Searching for a Black Writer

Carelessly scribbled onto a piece of loose-leaf paper, the note read:

I am in search of a Black writer for a project. If you are interested please give me a call at this number. This is a land line—no text pls. Thanks :)

An older woman tapped me on the shoulder and slipped the note into my hand. I watched her spindly figure slip away between the rows of foldaway chairs, behind the balding man taking notes on a Santa Barbara Writers Conference pamphlet, and in front of the legs of the hopeful blonde holding a pink notebook to her thighs.

"What was that?" Sophie said, leaning over my lap. Despite being in a room of fully grown adults, I felt like a teenager whispering in the back of the class, fearful the panel of speakers at the head of the room would snap their heads toward us and tell us to put our phones away. Sophie, the two other UC scholarship girls, and I were the only people under 30 in the room. I was one of only two black people there.

I shook my head, unable to shake the cat-like paranoia of a woman being watched. "I'll tell you later."

On the second floor of the Mar Monte Hotel, overlooking downtown Santa Barbara, a panel of published authors and agents introduced the conference. They went on and on about how much we were going to learn in the next few days of publishing panels and writing workshops. I watched crowds of ships bob on the ocean's surface through the window behind the panelists' heads.

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The day before, a group of billionaires had made news when their submarine went missing somewhere above the wreck of the Titanic. At that point, everyone assumed that the ship had imploded. I imagined it somewhere outside the window, below the gray-blue waves of the Santa Barbara sea floor, sucking into itself like a vortex and taking everything with it.

My dad was the first person outside of the conference I told about the note. I did not know who else might understand when I phoned him a week later. He laughed and then asked if I had called her back yet.

"Why would I do that?"

"Why wouldn't you?"

When I got the note, I felt shock, slight disgust, and the strangest sense of enamored flattery. I laughed imagining someone writing this note in a fervor, pen pressed to thigh, ink staining her designer skirt at the sight of brown skin from the corner of her eye, so proud of her find: what a rare find.

But to my dad, the goal of me going to school in Santa Barbara was to have opportunities like this: to meet people who would get me somewhere farther than that house in Long Beach. I was about to enter my senior year with little to show for it besides a few small publications and three years of work experience in fast-food restaurants. I was one year away from becoming a failed writer.

So, part of me really did want it to be real—that feeling of being discovered and knowing I could be something special.

At five years old, I was an artist and an escapist. I scribbled in the gaps of my reality with stubby colored pencils, scattered paper, and Legos and Polly Pockets in the playroom of my

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family's old house in North Long Beach, the first place we've ever actually owned, my parents and I.

It was where my mom taught me to read my first chapter book and where I wrote my first stories.

As years went by, that glorious play space–the big room with the sliding glass door and aging futon where we sang to Far Far Away Idol and sipped apple juice from a plastic kitchen set–wore away. The creamy ceiling tiles browned and rotted and broke away at their corners, allowing in all kinds of buzzing wasps and spiders; the door to the backyard would not close properly. I didn't think about that stuff until it became broken enough for us to leave; back then, it was just my castle.

I remember drawing myself. I was beautiful, all grown up and tall, and dressed in a pretty red dress, a pair of pretty red shoes, and a pretty red handbag. And I remember wanting to show my mom because Mommy liked it when I drew her things. I wanted her to be happy and proud, to scrunch her nose and tell me, "You did so good, Lovie," as I presented it to her.

She looked at me in confusion. "What's this Lovie?"

"It's me!" I smiled so big.

I watched her excited smile fall, and a now-familiar grimace replaced it.

She began to yell, "What is this? This isn't you. Do you look like this? Does your sister look like this? Your Daddy?"

Mommy didn't like that beautiful me had hay yellow hair down to her waist, or her skin was the same color I used to color in the sand on the beach. Beautiful me was supposed to be brown; brown like my family, and like my neighbors, and like my reflection. But not like my mother. She is not blonde and White, but she is not quite Brown either.

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I didn't know a beautiful brown version of me, but wanting to be something else was just shameful.

I was unhappy with my reflection for so many years after that, unhappy with my big round nose, puffy cheeks, and short, frizzy hair. I always assumed that things would just get better as I got older; my hair would be different, my nose would fit my face better, and I would be happier.

I wonder if I understood then that my skin wouldn't just continue to fade until I was just as light. I don't know why it felt like we should all be so unhappy with who and where we were.

I never had any reason to want to leave my home in that neighborhood. My favorite home videos were in that house, eating mud from the front lawn and bathing in a chalk-filled kiddy pool. I loved the neighbors who had watched me grow up and brought us oatmeal cookies. But in 2008, my parents lost the house. My dad never did want us to grow up in a neighborhood like that, like the one he grew up in. He told me that later.

They always wanted more; my parents did. They wanted a house in the suburbs, the nicer suburbs, for my sister and me to go to a prestigious university, to go further, somewhere foreign, somewhere we could brag about.

But how could I want them both—the house and its memories and that beautiful, rich, white version of me? The comfort and the absolute foreignness.

At least then, my blackness was something of harmony, a warmth surrounding me in what I knew, giving me a sense of self. As I left that house, it became stilt, thin and tall, lifted up from the surrounding land, fragile. But wasn't that what I wanted?

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The opening night banquet of the Santa Barbara Writers Conference—the night I was passed the note—is one I remember through a drunk haze. I had never had wine that expensive or strong before. A very kind woman I met at the bar felt endeared to me and bought me a glass for $20.

I was standing in line, trying to discern the likelihood of getting carded (at the time, I was only 20), when she introduced herself to me. She complimented my hair, the bright orange I'd dyed it after high school to distract from how much I disliked its appearance. My mother said dying my hair so unnatural was something only white girls could do. I thought that if I was always going to be the only Black girl in a room, I might as well stick out for something other than my skin.

I think the other writers, always searching for their next story, looked at me—my brown skin, bright orange hair, and hot pink lipstick—and wanted to collect me, and I was something peculiar to them. And I was more than happy to let them—as long as I got something in return.

"I think you guys may be the youngest group here," the woman said, gesturing to my classmates across the room, her scarlet-red bob grazing my shoulder. She looked like someone who liked to stand out in a crowd and put effort into doing so. I didn't like how close she was to me, but I smiled and laughed.

"Well, we're the only ones here on a grant from the University. It's a little intimidating. Everyone here is so experienced."

"Don't let them scare you off. They all want what you have."

As I wondered what she meant by that, I eyed the man in front of us approaching the bar. He didn't once look up from his conversation as he ordered a glass of wine and pressed a $20 bill to the countertop. The bartender gave him no change.

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“I’ll try not to,” I said.

I did the math in my head. A $20glass of wine, plus the $40 or so I was spending on Ubers to and from the conference, plus the $700 in attendance, which I paid out of pocket until my grant check cleared. $760. My bank account would be drained. But I couldn’t sit in this fancy hotel with all these seemingly fancy people and not have a glass of wine.

I was next in line. I hesitated and smiled at the woman.

“What kind of wine do you have?” I asked the bartender. He was tanned and beautiful.

“Just red or white,” he said.

“Like Moscato?” I shrugged to the woman, and she laughed, approaching the bar next to me.

“We only have a Chardonnay. Try this,” the beautiful bartender gave me a pour in a plastic cup. It tasted nothing like the Chardonnay I’d had at my grandmother’s last Christmas, which was bitter and vinegary. It was not sugary and peach-flavored like the $5 wine my roommate and I liked to share. It was perfectly in between.

“I’ll take a glass of that.”

The beautiful bartender filled a beautifully angular wine glass right to the top and slid it towards me.

