the desire for a sister, becoming more accustomed to finding my own way in my world. I silently stopped needing the validation of someone else to finish my endeavors, my projects, and my sentences and gradually, too, I became very close with my mother.

She and I began playing music together, I started teaching her how to sing, we attended Middle Eastern dance classes, and we wrote a play for no other reason than writing a play... We would stay up late together and talk for hours, watch movies and laugh. We laughed so hard about absolutely nothing at all. We spoke French together, much to the consternation of my Dad who didn’t understand French at all!

When I turned eighteen, my mother wrote me a letter.

“Remember when you were a little girl, sitting at the kitchen table, petitioning me for a little sister to keep you company?” she began. “I know that it is too late to give that to you, but I want you to know that I now understand why you wanted a sister... I suppose, what I’m trying to tell you is that you became the sister I wished I had had. You’ve been so much more than my daughter. You’ve become my best friend, my shopping mate, my drawing board, and most definitely, my sister.”

I read that letter over a few dozen times before I realized why I had been gaping enviously
at the familial situations of other young girls on the playground. I didn’t want someone to dress up or to play house with. Playing house is only fun for so long... I wanted someone to take on the world with me. Oddly enough, it turned out that I found someone who, though she had a sister, was never able to have this type of bond with her. I found someone who wanted exactly what I was looking for. My mother and I had shared that tie for years... And I didn’t even notice because it felt so natural.

As children, although it might be couched deep in our subconscious, we find ways to justify how things could have been better if we were dealt someone else’s cards. Yet, as we get older, some of that pressure of “what if things were different?” evaporates into “how can I make things different?” For me, there was something about forgetting the “other possibilities” that seems to bring out the best in my family dynamic, and I ended up with something completely unexpected. I realize that my Mom can never be the sister I always wanted, and I could never erase her failed sibling relationship. But what’s more important to me is that we do share a very special and close bond, which is unusual yet quite fulfilling for both of us.

Simply put, when I turned seven, I wanted a sister, when I turned eighteen I realized I had had something far better than a sister all along; a mother who could be my sister, my friend, my mentor and teacher and yes, my disciplinarian too. But, best of all, because of our age difference, she could fulfill all of these roles for me without the petty jealousies and rivalries that certainly would have developed had she been my true sister.
My heart is pounding outside of my chest, sweat showers across my entire body, the brown curls on my head, which were recently in a tight ponytail, fall across my face blocking my vision for hardly seconds as my excited body moves to the adrenalin caused by the Latino melody playing in USA Dance Studios. “Point, lounge, bend, turn!” my dance instructor projects while making sure that my partner, Andrey, and I are dancing to our best abilities till there is no energy left in our moving bodies. His shouts are never a distraction due to the passion I feel as I perform on the dance floor. My partner and I must either maneuver six distinctly perfect steps in the blink of an eye to the fast beasts of Cha-cha and Samba, or work slowly and gracefully for three seconds on each step to the romantic mood of Rumba. But my favorite part has always been the intense quickness we must fulfill to keep up with the exhilarating motion of the Jive. No matter what dance I am working on, I mentally black out and let my subconscious take me away. I don’t exactly know what occurs during those three-minute dances; all I know is the thrill I receive from the ballroom and how absolutely amazing I feel in the process of dancing. Unfortunately, this remarkable adrenalin produced by dancing is just a memory.

Ever since my first eight-year-old steps into the small dance school in Ocean Parkway, I have been drawn to ballroom music and movement. I watched the older generation in extreme amazement and longed to have this talent in my future. Jumping from birthday to birthday, maturing, adjusting and going through various dance schools and partners, I ended up at USA Dance Studio in my home neighborhood of Sheepshead Bay. After an incredible week of practice I finally felt that the talent and ambition I longed for came out of my core and was distinctly visible.

After spending an incredible, passionate, sweaty, and slightly painful three months at the dance school, it was time to perform and compete. With a new partner and a new group of friends supporting me, the butterflies in my stomach multiplied. My crazy nerves were taking over me. As I woke up on the fifteenth of June, the hot summer air allowed my nerves to settle and eventually turn into excitement. I rushed out of bed to begin my long routine preparation for a grand competition. As my aunt and I were camouflaging my face with tan cover-up and bright colored eye shadow slightly covering my thin black liner, I practiced all the dance steps in my head. After the intense make-up session came the mandatory low bun followed by the gorgeous custom-made dress and danced-out shoes. But I wasn’t completely ready till that last touch of glitter went all over my body.

Finally, as my stoic partner and I stood in silence on the dance floor with my right foot pointing outward, my hands in an artistic lift over his shoulder, and my posture completely straight, I felt, for nearly a moment, that there was absolute
silence in the entire hall. As that still second passed, I was ready to perform and compete. I gained all my confidence by obeying the music's control. Andrey and I followed the beats with our bodies and ability which combined into an incredible dance correlation. There were no nerves left in the pit of my stomach, no silent moments in the depth of my mind, just movement, rhythm, and the cheering of the overwhelmed crowd. I gave those four dances my last energy, life, and skill, my absolute all. The emotional and competitive roller coaster produced an incredibly good mood. Fortunately, the hard work paid off, we received first and second place. Regardless of the place I would have achieved, I knew that I would always treasure and enjoy this competition greatly.

I am eighteen years old now and, although I don't pursue dancing professionally, not once will I regret the many astonishing experiences it gave me. There has not been one time that I disagreed to spontaneously dance at an event, nor have I ever felt any doubt or nerves while doing so. The dancing background has boosted my confidence greatly and has allowed me to show my skill and entertain my family and friends at many holidays or celebrations. I might have quit on competing, but I know that the thrill and skill I have acquired will never leave my body and soul.
PART TWO: TURNING POINTS

Max Feist • Georgina Pang • Tremar Yetman
Rita Tobias • Meghan Santos • Ofear Balas
Mila Tarantur • Meira Bennett • Andrew Toomer • Rahima Nayeem
“Is there anything you want to ask me?”

“No”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah I’m sure. Goodnight.”

As I slowly left the dimly lit hospital room filled with the buzz and hum of life-support, I thought to myself, “What an unfair question to ask me!” I was merely twelve and completely overwhelmed by the situation. It felt like a scene from some Hollywood drama; an emaciated, sick father asks his son if there is anything he would like to know, sensing that his time is near. If it were a movie, the son would have probably asked his father some pure, innocent question about life or love and the father would have given him a simple, meaningful answer full of tears, broken smiles, and closure. Except it did not go that way. There were no innocent questions, no meaningful answers, no tears, and especially no closure. There was only denial, avoidance, and an emotional disconnect.

Then there was February 11th, a phone call from the hospital, and a long period of amnesia. My first thought when I woke up that morning was that I needed to see my father. I was upset because of the way we had left it last time I visited, and I knew there was not much time left. But when my mother got the call from the hospital, I realized the finality of the situation, and I began to regret everything. A strange cooling numbness sank into my body, and for months it felt like I was underwater. The pressure of that last question weighed me down like concrete boots in an ocean of grief, shock, and platters of food being sent by Jewish friends and relatives. The days came and went with no substantial thought or even emotion. The distress of the situation and my regret for not asking him anything shut down my brain’s emotional center.

For years afterward, I could not recall a single thing about my father - not his face, not his voice, not even the last thing I said to him. It was as if he had never even existed. I supposed it was some sort of defensive mechanism for my mind; the only way I would be able to go on with my life was if I shut him out completely. I tried as hard as I could but the only thing I could ever recall was the image of his ninety-pound, malnourished body ravaged by cancer, delirious from the medication, and terrified of death. I could also very clearly recall my feeling of being totally lost for words and furious at myself for not being able to think of the simplest question. For years, that feeling tormented me, and I felt angry with myself for letting him down, making him feel useless in the last vulnerable moments of his life.

Then I started to remember. It took me a while to build up the courage, but I eventually picked up my father’s book. At the time, school was a distant thought for me. After my father passed, I began to suffer from writer’s block. Even the simplest reading or French assignment seemed like an endless hike up an ever-expanding mountain. I turned to the book as a last resort; no amount of apathy or self-pity was helping my
situation and I needed to get inside my father's head. So I picked up the brand new, glossy book and began to read. I absorbed everything as if it were, one of the Dead Sea scrolls.

While he was sick he decided that he wanted to share his struggle with people. Instead of just frizzling out in solitude, he made a courageous decision to write a series of articles for the Montreal Gazette entitled “Cancer: My Story.” He kept writing the articles until he passed away and after he did, one of his best friends decided to bring them all together into a book for people to read.

In the late summer, he was diagnosed with stage-four lung cancer, which had also spread to an area of his brain. He had been smoking a pack of unfiltered Camels every day since he was fourteen and was never able to quit. He was operated on a few times, first to remove the tumor in his brain, then to remove his entire right lung, since it was past the point of repair. Then he began his rounds of radiation and chemotherapy, which made him extremely sick and miserable, but he was still able to keep his vitality and sense of humor in his writing, which is probably why his articles were on the front page for six weeks in a row. I recall one story about how after his first operation he didn’t want to use a catheter so he promised the nurses he would pee on his own. It turned out to be extremely difficult but he soon realized that he was able to pee into the bedpan when the tap was running. However, one of the other patients in the room was driven mad by the sound of the water and made him turn it off, and a hilarious argument ensued.

Despite his good humor, the disease spread to his lymph nodes and liver seven months after the diagnosis, and there was no going back. He was in palliative care for three weeks before he died.

As I read his writing, shedding a new tear with every page, I began to hear his voice. I began to be able to picture him in every stage of his struggle and was slowly rebuilding his image in my head. It was almost as if he were communicating to me from the grave, giving me little life lessons and even some laughs. Slowly but surely, my father was coming back to me, in old family photos, in dreams, and in realizations I had about myself. I realized at one point that we are all just a result of our past experiences; without them we would be nothing. One of my favorite memories of my father is going on exotic family vacations and waking up with him at six in the morning to go stroll on the beach and collect seashells. I still have baskets of shells in my home in Montreal and can place particular memories with most of them. These experiences got me interested in science, and curious about the natural world.

In this way, a whole new picture of my father formed in my head and I began to look at him as a young adult instead of a scared prepubescent boy. Questions began forming in my head that I wish I could have asked him, things about his past experiences and how they affected his personality. I realized that he had lived such an eventful and dynamic life, travelling the world, making a world music radio show for seventeen years, falling in love, and having children. Although he was filled with fear and regret at the end of his
life for not being able to live up to his true potential, he really had a life that many people would envy.

As I look back on that night in his hospital room, I understand why I wasn’t able to get a single question out; however, I cannot forgive myself. It feels like that moment is constantly hanging in the air, never resolving itself but always being renewed. I think about it every single day and come up with new questions. If I could just go back to that moment in time I would know exactly what to ask; “Why did you fall in love with mom?” “What makes a man, a man?” “Will you miss me?” Questions that might not necessarily have answers but can provide some sort of direction in one’s life. Unfortunately, time only moves into the future, and focusing on the past can just compromise that future. So I try to move in one direction, towards a better understanding of myself and the world I live in. And my regret is always there and will always be there, reminding me how important questions really are.
Chris slumped down onto his bed and gazed up blankly at the familiar ceiling that he woke up to each morning. His whitewashed room was filled with an overwhelming nothingness; and besides the ticking of the clock that beats in sync with his throbbing head, it was filled with a deafening silence. As fatigue filled the emptiness in his heart, he happily let his heavy eyelids close. Chris retreats into this world full of excitement and adventure each night in his dreams, only to be sucked backed into the same, unvaried reality each morning.

“Chris! Wake up. Now!” his mother said, as she drew the curtains, letting the blinding rays of the morning sun stream into the room. “Get your brothers ready for school and make sure they don’t forget anything.” Chris got up reluctantly, rubbing the weariness out of his eyes, knowing that his mother would never leave home for work with peace of mind if he did not.

It has already been a few months since he graduated from high school but Chris has remained undecided about his academic future. After sending his brothers off to school, he sat down at the kitchen table and retrieved an envelope hidden between the yellowed pages of his mother’s cookbook. “Dear Christopher Alonzo,” he read, for the hundredth time, “Congratulations! You are accepted into Brooklyn College, City University of New York under the Theater Major Program. Please fill in and send us the attached copy of the affirmation letter to guarantee your spot in our freshman class.” Chris lay his head down on the icy cold marble table as he thought about the day he received the news of the acceptance.

That day was nothing close to exciting, though the weather, as he remembered, was beyond horrible. The trees on the streets were swaying threateningly back and forth with the hurricane-like wind and the raindrops were pounding on the glass windows. Chris struggled with an impossibly small umbrella and rushed out to the fallen letterbox to rescue the mail. He was glad he did, as somewhere within the pile was that crisp brown envelope labeled with Brooklyn College’s logo. He hesitated for a bit before tearing the envelope open. His hands trembled with euphoria as he read the letter. Warm tears of joy trickled down his face and with a boyish smirk he literally jumped out of his seat with joy, punching his fists up into the air; letting the seemingly insignificant bills fall to the floor. He was overjoyed; and at that point in time he thought nothing, not even that horrible weather, could get him down.

He was wrong. As he continued with his daily chores at home, Chris’s excitement and joy were gradually replaced with worry and perplexity. “Will mother be able to handle the household if I were to concentrate on college? What about her work? What about the two boys? Who’s going to babysit them?” he thought. Endless questions and worry streamed into his mind, placing him in a dilemma. Careful not to stress his mother out any
further than she already was, Chris decided to keep the acceptance a secret.

His mother, as a single parent, had to work doubly hard to support the family; and that was no easy task. She goes to work early each morning, leaving all the household matters in her eldest son's hands. As a young boy in his childhood days, Chris understood the difficulties his mother had to face. Out of love for his parent, he fulfilled what his mother expected of him and soon became an irreplaceable support in the house. That unfounded maturity eventually landed him with a heavy burden that he had never wanted, a responsibility that should never have been his. Nevertheless, he stuck with it.

However, behind this overflowing sense of responsibility lay a fiery passion hidden behind the long lashes that lined his beautiful deep brown eyes. Chris had always wanted to be an actor. The monotonous humdrums of reality made him dream about living a life in a different world filled with adventure and thrill; and in that short period of time in which he acts, Chris could be anyone he wanted. Moreover, he had all the qualifications an actor could possibly possess: a charisma that appealed to everyone around him, the talent that any Wanna-be-Hollywood-star would die for and not to mention, those striking boyish features of his that were accompanied with a thick mob of rich brown hair that stayed casually perfect without any effort.

I do not even want to imagine how long Chris would have kept the acceptance a secret if his mother had not noticed him acting all weird. That night at dinner all that could be heard were his brothers' constant squabbles and his mother's efforts in trying to get them to eat their food. Chris drained all the noise out of his senses as he twirled the spaghetti with his fork, staring at it deep in thought.

“Chris...Christopher!” called his mother gently after sending the two boys to their rooms, “something's up with you. What's wrong?”

“...I can't hide anything from you, can I?” replied Chris with a smile on his face. “I got accepted to Brooklyn College, Mom. But I...”

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed, more exaggeratedly than he had when he got the news, “I'm so proud of you Chris! But why do you look so sad?”

Chris heaved a sigh as he poured out his worries to his mother, telling her how he felt about going to pursue his dreams. He stuttered and mumbled as he explained himself, looking up at his mother's face, expecting the same worry to flash across her face, only to be greeted with a surprising smile. “Chris,” she said, “Go to college. Be an actor and be successful. That is the best thing you can ever give to a mother.” With that, she accompanied Chris as he spent the night filling in the affirmation letter.

That night, as he lay in his bed, Chris stared at the same familiar ceiling and looked around at his whitewashed room. They were as boring and sad as usual, no doubt, but instead of emptiness and sadness, Chris felt a compelling urge to jump up and punch his fists up into the air as he had done when he first read the acceptance letter.
As I woke up that morning, I couldn't help but ponder the fact that the day was actually here. My mother and brother were leaving to go live in Florida. As we drove to J.F.K. airport, memories of them began to flood my mind. I remembered all the good times we shared, and even the dreadful—yet still cherished—arguments we had as a family. As I stared at the trees and other cars zooming by, it was like life was moving in slow motion—almost as if my body and mind weren't ready to let go of this moment, the last moment we would share together as a family for a long time.

When we pulled up to the airport and unloaded the luggage, it was time to say the final goodbyes. I hugged my mom, told her I loved her, and to be safe in Florida. I reassured her that I would be fine in Brooklyn and there was nothing for her to worry about. After I talked to my mom, I could hear a faint voice crying not too far behind. As I looked in my peripheral vision, I saw my seven-year-old brother with his head down. I quickly turned to him and picked him up and embraced him with a hug full of love. As I felt his warm tears soak through my shirt and drench my shoulders, reality hit me like a brick wall: they were actually leaving. I couldn't hold back my tears any longer, and they ran down my face like rain from the sky.

My last words to my brother were to take care of Mommy because he was the man of the house now. As they walked to the check-in, I felt part of me being stripped away, but this was also a sign of my embarking on a new chapter in my life.

Growing up in Pentecostal church in Brooklyn is one of the most interesting experiences that one could ever go through. My church, which is predominantly Jamaican, was like family to me. I was brought up in the church from a little child. My mother dedicated me to the Lord when I was baby in a process called a “baby dedication.” My church has always played an essential role in the way I was brought up, teaching me to follow Christ and have a relationship with him because Christianity is not just a religion—it is a relationship with Christ. My church even played a major role in my education. My church, because of a vision from God given to my bishop, started a school which I attended beginning in second grade and continuing all the way through high school. My mother believed in God and the church, so she knew that the school would be the best thing for me.

Raising two children as a single mother wasn’t an easy task for my mother and it wasn't an easy thing for me. For most of my childhood, I would ignore the fact that I didn't have a father in my life because I didn't want to be one of those kids that lost control of their lives and used their family situation as an excuse for bad behavior. Also, I knew how hard my mother worked to keep my brother and me in a safe and positive Christian environment. I remember countless nights when she would come home dead tired from going to
school straight after work, while she was working on her Masters from Brooklyn College. I owed it to her to take care of my brother and keep myself out of trouble. My mother took the place of my father as much as she could by balancing the role of “mom and dad,” but there was still a void that only a father could fill.

The men’s ministry and the Christian men in it played a cardinal part of my life. The two men that impacted my life the most were Paul Meyerend and Mark McCarthy. Mark McCarthy (Brother Mark) was like an uncle to me. He watched over my brother and me while my mother was at night school. Since he was the security guard at my school, he always watched over me and kept me in check. Paul Meyerend (Pastor Meyerend) was like a father to me because he took me camping with his family and on trips to Florida. I was at his house almost every weekend. The fact that his sons attended the same school as I did was also cool. With men like these in my life, not having my biological father around almost became a figment of my imagination.

My church, being proactive about spreading the word of God, eventually opened up a church in Florida. The Bishop said God gave him a vision and he followed it. One morning while I was getting ready for school my mother said she wanted to ask me a question. So I told her OK, and she asked, “If I moved to Florida, would you want to come with me or stay in New York?” The next morning, I told her that I would want to stay in New York because this was all I knew, all my friends were here, and I had already started two years of high school here so I wanted to finish. My mother and I knew I had to find a place to live while she was in Florida. When my mother told Pastor Meyerend about our situation, he lovingly opened his house to me and allowed me to live there and really become one of his sons. Acts like this are the main reason why I know I am never alone, even when it seems like things aren’t going my way. People in your life that are there for you through “thick and thin” are the people that you can count on. I still miss having my mother around but even though my mom is a couple thousand miles away, I still remember the important life lessons she taught me. My mother leaving, even though I miss her dearly, has shown me how important and dedicated she is to furthering God’s kingdom, which is something I will always respect.
BLINDNESS
s Rita Tobias s

Everything became darker and darker with each step that I took. Suddenly, I was immersed in total blackness, as I stood contemplating whether my eyes were indeed open or shut. I felt my body tremble as I reached in front of me for some sort of direction. My teacher had warned us about these feelings, but they were far more intense than I had anticipated. I was at the Blind Museum with my fellow classmates on a volunteer program in Israel. We had been visiting hospitals, orphanages and soup kitchens. Before visiting the blind, our teacher wanted us to experience blindness for ourselves. How would it feel to have no sight? Would we be able to compensate using our remaining senses?

As I walked through the exhibit I had to rely on my other senses. While I carefully made my way through the tour, one of the places I stopped at was the “grocery store.” The tour guide challenged us to identify the fruits that lay before us by examining them with our senses of smell and touch. This, he said, was the way he was forced to analyze objects every day. This was far greater a challenge than I had imagined. I was holding a roundish fruit, one with a bumpy texture and a citrus smell. Unsure of what it was, I took another sniff and guessed lime. It was a lemon. The only way I could differentiate between a lemon and lime was by looking at their color. Mundane objects were suddenly novel creations whose obvious qualities appeared completely different when experienced through a different lens.

At one point, we went to a “café” and sat with our tour guide who had been born blind. He explained how he had adapted to his blindness, how he had to learn to use Braille. As I sat in the dark, I started to wonder what my guide looked like because I still hadn’t seen him. His voice was deep; I thought maybe he was in is thirties, tall and good looking. I was taken aback when I realized that he was, in fact, a short, middle-aged man with grey hair. Yet this no longer mattered because my opinion of him had been formed without these superficial details. Without sight, I was able to focus on who this man truly was.

This experience was truly enlightening. It made me realize the emphasis that our society puts on outward appearances. And although I wouldn’t like to admit it, it made me realize how much I focus on outward appearances. Although sight is the sense that unifies everything, it also serves as an obstacle. What stops a person from approaching another is usually their appearance, but if we took away this barrier, imagine the possibilities.

After leaving this exhibit, I made a promise to myself that I would work on breaking this barrier. The next day, while visiting the sick in a hospital, I remembered my promise. I would not let a person’s appearance stop me from approaching him. Instead of going with my friends to the children’s ward, I went to the cancer ward. As I walked down the hallway, I went into the first room I saw. Right there was a teenage girl sitting in
her bed. Her name was Sarah. She was 19 and
completely bald. I wasn’t going to let her baldness
or sickness frighten me enough to stop me from
getting to know her. After sitting with Sarah, I
realized that she was just another teenage girl like
me. She was diagnosed with cancer at the age of 17
and has been struggling with it ever since. We
talked about TV shows, movies and clothing that
we were both interested in. She might have been
bald and sick, but that didn’t mean she was any
different from me. For the first time, I was able to
control my sight and destroy that barrier.

This experience was a true-life experiment
and it opened my eyes to a whole new way of
thinking. I know that my impression of my tour
guide would have been drastically different had I
seen him prior to truly getting to know him as a
person. I know that I wouldn’t have been able to
approach Sarah that day in the hospital and would
have gone with my friends to the children’s ward.
Anytime I meet a new person, I do not allow my
sight to make the first judgment; I push beyond it.
Over time, I have come to realize how often I was
blinded by my sight. 
Charisma is a young woman from Brooklyn with caramel skin, dimples, and curly black hair. The dimples are automatically recognized since she laughs and smiles most of the time, just sitting here with her for a half hour or so, no lulls in the conversation and never a dull moment. She is about average height with a slim body but her personality and description of her own trials and tribulations are definitely indicative of a very capable and strong woman. You would never have guessed with her optimistic disposition that she has faced hard times in her life.

Her earliest years were spent in Bedford Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, and up until the present day she has lived in Brownsville and East New York as well, until finally establishing permanent settlement in Crown Heights. The brown eyes behind the stylish name brand glasses have witnessed most of Brooklyn’s tough as nails neighborhoods. To show for it, she definitely possesses confidence and assertiveness.

She has seen and experienced struggling in her life on more than one level; her mother has been a single parent since the tender age of 16. However, her mother was not willing to continue to support her and around the time she was supposed to have started college, abruptly kicked her out. Charisma felt blind-sided, hurt and worried. Her mother was making more than enough money to be able to put her through college, but now she was left to fend for herself and become the sole breadwinner. She was forced to take out a student loan and find her own living arrangements.

Despite this emotionally traumatic and unimaginably stressful situation, she still managed to land on her own two feet. Charisma explains to me how she was always a good student in school and never had to be told to nor was guided in that direction. She had always been, in a way, responsible for herself, and judging by the smile she wears on her face this is not too much for her to handle. Though the selfish decision of her mother left her emotionally scarred and delayed her college plans, here she is sitting with me in composition class, telling her story.

“My best friend’s mom says maybe she didn’t have a childhood. I have a lot of resentment towards her, but I’m stronger,” Charisma explains, “We only speak through BBM.” No one on this planet is perfect, we are all an array of flaws and blemishes clumsily clustered together, and though what her mother did appears from this angle to be wrong, I withhold any judgment of her; the important fact is that Charisma is very upset and hurt by her. Luckily, she was able to move in with her grandmother and continue with her studies with that load off her shoulders. Charisma is just one of those people that always appear to be happy just to be alive and see the beauty in that.

As the last few minutes allotted for the interview wind down, I finally hear some words that express a smidge of vulnerability; mind you, this whole time she’s simply been giving a play-by-
play type of exposition of what her life has been like, never even a hint of complaining. She explains how she lives on Utica Avenue, a bustling strip of loud cars and fast-paced people, and how by the time she gets home from school, though it’s still semi-crowded, she feels somewhat afraid. “It’s darkness when I get home, I walk fast.” The statement connects with me because now I understand that no matter how tough and able you may be, you’re still a small person in comparison to this big world. With all the challenges life may throw your way, you can either run or hide from your problems, or you can face them head on. Charisma has a positive energy about her that allows her to be as unaffected as possible through all the negativity, and get to a place where she can be content, similar to how she walks right through the darkness of Utica Avenue and goes to where she is home with her grandmother and her schoolbooks.
J didn't feel like going to school. It was his senior year and he had spent most of it hanging out at friends' smoking weed, drinking beer, and just generally chilling. There wasn't much difference between J and his peers, except that he had a concrete goal that he had been working on since he could remember. J was going to be a fighter pilot; he was going to control the sky one day, just him and two thousand tons of metal between his legs. That was until he was diagnosed with a medical condition that precludes him from ever being a pilot. When he lost that goal, he lost everything. There was nothing to strive for anymore, so he didn't strive. Nothing to gain, nothing to lose; alcohol, drugs, and vagrancy took over his life.

J is a tall kid with a strong Polish background. Both his parents were born in Poland and moved to the United States before he was born to find their American dream. He has baby blue eyes and goofy ears. He can't take anything seriously for the life of him, or so he thinks.

In the middle of his senior year, almost a year after he was diagnosed with the illness that took away his inspiration, his graduation prospects were bleak. It's not just school that J was avoiding; he had also been absent from home for a long while. He could always find a friend who would let him crash when he didn't feel like he could face his family. Avoiding his home was a symptom of the problem. He knew this but didn't want to deal with it. He felt adrift, as if he had nothing to do, nothing to live for, and nowhere to be. He had lost his motivation, his goals, and his dreams.

After one of his prolonged absences, J decided it was time to check how his family was doing without him. He casually walked into his home, bracing himself for the backlash he knew his parents would inflict upon him. The moment his mother, a nurse, saw him she rushed to him, tears streaming down her face, and embraced her son. His father, when he saw him, gave him a stern look.

"Where have you been? Do you know how worried we were?" his father asked, his voice slowly rising in tone with each word.

"Didn't feel like coming home."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means what it means," J yelled back, letting his anger get the better of him.

"Both of you stop this," his mother yelled, still crying but trying to get a handle on the situation.

"I want you out of this house," his father hissed in deadly serious tones.

"Fine, like I give a shit." J angrily walked out.

J spent his days bumming cigarettes off his buddies, trying to get easy money and then spending it on booze and weed. As time went on, the feeling of hopelessness grew inside of him. He could feel how aimless he was. He used to think about the future, about what he would do and what he would see. These things weren't conditionals; they were facts. He was going to go
places and do amazing things and he knew it. But that was then, this is now; now he would fight with his parents, get kicked out, come back. Rinse and repeat for weeks. He started feeling restless and drained. His life was going nowhere and he knew it. It was time for a change. It was time to go back to basics, time for a reality check.

After more than half of his senior year spent on the run, J decided he needed to get his life back in order. He started by cutting the alcohol and marijuana out of his life. He started attending class again, which wasn't easy. He hadn't been to school in ages and it showed. He was far behind but he knew what he wanted. The last five months of high school were spent studying, telling his so-called friends to grow up, and trying to rebuild the relationship with his family. It wasn't easy. His parents and siblings might forgive, but forgetting is a whole different story.

Today J is a quiet, goofy college student. He sits in a room with twenty-four other goofy college students. He still retains the bad habit of smoking from his days as a vagrant but he doesn't smoke weed, and he barely drinks alcohol. He may not know what he wants to do ten years from now, but he has the energy to search for a new goal. The world is a large place, and J realizes something today that he never fathomed a year ago. There might be something out there that will motivate him the way he was inspired to be a fighter pilot.
Early one morning, I watched the rain dropping onto the cement in slow motion. I could hear the tapping of the droplets of water on the ground as they produced sound waves that traveled to my ears. Fresh air was seeping through my nostrils. The rain was washing the dust off of the buildings and the sidewalks of the noisy streets. It seemed like the rain was filtering the pollution in Manhattan, because the air was unusually fresh. Immediately I reached in my bag for my pack of cigarettes. My coffee was still hot and I was feeling lucky that day. With the red flame produced from the strike of a match, I lit my cigarette. The contrast of fire with water was clear in my senses, as if the universe were revealing the beauty of the four elements to me. Suddenly I was aware of being alive, and the first drag of the smoke in my lungs felt delicious.

The drive to smoke is irresistible. Cigarettes make me feel good and enhance my senses. Smoking has also become both my second nature and an act that accompanies me in my everyday tasks. Even at this very moment, the image of a cigarette and the urge to smoke take over my physical self. But recently, I discovered that during smoking I also feel a torturous guilt. This guilt I feel is due to the negative aspects of smoking.