“I’ll take the same,” said the woman, pulling out her card.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I blushed, unsure if I should be embarrassed or flattered.

“It’s my treat.”

I decided to be flattered as she swiped her shiny silver debit card and grabbed her glass by the stem.

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"Don't let them get to you," she winked as she returned to her table. "Remember, they're just jealous."

The drink and the comment went straight to my head. I desperately wanted to take the glass home–this beautiful, angular piece–like it was a treasure. But I did not; I did not want to be *that* Black person. Not when I had woken up that morning fully determined to finally be a real writer and adult.

I knew there was a high likelihood I would be one out of three Black people in the room; I often was. I knew there was a likelihood I'd be one of the youngest people there, which made me a target of what I couldn't quite figure out. Amusement? Disdain? Envy?

At dinner, the other grant girls and I struggled to keep our heads above water with the adult writers. As we went to sit down, a group of them split us up like pets, making each of us sit at a different one's side. I assume it was to get to know us better.

"They offered him 20k for the first 20 words, and he just never did it! Can you imagine?"

No, I couldn't imagine, I told the woman sitting to my left as she laughed on a mouthful of steak and potatoes. I couldn't imagine ever turning down that much money–I didn't even know what that much money looked like.

"How old are you, again?" she cooed. I was 20 at the time.

"Just twenty? Oh, you're a baby. And what do you write, fiction? Oh, how cute. So, so cute."

A girl in her 20s never wants to be cute. She wants to be impressive. Hot. Professional. Taken seriously. But never cute.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder from behind.

"Hey! Uh, my memory's not too good, but did you say you had a spare lodging earlier?"

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I turned around in my seat and met the blushed face of my fiction professor, Jervey. He was the first faculty member I met at UC Santa Barbara and one of the two Black professors in my writing program.

At first, he reminded me of my grandfather, my mother's father. He had a kind of Blackness that was only recognizable to other Black people or someone whose family hailed from down South–as he himself described it. He had pale, nearly white skin and short, curly hair like ramen noodles. Every room he entered inhabited some indescribable otherness I could only describe as Mariah Carey Black. He told me I reminded him of his daughter, a half-Black, half-Chinese girl. This was all we had in common.

For my first year of university, I was convinced that this man was the most well-connected person I would ever meet in the publishing industry and that he was destined to push me toward my goal of becoming a published author. My reasoning was that he had once been a New York Times bestseller (a title more impressive than the reality of his career), which, of course, meant I had to impress him. With time, I found the truth. He wasn't good for much besides a few old stories retold, and retold, and retold.

Yet, it was through him that I got my first publishing opportunity, 150 dollars for a piece of flash fiction I wrote as a class exercise. It was a scathing evaluation of my family, a half-baked think-piece on Blackness and religion, and my own shame. It was something I had never planned to publish; it felt more like a chunk of my soul than something anyone else needed to read, and it was not a chunk I liked. It was the part of me that was ashamed of where I came from. The naive, blameless version of me I was pretending to be.

"This is what you need to be writing," was what he told me.

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At the conference, I looked back at that man, who was short despite me being seated and him standing, with glassy eyes and slightly red in the face.

"Did you say you had a spare lodging?" he said.

There was something unsettling about the way he said it, as an awkward sort of joke–was he asking to sleep in my hotel room? Or was he just asking to sleep with me?

I laughed back, as I had all night, but told him I did not have a hotel room and that I lived near the school.

"Ah," was all he said as I waited for him to recognize me and ask how I was doing. He did not,] and instead, he walked off with a nod.

The woman to my left strained her neck, watching him go. "So, you know Jervey?"

"Yeah, he's one of my professors," I said, trying to shake the strange feeling he'd left me with.

"Oh, he's great! You're so lucky."

So everyone kept saying.

I set down my glass and looked around the room. It was not just him; all of the writers' faces had gone rosy, all laughing and chewing belligerently. Was everyone here plastered? The woman next to me was talking herself red in the face as she picked at her plate. Mine had already been picked clear, and I wondered if it was gauche to go back for seconds.

I hadn't eaten much the last week, mostly living off stolen food from work: tater tots, chicken wings, and bites of old pizza in between shifts. The night before, I'd stayed up until 1 a.m. feeding loud, drunk college students and working my muscles to tight ache. I was constantly broke in those days as I wasted any money left over after paying my bills on expensive clothes

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and hair to support this ever-beautiful, perfect version of myself. I decided it was necessary to fit in with Santa Barbara. I had to be better than. I'd always had to be better.

Yet, it didn't matter how much better I tried to be in that moment. I wasn't going to be taken seriously; I wasn't even considered. I was a grant attendee, gifted a chance to walk among writing gods, except the gods were more akin to the Wizard of Oz; big, loud, silly man behind a glittery sheet. And I was a thing of amusement, a pop of color. I felt just as much a feature of the room as the decorative wallpaper or a gilded lamp.

I was lured with a grant check that would not clear for three more months into being a diversity check in every room I walked into. Being a Black writer here was to be used. Fodder for someone else's self-enlightenment. A blaxploitation admission essay.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Sophie hissed across the table once our sitters had left us alone.

As we were splitting an Uber, I couldn't leave without them. Sophia nodded enthusiastically.

"Give me one second."

I picked up my empty plate and walked past the buffet to the bar. The beautiful bartender smiled at me, and I bit my lip, a bit embarrassed. I had never left a restaurant without asking for a box to go. I could tell he hadn't been asked that in a while, and though he raised his eyebrows, he did not laugh at me.

"Follow me," he led me into the kitchen. It felt strangely normal that I should be in there at all. But tonight, I wasn't a staff member; I was a guest.

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Outside the Mar Monte hotel, Sophie, Sophia, and I stood in the cold ocean air in front of the hotel's double doors. I contemplated whether the woman who passed me the note wanted to pay me and for how much. How much would it take for me to say yes?

The Uber drove us out of downtown Santa Barbara, up the 101 South, back through Goleta, and finally into Isla Vista. My apartment was empty now, only because it was summer. I lived with five roommates, three of us in each bedroom, and the apartment was usually so crowded that it was hard to breathe. Stacks of Emily's furniture and belongings crowded the living room as she prepared to move out. Someone was always moving; things were always changing.

I fell backward onto the edge of my bed, grateful my bedroom was empty for once. The frat house below my window didn't party as often in the summertime and was truly silent. Already, I was anticipating the sweaty kitchen of the restaurant I worked at, stretching hours long into the night again as soon as I finished the conference, and my time off ran up.

I pushed myself onto my stomach, hanging over the edge of my bed, and reread the now-crumpled note in the slip of moonlight that came in through the window. I laughed to myself. It was funny, wasn't it? How desperate I was for success?

So many people in my family had sacrificed so much for the idea of their posterity. I couldn't waste getting to go to school here. I needed to be better, to do something great.

I called the number.

"I'm working on a docuseries about Zora Thurston," said the faceless woman. "It's going to be on Netflix, so you'd have to sign an NDA before I can tell you much about it. You do know who that is, right?" Her voice sounded small, clipped, and quick.

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"You mean Zora Neale Hurtson?" I asked. With my phone pressed to my ear, I closed the Google Document I was typing notes into and searched for the name she'd written—the first result: Zora Neale Hurston.

"Yeah, Zora Thurston, really important Harlem Renaissance writer. Netflix says we need to have someone Black writing on the team to get it greenlit, which I think is kind of–well, there's a big push to have a Black perspective on these kinds of things now. You know, I'm South African myself, but that doesn't exactly count for much," She huffed with annoyance after this, as if it should have made all the difference.