Tabloids and commercials against cigarettes and the health risks associated with them are abundant and are haunting me. One day while I was sitting on the balcony, smoking, I saw a bus passing by on which an ad featured the image of a middle-aged lady who was missing fingers. Beneath the woman there was a quote that said, “I wish I quit smoking earlier.” After that moment, I promised myself that I would quit immediately. Sadly, I broke this promise. I’ve made this promise to myself countless times in the past, and each time, have broken it.

I remember smoking next to an F train station near my house. An elderly lady passed by next to me and shot me an unpleasant glance, as if to emphasize my bad habit. Seeing the old lady triggered potential future images of myself. A horrifying picture flashed in my eyes: I was lying in a hospital bed with tubes coming out of a hole in my throat. I felt furious with myself. I was tortured with terror and fear for my body. I tossed the nearly full pack of cigarettes in the garbage without hesitation. I was like a basketball player. I reached for my goal high up in the air. A few days later I bought another pack.

Recently I quit smoking for eight months. But a sudden stressful change in my life interfered with my success. I was laid off from my job and had a hard time finding a new one. As a result, I decided to pursue a new career in nursing. To achieve my goal, I enrolled in Brooklyn College to earn prerequisite science credits required to get into the nursing program of my choice.

The first day I walked in front of Boylan Hall, there were students smoking all around me. Having to go back to school and then seeing
others smoke have brought the desire back to life. I felt as if the cigarettes became alive and were speaking to me, “smoke me, I will solve all your problems.” Earning a second bachelor’s degree is an enormously demanding situation—one that caused me great stress and in turn, smoking seemed to alleviate it.

During lonely times, the cigarette even serves the role of my best friend. I remember a couple of years back, a horrible time I went through during a break-up. I remember this particular moment sitting on the balcony with gravity pulling tears down from my eyes like a magnetic force acting on metal. It was me against time, which was passing very slowly. It was an extremely dark night, and not even one star could be seen in the sky. My heart ached and I felt restless. I was holding my cell phone, staring at it, and begging God to make it ring with this guy’s name blinking on the screen. But instead I saw 2:30 AM displayed on the screen. I was sitting and waiting. I reached for my cigarette, lit it, and inhaled a great distraction that was my comfort during this moment of pain.

My dual relationship of hate and love with smoking began when I was only in the eighth grade. I remember I was spending time with a friend named Anastasia in the basement of an apartment building I was living in at that time. She was smoking a Marlboro. I remember how interesting the blue cloud of smoke looked coming out of her lips. I couldn’t resist asking her to let me try one. She gave me her cigarette. My first drag felt like bitter-tasting air. Suddenly I heard her laughing unusually loud. She said: “If you don’t know how to smoke then don’t embarrass yourself in front of the boys. Let me show you how it’s done. Take the cigarette and breathe it, just like air.” I followed her instructions and felt a powerful burning sensation in my lungs and I almost fainted. My first experience with smoking was a deadly one.

Nevertheless, ever since then many situations in my life have encouraged me to keep smoking. Cigarettes always fit perfectly into any kind of experience- happy or sad. For instance, I love smoking when I have deep philosophical conversations, after a horrible exam, in the morning with a steaming cup of coffee, when I study, and when life seems boring. Cigarettes help me relax when I’m stressed. They can also serve as a social link during cigarette breaks. All of these things make me so addicted to smoking, but recently the addiction is accompanied with endless fear and guilt. Learning about biology has unquestionably contributed to my guilt.

My new goal to become a nurse has led me towards a more complete understanding about the evils of smoking. Often after reading a chapter in human anatomy and physiology, I become increasingly aware of the vulnerability of my body. For example, if I smoke immediately after reading, I involuntary begin to imagine how the smoke travels down to my lungs. Then I see how the chemicals eat away the thin walls of my precious lungs. This image creates an irritating feeling in my torso and halts my attraction to the cigarette. Because of this, I have an intuition that becoming a nurse will help me quit.
Unfortunately, at this stage of my life I am shamefully addicted. When I was younger cigarettes used to be fun and a regular way of life. Today I have come to realize that they are my enemy and a violation of my body. Although up to this point I have somehow infected myself with the illusionary thinking that the health risks associated with cigarettes will not affect me, down deep inside my heart I know that nothing is further from the truth. I sincerely hope that I will quit in the future because I know that it is absolutely necessary.
ANOTHER MAN’S TREASURE
Meira Bennett

There was nothing unusual about my behavior as I walked into the subway car and opted to sit in the small patch of orange seat between a woman who had a bulky shopping bag on her lap and a man whose legs were spread out wide. On the other side of the subway car, there were three empty seats but nobody sat there. We would rather sit thigh to thigh with strangers than two seats away from a homeless man.

He was a typical New York City bum. Skinny, black, unshaven. His rumpled, stained clothing and cargo of flabby black garbage bags suggested a recent rifle through a garbage dumpster. He looked like he smelled and as though he would smell like he looked. At least he was quiet, we thought to ourselves, New York City superiority at its prime.

The train rumbled towards Manhattan. People entered and exited, sat or stood, yet the homeless man remained and the seats stayed empty, a bright patchwork within the black, pink, and khaki of the summer wardrobe. The train stopped, the doors opened, the doors closed.

“Hey!” a coarse voice rang out from the opposite end of the car. “Can someone help me please?”

We moved our legs aside so that he wouldn't touch us as he brushed past. Someone handed him a dollar. He nodded, stuffed it in his pocket and continued down the car.

At the end of the car sat the original homeless man. As the white homeless man reached his seat, the black homeless man's face lit up.

“Heeey, man!” he called out. “That's a nice bag,” the crippled homeless man replied. We turned our heads to look. I hadn't noticed the black pleather bag on the man's lap.

“It was in the garbage,” the first man replied. The other one expressed his approval. They both spoke in stunted speech with voices weathered and abrasive, but the two talked as if they were old friends. The crippled homeless man sat down where no one else had wanted to sit, and they admired the man's treasure.

The train stopped at the next station and the crippled homeless man stood up and shuffled to the door leading to the next car. But before he could open the door, the black homeless man shoved the purse at him.

“Here ya go man,” he said with a gleeful smile, revealing shocking gaps in his teeth. The crippled homeless man smiled too, shook the man's hand, and shuffled off into the next car. We watched him go, hoping he would make it safely—a moving train and a man with a cane.
By the time we reached my stop, the black homeless man was still sitting in the same spot where he had been the entire trip. From Flatbush Ave to 86th Street and Broadway, those three seats had remained empty. As I walked out of the car, headed towards my warm supper, my hot shower, my comfortable bed, I dropped a one dollar bill onto the black pleather bag that the crippled homeless man had refused to take.
My friends and I have our differences but we all share a common interest in the realm of music. We are fans of a hip-hop artist known as “Lil B ‘The BasedGod.’” Most people aren’t familiar with his music, due to his underground status, but his current following can be attributed to his music and his very own signature dance. The dance, known as “cooking,” is something my friends and I regularly do wherever and whenever. Even though not too many other people cook, I never expected the support the dance would receive.

Whenever Corey, Sam and I go out to parties, other partygoers will usually find us cooking to whatever music is playing. The dance itself is very versatile and can be done to virtually any song. Most of the time, people don’t even know what we are doing, but one exception has occurred.

Corey, Sam and I don’t usually go out partying, but the coming weeks were going to be the last time we would see each other for months. Corey and Sam were both heading upstate to separate colleges, while I planned on staying in Brooklyn. We wanted to do something memorable before they went away, so we all decided to go out that weekend and let loose. Even though we felt that the party wasn’t going to live up to our expectations, we went out anyway.

The name of the party was Brooklyn Zoo Part 2. I was the only one who had gone to the previous one, and I had been disappointed. This second time around, Corey and Sam were accompanying me, and I felt more optimistic. This would be my first time partying with Sam, and I was eager to find out how she has fun. You wouldn’t really expect much out of her, but her ambition makes up for her dainty looks. I did know what to expect from Corey. Corey is naturally very nonchalant when it comes to the party scene. If you were to ever lose him at a party, chances are you would find him talking with someone before you would ever find him on the dance floor. I’m the opposite of Corey. My goal for partying is to dance with as many girls as possible.

Our three personalities meshed together that one fateful night. We were energized and appreciative of what we were experiencing. The music was great, which was a nice change of pace from the mediocrity we were so used to hearing. Our passion for cooking was fueled by the good music blaring from the speakers. The three of us cooked the night away with our arms out, emulating the art of patty flipping. Our imaginary grills were before us with our proverbial spatulas in hand and shoulders bouncing in unison. While most everyone else was conforming to their predictable two-step motions, we were pioneers on the dance floor with our chef-like dance skills.

The best part of it all was that we discovered that we weren’t the only ones that knew how to cook. As the night went on, more and more people joined us. Before we knew it, a small circle had formed around us as we had our very own cookout on the dance floor. As we cooked
throughout the night, eventually the DJ played a song by Lil B. That was the icing on the cake.

Having all those people around us was an experience that I will hold on to for a long time. My friends and I came to that party with a common interest, and I found it to be truly amazing that complete strangers would come together for that same common interest and have fun together. That’s something that rarely happens in this world today. s
United Before God, Divided We Stand

Tall or short, dark or fair, skinny or fat, strangers or best friends, everyone comes together to pray. We put all our differences behind us and stand shoulder to shoulder, to pray. To God, we are all the same. Our physical appearances, nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures do not make us more or less special to God. We are all His people and to Him we are equal. God does not discriminate and neither do we when we all stand together in prayer. However, after prayer, things change. People suddenly start to take into account differences that did not matter when praying. They forget that God is still watching and decide that their nationality makes them better than other people. Just last week, during the month of Ramadan, I went to the Turkish masjid to pray and break my fast. I didn’t feel like a Muslim but like an outsider at a place where I should have felt at home. The people there made me feel like I was dirt that they were stepping on just because I was not from the same place they were from.

The sun was setting and it was almost time for iftaar, the meal when we break our fast. Because it was summer, the day of the fast seemed endless. My mother, my sister, my two younger cousins and I had left my aunt’s house earlier, but we lost track of time wandering in and out of the shops. Now we needed a place to eat, but the restaurants around us did not offer halal food. We finally decided to break our fast at a Turkish masjid a couple of blocks away, where I had attended Arabic classes as a young girl.

Once we arrived at the masjid, there were two separate entrances. One led the men to the main floor and the other led the women straight upstairs. The men had the whole first floor to themselves and the women the entire second floor. My mother, my sister, and my two girl cousins went upstairs. We decided to wash up before praying and thus headed towards the restroom. On our way there, we marveled at the masjid’s beauty: the green carpet with the sophisticated designs and the ceramic mosaic tiles which complemented the stunning medieval Islamic art on the walls. Big, expensive chandeliers hung from the ceiling. I thought to myself that this was the prettiest and best masjid ever.

The bathroom was huge but not as nice as I had expected. It wasn’t decorated as nicely as the outside. My family and I washed up for prayer, which would start at sunset, and then left. We wanted to go to the prayer room but we didn’t know where it was. No one was even available for us to ask. The whole place was very quiet and vacant. I looked around the place, at first for people, but then just out of curiosity. The place had changed so much from when I was last here, which was more than ten years ago. The masjid was rearranged with additional new rooms. The place even looked bigger and more majestic. Maybe I just didn’t notice the beauty of this place as a young kid.

What I remembered was running out of breath while playing tag with my little Muslim
friends, most of whom were Turkish, getting in trouble for fooling around during class, and eating pizza during lunchtime. All the kids were as close as sisters. We were always together, whether it was playing, eating, or standing up for each other. I remembered my best friends and started to miss them. I wanted to recall all those memories that I shared with them. I was so lost in thought that I didn’t even realize I had opened a door and was about to enter until my mother called out to me that she had found the prayer room.

My mother didn’t know if the room was actually a prayer room, but she assumed. There was a huge shoe rack outside the room, so high that not even the tallest person would be able to put her shoes up on one of the top racks. It did seem like the prayer room since there were a couple of pairs of shoes on the rack and people are supposed to take their shoes off before entering the prayer room.

My family and I walked in. I was amazed as this room was even more beautiful than the hall outside. It looked like part of a luxurious hotel for the richest. This was not an ordinary room, but an indoor balcony. The room only had three walls decorated with spectacular Islamic art; instead of a fourth wall, there was a railing. If one were to look down from the railing, she could see the prayer room on the first floor, the imam who would be leading the prayer, and all the men who had come to pray. The balcony looked down into the men’s prayer room, which was more than twice as big as the women’s. A gigantic chandelier hung from the ceiling and lit up the two floors. The floor of the balcony was covered in carpet with boxed designs. The sight was astonishing.

Women were scattered around the room, sitting on the floor, waiting for prayer to start. Kids were looking down from the top, protected by the railing that kept them from falling. We decided to have a seat because there were still a couple of minutes before prayer started. While everyone waited for sunset, a young boy from downstairs read the verses of the Quran while everyone listened. Everything was very peaceful and I felt relaxed. I was glad that we had stopped here. As I looked around the room, one thing I noticed was that almost all of the people were Turkish, just how it was when I was younger. It shouldn’t have been surprising; it was a Turkish masjid after all. There were only two Pakistani women who sat on the far end of the room, and my Bangladeshi family on the opposite end. After noticing that, I just went back to concentrating on what the young boy was reciting. The observation I made didn’t really bother me too much, not until later on.

The sun finally set and it was time to break our fast and pray. The imam stood up and got ready to lead the prayer. Normally at home or at any other masjid, we would break our fast with a small drink and a date right at sunset, and then pray; this masjid did it differently. We went straight into prayer. It didn’t matter because the prayer wouldn’t last too long. Waiting an additional couple of minutes would be nothing compared to the long day of fasting.

Right after prayer, all the women rushed out of the room. We had no idea where they were going. We decided to follow them because they
were probably heading to the room where the food would be served. During the month of Ramadan, everyone is invited to the masjid to have iftaar after prayer. People take turns cooking food that is served to the people who break their fast in the masjid. As we followed the other women, we could smell the food that was going to be served. Our stomachs grumbled knowing that food was near, but not close enough. We entered the huge room and the aroma of chicken filtered through our noses. The smell was unbelievable. Maybe the food smelled even better because we were ravenous. There were huge tables filled with chicken, rice, beans, soup, sweets, drinks, and so much more. I couldn’t even identify all of the foods but they looked tantalizing.

Seats were filling up quickly so we decided to sit at an empty table close to the entrance. Some of the people from the surrounding tables stared at us like we were aliens. They didn’t seem too friendly. My two younger cousins each grabbed a seat when a Turkish woman came and said that we couldn’t sit there. My mom didn’t argue and we moved to another table close by. I was embarrassed. Someone had just denied us an empty table. Maybe it was reserved for someone important, but if it was, there should have been a reserved sign. At this point, there were very few empty tables left. People kept on coming in, all Turkish, who weren’t even present during the prayer. Kids were running everywhere, food in their hands, screaming and laughing. My family and I sat at the new table we had found but before we could even start eating, another woman came to our table and told us that we couldn’t sit there. The woman told us to find another table. I was shocked for the second time. This had never happened to me. I felt very low because someone had told me that I couldn’t sit at an empty table. It wasn’t even that the tables were reserved. The tables weren’t reserved so why couldn’t we sit there? This was a masjid and it was supposed to be for everyone. The food here was supposed to be for everyone too. My little cousins couldn’t wait anymore. They started to complain but my mom just gave the table up. She said that we were guests at the masjid and that it would be better if we listened to them because it was a Turkish masjid and the people were Turkish. My sister spotted another table with one seat taken, but the woman said that the table was taken. My mom was very disappointed. Where were we supposed to sit?

By that time, I just wanted to leave. I could not believe that this is how we were being treated. I never felt so abandoned or hurt. I was holding back my tears because I didn’t want the Turkish people to think that I felt defeated. What was even more heartbreaking was I could see the sadness in my mom’s face, the look of being totally rejected. This whole situation was very surprising to me. I have known Turkish people and made friends with them since I was very young. Some Turkish people do look highly upon their race and down upon others, but most of them are absolutely amazing and wouldn’t even hurt a fly. Even the arrogant ones had never made me feel so low.

My mom went up to the front and asked for a table where we could sit, while my sister, my cousins, and I waited where we were. I know she didn’t want to but it was for my cousins. One of
the women pointed to a table all the way in the back of the room. I followed her finger to the back of the room. There was a table, all the way in the back, with two women sitting there. They were the same two Pakistani women I had seen when I was in the prayer room. I looked around the room and saw that everyone else in the room was Turkish. They were all talking, laughing, and eating while the two Pakistani women ate silently. I couldn't believe it; we were isolated from all the other people just because we weren't Turkish. I felt that if we were Turkish, we would be able to sit wherever we wanted. My family and I walked to the table. I noticed that this table did not have as much food as the other tables. It had everything, but in smaller quantities. My cousins quickly sat and started eating. They were too small to understand that we were not welcome here just because we were of a different nationality. I sat down but didn't touch the food. My mother and my sister didn't either. I did not want to eat their food, not after how they had made me feel. I was starving but not eating their food would not kill me. I decided I could wait even though my stomach continued to grumble. Eating their food would take away the little dignity I had left.

I felt like I didn't belong somewhere for the first time in my life. It surprises me that this is how I felt at a masjid where everyone is supposed to be welcome all the time. The way I felt that day was something I had never experienced before. My heart felt heavy, like it was going to explode. I went home, replaying what had happened; still, I could not get over the shock. I thought about how I had been treated as a young girl in this same masjid. I never felt any different from the other girls because of my nationality. We were all the same, all little girls at the masjid learning about the ways of Islam. So why was I being treated differently now? The question made my head hurt. I didn't want to think about it anymore. I felt that my family and I should have left right after the first woman had denied us the table.

In the masjid, we were all Muslims even though we were from different ethnic groups. We should have all been treated equally. Whatever happened that day should not have happened at all. What upset me most about this situation was that this all happened in a masjid, such a holy and pure place. People should not be treated differently just because of their nationality, especially at a masjid where people from different backgrounds all come together. God does not play favorites, so we should not either.
PART THREE: CHANGING PLACES

Samuel Rodriguez Beltran • Max Temnogorod • Yaakov Hacker
Allen Gorbonos • Neliya Karimova • Darwin A. Maria Lara
Peggy Hazan • Godfred Talaga
LEAVING TOWN
Samuel Rodriguez Beltrán

It is not that we didn’t care that much about education. My parents were busy the long day trying to bring food to the table. It was something like you should, not you must, go to school to have a better life than your parents. So, without a clear idea of what I wanted, I went alone to take the test to enter the secondary school, in a small town in Southern Mexico. As an insecure thirteen-year-old teen, I did well in my first attempt to do the schooling thing on my own.

Classes were filled with readings about revolution. The teacher wanted students to understand the meaning of expressions like “workers united against their masters” or “people joined in protest against bad government” and “the richest who kept the better lands.” Most of my teachers used to work in the University of Agronomy as well. At the time, many of them believed in Marxism and Leninism. They would fight defending their ideas. Classes were tough. They wanted us to become aware of reality and who we were.

The school was a big one. It was built in the bottom of a small valley, surrounded by mango and coconut trees. Crossing its large backyard, we could get to the canyon where students used to hang out after classes to bother alligators. I was the youngest in my class. Many of the students were workers from the sugarcane plantations outside of the town who couldn’t make their way to school when they were younger.

I was a shy person. I used to think that what I needed was just one good friend and that would be enough. My father would disapprove of my solitary life and would tell me if I wanted to have friends, I had to be friendly with people. It wasn’t that I didn’t like people. My solitude was fed with readings of Maxim Gorky, Bruno Traven, and the Old Testament. One day I started hanging out with three guys. I was accepted into their group when I showed them that I knew how to play chess. Luis was the smart one who would tease the others with jokes and plan our trips to the mountain. Gerardo was the cool-headed guy who would think twice before doing something. His father didn’t want him to go to school but to help the family on the farm. Alex was the sports guy who would tell us how to be appealing to women.

Sometimes we would go to the old movie theater to watch old American Western movies. We spent hours talking about the Last Picture Show. On Sundays we would go to the playing field to cheer Alex’s soccer team. If Saturday wasn’t cloudy, we could go to the Great River or Luis would organize a trip to the big mountain to hunt rabbits, birds or whatever living things we might find on our way. Meanwhile, between vacations and classes, we used to kill time playing chess.

School was not only the place where we could learn. Poverty is a good learning tool. While we were learning about the dictator Porfirio Diaz, whose bad government led to the Revolution of
In 1910, we also learned from our teachers that the current government had started selling or shutting down its large companies. The sugarcane plantations were among them. In the town, workers were organized and decided to protest against the sales. The government didn’t want to yield, and the workers (our parents, uncles and brothers) decided to go on strike. Police forces almost took over the entire town. My friends and I would talk about how the events were leading to violence. After classes we helped to bring food and drinks to the workers on strike. Teachers leading the strike persuaded us to go to the main roads to ask for money from the drivers for the families with children. At the same time, we went on with our lives in the stone streets of the town, in the valley, in its market, in the old theater movie, in the river, and the school. The town became divided between the ones who supported the government plans and the ones who didn’t.

We talked about the strike many times. Gerardo started using Leninist arguments to defend the workers’ rights. Alex wasn’t that mentally quick, but he said something we all agreed with: that without the sugarcane company the town would become a ghost town and the only way for workers to get what they wanted was through protest and rebellion. It became apparent that in my friends’ houses their brothers and sisters were talking about the same. Luis kept silent while trying to figure out how to kill the Queen with two pawns and one knight. It was too risky. I was there with my friends sharing games and learning about social problems in our community. We were growing together. However, my mind was far away from there. One of my teachers had talked to me about the city and its greatness, about how old it was and its ups and downs. Great revolutionaries took it over as a trophy.

School ended. One day I told my father I wanted to move to the city to see what it looked like. I kept chewing, for some time, over my plans of moving there without telling anybody. I dreamed about its tall buildings, the ruins over which the city was built, its large lines of factories, the big market in Tlatelolco. My father didn’t disapprove of my idea. He told me “You have to move from here to learn about life.” I worked for a while in the town’s bookstore and when I had saved enough money to buy my ticket, I went to see my friends to say goodbye. One by one. They couldn’t believe that I was leaving. I tried to explain that it wasn’t that I didn’t want to share my plans with them; it was just something I wasn’t sure about. That was the last time I saw them. I wonder where they are and how they are doing. This short story is dedicated to them.
A hundred and fifty kilometers southwest of Kiev I followed my great-uncle Kolya down the street, leaving my uncle and grandmother to wait for us in the car. Kolya wrapped a stout arm around my shoulders and shook me, a smile breaking through his tired, accusing expression.

“Do you know about the city of Berdychiv?” he asked in Russian, with a Ukrainian twang that I was still getting used to.

I shook my head, only guessing that we were walking on the city's streets, turning a corner and entering one of its bars. Kolya approached a bartender and asked her, in his softly ironic tone, whether she could sell us Berdychivsky beer. She nodded and glanced at me as she filled two cups. We sat at a small table nearby the three Ukrainian men whose cigarettes bounced on their lips as they talked and laughed; old men in flannel and their endless stream of jokes...

This was August of 2009, during the ten days I spent visiting my mother's relatives in Ukraine. After immigrating to New York in 1995, my parents and I had only revisited Kiev briefly in 2002. Another seven years later and I was back to see the family that was so unfamiliar, the relatives to whom I felt so unrelated, in the distant country of my birth.

“Don’t drink it if you don’t like it,” Kolya said, setting his empty cup on the table.

But I did like it, so I gulped down the rest of my beer. On our way out Kolya asked the bartender for a bottle to take with us, and while she held an empty lemonade bottle to the tap, she stared at me again. I turned away and noticed that a man standing near me at the bar was eyeing me as well - not menacingly, at most curiously; but I became uncomfortably aware that I was at least twenty-five years younger than any person in the place, save perhaps the bartender, and that my hair was much longer than any other man’s. Not too many of their shirts were advertising America’s Favorite Ketchup, either.

We were on our way to the selo, the small Ukrainian village where my great-grandmother lived out her whole life. Having been raised there, Kolya visits often, leaving the metropolis of Kiev with his wife and son almost every other weekend to spend some quality time in his natal countryside. For the past six years, they have been building on the land, renovating and adding to my great-grandmother’s original house. The last time I had seen it I was three years old, only weeks before I would set foot in America. Returning as a seventeen-year-old, I sat in the backseat of Kolya’s car digging through the tough soil of memories, half of which had been implanted retroactively over the years, and the rest distorted by time.

Kolya leaned over from his passenger seat and asked me about the roads in New York, whether they are paved nicely and whether the bordering vegetation is as green as on this rural Ukrainian road. He asked if they teach us any Russian history in school. I was grateful for something to respond to, though with my accent I
tripped over the word “revolution” and fell back into my seat to stare out of the window.

We passed field after pasture; at some point I looked out the window on the side where my grandma was sitting and I saw a cow standing atop a small hill, backlit divinely by the setting sun. A vaguely familiar tingle rose in me, a memory of a memory: looking at the sun peeking out from above the rooftops on my block, looking for some unnamed, sunbathed home.

Before long we were teetering left and right as the car crawled up the dirt road to the selo. An overexcited black farm dog came running toward us, ending up behind the car and following after us barking. We pulled into a small yard and I got out, noticing the blue and yellow flag waving atop a long metal pipe.

“Who is this boy?” My great-aunt Masha kissed me twice on each cheek.

Bemused, I thought it was a pretty valid question. She then said something in Ukrainian and I must’ve looked confused because she repeated in Russian.

“Oh, yes, everything’s good,” I replied. The dog ran up to me and began to growl.

“Dik,” Masha addressed him, “he’s yours. Your own.” She seemed to have convinced him that I was familiar; he stopped growling and let me pet his head.

I asked where the toilet was and Masha pointed to a tall box at the edge of a small field.

“And you can wash your hands here.” On the flagpole hung a deep metal bowl with a push-in spout, and a plastic bucket beneath it to catch the revenue. I knew I looked clumsy getting used to these accommodations.

“How far we dragged you from New York...” my grandma laughed.

I woke up at eight the next morning because of the flies that insisted on using my face as a landing strip. We ate a breakfast of mashed potatoes and chicken and soon after I went back to sleep. This time I awoke to the sounds of hammers and axes. The men were building a make-shift hay shed out of long unprocessed planks: scraping off the bark and nailing the planks to vertical wooden beams. Observing them, I thought about how strange it was that I felt so unfamiliar amongst people who are, objectively, my family. The group of men consisted of Kolya, his son, his stepson, his stepson’s father-in-law, and a neighbor from the selo, all brought together to build a shed whose construction wouldn’t benefit most of them. Just like the planks with which the men built, their familial ties were raw, pure, and undeniable; they were enough to hold things together.

I wanted to help but they insisted that I relax, so I climbed up a ladder to the attic and watched as Kolya built a shed on the land that his mother, my great-grandmother, once called home. Masha was squatting in the distance, digging up potatoes as the sun slowly made its way toward the horizon. It was the same sun that I can see through my windows in Brooklyn.

Fourteen years ago, my grandma would
recall, I ran around these fields and squeezed in between the men sitting on the bench and grinned. Now I felt like a stranger, but they wouldn’t let me forget that I was theirs.
This September 9th would have been my grandfather’s eighty-fourth birthday. He passed away on July 8, 2010. I am dedicating this project to his memory and to his strength of endurance. Since I was old enough to remember, my grandfather would share with me many stories of his childhood and his experiences of the horrors of the Holocaust. He lived each day as if it was his last, many times commenting on how everyday of life is a gift.

My grandfather Shalom Hacker, who was one of six children, was born in Cracow, Poland on September 9, 1926. His family ran a successful business of carpet weaving in the back of their home. He lived a normal daily life with his family and friends until September 1939 when the Germans invaded Poland. From here on will begin the horrific details of the next five to six years of his life that my grandfather had to endure as a mere child trying to survive the war.

My grandfather’s nightmares began when his city was surrounded and turned into a ghetto by the German Nazis. His father and brother were immediately imprisoned within weeks of the occupation. His mother and two sisters remained in their homes with strict rules from the Germans, on how to live each moment of their lives. I remember vividly the story that my grandfather told me of how his father and brother were imprisoned shortly after the occupation. My grandfather would make sure everyday that he would be able to visit them in prison carrying with him a thermos of soup and a letter that he wrote, which was stuffed in a false bottom compartment. He would put his life in an even greater danger than it already was, out of the respect and love that he had for his father and older brother.

The daily visits went on for weeks until one day his father and brother were gone. That was the last time he ever saw or heard of them his whole life; he never found out what had happened to them. One day during the occupation of the ghettos my grandfather and his family experienced the tragic loss of another brother, Moshe. In the ghetto everyone was given a job to do and it was Moshe’s job to work on the train tracks. Doing his job, he, a mere ten-year-old, was run over by the trains. Soon after began the deportation of the community by the train that was bound to the concentration camps. Bound to Auschwitz.

My grandfather’s mother and two sisters were placed on one of the first trains deporting Jews. Not understanding at that time that the final destination was to be Auschwitz, my grandfather ran all the way back to his house to get his mother and sisters blankets and pillows to keep them warm during their ride. He pushed his way back through the crowd of weak and starving people until he met up with his mother and sister. He gave them the pillows and blankets, wished them a safe trip and then gave his mother and sisters one last hug and kiss, not knowing that was to be the last one he would ever give them. When he wanted to turn back to the center of town, he was stopped.
by a Gestapo who thought that he was on the list of people to board the trains; luckily he was quick on his feet and ran like he never ran before all the way until he got home. For the first time since the occupation my grandfather found himself completely alone without his family and friends. This was only to be the beginning of one horrific nightmare.

Life crawled by painfully and dreadfully. He continued working and keeping busy with all the hard work demanded of him by the Nazis, until the next deportation train arrived into town. This time he was on the list to board the train. Not knowing where he was headed to, he was pushed amongst thousands of people onto an old rickety cattle car. He would tell me how he remembered how packed it was; you weren’t able to move an inch right or left. It suffocated you, causing many people to die or leap to their deaths out of the windows of the cattle car. Though he was barely alive, he managed to survive the trip, the train finally stopped in the labor camp Plaszów.