"So, they need someone Black on the team, and I had someone–my partner, a biracial woman–but she got sick with Covid."

It sounded unreal that this woman wanted me to work on her Netflix show simply because I was Black. "The woman is an absolute joke," I thought. Does she, do any of them, hear just how ridiculous they sound? But she had connections, didn't she? Netflix is a big name to drop. Was this the type of person who I had to impress?

"What do you need me to do?"

"I need you to make a pitch deck. Do you know what that is?"

I didn't, and I told her so.

"Well, research pitch decks and look into making one. They want to present what the show is about, give an idea for it so people will wanna make it, you know?"

"How will I do that if I don't know what the show is about?"

"Just research Zora Thurston. You know who that is, right? Very famous Black author. My research is on a time in her life that's not well known, but I can't tell you about it unless you sign an NDA. Oh, and I'll need some writing samples."

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I took down the information she wanted me to, and I did the research on Zora Neale Hurtson. I prepared a portfolio and emailed her back and forth for days, arranging for it to be faxed to her office and printed. I called. I called again. I waited days and days for her to get back to me to discuss rates or what she thought of my writing. I never heard back.

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I assumed my samples must not have been good enough. But Black writers are rare in Santa Barbara, so rare she slipped through a crowd to find me. It didn't make sense, but I had to let it go. If this wasn't enough for me to make it, I didn't know what would be.

To Render

Few people pick a school like UC Santa Barbara to write fiction. They pick it because they want to study marine biology and surf three steps from their dorm. They pick it because they want their college experience to be day-long ragers and girls in bikinis. I found the school enticing for all these reasons, but I only really cared about becoming an author. I've always been a person with a singular focus and singular idea of who I should be.

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I spent my childhood anticipating trips to the bookstore with my grandmother. Each time we visited my Grandma Ruby in Santa Monica, she would take my sister and me to Barnes and Noble. While we scoured the young adult fiction, she would wander the cookbook section, and after an hour, I'd return with armfuls of books. Over the years, my shelves have been filled with the books she bought me or lent from her own collection.

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I filled the journals she bought me to the brim with stories. I wrote during the school day I wrote at night after doing my homework I wrote on car rides and during sermons at church. I

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wrote so much that, as a punishment, my third-grade teacher took my favorite journal one day and hid it in a cupboard in the back of the class.

"You can get this back at the end of the day. But if you bring it in again, Maya, I will get your parents involved. You need to be paying attention in class, not scribbling."

Before the day was out, I had concocted a plan with my best friend Cyrus to switch the journal out during lunch. We snuck into her classroom, claiming that Cyrus had left something in his desk–a big rock we had left there earlier–we replaced my sparkly red composition notebook with a black-and-white one I favored less.

Ms. Fittinger noticed the switch before lunch was out and took both notebooks away. She then called my mom to school to discuss how inappropriate it was for me to spend all my time reading and writing in class, even if I had finished my work. She emphasized how this kind of thing would not roll in Middle school–a thing teachers liked to say when they wanted me to act more mature than I needed to be. It really meant: "You won't be a kid forever. Grow up."

But it did roll in middle school, and in high school, and in college afterward. I started novels on loose pieces of scrap paper, and if I wasn't writing, I was staring off into the distance, daydreaming up a story. In high school, I'd stay up until the early morning writing fanfiction in bed. I graduated with nearly 200k words written and a stack of filled journals.

Despite Ms. Fittinger's warning, I went on to live most of my life half-present, half-occupied in a fantasy or daydream, especially when I didn't much like reality. By fifth grade, my mom started to notice signs of depression. It wasn't until my sophomore year of high school that I started to notice something was wrong. Each morning, I'd get off the bus and walk towards the school entrance, past groups of kids that hung out on the grass in front of the Lakewood High sign. I would feel their eyes on me, studying the minutiae of my hair or my outfit.

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I started waking up two hours before the bus each day at 5 am to get ready for school. For those two hours, I'd try my best to make my hair lie flat or curl right, to make my eyebrows perfectly arched, and erase the creases of my under eyes.

I still didn't have words for the way my mind ran nonstop, criticizing everything I did. I was never good at speaking words to my emotions; they always came out wrong. But I could always communicate through a page. Writing felt like a superpower.

While the adults in my life were impressed, they all tried to push me towards financially viable career options in writing–be a teacher like my parents, teach English in France–except for my Grandma Ruby. Grandma always wanted to be a writer, and she would have been one if she hadn't had to drop out of school in the fifth grade to work with her parents on the farm they sharecropped. She wanted all six of her grandchildren to have a good education and be successful because of this. But she also loved to read. Grandma Ruby had collections of cookbooks, and Jane Austen and Agatha Christie scattered all around her apartment.

She is the reason I only ever wanted to be an author; she wanted a writer in the family.

So, I pictured myself growing up and leaving home to be a writer like Rory Gilmore, head of some newspaper at Yale, or Daniel Radcliffe's version of Allen Ginsberg, frantically typing away in the dorm room at Columbia.

In my first term at a real university, three months after transferring to the University of California Santa Barbara, only one fiction class was offered within my writing program. To get into the College of Creative Studies, I submitted a meticulous portfolio of my short stories and high school essays in a desperate attempt to prove I could write. I was told that only a few people would make it through admission. After spending three years in the program, I now think the truth is that not very many applied.

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Unlike the rest of UC Santa Barbara's campus and all its beautiful, new lecture halls that overlook the ocean and have swivel seats and electronic whiteboards, the College of Creative Studies was built sometime in the 1960s and has since become a stretch of multi-use classrooms for the Writing, Art, Music, and STEM programs. Each class has its own piano, many have sets of easels in the corner, and paint is splattered across the walls.

My first-year fiction workshop was held in an old conference room. A long, low wooden table stretched the length of the room, and a projection screen hung limply over the chalkboard in front of the class. The room smelled of dust, mildew, and chalk.

When I arrived each day, a stout, caramel-colored man named Jervey would be sat at the end of the table, pushing clementine oranges and chocolate-covered cookies across the table and speaking to us with his mask lifted. And *he* wanted us to call him Jervey. Almost all my professors in CCS wanted to be called by their first names. It was progressive to create less of a power dynamic between professors and students, they argued.

Jervey started each class like a substitute who hadn't expected to be given an extra class that day.

"Well, we're all here," he'd say, lifting the loose cloth mask off his lips. Lips that smacked as he paused, looking for the next words to say. He'd begin on some tangent:

"Who here has read Kate Chopin? What, no one? Wow. You guys should really know her; she's a very important uh... woman writer. Wow, what are they teaching you guys anyway?"

With wide eyes, he'd chuckle dryly and cough over the edge of his mask.

"Colleges can't really teach anyone how to write, though. You'll realize this if you ever get into the publishing world. Lots of educated people with money who can't write for shit in publishing. And some people with no experience who end up making a lot of money!"

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From the way he said it, I understood that he was not one of these people.

"But the industry and agents are assholes, anyway. You know, actually, I should bring in my agent for you guys. That'd be a good experience for you all to meet a *real* agent."

He gave off the air that he believed himself to be a misunderstood genius. I disliked cockiness in general, but who was I to say that he was not?

In this fiction workshop, there was a random scattering of people across campus who thought they could write. I was one of them. The others: several STEM seniors in need of a creative elective, some pompous English majors, and a few fantasy novel lovers. Another first-year from CCS. And our professor: a published author, who had once made it onto the New York Times Bestseller's List. At the time, though, I knew him to be exclusively published in online literary journals.

Before coming to UC Santa Barbara, I spent a year attending community college classes via Zoom to get a head start on my education while sequestered by the Pandemic. I learned that fiction writing was something many people felt they could easily do at some point: recent high school graduates like myself, 30-year-old stoners, retirees, and mothers with full-time jobs. In some people's eyes, all it took to be a fiction writer was to think up a story and put a few words to the page.

This theory was tested when my class had to workshop my 30-year-stoner classmate's short story. It featured him and a classic sitcom character smoking in a palace on the moon, surrounded by naked middle-aged women who would only wake to have sex with him or offer to make him pancakes. Bryan didn't understand what I meant when I asked him:

"Don't you think that having the protagonist squeeze the unconscious woman's breast with his foot is a bit objectifying?"

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It was hard not to feel that hinging all my hopes and dreams on fiction wasn't a mistake at this point. I wanted to believe that there was something important for me to learn from Jervey.

I did not want to end up a failed writer–not just a bad writer, but someone who never accomplished anything through it.

For the first few weeks of my time with Jervey, he wanted us to write vignettes. He opened class by reading us something he'd published recently in an online journal about an albino boy he knew back in New Orleans who was so white "you wouldn't know he was Black if your family wasn't Black." The boy was a bit of a freak, apparently, and burnt down his family's house to make his room as black as he wanted to be. I didn't get the point of the story, but Jervey seemed to think it was very poignant. And I wanted to impress him by "getting it."

"Render," Jervey told us. "It takes so much effort to imagine and to create and most people aren't very good at it. Try to render instead."

Despite the fact that this was a fiction class, not creative nonfiction, Jervey asked us all to spend the next fifteen minutes rendering something, some experience. I couldn't think of a single important thing to write.

Up until that point, I had chosen to write only fiction because it distanced me from reality. It was a distraction from my own life. And truly, I didn't feel I had very many important experiences to offer.

For much of my adolescence, I had hidden in my parents' sheltering arms and never went much further than Lakewood High on my own. I often didn't have a car or my parents' permission to venture without supervision. And they had a lot of things they disapproved of. The list went on and on: my friends, my friends' parents, TV shows with sex scenes and cursing,

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revealing clothes, makeup, partying, boys, dating boys, the gays, drugs and alcohol, and getting bad grades.

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In fiction, I got to explore experiences I had never had.

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At community college, my first short story was about a woman with a proclivity for stealing. I'd shoplifted in high school, even got caught once and forced to pay a fine. This woman was different. She didn't just steal makeup from the store. She liked to steal from other people. She'd snoop around other people's homes and dig through their belongings, their diaries, purses, and fridges. She stole from other people what her own life lacked.

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I wanted to be imaginative, and Jervey wanted me to render. As I sat there and tried to think of something to write, all I really felt was how much of a disappointment I was.

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Especially since my family expected so much of me after getting this far.

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"I've never lived anywhere as nice or expensive as this," my dad told me the day we toured my new home for the first time. My apartment in Isla Vista, the noisy beachside town where all the nearby students lived, would've cost $3600 if I had lived there alone. But split between six girls, it cost my parents $600 a month.

My father wanted to ensure I knew how privileged I was to have this college experience.

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All year, he mocked me in our phone calls when I referred to Isla Vista as IV and told me how arrogant and bougie I must have been getting. I knew it was all in jest. My father has always been very proud of my sister and me and proud that the life he made for himself and his family could afford this. But it all made me very sad.

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The truth was, I was starting to realize that I hated Santa Barbara.

Three months into my move, Santa Barbara, or the version of it I got to know through the University, wasn't suiting me. The first thing I learned about Santa Barbara was that it is

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overwhelmingly white. Somehow, I didn't know this before I got there. All the colleges I had applied to had low percentages of Black students, though none as low as this one. In Long Beach, Black people weren't a minority, but my high school was a mix of everything. I thought UC Santa Barbara would be the same or similar. They had a Black Student Union. The cool neo-soul girl with the headwrap who guided my senior year tour was even in it. That had to mean something.

I didn't realize then that Blackness in Santa Barbara would be something I'd have to search out. If I stayed within my natural circles: my classes, my new roommates, and work, not only would I always be the only Black person in the room, but I'd be in a culture where no one had seen my favorite shows or would play my favorite artists at parties. Where it often felt like no one understood me.

And while I was trying to figure out how I fit into it all, everyone else was overwhelmingly happy. Isla Vista is half-beach; why wouldn't students be deliriously happy? People there loved nothing more than dayging (day raging) in bikinis and head-bumping to surfer rock. And they all seemed so, so happy. Even when they weren't, the second a problem arose, an Isla Vistan would just drink and party until it went away. I wanted to be like this, but I wasn't there yet.

The amount of whiteness around me made me feel more self-conscious than ever, with my self-imposed expectations of success conflicting against the pressure of becoming a real college girl: someone who drinks and parties and has sex and wild, abandoned fun, despite the fact that I had never done any of these things. I didn't think I needed to in high school. I studied; that was supposed to be enough.

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So, in my anger at not having anything to write about in the fiction workshop—no interesting experiences of my own—I wrote about my parents. I wrote that my father didn't have any friends of his own except for his six siblings and that those were the only people my parents really spent time with. That they drove down to Carson to that seedy old bowling alley and sang karaoke on the weekends, and that before Uncle Leroy got married to a nice lady, Sheree, he had a wild girlfriend I named Miss Lorraine, who wore glittery blue lipstick and stumbled drunk into Aunt's house on the fourth of July.

And I'll tell you that my family doesn't do that type of thing. That my Uncle Damone is the Pastor at the church he and his siblings were all raised in, and that my cousins and I, at least from my perspective, were supposed to be good and churchgoing and proper. Well, I wasn't. And neither was Miss Lorraine.

I spit it all out onto the page and sat back, nearly heaving. I looked up to see Jervey eyeing me in a curious way. I could tell he wanted me to read, so my hand shot up when it was time to do so.

My voice was stuttering, as always when I read, but I tried to make it sound strong and important.

"We're the kind of family that chased off my cousin Elijah's girlfriend for being a bit too affectionate in my aunt's pool, that masquerades partners as "friends" because my kind, and my Uncle Darren's kind, are condemned to hell.

No, in our family, God's Will comes first, and it's our wants and needs—each other's true selves—that comes second.

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Even as I read it, I wasn't sure my words could capture the whole story. It felt incomplete, lacking perspective. I felt like I was airing out my family's dirty laundry or slandering them. But Jervey said it was good.

"Very good," he said with a dry laugh. "You should submit that somewhere."

I tried not to smile, as it wasn't becoming to boast or to accept compliments openly. I also struggled to believe him. I always wanted to believe that I was a good writer, but in truth, I needed outside validation to truly believe it.

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As my classmates packed their bags and began to filter out at the end of class, I found Jervey watching me again.

"What are you mixed with?" he asked as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

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I was standing behind my seat, sliding my laptop into its case when he asked me. It was something I got asked often in middle school, but not much since. It felt strange to be asked by a professor.

"Chinese, or some kind of Asian, I think? I've never actually taken an ancestry test, but my dad says that's what my mom's side is mixed with."

"Y'know, my daughter is half Chinese," he said, pulling up a photo on his phone of a small girl whose skin was lighter than his. She had loose, curly hair and thin eyes. She looked nothing like me.

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"You remind me of her."

I decided to take this as a compliment.

"Are you in the College of Creative Studies?"

I told him I was.

"You know it's nice to see another Black person in CCS. There used to be a bunch of us, but not anymore. Things have changed, I guess."