After disembarking he was immediately assigned a job, as a telephone pole repairman, and a bunker where he could sleep. Like thousands of other children, he was squashed into a bed that he had to share with three other children. His next destination after Plaszów was one of many concentration camps, Dachau being the first. He never stayed more than six months at a time in any individual camp. After many days of hard work, he was once again forced to board another cattle car. This time the destination was Buchenwald.

He told me many stories of his stay in Buchenwald. To me, it sounded as if Buchenwald was one of the more vile imprisonments. On one of the first weeks that he was there, while walking from his bunker to one of the fields, my grandfather was stopped by a Gestapo soldier who pulled out a gun and aimed it directly at his head. My grandfather was sure that those were his last moments on earth. A split second before the Nazi was about to pull the trigger, he stopped, put the gun down and said, “It is my first day on the job and I don’t think I want to start it off with killing”. This was the way of the Gestapo soldiers: they would commit psychological torture on their Jewish prisoners. This was not the only time my grandfather survived a near death experience. Once, my grandfather bent down to tie his shoe, just as a Nazi shot at him. The bullet went right over him killing the little boy in front of him.

After a few months he was once again on a train bound for what was to be his final destination in the war: the extermination camp of Mauthausen. This was his shortest stay but his most gruesome one. His job in this camp consisted of throwing the murdered Jews into big pits of human skeletons. He was also one of the many that had to actually carry the live to their death by entrance into the burning furnaces.

The war went on for a few more months until the miraculous invasion of the United States Army into the camps of Mauthausen. Mauthausen was one of the first camps that the American soldiers liberated, shocked from the horrors they found. Although I have heard of all the camps my grandfather has told me about, Mauthausen is the only one of which I have actually seen proof. He showed me his liberation documents stating the
camp of Mauthausen, with his name, ID number, fingerprints, and the year 1945.

Yes, he was liberated but now began the difficult task of rebuilding his life from ashes. Finding himself to be the lone survivor of his entire family, he was set up in a deportation camp. It was in the DP camps that thousands of Jews were still dying from the after-effects of the concentration camps. Many died from starvation and illness, and some even died from over eating. My grandfather had told me that by not overeating he slowly started to rebuild his system back up to functioning as best as he could manage.

In my eyes there is no other way to describe him but a true survivor. After a short while in the DP camp he was one of the lucky teenagers who was rescued by a special and dedicated rabbi who took these boys under his wing and retrained them in the ways of their religion. After a short while in this school he made his first trip to Cuba to try to find a job so he would be able to support himself. He found himself a job where he worked in a kosher kitchen as an assistant to the head rabbi. This was one of the first steps he took in the rebuilding of his life.

After the war where the survivors found themselves alone, not knowing the whereabouts of their family members or even if they were alive, a project was developed to help locate and unify them with their family members and friends. What started as a simple project generated into countless lists and lists of people who had survived the war. It was through this project that a second cousin of my grandfather located him while he was in Cuba. This cousin reunited him with his older brother who had survived the war as well. My grandfather's brother had made his way to the United States after the war. The fact that he lived in America enabled him to sponsor my grandfather to come to the USA and eventually achieve complete citizenship.

After a short trip to Israel my grandfather met my grandmother, fell in love and got married. Shortly after the marriage he took his wife and brought her over to America. This was where they began to rebuild their home and family. Their future consisted of two children and a family of many grandchildren. Sixty-five years after his liberation from Mauthausen, sixty-five years after rebuilding his life from ashes, my grandfather, blessed memory, passed away on July 8, 2010.

I didn’t get to personally interview my grandfather for this project but my information was derived from the many personal conversations I had with him during my visits to his home. A few weeks after his passing my family found among his belongings, papers in his handwriting, documenting in great detail all that he went through. I had the honor of reading these papers, giving me the information to all my unanswered questions. I felt like I was sitting in front of him and doing this interview one on one. Long live his memories. May we never forget the persecution of the six million Jews and all the others who endured the Holocaust.
The third-floor hallway looked like a typical New York City traffic jam: the high-school freshmen were trying to push their way through the sea of upperclassmen. The teachers, like motorcycles, were swerving through the crowd either to get to class or to go on their lunch break. Ying was one of those people on the third floor. Her slender figure and polite nature did not help her at all; however she informed me that she was never jealous of “tall” girls. Ying believes that she is at the right height for a girl, and that personality is what really matters. Wearing long, black hair that falls just below her shoulder, she pushed her way through the swarm of people. Ying, and the two friends that were walking with her, finally escaped the crowd and were now on the brighter and more peaceful second floor.

The three girls were heading to their next class: United States Government and Politics. The girl on Ying’s right was looking suspicious, as she was texting a very long message to her boyfriend from another school. The girl on Ying’s left was talking to Ying about last night’s season finale of American Idol. As the young ladies were walking to class, about ten different people said hello to Ying, and that made her feel special. Ying, with her rosy red cheeks and blissful smile, walked the halls without a trouble in the world. The three girls then finally reached their destination and sat down in their favorite seats, in the middle of the classroom.

Looking back to her time in elementary school, Ying was not as happy as she was now. Ying was born in China, in the town of Fujian. She came to the United States with her parents at the age of eight. Once she set foot in New York, she settled in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and was straight-away placed into the second grade. At her age, the children in her class were freely speaking, and improving on reading in English; so Ying had to be placed in an ESL class so she could catch up. Learning the English language was hard for her, and the atmosphere of the classroom did not make it any better. The kids in her ESL class had already been in it for at least a year, and the teacher did not spend extra time with Ying so she could get on track. What made it worse was that she had the ESL class only three times a week, lasting one period each time. Now Ying, who barely knew ten words in English, had to be in her regular class for the rest of her time in school, unable to learn properly.

Going to class was becoming harder for Ying everyday; she felt out of place. She felt secluded from the kids who were reading books like Frog and Toad and sharing crackers-and-cheese snacks with each other. She felt trapped in a room beautifully decorated with drawings of exotic animals and an enormous poster consisting of gold stars under each student’s name. What shocked me most about Ying’s story was that she told me that all her elementary-school teachers lost faith in her. Her teachers saw that she was not interacting with other students nor participating in class discussions. As she told me this, sadness had fallen
on her usually smiling face. Ying’s parents were incapable of helping her as well because they too were learning the English language steadily, and with even more difficulty. Ying then graduated elementary school and knew that if these actions persisted, she would never make friends nor make her parents proud by doing well in school.

Once Ying entered the sixth grade, she vowed to take her ESL class more seriously and constantly press the teacher for more help. It turned out that her ESL teacher was exactly what she needed: he never gave up on Ying and saw the potential in her to learn. He even took time out of his lunch to help Ying with her homework and revise her term papers. As time went on, Ying was not afraid to socialize with her fellow classmates.

With this newfound confidence, Ying excelled in school, and slowly but surely, her dream of speaking fluent English was becoming a reality. Ying’s time in junior high school seemed to end swiftly for her, but it ended with her finally speaking the language she yearned to perfect for a very long time.

Sitting in her U.S. Government class, Ying read the Bill of Rights and participated in the class discussion pertaining to the importance of it in the Constitution. While her friends were looking out the window at the beautiful spring sky, Ying was captivated by her teacher’s opinion of the Bill of Rights. By looking at how comfortable Ying was in this class, a person would have never thought that she had difficulty learning the English language.
Who knows how it feels like to live in the middle of an endless frozen tundra? I do. Before I moved to New York, I lived in a small Russian town all the way up north where the tallest building was five stories high. All the entertainment there was just a couple of restaurants, a few night clubs, one movie theater, and a national museum. I never attended any kind of big show or concert nor had I visited an exhibition. There was nothing to do during the summer as well, because there was no summer at all. The difference between an incredibly long winter and an unbelievably short summer was just a miserly few degrees. I didn't know what it was like to lay on the beach and get a suntan, and I could only dream about swimming in the ocean. I loved my native town, but I also had a dream to travel across the ocean and see what “Big City Life” looks like. This happened to be possible when I came to America. In New York I met a lot of interesting people, experienced living a different lifestyle and finally enjoyed a real summer. That lasting impression from New York City life broadened my imagination and totally changed my life.

As we were getting closer to the American shoreline, I could see more than just the ocean's surface, which I got bored with for the last six hours of my flight. Everything was so new and interesting to me that I didn't feel tired at all. When we got closer to our destination, it started getting dark outside. But there were thousands of streetlights that made it possible to distinguish outlines and shapes of the whole city in detail. What struck me the most was a huge straight table that covered the entire city. Streets and avenues crossed each other and made the city look perfect and simple at the same time. I doubt whether you could find one city in Russia that is built the same way. Soon, I noticed some incredibly bright light shining on the small piece of land, and a narrow ring of darkness surrounding this mysterious light. I could not understand the nature of that phenomenon. Eventually, I realized that it was Manhattan, and the dark ring around it was the Hudson River. I couldn't take my eyes of this mesmerizing view. I stayed staring out of the window until I couldn't see the city any more. Then, I began to talk with my friend Tanya about everything I had just seen. I couldn't stop telling her about the impression that was left on me until we landed. It was Tanya's second time flying to America, and nothing surprised her anymore. She even got tired of my blabbering by the end of the trip.

When we got outside, it seemed to me that I shifted into a new reality. Even the trip from the airport was an experience on its own. The highway was less than half a mile away from the ocean, but it was the closest I have ever been to it. The ocean looked so peaceful, as if it stood still for hours. I was so tempted to ask the driver to get off the highway, so I could at least get my feet wet. The road itself seemed to be like an ocean. It was an endless stream of cars of different makes and
models, shapes and colors. I had never seen so many cars in my entire life. When we finally reached home, I realized that I was exhausted. The only thing that I wanted to do more than take a shower was to go to bed. As soon as my head touched the pillow, I fell into a deep sleep.

Next morning, Tanya and I ate quickly, took a subway map, and went outside. As soon as we got to Manhattan, we found the very beginning of Broadway, and started to walk up towards Midtown. I saw New York exactly the same way I imagined it a long time before I came here. All those images from American movies about New York suddenly came up in my memory, and it seemed to me, for a moment, that I was in one of those movies. Even though the streets were crowded with people and the roads were flooded with cars, I was looking up all the time. I was so astonished by seeing the giant skyscrapers and so hopeless in my effort to count their countless floors. People of all races and various nationalities were walking and mingling together. It was so striking to see different faces and hear people speaking languages other than Russian. There was a cacophony of English, Spanish, Chinese and many other languages. The more time we spent in the city, the more comfortable I was getting with the new surroundings. At some point I even felt as if I had been living in New York for many years. When we checked out almost all the tourist spots, our route was getting closer and closer to a culminating point. Since it began to get dark, we finally were able to enjoy the view of the last but definitely not the least spot in Manhattan. That was the place I only saw in movies and always wanted to visit. Times Square is the place where the biggest concentration of tourists in New York City can be found, the place where at night it is as light as at day time, the place they call “the heart of the city.”

Time froze as soon as I stood right in the middle of the square. I was looking up above and turning all the way around. At that moment, my dream was so close to me that I could touch it if I wanted. The neon light was blinding my eyes, and the motor noise stuck in my ears. I had never seen that many people in one place at the same time. Anywhere I looked there were thousands of people. They were walking on the streets, passing by in the cars and flashing from commercials. Sometime later, there was not even one thing that we didn't take a picture of. It was long past midnight, and we were very tired yet so happy.

A couple of weeks before I had to fly back to Russia, I stumbled upon the pictures Tanya and I took that day. I saw my dream, my Big City on those pictures again. It was so close and so far away from me at the same time. That moment I realized that I would never let my reality become a dream again and let New York City life slip away from me. I did not know what was waiting for me over here in the US, and how I would stay here, but I already knew that this city would be my new home.
The Other Side

Darwin A. Maria Lara

There I was, lying on the floor, tears falling in my old and wasted Levi’s, alone in the deepest corner of the lonely apartment in South Second Street. My only companion was darkness, but even darkness itself was not dark enough to hide my torment and frustration. They were both too deep in my heart. They had become a new part of my body, my new eyes and sense of judgment. I can’t blame anyone for this tragedy. However, I can blame society for making me act and think the way they wanted me to act and think. If it weren’t for society, I would have been able to see everything I was leaving behind, my beloved country and family, my friends and beliefs, but most importantly, myself.

Everything started when my mother came from the U.S., consulate in the Dominican Republic with the news that we were given permanent residence in the U.S. I jumped for joy and asked her if this was some kind of joke. With a smile as big as Niagara Falls and a face as red as Mars, she shook her head. That same day, I called all of my friends to tell them the “good” news. Just like me, they could not believe it. They started talking about how awesome it would be to take the train in New York City and just look out the window and see all the beautiful views that this city had in store for me, and how fantastic it would be when I would make snowmen with all the kids in my street. Just the thought of it had me excited.

The big day arrived and I was awake and dressed two hours before it was time to leave the house. My father, mother, uncle, and I left home at 7 am to go to the airport. When we arrived at the airport, we discovered that our flight had been delayed for almost four hours. After we waited for what seemed to be an entire day, my mom, uncle, and I said goodbye to my dad. I started feeling a little melancholy, but at the same time I was excited because I was about to see a completely new and mysterious world. After my dad left, the three of us proceeded to the immigration line where they would check our papers. After a long line, we found out that I was not allowed to leave Dominican Republic without a special permission from my father because this was my first time leaving the country. My dad came back again, but we had already missed the flight. Finally, we were done with all these complications. We could finally enjoy ourselves in “beautiful” New York City, or so I thought.

When we arrived to my grandparent’s apartment, it turned out to only be a small studio, and there were already two more uncles living there, along with my grandparents. It was like a small lab and we were the rats. One of my uncles slept in the kitchen, another one in the living room, and the other in a small hall that connected the main entrance and the living room. My grandfather slept on the couch, while my mother, my grandmother, and I slept in the bedroom. This was my new “fantastic” life. This was my New York. Two days after my arrival, there was one of the biggest snowstorms I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t see
anyone in the streets besides the truck that cleans the snow from it. Three days had passed since the last time I stepped into the huge streets of New York. I asked my grandmother if I could go outside but she replied to me with a sudden “No.” She said that the police might take me because I was supposed to be at school. For almost three months I had to stay in the apartment with nobody to play with or talk to. My mother started working in a factory, and every time she would come home from work, she would start crying. I could feel the knives cutting me from my esophagus all the way to my large intestine. Rage, sadness, angry, pity, irritation and sorrow: I felt all of these feelings at once. I couldn’t take it anymore; I wanted to scream but there was no sound; I wanted to cry but I had no tears; I wanted to drown but I still had breath; I wanted to die but I was still alive. Every night for the next two weeks I would go to the only corner in the apartment that was not crowded and cry alone. My wasted Levi’s got more wasted for all the tears it absorbed. Every night the walls would stare at me, wanting to talk but unable to do so.

Sometimes we make assumptions about places because of what we see in TV or what we hear from other people. In order to really know something, you have to live it and see it with your own eyes. And even though everybody has different experiences, mine was nothing like what I was told it would be. The funny part is that until this day, I still haven’t made a snowman.  