I struggled to imagine a version of Santa Barbara where Black people weren't one out of 20, but I liked the way he said it: another Black person, not just a Black student. It was like we were in this together.

As Jervey went on another tangent–telling me again how not all Black people look Black even if their families are Black and only other Black people can tell–I decided he reminded me of my Grandad. Their skin tone was almost the same, with the same round face and shiny bald spot at the top of their head.

"Have you ever been published before?" Jervey asked me.

"No," I told him, but it was a big goal of mine. At that point, my only goal was to be published by the time I finished college. Then, I'd be good enough. Then, I'd be a real writer.

"You're from LA, right? I have a writer friend who has this journal. I'll send you her information. You should submit. She does this festival for writers in May I'll be there, and sometimes some students from CCS come. You should go. They'll find you very impressive."

I took this as meaning that *he* found me very impressive and gleamed. I hadn't read anything he'd written besides the one story, but he made himself seem impressive, that he had an agent and was getting published left and right.

When I submitted *Miss Lorraine* to the publication, it was accepted almost immediately. I didn't realize it then, but this was because Jervery had connected me directly with the editor. He was also a journal founder and was published in most issues. There was no physical magazine, but there was a stipend of 150 dollars, which felt especially good. I was going to be published right beside my professor.

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Our next class continued with a similar routine. After Jervey's opening monologue, he set aside 25 minutes for the class to "render" the products which we would discuss for the rest of the class. His class became the only time that quarter that I wasn't the only Black person in the room.

As I began to render for the second time, I suddenly felt I had a lot to write about, empowered by my writing capabilities. Specifically, I was thinking about my hair, which often became the topic of conversation here. What is that little hat you wear? How do you get it that color? Did you cut your hair? It was so much longer when you had the–what do you call them–dreads?

Before I left for school, I thought very carefully about how I wanted my hair to look and what version of myself I wanted to become through it. For 25 minutes, I wrote about that feeling.

When it was time to read, like before, I felt a burning in my stomach, but my hand shot up immediately.

I cleared my throat and practiced my voice again: strong, confident.

"As Black women, our hair forms a hierarchy. From when we're just little girls–getting our virgin locks pulled tight into afro puffs and braids with brightly-colored, plastic barrettes–get a place on it. Long hair is most beautiful and to be desired. Short hair is not unless you're a strong, businesswoman-type, a radical sistah, or the wrong type of dyke. Those we try to avoid.

There are the Ebonys of the world, dark little girls whose hair would come up in thick tufts around worn braids. We made fun of those girls when a loose braid of Kanekalon hair was found on the playground, the style loosening, begging to be redone. Then there are the Marlees of the world, the mixed girls whose genes got just the right amount of black. Her hair is never

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nappy, no, she has long, flowy curls that could land her a Netflix original, the kind that falls down her back like the white girl hair we all refused to admit we envied."

I had been told before that in writing classes, there comes a point when your story stops being something you have to create and takes on a life of its own. Mine began in that classroom. From that day forward, the story was all I thought about, my real experiences in Isla Vista tapering off into fictional daydreams, fiction bleeding into my daily experiences. For months, I lived the life of a fictional character, exploring insecurities I'd long hid. It propelled me forward into self-discovery.

And, like before, Jervey seemed to find my work important and profound. I dived into this feeling.

At the end of the three months of the fall quarter, "Good Hair" became my second story to be accepted for publication, my first one over two pages. When I got the email from a small literary magazine, I screamed with joy and fell to the floor. I thought, I can do this: I have something to say.

Next quarter, after the fiction workshop had ended, I checked the course list to see what classes my cohorts and I had to take for winter— "Literary Theory," taught by J. Tervalon.

"What is lit theory?" one of my classmates texted in the group chat made for our cohort of first-year students. Though I was technically a second-year transfer, I took all my classes with this group of twenty-something writers, and for several years, we grew quite close.

"Does anyone know the professor?" texted someone else.

I was excited to say that I was the only one who had taken a class with Jervey, which made me feel ahead of the rest. I told them that he was eccentric and a bit strange but nice, and he was an author and helped me get published the previous quarter. I didn't mention how I

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suspected he only paid me such special attention because I was the only Black student. It didn't seem as relevant.

"Is he a good writer? I think that his book is on the reading list," one of my classmates texted back.

I logged onto Gauchospace, and there it was: "All The Trouble You Need" by Jervey Tervalan, listed on the class syllabus.

Cocky, I thought, for a professor to put their own book on a reading list. But all the same, I was interested, almost excited to read it. It took about a week into the winter quarter for my book to arrive and for the group chat to start buzzing again. Thirty minutes before one of our Zoom classes began, someone sent a photo into the chat. It was a page of the book.

"Uhh, guys, has anyone read Jervey's book yet? Isn't this kind of weird?"

The next day, when my book arrived. I poured it over immediately. *All The Trouble You Need* is the story of Jordan Davis, a 28-year-old Black professor at UC Santa Barbara who's troubled by his love life involving several undergraduate girls, including Trisha, "the seductive twenty-two-year-old virgin," and Daphne, "an exotic, forbidden student from the college class he teaches, and keeper of shadowy secrets." In the first few pages of the book, Jervey's self-insert protagonist engages in descriptive and vaguely consensual sex acts. That was the page my classmate sent in the group chat.

Within the next few days, all my classmates had read the book and concluded; there was something deeply unsettling about Jervey. I felt disappointed in the quality of writing and its subject matter. Was this the man I had revered for a period of time?

Suddenly, each interaction I'd had with him was cast in a new light.

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With this new thought, I reexamined what I had written in that class and how icky it made me feel that the only published writing I had was that which plundered my own privacy and pain for validation—for his validation, for some white editors, and my family.

But at the same time, I was proud of my writing. I was proud of what I had accomplished, and I had gained confidence in myself as a writer. I didn't know how to reconcile the feelings. I did not want to move forward as a writer if it meant exploiting the people around me.

If that was what being an author looked like, I wasn't sure I wanted it anymore. And if I wasn't sure that was what I wanted, I didn't know what I was still doing there.

Mother of Longing

"I was alone in the world. It was not a small accomplishment. I thought I would die doing it. I was not happy, but that seemed too much to ask for."

-Lucy, Jamaica Kinkaid

My mother and I drove away from my grandmother's apartment in silence. When I was younger, we would visit her every weekend. Lately, we were lucky if we could find the time once in a season, and I had ruined it; that short time spent together. I felt justified in our fight, but I was waiting for my mother to break that composed feeling.

It was one of our usual fights. I was 21, or I was 16, I was in middle-school, or starting my first day of senior year. I thought I was somehow old enough now that we would finally be on equal footing. A daughter always wants to be understood by her mother. I wanted her to see what I saw in us, that link we shared.

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It didn't matter why we were fighting; it never did, whether we were fighting about my hair or the outfit I hid under a sweatshirt to school that morning. A sink full of dirty dishes or the secrets she'd found hidden on my phone, like where I'd been the night before.

As we turned the corner onto the freeway, we exchanged low murmurs and quick back and forths.

"You know better than to do that in front of your grandmother."

"I didn't say anything wrong," I said.

"Watch your tone," she said.

Then, silence again. Burning. A gnawing. I watched the skyscraping body of Knott's Berry Farm pass on the left side of the highway. Supreme Scream rode up fast and dropped—the orange of the sunset smeared beneath the windshield.

Mommy started up again. This time was a bit louder, a bit harsher, but I remained tight-lipped, uttering little response though it was pulsing under my chest. At this point, my face burned, and we were moving so fast that I just wanted it all to stop. I felt dizzy. I was starting to doubt myself, doubt my feelings, doubt my mother.