My high school organizes a trip once a year for students who want to go to Israel and do community service work. After two years I was allowed to take part in the trip and my excitement was so high that I couldn’t pack my bags fast enough. It took over most conversations between my friends and I. We planned everything from the sleeping arrangements to who was bringing the shampoo. With only a few weeks until we took off, my friends started to cancel their tickets due to the worsening war in Israel. Naturally, I started to get nervous because I couldn’t just drop out a few weeks before I was about to experience one of the most amazing journeys of my life. When my parents broke the news to me I was devastated, even though a part of me knew this was coming, and I began a war in my own home. I would argue and beg my parents to change their minds. I ignored them when they told me it was for my own safety and that I didn’t understand. In fact, I ignored them whenever they spoke. This was a trip of a lifetime, and I was not going to wait a year, but they were firm. I saw a friend who was getting ready to go on the day I should have been leaving. When she gave me a sympathetic smile, it was as if I had been punched in the gut.

By the time senior year rolled around my name was already on the sign up list. I went through all the preparations like the last time, but it just wasn’t the same. I wouldn’t let myself get too excited for fear it would be taken away from me once more. It wasn’t the only topic of conversation this time; the room arrangements weren’t as thought out, and it didn’t matter who brought the shampoo.

I didn’t fully realize what I was about to experience over the next ten days when we landed in Israel. We helped out at soup kitchens and gave out gifts to autistic children in schools. I would talk and play with the kids and make them smile. We took tons of pictures and later, on the bus, we would say how humbling it was. I agreed with everyone and nodded my head until I got dizzy, but inside I knew I didn’t feel as strongly as everyone else. I wondered why I wasn’t as overwhelmed as my friends. I expected my mind to be reeling with shock.

I was really happy when we went to hand out toys to children in hospitals. I knew that after everything they were going through, a simple smile would make them happy. When I was asked to grab a handful of toys to give out in the cancer ward I didn’t hesitate. I thought if anyone needed cheering up, it was young children suffering from cancer. There was a noticeable hush all over the floor when we opened the doors and as we walked tentatively further into the hall, we saw a few tiny cribs filled with sleeping newborn babies. Standing over one was a sobbing mother. You think you know what it looks like to see someone crying over a loved one because you’ve read about it or seen actors in movies, but it is nothing you can prepare for. We were watching her heart break and all we could offer her was a rattle. At that moment I
didn't just come down off my high horse—I fell face forward onto the ground. In my mind we were so important and needed. I wanted to turn around and pretend we didn't see her. I wanted to go on giving out toys to all the other children. When one of the chaperons picked out a simple toy and started walking towards the woman all I could do was stare in horror. The mother clearly wanted to be alone. To my surprise, she looked up at the approaching American woman and smiled. She accepted the gift and thanked us all many times, with tears still streaming out of her eyes.

I had previously said we were making a difference in these peoples lives, but when I first saw that mother crying I thought we were intruding. I was ashamed to be witnessing her grief. I thought that we were just making her situation worse. I was wrong; she needed us more than anyone else in that hospital. To her the gift wasn't just a rattle, it was hope. She had something to hold on for.

When I got home from my trip I finally realized that it didn't matter what year I went. It only mattered that I went, and how much I gained out of it. I like to think that mother and her baby are in their own home laughing together playing with a simple toy, which they aren't really sure where they got, but they still know that it means more than what it looks like. I better understand what my parents meant when they told me I had to wait a year because they were afraid. They weren't afraid for me—they were afraid of losing me. S
The aphorisms, “a deaf ear is followed by death and an ear that listens is followed by blessing,” “a new broom sweeps clean,” “a rolling stone gathers no moss,” “as you sow, so shall you reap,” and “a faint heart never won a fair lady” have all contributed to my transformation as an individual.

Africa is a culturally vibrant continent. I was raised in a small village with my grandmother and other family members. Life there was challenging because there were no teaching facilities to help improve or upgrade our low educational standards. Employment, too, was not adequate in the community and many people had it tough attempting to attain a better standard of living.

I agree with the proverb “a deaf ear is followed by death and an ear that listens is followed by blessing” because when I was younger, my uncle, who was a medical doctor, summoned we children in a group, and we listened to him talk about health issues he had experienced in the hospital. He normally took me to the hospital during my leisure time to witness how the patients were cared for. On one particular visit, I recall a doctor called Blankson using me as an example to teach his students how to operate on a human being’s body. The doctor illustrated my body parts in front of the class and explained certain functions to the students. I was not afraid of his demonstration because I was also learning from his explanation. His demonstration sparked my enthusiasm for becoming a gynecologist, especially when he illustrated on the reproductive system of the male body parts in comparison with a female reproductive system. He concluded with the problems associated with both systems, acknowledging that women had a lot of reproductive health problems and disorders. This fact encouraged me to aspire to become a highly specialized gynecologist in the future.

This experience in the medical field motivated me to study hard with the aim of obtaining a scholarship for medical school. As time went on, I was granted a scholarship from my high school to a school in the main city of Ghana, called Accra. In the city, the students were familiar with the equipment in the science laboratory, but in my case, it was a different story. I found it difficult to recognize some of the equipment because of the inadequate education I received from my village. However, socializing with other students who were much more experienced than me, and who had adequate knowledge of the equipment helped me to achieve a smooth transition. I was also very shy in class, but as time progressed, I became more comfortable.

“As a new broom sweeps clean” suggests my smooth transformation as I moved ahead in college. Since my interest was to specialize in gynecology, I focused on the subject of biology. During my first year, I was elected as class representative with positive and tremendous responsibilities. The criteria for a student to be elected as a representative in class were based on intelligence, obedience, gentleness, and honesty. I
am not saying this to blow my own trumpet, but the professor and other classmates noticed potential in me and selected me to stand for the election as a class representative. I therefore thought about it, and sought family counseling. The family agreed on it. I was voted first out of five other students in my class and I later won with the majority vote (87.3 percentage of the total class). The position and tasks were challenging, but with determination I managed to succeed.

During my second year in college, I was granted a working holiday visa from my department to travel to England to experience the different cultures and to explore other educational opportunities. There, I met many influential people and gained valuable lessons from my experience. I went to Hull University to visit the medical school so I could apply the knowledge that I would collect in England to hospitals in Africa. Most of the professors warmly received me and took me through the school, advising me of the vast opportunities that could be explored in this field. I finally traveled back to Africa and continued my studies there.

In my final year of college, both “a rolling stone gathers no moss” and “what you sow, so you shall reap” served as guides of what was to come. I was browsing the Internet and I decided to check on the United States of America embassy website to search for information about how to apply for a visa. After seeing that there was a visa lottery, I looked through the information and I decided to give it a try. I applied and fortunately, a year later, I won. The U.S embassy sent to me a letter that contained a schedule of my appointment date for an interview. This process continued until I was granted the visa to come to America. With joy in my heart, I made it known to my parents and they said, “You have indeed been ordained to become a medical doctor.” Three months later, I graduated from college with my first degree in biology as an “A” student.

I have learned that that no matter who you are, and regardless of your position, you have to listen to advice in order to attain goals. I listened to my uncle who encouraged me that with hard work and determination I could be transformed into the person I wanted to be. Perhaps “a faint heart never won a fair lady” is the most important quote to me, since to succeed in life one must first have the courage to pursue what he wants. I was never discouraged when I went to study in the city due to the fact that I lacked some skills, but instead I was always motivated and studied hard to get ahead to where I wanted to be. All these great quotes inspired me to transform my life.
PART FOUR: RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS: RESPONSES TO HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A PROBLEM?

Beatrice Baraev • Gianluca Randazzo • Krystal Burrows
Mariaisabel Zweig • Gregory Witkin • Nigora Raufova
Clarissa Marie Ligon • Kiran Sury • Brian Ghezelaiagh
Being lost in a cultural limbo is a phenomenon that most individuals experience at one point in their lives. People tend to get confused when put in situations where they are faced with multiple conflicts of interest, and until they figure out who they really are and define their goals and priorities, it's very likely for them to feel lost. Lina, from the book How Does it Feel to be a Problem by Moustafa Bayoumi, exemplifies this.

Lina has a genuinely difficult time finding herself in her culture, especially early in her teenage years, when she struggles to be her own person despite her family’s cultural and religious expectations of her. She doesn’t really know who she wants to be yet; therefore, she constantly changes her mind about major issues, like which group of friends to have, and how religious she wants to be. Teenage Lina is a rebellious and strong-willed character who does what she wants, not what others want her to do. She dresses differently than her parents, smokes, and dates guys who aren’t Muslim, which are all intensely prohibited by her conservative parents. As a high-school student, Lina starts lying to her parents about smoking cigarettes, wearing makeup, and skipping school to be with Daniel, her non-Muslim boyfriend. Her parents see her as rebellious, foolish, and defiant, and they don’t let her live her own life or make her own choices as an independent woman. They constantly assume that they know what is best for her. Case closed.

While Lina is lost in a cultural limbo with her family, I’m lost in a political limbo with mine. My family, friends, and community are all right-wing conservatives whose favorite television network is Fox News, and favorite all-time organization is the Tea Party Patriots. I was exposed to this all my life, and thus developed an interest in politics from very early on. At first, I openly agreed with all of my parents’ opinions, and felt ecstatic to just be allowed to participate in their discussions. Unfortunately for my parents, that didn’t last very long. Like Lina, I started growing as an individual, and my thoughts and opinions drastically changed. No longer did I blindly agree with every word Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity preached so passionately. I started to question. And in doing so, I created my very own political ideology, one that is much more moderate than that of my parents, focusing on open mindedness and equality, rather than elitist prosperity views. As in Lina’s story, my parents refused to accept my decision to be different and focused instead on trying to change the person I had become at every possible opportunity.

This was especially true two years ago, during the presidential race between Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain. While my parents were busy quoting Sarah Palin’s speeches, I was slowly being captivated by Obama’s motivational words of change and unity. Needless to say, this didn't sit well with my family, and, frustrated, they stopped trying to get me to
change my views with rational discussions of policy, and instead resorted to trying to scare me by using conspiracy theory after conspiracy theory. I didn’t understand why they couldn’t just let me be me, and why they found it an imperative to change me into being exactly like them.

Eleven-thirty p.m. on November 4, 2008 was the moment of truth. My family and I were sitting together in the living room, eagerly watching as each state revealed its electoral college votes, bringing us closer and closer to finding out who our forty-forth president would be. (Well, we weren't literally sitting together, being that my mother, father, and siblings sat side-by-side on one couch, while I sat by myself on the other.) At the beginning of the night, we were all optimistic and convinced that the nominee of our choice would certainly get elected. At the end of the night, I was the only one left smiling. After all of those months of feeling lost in a political limbo with my family, I finally learned the most important lesson of all. Here I was, feeling alone and isolated, when in reality, millions of Americans shared my political views, and helped elect my president. Sure, maybe in my tiny community, I was the outcast. But in the grand scheme of things, I was far from alone.

While Lina’s struggle for freedom to live her own life may seem different than my struggle to be accepted because of my political ideology, many factors about her personality led me to conclude that we have certain similarities. First of all, we are both stubborn and determined to make our own choices, no matter what consequences that may bring about. Second, we are both searchers of truth, and we had a rough time finding it because of our backgrounds. Last but not least, we both learned the hard way to accept the obstacles on the way, grow from them, and move on.
Years ago, back when I resided in the humble little town of Huntington Beach, California, I worked at a small French coffee and sandwich shop made famous by its delectable baguettes. It was an incredibly lucrative business nestled in the bustling hills of the upper class, Newport Beach. The owner was a short, wrinkled Frenchman with high-octane energy, beady little eyes, and one very loud voice. Confrontation was the name of his game, and he loved to argue. Even the bravest soul would quiver and faint when faced with this monster, and I was no exception to the rule. I would spend hours in the fridge hiding, for the sole purpose of avoiding idle chit-chat. In Moustafa Bayoumi’s book, How Does it Feel to be a Problem?, the young woman Rasha confronted one of her head jailers in a restaurant, telling him off for all the misdeeds that had befallen her. I felt inclined to participate in a similar confrontation with my aforementioned lunatic boss, one that made me swallow my tongue but gave me the confidence to truly believe in myself. Bayoumi’s tale and my story are both woven with the common thread of standing up for what is right, no matter the fear, no matter the consequences, no matter what everyone deserves to be treated like a human being.

In Bayoumi’s book, Rasha was constantly mistreated by the several jailers and guards that populated the female prison. The counselor at the prison was the absolute representation of the inequality and unfairness in the compound—an unpredictable and rude man who “made her mother cry for no reason.” He would even go as far as blaming the prisoners, saying, “they deserved everything they got.” Such insensitivity and blatant callousness were infuriating in the eyes of the innocent Rasha. To be treated unfairly and in such a rude manner upset me in this specific circumstance as well. My boss had just been informed by a customer, dissatisfied with his meal, that the sandwich he had been eating was all wrong. Now, it was Sunday, crowded, and boy was he in a bad mood. Continuously throughout the day, you could spot him stomping around screaming at anybody he could find in the kitchen. The veins popping out of the side of his neck looked as if they ought to be yelling too. Once informed about the rogue hero with turkey instead of roast beef, he turned his unwavering and flaming attention to the first poor soul making sandwiches... me. The verbal barrage that followed would probably make an ex-con bleed tears. Although comparing an innocent woman in jail to sandwiches may seem ludicrous, I can start to fathom the anger that Rasha must have felt. To be treated unfairly, and without any proof or reason, is something any person must stand up against. If you let the opportunity to right a wrong pass you by, it can be torture.

Rasha takes a deep breath and confronts the harsh man from her past with gusto. She didn’t walk up to him with a gun or clenched fist, but with words of righteous anger. To put it simply: she gave the bastard a good scolding. I too, felt my
anger was righteous. After the verbal mauling, I stood firm and attempted to let it pass. But he kept coming back, adding different phrases and some very interesting curse words to the mix. Still, he had to go a bit further, so he stood next to me, mouth twitching, eyes bulging, and belted out straight at my face in front of all my co-workers, “You can’t make sandwiches for shit!” That was it. That was all I could take. In the way that Rasha summoned her courage to walk up to the counselor, I did the same. I stood a foot taller than him, looking down at his glorified power trip, and told him quite calmly, “It wasn’t me.”

“What did you say?” he asked rhetorically, his ear practically in my mouth. I stood still and repeated myself, “It wasn’t me.” His lid popped off, plopped on, and then popped off for a second time. His screams could be heard from the very back of the restaurant, as if he was performing on Broadway. I wasn’t going to let him boss me around inappropriately anymore, and I wasn’t going to let him think I was a poor cook. So I held up my hand, pausing him mid sentence, and with an extremely loud yet steady voice I said slowly, “I don’t ever fuck up my sandwiches,” I let it sink slowly, “Got it?”

Rasha’s confrontation was purely self-satisfying, which was not only necessary to mental well-being, but also life-changing. After her brief encounter, she felt alleviated of the weight bearing down on her chest. True justice had been served. My situation was different. I wasn’t in the desirable position to walk away smiling to myself, no; I had to stand and wait for the answer. Despite my internal disintegration, I stood firm, my face as straight as an ironing board. My boss looked at me with this profound stare, completely taken aback. To my surprise, he promptly apologized, patted me on the back and said, “You’re so right, what was I thinking.” “Flabbergasted” was the only word appropriate enough for my feelings in that situation. So Rasha and I stood up for what was right, and in the end, both of us walked away smiling ear to ear.
“How does it feel to be a problem?” It was after I read the book and asked myself this question that I appreciated and understood what being a minority in America truly means.

My own experience goes back a few months to a time when I was out of school and working full-time at a company in Harlem. It was early one Monday morning, and my co-worker and I were deciding on what we were having for breakfast from a store in the area. I had never bought from this particular store before, so I asked my co-worker about the menu. “Sandwiches, bacon and eggs, grits...” was her reply, and at “grits” I scrunched my nose and told her that I don’t eat grits because I don’t like it. She gave me in return a dropped jaw and a stare as if I had just said the most incredulous thing in the world. Then she stated matter-of-factly, “But you’re black!”

What does being black and grits have to do with each other? That question bubbled in my head all day. At first I took her statement personally—who was she to decide what I should or should not like to eat? Then I realized that her statement was fed by pure ignorance; her ideology driven by media stereotypes and “social norms” and the seemingly general sentiment of “I won’t care to find out more about others” (or rather, “I don’t care about others”). It upset me, that in this day and age people are still judged on their looks. Mind you though, I don’t only mean their skin color or hair type but even your eyes, the way you dress, the way you speak, the music you listen to or even the books you read can make people put up an instant mental block based on their own preferences/prejudices.

All this said, I can absolutely relate to some of the characters in Moustafa Bayoumi’s novel, although I can’t really tell if my personal experience would fit with the other stories or the author’s own feelings since I feel like I have experienced two sides to a story. On the one hand, I was subjected to the typical media-generated stereotypes that minority-Americans usually and often experience (kind of like Omar’s situation where he had a confrontation with a co-worker over his job at Al Jazeera). On the other hand, my own background gives me the opportunity to be free—in a sense—of all the difficulties and delicacies surrounding racism. I was born in the Caribbean and lived there for 16 years before moving to the US. “Back Home” as I call it (and as is commonly called by many immigrant families) there is not much if any conflict between different communities; Black, White, Asian, Indian, Muslim, Catholic, and Hindu people all live together, eat together, and go to the same schools. Everyone is respectful of each other’s culture, and accepts the variety as their contribution towards creating one unique melting pot of a nation.

So in answer to the question “How does it feel to be a problem?” I say: “I don’t feel that I’m a problem.” At least that is what I would say were I...
still in the Caribbean. But living in America has made me change my way of thinking—if only out of necessity. Media is everything; image is more than everything. And like Moustafa Bayoumi sought to shed some light on the unknown parts of Muslim/Arab-American lives, I wish that people would take the time to find out more about the lives of others rather than rely on stereotypes to facilitate their lazy ignorance. S
Moustafa Bayoumi’s *How Does It Feel To Be A Problem?* Being Young and Arab in America tells of the experiences of seven young Arabs and the struggle of being America’s latest scapegoat. Sami returns to college after serving two tours in Iraq where the enemy he faces is himself. Yasmin goes to war with her high school’s student government whose policies require her to turn her back on her religion. Omar searches in desperation for a job with a résumé marked by two words that arouses suspicion for no plausible reason: Al Jazeera. Lina, a teenage rebel in a capsule of conservative Muslim customs, finds beauty in her religion (and ice cream) after a visit to Iraq. All of these stories strike a different chord with the reader. Rasha’s story in particular changed the way I view the world and the role I can play in it.

Like myself, Rasha is a freshman in college with happy high school memories lingering in her mind. Her parents came to America for a better life as my grandmother came here from Mexico and was taught “the simple values of honesty, compassion and protection of her honor” (17). Rasha and her family’s immigration status were not established. After September 11, 2001, their status was reason enough for Rasha and her family to be awoken by strangers and taken to a detention center for three months as suspected terrorists. That is one of the two things that struck me the most about Rasha’s story: how her life could be that of any other American girl as she falls asleep and then be awoken to accusations of having terrorist connections.

When the view of the Twin Towers from the fourth grade classroom became covered in a cloud of dust, I did not realize how much it would change the way I view the value of life. At church recently, a baby boy was brought to the baptismal fountain. The first thought that entered my mind was not “Oh, he is so cute!” It was “This baby was born after 9/11. He has no idea what happened.” After 9/11, I was never allowed to trick-or-treat on Halloween. Mother could not bear the possibility of her children consuming anthrax apples. Although the change in Rasha’s life was much more drastic, my life changed as well.

One of Rasha’s inspiring qualities is her ability to persevere for social justice after she was denied that very thing. Her release from prison was not followed by years of depression or loss of hope for justice. “Rasha interned with a United Nations-affiliated organization on Middle East peace. She was also nominated by her university to be a delegate scholar at an international conference on diplomacy” (37). Her story reminded me that one cannot be silent if one wants to make a change in the world for the better. For most of my life, my future endeavors were purely in the world of performing on a stage. The only world I was interested in was the world of a play or musical,
one that I could enter and leave whenever I want. Writing has always been a passion of mine, but I never wrote about socio-political issues. A play that I am writing is inspired by the hardships of Arabs after 9/11, especially those who were detained in the wake of the attacks. Theater is a place where people go to be entertained but it is also a forum where the playwright can expose his or her stance on events the audiences are surrounded by once they leave the theater. What is said on the evening news can turn into white noise, as humanity is preoccupied with its own life. But the theater is a place to sit down and focus on what is onstage. Rasha’s story made me realize that I do not want to help people escape the world in a campy bright musical (although those are fun once in awhile) but rather hold a mirror to the world and expose its flaws and what we can do to fix them on stage.

The last time I saw an Arab in a movie was when I watched Harold and Kumar Go To White Castle. The last time I saw an Arab in television was when my family rented the first season of 24. The Arab was a terrorist. The social science section in the Barnes and Nobles by my high school was on of my favorite places to go to after school but not once did I see a book that depicted the issues in the Arab community. Arabs who have been in this country for decades and their children are denied a voice in film, television and literature, even in the evening news. Bayoumi’s writing grants them a voice that is both unique to their history and culture yet as common as the hopes and dreams of a Caucasian teenager. Before this book I never paid much attention to Arab people nor considered the prejudice they face. Before reading the book I believed they never had anything to say about the world and that was why we never heard from them. But now I realize that they are talking. America is just not listening.

I hope that my writing will promote cross-cultural connections and show that a girl who lives in Iraq and a girl who lives in Beverly Hills are different in many ways but are also essentially the same: all human beings long for freedom and happiness. Equality is a different story. Many people who are on top of the social ladder of America want to stay there and will kick anyone who tries to climb up with them. This is what is poisoning the idealistic America our elementary school teachers taught us about.

Rasha’s story and Moustafa Bayoumi’s writing both have truly changed my life. Because of them, I want to write stories. “Stories connect us to each other. In ways that polemics and polls cannot, they can reveal our conflicts within ourselves and our vulnerabilities to each other” (12).
Do Asians, Muslims, Arabs, Jews, the French, and the Irish immigrate to the United States, or do human beings? Are immigrants seen as categories or as humans? For many years, people have travelled from their homelands and their roots—the culture—to seek out new opportunities freely. However, when they are greeted by the Statue of Liberty, not all immigrants are accepted into the melting pot, and therefore are denied the opportunities which come with assimilation. Maybe their halal food, fried rice, and matzo ball soup are accepted but sometimes the immigrants themselves are not. What does a person or family that dreamed all their life to find happiness through the process of immigration do when their experience isn’t welcoming? Do they hang on to their culture or pretend to be something else in order to assimilate into society? We hear a lot about these people but not enough from them—immigrants like me who sometimes pretend to be something they are not.

I am of Russian-Jewish descent and immigrated from Russia to Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, in 1993 when I was one year old. I only wore yamakas and went to synagogues on holidays and grew up the same way most Americans do. I went to a diverse school, a park with parents mingling and hyper children as if they drank Red Bull. I loved going to the super-markets where food was “Americanized” and enjoyed the diversity of my peer group. As childhood passed, everyone started being more observant and noticing differences amongst one another. The Italian boy had darker skin and an accent, the Arab girl wore a hijab over her head, the Asian boy spoke Chinese to his grandmother, and there was I, a Russian immigrant with clothes from Duane Reade. A person can be described by their looks, but a person cannot be accurately defined by them. People started asking the popular question: “What are you?” and I would reply, “I’m Russian.” Of course, after being taught Russian, trying all their mouth-watering food and hearing spiels from family members on the greatness of Russia, what else could a ten-year-old say? Despite this, I always wondered if I should have said I was Jewish or if it would have made a difference at all.

One warm summer day, I went to Shore Road Park to play basketball as I did almost every day with roughly the same group of people. This park is near the Verrazano Bridge with an astounding view of Manhattan, hiding behind small waves and bigger clouds. There are always ice-cream trucks with their tunes and kids running to them from numerous families that relax on the grass and benches. When catching a breather from a game you can see private boats on the water and seagulls watching people as if they were brunch. Basketball courts are different from everyday life; you’re looked as a player and not a person. I enjoyed playing there all the time and had plenty of fun with my friends along with the competition. If not playing basketball then it’s hanging out in the sidelines and “chilling.” The majority of the
people in the park, and neighborhood itself are Arabic but this is never a problem for the others who come to shoot hoops. Arab, religious or not, dark or light, blue eyes or brown, anyone can play basketball just as everyone should be equal.

My friends and I were playing a game when a group of Jews passed by with their religious clothing. They were wearing a suit with black shiny shoes. They wore yamakas and hats, along with religious white strings on their hips. Enjoying the walk and breeze, they were holding prayer books and walking at a slow pace. My friends started laughing at the Jewish people, not realizing that people can laugh at them for their differences as well. Anyone can walk down a street and discriminate against people: “he's gay for wearing a pink shirt; he's talking in gibberish so he's illegal; he has long braids and baggy jeans so he's a convict.” Everyone can discriminate and be discriminated against and this in turn is an endless cycle, one that is not necessary if people learn how to accept and appreciate diversity.

Being with them, I laughed a little and returned to the game. My friends then asked me, “Aren't you Jewish?” and I regretfully answered, “No.” I will never forget this moment. I felt as if I denied my history, the opportunities that millions of people before me fought for, for me to be able to live a life they dreamed of. I had let my ancestors down; I had let the passed baton slip through my fingers. People should never hide their roots and who they are. If they can’t accept themselves then how will they accept others? Pretending to be something else is like pretending you don't exist because a person is defined by their culture and origin. We always played together and the park was like a big family, like our own micro-melting pot, yet I never told them I was Jewish. What would have happened if I didn't laugh, I thought to myself. Would I have been seen as the enemy, as my friends viewed the Jews as? There was an internal battle, one side wanting to fit in with my friends, and the other naturally wanting to support the people similar to me.

This is similar to Sami’s internal battle in How Does It Feel To Be A Problem? by Moustafa Bayoumi. Sami, an Arab Christian, joined the American military and was being sent off to fight against other Arabs: “I have a conflict of interest, I'm Arab and I can't fight against my own people,” he says. His officer responding with, “But they're Muslim, soldier. And you're Christian.” (60). Listening to the officers, Sami decided to go to war and fight against Arab people. Unfortunately, Sami and I both went against our own people. But this in large is a battle that every immigrant, including myself, faces. When people immigrate they have a choice to keep their beliefs and roots or to assimilate into society. It is possible to do both but very hard. Every day, immigrants pretend to be others in order to fit in, going against themselves and therefore their people. However, it is sometimes worth it in the end, since you gain more freedom and acceptance by assimilating into society. Most immigrants come to the United States with their history, hold onto it for a while and when the struggle to “fit in” happens they start to pretend. Soon this pretending turns into change and assimilation, letting go partially or fully of their past and taking on a new identity.
What would have changed if my friends knew I was Jewish from the start? Would we have still played basketball and would they act the same towards me? If they knew from the start then maybe certain assumptions would have been made. Pretending was useful since it made them look at me as a person and not as a race or religion. But is this what “perfect immigration” should look like? If they knew I was Jewish, they would have laughed at me just as they did to the others, in and outside the park. Similarly, in How Does it Feel to be a Problem, Rasha and her family are put in prison because of their Arab identity. However, during her time in prison, she experienced people as people—not as their race or religion. In her experience, people were labeled as inmates, and everybody was looked at in the same way. If only this reasoning was applied to everyday life, people would be looked upon not as categories but as human beings with similar needs. It is important for people to be able to define themselves and not be labeled based on where they come from or what they look like. Before the World Trade Center was attacked, Arabs were seen as equals, but after the event they were given a new identity. Arabs were “re-defined” after the attacks. All of this causes the need for pretending to some degree, but hopefully, one day, it will not be necessary in order to experience belonging. It isn't necessary for me anymore and I still enjoy myself at Shore Road Park.

Years ago, bullets grazed people's skin, people walked in their family’s ash falling from the sky in gas chambers, people dug their own graves after building the Great Wall of China and people weren't allowed in school if they were a certain religion. Today, there are international wars, gas prices continue to skyrocket and street gangs assault. The solutions to the challenges that diversity creates are yet to come, but the problem of discrimination is known and it is time that every person does their duty in order to create a world welcome to everyone. We all have our place between the soil and the peak of Mount Everest. Two different people can share a land, the United States of America, and there is no need for battle.
Ever since my immigration to America, I have desperately wanted to go back to my homeland, Uzbekistan. Located in Central Asia, Uzbekistan was, to me, a place of hundreds of smiling relatives, hot rice and tea, old friends, and a place I originally referred to as “home.” I longed to reconnect with my past and hear the stories of what I was like when I was younger. As years went by, I held tight to my Uzbek dream all the while becoming enticed by the world of Brooklyn. I loved all the convenience of Brooklyn. Despite the absence of family, I grew a love for living here. I felt truly American. I loved school. I loved my friends. I had imagined a future where I would one day attain a prestigious career and live the American dream. Everything seemed as if it were falling right into place.

At the age of twelve, my Uzbek dream came true. My mother, sister, and I would spend an entire summer in Uzbekistan. I had waited for this dream for eight years. But the ideal picture I had in my head was in reality quite the opposite. I experienced the largest culture shock I’ve ever known. Simply walking through the streets, I noticed how different everything was. People were very conservative and had an outlook on life much different than my own. At that moment, everything I wanted was questioned. Where typically girls get married early in Uzbekistan, I wanted to fulfill a career for myself. My smiling relatives wanted me to be a proper Uzbek girl. I however wanted a life for myself rather than to be dependent on someone else. I felt torn. I felt unsure. Never in my life did I have to choose between two cultures. Am I American or am I Uzbek? Is America or is Uzbekistan my home?

I felt very much like Sami in How Does It Feel To Be A Problem? by Moustafa Bayoumi. Sami felt torn, much like I did in Uzbekistan, between two identities. Sami was experiencing an internal war. He told his commanding officers “I’m Arab, and I can’t fight against my own people” (60).” Sami and I asked ourselves the same questions: “Which world do I belong in? Who am I really? What do I choose?” Although he connected more with Hispanic culture in the beginning, Sami could not help but find his Arab roots in the end. Prior to war, Sami did not envision himself feeling linked to his people. He was not aware that he would feel lost in two worlds.