Back home, the yellow walls of my bedroom, cast in the light of half-burnt bulbs, closed in on me. I heard her footsteps near the door and knew it was going to start up again. This was the part where she acted nicely towards me. She'd rev up slowly and tell me she loved me, pulling me sobbing into her chest.

It would still end in screaming. What's the point? She won't stop until she's won, and I can't think, I can't feel, I can't understand anything.

I screamed. "Stop. Please just stop."

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My body balled over on the bed, sobbing, rocking, heaving, shaking. She looked at me, oscillating between the two versions of her I know. Compassionate, caring, loving. Disdainful. Then she shut the door. That time, she left.

It was not the first rift we have had in our relationship, and it will not be the last. We are both fiery and determined, but we see the world in dramatically different ways and always end up offending or hurting the other. It was the same for my mother and her mother. It was politics, sexuality, and the way I chose to live my life. I felt so deeply that if she just saw things from my perspective, she would understand. I desperately wanted to make her understand.

I didn't know what to say to her. I knew that if I spoke, I'd only say it all wrong. So, I wrote it instead.

As a child, I wrote out everything I couldn't communicate with words.

I tore a page from my journal and slipped it under her bedroom door that night. When I was 10, it was pressed into an envelope. When I was 12, it was scribbled on my bedroom desk.

"I have had to fight and fight and fight just to exist as me. I will not downplay who I am to make you or anyone else more comfortable. I don't need you to validate my life and experiences. All I ever wanted was for you to accept me as I am. Flaws and all."

For my three years of university, I existed in a state suspended between my many homes. They felt endless. I spent a month in Santa Barbara, a week back in Lakewood, and a weekend with my grandmother in Santa Monica. I spent a few days in San Jose before another trip back down to Union Station. Seven long hours were spent being jostled down the coast in an Amtrak train to another month on the Isla Vista shore.

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I didn't know when I left home that from then on, I would spend every holiday, every birthday, and every school break trudging up and down the hallway of Union Station, weighed down by the weight of my belongings. When I first saw the station, I thought it was glorious. It became less so, its tall corridors smelling of unwashed bodies and piss, hustling in sweat to their next destination. Long train rides spent smelling lunch on the other passengers' breath, sleeping with my head knocking against the window.

The day my parents dropped me off at university, they did so briefly. We loaded my college apartment–the 600-dollar spot I'd found on Facebook only a month earlier–with all the belongings I deemed necessary to start my new life: an unbuilt desk, my new office chair, produce boxes of books and plants and shoes, and two giant trash bags full of clothes. My roommate's old mattress was waiting for me on the top bunk, and the other girls' belongings carved out a corner of the room.

When my mom told me she, my dad, and my sister were leaving for home, I was sitting in what would soon become my corner of the bedroom in a scatter of nails, slats, and boards. It was only 3 pm. I had no car, half of my last paycheck, and an empty fridge. But it was time for them to go, though, at the time, I could not understand how beating the traffic back through LA was a good enough reason. I hugged my mom, took a smooch on the forehead from my dad, and tried to remember how my sister acted when it was her turn to finally be alone. I was surprised mine didn't last longer. Surprised they didn't stay for Freebirds burritos or take a tour of the streets, my dad still remembered. He had his own memories of this place, of IV Halloween and spending Deltopia in his best friend's dorm. It was my turn to make mine.

I had been preparing my whole life for the moment my parents would drive off from whatever place I had decided to be an adult, the moment I would be alone. Through the

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pandemic. I hungered for it, visualizing this scene again and again in daydreams and wondering what I would do with such absolute freedom.

After finishing high school, the last place I wanted to be was in my parent's house. All I could think of there were the therapy sessions, the secret texts and phone calls, the screaming and cutting. The silence filled the halls of the empty house, suffocating me.

I thought then that I could just leave it all behind.

But in this moment of so-called independence, I was missing the tools I needed to finish my desk—or vanity, really. It's a thin console with a huge mirror, and I had no hammer to drive in its nails. So, I hammered the thing together with the end of my new Hydro Flask and dented its back. For lunch, I ate chocolate chip muffins that my kind, new roommate had made and left on the counter, and later, the In-N-Out Burger she picked up for us.

I sat and sat and sat and wondered if I yet felt more or less lonely in the apartment than I felt in any of my parents and I's houses. When I ever would.

When I was a Junior in high school, my loneliest times were getting driven to therapy on Tuesdays. I knew I needed to do it–I'd felt since middle school something was wrong inside, like a big chasm in my chest–but this wasn't how I wanted it to happen.

I started going to therapy once every two weeks after my parents had caught me with a girl.

In this tall, cubed structure downtown, my mother and I were checked into the Kaiser offices by a security guard in a tight metal booth. Upstairs, we sat in silence on a couch in front of a receptionist's desk as tension built between us. At half past, a tall white woman with a European accent and an obnoxious wart on the side of her nose led us into her office. It was covered in crayon art and colorful photographs, and the sun shone brightly through the window.

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There was one of those typical blue couches off to the side, the kind you see in movies. Since my mother was there with me that first day, she got the couch, and I sat on a chair off to the side. The therapist sat at her desk and smiled at us with her dead eyes.

"Why don't you tell me why you're here today."

I knew why I was there, but it was hard to describe. I could only imagine myself in the shower, wet and shaking, with my phone balancing on the bath's ledge.

My mother turned to me. "Do you want to tell her?"

I thought of my heart beating as my mother asked me to unlock the phone. My slippery fingers failing again and again, being naked and wet and embarrassed in front of the piercing eyes of my mother.

I shook my head. I did not want to recount this all to a woman I did not know. I let myself become engrossed in my hangnails as my mother described my relationship with "that girl.",

I pulled and picked at the hangnail until it bled. I did not want to think about sitting on the stool in my mother's room as they read back everything we'd done and said. They asked if I'd really allowed someone to do that, to say that, if I'd sent those pictures.

I immediately knew what they had found.

When my mother was angry, she spoke through gritted teeth. "When you're dressed, come right here."

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In my parents' house, I learned to hide a lot, to explore in secret, and to delete browsing history and texts. Those messages were the one piece of evidence that I never deleted over all those years. They were my relationship. They were my first love.

At the end of it all, they texted her, "These are Maya's parents. If you message or speak to her again, we will go to the police. Catch a case."

I never found out what happened to Amalee or spoke to her again. I never sent her the letter I promised I would. When I tried to reach out years later, I heard nothing back.

For years after, I would try to forget the sound of my mother's and father's voices during the summer of Junior year. They bounced off the house's beige walls, bathed in nauseatingly artificial yellow light.

"Did you really tell her to do that? Let her do those things to your body?"

Tall, stretched-out walls, plaster crusted into the nooks and crannies.

"Did you really say *I like it when you call me a–*"

The therapist's office had the same walls. Dinghy white paint. Absorbent. I could just let them take it all in for me.

"I don't even know who you are, Maya. Is this who you are?"

I developed a habit of picking at my lips or nails. When that wasn't enough, I'd scratch and press my nails into my skin. I don't know what compelled me to do that. Very few in my life have understood it.

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On the day of that first therapy session, I found a broken razor at the bottom of my jewelry box. That was the first time I cut myself.

Years later, I stopped shaving entirely because I did not trust myself with those things.

I met with the strange woman biweekly after school for months after that day. I sat on the typical blue couch with my hands inside my sweatshirt, my hair was undone, and my under eyes dark and creased. I did whatever Elena, my therapist, wanted me to. Whatever she thought would move me through my emotions. I painted streetlights in swaths of blue or an orange sunset meant to represent my future, and I mentally urged the clock to speed up.