Similarly, I did not think I would have to consider altering my long-held American dream. Despite my culture shock, I did feel at one with my people. I saw people in economic and political turmoil, people who could have been me had I not left the country. Uzbek people are very kind and have great hospitality. I began to grow a strong appreciation for everything I had back home. I even began to wonder which country was really “home.” I felt proud to be born in Uzbekistan. I had learned so much about my Muslim culture (Uzbekistan is 88 percent Muslim), my family history, my parents’ way of life, and my Uzbek
language. I found myself able to hold lengthy conversations with my neighbors.

Likewise, Sami “started to feel proud of his Arabic heritage. He learned more about his history from the interpreters. He could talk in Arabic to these guys and leave the marines in the dark, having something on them” (70).

My vision of how my life would be before I visited Uzbekistan was one of self-importance. Looking back, I am grateful that I had the opportunity to explore the other side of “me.” Much like Sami, I feel like I’ve discovered a new part of myself. Sami and I both feel self-satisfaction for completing that missing element in our lives. I have come to the conclusion that I do someday want to attain the American dream but, after that trip, that dream of mine has a few revisions. Sami is an Arab-American who considers America his home. America is my home, and I am an Uzbek-American.
Most colleges have a program for their incoming students, and Brooklyn College is no different. At Brooklyn College, there is a program for freshman and incoming transfers that help them assimilate to their new environment. Rightly titled the First Year program, it includes a common reading that is interlaced in almost all subjects throughout the first semester. This year’s choice, Moustafa Bayoumi's *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*, has put Brooklyn College under fire in the media.

According to several critical articles, the problem that continues to arise is not the book itself, but the fact that it is mandatory reading for all. For many, this book was a bad choice for its timing, content, and the lack of a contrasting view, but actually this choice is perfect because of those reasons. This has little to do with student’s views of Arab culture and their political standpoints. This book is important for students because there is more than one side to every story. Bayoumi's novel is a good choice because it tells the other side of the story the public gets in the ongoing media blitz surrounding all things Muslim, and allows students to draw their own conclusions from what they’ve learned.

Some believe the book corrupts student’s political views and free will. Critics like Ronald Radosh, from the *New York Post* believe that it is a way for the “college [to] force feed… one point of view” (Radosh, “Misshaping Minds at Brooklyn College”). However Bayoumi’s book is not something written to call attention to an issue. The point of a common reading is to think and discuss. Just as Brooklyn College stated in the New York Daily News article “Alum to cut Brooklyn College out of will over required freshman reading by ‘radical’ prof”, it’s “regrettable... [that] someone can misunderstand the intentions of the Common reader experience and the context of the selection” (Siemaszko).

Part of the awe of college is the image of going somewhere as an adult, to learn new things, and make new friends. That said, being assigned a book like Bayoumi’s, gives college students the chance to voice their opinions as adults on a difficult topic. It allows them to learn about something that they don’t hear about every day. As a freshman who read *How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?*, I can say that I had not known about those post 9/11 stories, stories like Rasha's, who was sentenced, alongside her family, to prison for three months. Nor did I understand the betrayal many Muslims felt after the attacks, like Akram’s fit of rage as he punched a window on the day of the attacks or Sami’s confusion at how “his people” could do something so terrible. According to Bruce Kesler, a Brooklyn College alum, who cut the school out of his will because of this book, Bayoumi is there to “inculcate students with a political viewpoint” (Siemaszko). However, this book's only role in a student’s education is to add more to ponder, not to change views altogether.

Many feel that there must be a contrasting piece of writing alongside this assigned
reading, but that piece of writing does not exist. As Ronald Radosh, from the New York Post puts it, “Freedom of speech exists so that all ideas can be freely presented before the market place, to be aired and challenged. But in this case, the incoming students are being denied that chance—because the college wants to force feed them one point of view” (“Misshaping Minds at Brooklyn College”). However, what critics like Radosh fail to question is what piece of writing would show the contrasting view to this book. Bayoumi’s novel is about the struggles of people. He rarely speaks ill of others, with the exception of law enforcement and then some remarks about the Bush administration. As Bayoumi explains in his preface, he wanted “to tell the stories of seven different Arab Americans from Brooklyn as richly and accurately as [he] could” (6). What would the contrasting view be? A book that talks more about race, deems Muslims as the “enemy” and condones violence towards those who are different? Thankfully, we do not have to dig deep to find that contrasting view. What is a better example than the media itself? With news stories that insinuate negative views about Muslims, especially after 2001, a book that shows something positive is what everyone needs. Radosh wants a contrasting book that challenges “the view that Americans and New Yorkers in particular are completely Islamaphobic” (“Misshaping Minds at Brooklyn College”), but that isn’t what Bayoumi’s book is saying. Bayoumi has written this text to show how “stories connect us to each other” (12). He has written something tangible for everyone to relate to.

The biggest reason why this book was a great choice is that it relates to what is going on today. Even though, according to Dr. Donna Wilson, Brooklyn College’s undergraduate dean, “the book was chosen in January or February, before the intense national debate over the planned Islamic center near Ground Zero” (Gootman, “Brooklyn College Furor Is More Heated Online”), the timing was perfect. As students, my friends and I have enjoyed this book much more because we are able to see what is going on in a new light. Most of the people I have spoken to about this book, have reevaluated the way they react to the current headlines in the news, including the mosque in Lower Manhattan. Even the fact that the Iraq war was touched upon in the book helped me understand what occurred there. My understanding however, was not a sign of being brainwashed, but of a new outlook. I still dislike the idea of women wearing a hijab to hide their bodies. However, I learned that for some, it’s a struggle in itself and they feel proud to overcome the stares they receive. I wouldn’t do it nor would I advocate anyone else to, but I now understand the other side. I was also able to place Muslims in historical context, including the sanctions on Iraq discussed in Lina’s story. How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? showed the things that you don’t normally see on TV, and that makes the book more compelling.

Some say it wasn’t the best idea to choose a book like How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? at a time when it touches so close to home. However, if any progress is to be made, there has to be something that causes controversy. Part of
Brooklyn College’s mission is to have students “become independent and critical thinkers, skilled communicators, culturally and scientifically literate, and oriented to innovation” (Brooklyn College, “Fast Facts”). Books like Bayoumi’s are stepping stones to make students think and become better people. In order to become better individuals, we must learn all we can. We must take in those things we learn, dissect them, and discard what isn’t needed. The rest we should take to help us make a better place for ourselves and others.
My life is never as straightforward as I’d like it to be. It seems that every time it starts to follow a set course, to work according to some plan I’ve sketched out, something happens that puts me on a path I didn’t anticipate. “Omar,” a short story in Moustafa Bayoumi’s How Does It Feel to Be a Problem?, puts the title character in a similar situation. Though Omar’s and my motives were different, we both tried out journalism and neither of us got what we expected—we both took a hit to our pride that changed our plans.

When Omar came back from Chile, he reconnected with his Palestinian roots. He enjoyed his Arab heritage, and as Bayoumi writes, “For Omar, September 11 accelerated a process he’d already begun” (203). That fateful day acted as a catalyst for his conversion, and as a newly resolute member of the Arab community, Omar turned towards representation in journalism to help his people.

When I entered high school I was inundated with offers to join different clubs. One of the most prestigious was the school newspaper, and I was blown away when I heard the applause the top writers were greeted with when they took the stage at the orientation meeting. These were people who wrote and got their pictures in the paper every issue, and I wanted to be like them. I could imagine myself greeting a new class of freshmen with students knowing who I was even if I didn’t know them. I turned towards journalism for a much more selfish reason than Omar—to represent myself.

The difference between Omar and me is already obvious. We both wanted to increase representation, but his motive was civic-minded while mine was merely personal.

However, good intentions were not enough for Omar to get what he wanted. He made a promising start as an intern with Al Jazeera. He learned the basics of journalism and met influential people. As a journalist from an internationally known network, Omar should have had easier, rather than a harder time finding a job. In Omar’s words, Bayoumi writes that he was “Always told that working at Al Jazeera would be a positive thing for [him] and [his] community” (216). Unfortunately, it seems that news networks took his work experience there as a negative, and Omar felt ashamed. His pride in his Arab heritage was injured, and this led him to remove his time at Al Jazeera from his resumé (210). Instead of becoming a respected member of both the journalism and Arab communities, Omar became a bit disconnected with his culture—it was the only way for him to get ahead. As seen in the Q&A session with Bayoumi at the end of his book, Omar even went so far as to abandon his dream of a media job (4). While it’s possible that his new job could involve helping out his people, it is doubtful that it could have had as much impact as his being a journalist would have had. As a journalist he could have reached beyond his community and
changed the world’s perception of Arabs everywhere. Instead, his negative experience caused him to give up his dream.

As a high school journalist, my success at the newspaper was a lot less important than one man trying to improve the image of his people. Still, I took my job seriously, and I wrote to the best of my ability. I expected people to read my articles, connect my keen personality with the dashing good looks of my beautiful picture, and worship me as an idol. The newspaper was my ticket to high school stardom. That is, until the first issue came out. Maybe the photographer was in a rush, maybe he was going for a ‘candid camera’ look, maybe the photo editor decided to mess around with the new freshman writer, but the picture next to my article was less than stellar. With my eyes half closed, my mouth half open, and my expression somewhere in between astonishment and disgust, I looked like I had just walked in on my parents doing it. My hope of using the paper as a stepping-stone to popularity vanished. To make matters worse, no one even bothered to read the article I had put so much effort into. According to my friends, they took one look at my picture, decided the piece must be as idiotic as I looked, and moved on to the next page.

Though I was crushed at the time, it was probably for the best that my ballooning ego was deflated before it got a chance to take off. Omar never quite recovered from the hit to his pride, but I was more determined than ever to gain some recognition. I resolved to write an article so good that people would want to read it no matter what the accompanying picture looked like. I may not have succeeded yet, but the experience changed me. Writing was no longer a means to an end with stoking my pride as the desired product; writing became a goal in and of itself. I want people to read and enjoy my writing, and if they can’t put a face to my name, it doesn’t matter.

As far as his original aspirations were concerned, Omar’s change took him on a downward turn, while mine did the opposite. He may have started with better intentions, but they didn’t hold up to the pressures of finding a job. Mine were less than noble, but they changed instead of falling apart. The strength of dreams lies in adaptability rather than in desire—being able to modify your aspirations is more important than just wanting fervently. The proof is in the end of our stories. He has given up writing while I have just begun—hopefully, though, with a better picture.
The morning of September 11th sparked internal fires that torched the face of societal perceptions of Arab-Americans, especially those of the Islamic faith, in the United States. Henceforth, people of Arabic and Muslim backgrounds became, in the eyes of a great many Americans, “a problem,” as Mr. Bayoumi aptly puts it in his expository narrative, How Does it Feel to Be a Problem? Clearly, being labeled as a problem is rarely a good thing. In the context of Bayoumi’s collection of “portraits,” however, it refers specifically to the strife and paradoxical existence of young Arab-Americans living in the contemporary United States, amidst all the terror-born suspicion, racial prejudice, and overblown societal retaliation that has sadly become a hallmark of 21st century America. However, in spite of the melancholy tones that seem to be foreshadowed by the previous description, Bayoumi makes it abundantly clear in his preface that he did not intend for his novel to be “gloomy.” Rather, the author has endeavored to elucidate the admirable perseverance of the Arab-American youth in tactfully and bravely overcoming the forces that conspire to keep them from their identities and aspirations. Through his use of such powerful devices as characterization and poignant imagery, Bayoumi allows his readers the novel opportunity to experience vicariously how it feels to be a problem.

Very consistent with the aforementioned paradoxical nature of being “a problem” is a quote by Khalil Gibran that is said to be written in Rasha’s diary. The aphorism, “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain,” summarizes an important motif of the narrative: that being “a problem” has contributed to the growth and self-discovery of many of Bayoumi’s characters (16). It is noteworthy, for example, that Yasmin’s long-standing legal contention with Fort Hamilton High School was definitely an attributing factor to her eventual decision to pursue a degree in law. As a dubiously-elected member of the school council and a wearer of the hijab, Yasmin seemed to be on thin ice from the start. Despite the ostensibly foul perceptions of her by the school’s administration and the student body, the female protagonist still strove to advocate for the wellness of her classmates in a position that was capable of instilling change and improvement. Because she was obliged by her faith to refrain from attending school-hosted-parties, however, she was stripped of her post (94). Her absence as a member of the student council, as it turned out, was “a problem” with the Fort Hamilton High School E-Board COSA, as well as with her fellow Leadership members (92, 94). Of course, their projected reason for having a problem with her not attending dances was a mess of bureaucratic banter dealing in school rules and regulations. A discerning eye can easily see, however, that their real reasons are shrouded in Arab-specific discrimination and resentment, not red tape. The former is abundantly clear because
we are told that in previous cases, Jewish students had been partially relieved of their duties for religious reasons. The latter point deals more in a supposition that can be made about human nature: that we resent those who receive special treatment, especially if it is for reasons that are esoteric. Simply put: “Why should she be allowed to skip just because she’s an Arab?” Surprisingly, after all the school had done to her she still felt reservations about incriminating it in her legal plea to CAIR (100). Still, Yasmin’s was a portrait of triumph, for in the face of those who judged her for her seemingly occult background and garb, she won for herself, and all future candidates for the student council, unalienable rights and, through her own resourcefulness in researching her case, discovered her passion for legal defense of those who cannot advocate for themselves (114).

Bayoumi’s work explores a kind of paradox that only seems possible in cases of discrimination to the point of dehumanization and a loss of identity. Both of these criteria are seen in the case of Rasha, an Arab-American teenage girl whose family is arbitrarily incarcerated following the attacks on September 11th on the premise of their background. Bayoumi’s masterful representation of bottomless agony coupled with the most substantial, positive growth is what gives Rasha’s story such poignancy, and tells about the duality of being “a problem.” A notable optimistic side to her incarceration is that Rasha grew closer to her sister, Reem, with whom she’d been distant for many years prior (26). It seems as though, isolated from the outside world and stripped of humanity, humans gravitate toward those around them emotionally. Additionally, it was implied that Rasha gained an appreciation for people of other backgrounds and circumstances. By witnessing the resourcefulness of the Asian inmates as they cut and stored cafeteria vegetables for later consumption, and by essentially being forced to open her mind to the varied circumstances of those around her, Rasha gained an invaluable sense of worldliness and empathy (30). It would be fair to say that, had she not been jailed irrationally as a result of her being perceived as “a problem” then she never would have had the chance to leave her comfort zone and consequently become a better person.

In retrospect, to ask what it feels like to be a problem, in the context of Bayoumi’s novel, can be likened to asking how it feels to live a paradox. The author spices no clarity at the onset of his narrative in letting his readers know that while his book is intended to tell, through collected anecdote, of the horrors faced by Arab-American youths, one of his primary objectives was to accentuate the strength of the human spirit that is unearthed by the extreme prejudice and dehumanization experienced by his characters. Bayoumi thus gives the state of being “a problem” a dual-faceted nature: one of sadness and isolation, and the other of personal growth and betterment. All things considered, though, the best way to describe how it feels to be a problem would be, in a word, “frustrating.”