My mom was usually the one to take me; she believed in it the most. On our drives to and from, she'd play the radio and only speak to try to check in on my progress subtly, to see if the therapist had successfully helped me adopt her perspective. When my father did have to drive, the car was deadly silent. For most of that summer, he successfully avoided saying more than a word to me.

Outside of Elena's office, I spent most of my time alone. Over the summer, I saw no friends, was not allowed to leave the house on my own, and rarely left my room. My parents had already pulled me out of my extracurriculars as a punishment: no more Marching Band or Orchestra trips. And I had no access to a phone or a computer, no "access to the outside world," was how my parents put it to me.

Most of the time, they would not speak to me, my father especially, and with my sister out of the house, I had nothing. Left to reread old books like I had as a child, searching for relief and disconnect from fictional worlds.

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One therapy session, Elena suggested we sew a pillow filled with cherry pits, a sort of fidget toy meant to help with stress. We sat knees nearly touching, both our hands on the sachet as I sewed the last bit of the lining together. The feeling of her body that close to mine made me sick. I hated the smell of her, freesias, and Listerine. Days later, the little pillow began to stink, too, and so I threw it away.

Most days, though, we just sat in silence. I sat in silence as she tried to find new questions to ask me, some way to convince me to speak.

"Where do you want to go to college?" she'd ask.

"I don't know," I told her, searching for a new spot on her yellow walls to fixate on. It didn't matter where I was going to college anymore. It was all so useless.

"What do you want to do for work when you get older?"

"I don't know."

"What are you good at?"

"I don't know."

Elena let the room fill with silence when she wanted a better response.

"I'm okay at drawing. I'm good at writing."

She scribbled something in her notebook. "What do you write?"

I hadn't written much besides the last school essay I'd turned in, except for one thing.

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“I wrote,” In moments like that, I struggled to get my lips to agree with the words. They still didn't trust this woman and didn’t want to tell her anything.

“I wrote a letter. To her.”

“To your girlfriend?” Elena leaned in. “What did it say?”

Amalee, I wish I knew how to begin to describe you, but I was only just beginning to know you before everything came crashing down. You really meant something to me. You were my real first, someone I cared about and valued. It seems small, but I told my friends about you.

“It was just some things I never got to say to her, I guess.”

When Elena tapped her pen on the desk as she did. I knew she was waiting for me to go on, but I couldn’t give her any more than that.

“Does writing help you work through your feelings?” she asked.

I shrugged. “I guess.”

“Okay,” Elena said. “I have an assignment for you, then. I want you to write out everything you want to say to your parents.”

I was confused. “Everything I want to say?”

“To your mother.”

I didn’t have anything I wanted to say. If anything, I wanted to stop talking altogether.

“She isn’t going to like what I have to say or think. That’s the whole problem.”

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Elena put down her notebook and folded her hands across her lap. She meant business.

"Maya, do you want your parents to trust you again? Enough to let you have your phone back? To see your friends?"

I shrugged. It didn't seem possible. I would live this life until graduation.

"So, tell her that you're sorry. Tell her you know what you did was wrong."

"But I don't feel that way."

"Just try writing it."

I had never created reality through my writing like that before.

It was Elena who instructed me to read my parents' lists of regrets and move forward. It was Elena who had me focus on school and make up my mind about college. It was something they would be proud of, the only redeeming thing about me in their eyes at the time. As a writer I could make awful things useful.

I decided to apply to whatever was the easiest. The UC application lets you apply to four different schools with the same essays. I let whichever accepted me have me. Then, one day, my parents dropped me off in Santa Barbara with a chair and desk and ran off before afternoon traffic.

I thought leaving would solve all my problems, but that chasm never really filled. I still wasn't happy in Santa Barbara, and I realized I hadn't been truly happy for as long as I could remember. I was beginning to think I was very depressed, and with no real reason or outlet for it,

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I decided to forget myself in favor of loving someone else. I rewrote my reality once; I could do it again.

I fell in love again during my sophomore year of college. I didn't dare tell my parents about this girlfriend until we were speeding down the freeway half an hour into our 6-hour drive to San Jose. Going 80 miles an hour in that same car, my girlfriend would later crash on our one-year anniversary. I called my mom to let her know:

"I'm going up north with my girlfriend. We've been dating for about three months, and I'm going to stay at her house for a few days to go to Pride with her dads and her sister."

I don't remember exactly how my mom's voice sounded. Thin, maybe even a bit empty, as if she'd been expecting this or was holding it all in. I knew it was my choice, and it was a choice I had to make, but I still felt like I would break.

PART TWO: FINDING HOME

Don't Want my Desire to be the Color of You

After my confession, my mother and I had little left to say to each other. I hung up the call and fixed my gaze out the window on an empty highway fenced on either side by green grass

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and orange rock, driving further and further from the city. The afternoon sun was just starting to beat down. Samy and I had six hours of road ahead of us.

My girlfriend's hand squeezed my thigh, and I met her eyes and her tentative, trying smile. I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. Its inky darkness was stark against her cheek.

She didn't understand what was going on between my parents and me. If anything, my family problems were an awkward obstacle to her, something to forget as she turned the speakers up again and revved the engine of her beat-up BMW to the Tesla beside us. My stomach tightened, but I said nothing to stop her.

That summer after we'd met, the first time that I agreed to go home with her, I learned that my new girlfriend was a speeder. That was just who Samy was, as a driver and a person. She was reckless, impulsive, and emotionally volatile. Though we had only just met in March, we were already exchanging *I love yous* and speeding 80, 90 miles up the California coast for me to meet her parents at San Francisco Pride.

I should have known we weren't right for each other when she let her friends use the N-word in jest around me, but I had a blind spot for that kind of thing. I thought it was the intention that mattered. Time would show just how bad we were for each other, but I was persistent that I could make it work.

I didn't know it when we first met–at that time, I still considered Samy just another bead on the string of people I dated and who would eventually leave–but I would begin to choose this relationship over all else.—her over my better instincts, over my pain, over my family. To be with her, I had to exclude my family from a large part of my life.

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When I lost my first love, it was half-grown and just starting to bloom. I did not know if I was relieved or resentful that my parents ended it. Like Samy, everything with us was always extreme; we held each other like our lives depended on it. Our love was constantly hanging on a precipice. I feel wheezy to think about it all.

I know now that I went to Samy with all my extremes because that is what I thought lovers were supposed to do. It wasn't fair, but a life-and-death kind of love was all I knew.

Still, we arrived at her family's home in one piece. Samy's dads were warm and welcoming, hugging me tightly as I entered their home. They were both big men who doted on their daughters ceaselessly and quickly took me in as one of them.

They seemed to me unreasonably worried about our safety at San Francisco Pride that year. The Supreme Court had overturned Roe v. Wade earlier that month. Samy's dads, among others, feared that a giant gathering of queers and weirdos in the heart of gay America could be appealing to any newly empowered prolifer types with a gun if any such type existed.

But I had never been to San Francisco or anywhere that far north in California before. It seemed to me that in a city like that, we were untouchable. All of my problems were hours behind.

It was my first Pride festival. As Samy, her family, and I drove into the city, I gawked at the candy-colored houses angled off nearly vertical hills. It was colder than I'd imagined, the car windows frosty. When we arrived at the edge of San Francisco City Hall, Black and Brown couples spilled out of a subway entrance half-naked in shades of hot pink, blue, and yellow. To me, they were the very picture of queer liberation.

"Keep an eye on your phones and purses the whole time. And make sure you call us before you leave the venue," Mr. Flores said. He patted his daughters' heads as his husband,

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Mikael, dug through a purple fanny pack to receive cash for them. Despite the cold, there was a hot, stuffy feeling in the crowd of the entrance on Polk Street, vendors on either side of us waving bags of weed and rainbow t-shirts.

"Wait, where are you guys going?" Samy asked her dads as the two prepared to split off from us. The two stood pressed into each other's sides, engrossed in their phones.

"Leather Alley," Mikael said with a coy smile. "And then maybe a bar? Only adults are allowed in those sections, sorry sweetie."

"Just sneak us in. You could buy us drinks," said Samy's teen sister, Alondra. When I first met Alondra and her friend Tati, I assumed they were much older than 17. As we sped over the Golden Gate Bridge, she blasted the car with Lady Gaga and Russian rave music. She'd made it clear that without a high or buzz, what we did throughout the day was a moot point.

Mr. Flores just laughed. "There's so much to do; I'm sure you'll find something," he told us, scrolling through his phone.

"Go find one of the music stages," said Mikael. "There's a Latin one, oh, and Hip Hop."

Mikael wagged his eyebrow at me. Admittedly, the festival was the most Black and Brown people I had been around in months. I was sick of Santa Barbara EDM and surf rock, and the suggestion excited me. However, we lacked a map and soon found ourselves aimless.

For the first hour of the festival, we meandered through the streets, peeking our heads into booths selling jewelry and pride flags, past go-go dancers in speedos with dollar bills littered at their feet. The venue was contained to a few blocks of the city around the Civic Center Plaza, a big patch of grass where the Main Stage sat before the towering body of the Civic Center.

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Music pumped at every street corner, and voices boomed from the stands draped in white tarps to hide from the overcast sky. Everything drew my attention, and I was desperate to be a part of it all, but Alondra and Tati were bored and expressed it loudly.

"Give me your Stiiizy." Alondra held out her hand to her sister as we stopped at the end of a long block.

Samy pulled the purple vape pen from her pocket, and her sister took a long draw, blowing it up above our heads in a neat ring. Since we arrived, Alondra had one singular goal: to find booze. None of us were twenty-one yet, so her plan was to find some sweet, compassionate-seeming twenty-something in line to buy drinks for us.

"Maybe that one," Alondra said, pointing to an older woman standing in line to buy a drink. The bar stand was on the edge of the sidewalk, a line of people to choose from spilling into the street. This woman was graying but sweet-seeming in her bumblebee-themed outfit.

"No, she looks too old. She'll feel responsible," Tati told her.

Samy scanned the crowd with an interrogative gaze. "I don't know," she said. "She looks cool."

"Do you really need to drink that badly?" I held my arms crossed tightly across my chest.

Alondra rolled her eyes, "I'm going to try." She grabbed her friend's arm and kneaded her way through the crowd.

Samy's elbow nudged my side. "Loosen up," she said, pulling out her phone to take selfies. I held my lips together.

"Here, give me," I took Samy's phone and knelt down to get a better angle of her pink, blue, and purple outfit. She fanned out a pride flag the size of a cape behind her and smiled.

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“Why are you against Alondra getting drinks?” Samy asked me between poses. “It’s not like we’re going get in trouble.” She pointed to a cop standing a few feet away.

I didn’t really have an answer for her. Every day we’d spent with her sister, we’d done so drunk or high or looking to get drunk or high. I was finding it exhausting. In fact, it was becoming concerning to me just how much time Samy spent high.

I could tell that her sister didn’t like me just yet; I was too uptight, and she made me feel too uncool. But I couldn’t say that. Instead, I just told her it didn’t seem like a good use of our time.

Down the street, a crowd formed in front of a Latin band. I watched them dance and sway in couples, yelling exuberantly.

“C’mon, don’t you want to go dance or something?” I asked Samy, pulling her body towards me. I swayed our bodies to and fro with the music. Samy pressed her face into my neck, and her warmth made me feel good again.

“Let's go, just for a second. They’ll be fine.”

Samy laughed but pulled away from my touch. “Just wait for a second.”

She looked over my shoulder.

“Wait, where’d they go?”

In the crowd, Alondra and Tati were nowhere to be seen.

“Fuck,” Samy cursed, pulling out her phone to text Alondra. Standing on the street corner, we waited a few minutes, but no response came.

“Come on,” Samy pulled me down the street. “We have to find her.”

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We traced our way back through the festival, down the line of bar carts, past the Latin stage and the go-go dancers across the Civic Center, until we were back at the entrance facing Polk Street.

"Let's look for the other stages; I bet she ended up somewhere near one of them."

Left of the Main Stage, I could hear bass pumping from a sparsely-lined alleyway.

"Wait, I think that's the Hip Hop stage!" I sped up, excited. "Maybe she's there?"

We made it halfway down the alley when a man in full-body fishnets dashed past us. Then, two women holding tight to each other struggled to run in their high heels, their faces panicked. The music stopped. A few more people scattered past us, and I froze for only a second, meeting Samy's panicked eyes. I grabbed her arm, and we ran towards the Plaza, where a stampede of people fled the stage.

The crowds lounging on the Plaza grass stood up in shifts, alert. Some began to run. Others pelted questions as we ran, like "What's happening?" and "What's going on?"

I could only wheeze out: "I don't know."

No one knew.

Samy and I ran to the far right side of the Plaza, where we crouched behind a then taco trunk. I heaved deep breaths into my burning lungs.

"She won't pick up; why won't she pick up?" Samy banged her phone against the wall in frustration. Still, there was no sign of Alondra.

In front of the Civic Center, a drag queen in a towering white wig was escorted off the stage, the screens around her going dark. The music around us quieted as a voice crackled through the loudspeakers, warning us to stay calm. Someone was working to fix things somehow. They said we just had to remain calm.

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I could hear heavy footsteps, like horses trotting, and heavy breathing, but no gunshots or screaming. Next to me, a large woman with bantu knots placed her hand on my arm.

"It's gonna be alright," she said to me. "We're all going be alright."

I sank to the floor and held in my tears as Samy phoned her dads and sister over and over again to no response. I wondered if I should say a prayer.

"Dad? Dad?" Samy hissed into her phone.

"Where are you?" Mr. Flores finally responded.

"We're by the lawn, in front of the stage."

"Lawn? Which lawn? Wait, what did you say? Where's Alondra?"

Slowly, a calm had settled over the street. Though every cart and booth had been abandoned, only half of the people had filtered out of the venue. Everyone else was asking the people around them what happened. What was going on? No one had a clear answer, but the general consensus was that we were safe. No one was coming to kill us. We were safe.

"Is that Alondra?"

A few feet in front of us, squatting behind a table of unwatched drinks Alondra, Tati, and two boys we hadn't met.

"What is she doing?" I asked.

Samy laughed, relieved. She and her friend had found some boys, and now they were trying to steal more drinks in the chaos.

Samy grabbed her sister by the arm. "Come on, Alondra. We need to leave."

"Why?" Alondra scoffed. "Nothing's happening. We're *fine.*"

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But I still hadn't come down from that feeling of fear. My eyes flitted from Alondra to Samy, to the woman returning to the booth, to the alleyway across the Plaza, to the crowds of people making their way out.

I tugged on Samy's arm, feeling like a child. "Can we please go?"

"I just want to get another drink first," Alondra said.

My body felt antsy, and erratic. "No. I'm not staying."

I walked off without checking to see if Samy was following, though I knew she was eventually.

I didn't really know where I was going. With Samy trailing behind, I struggled to navigate the cityscape to find our meetup spot. I realized for the first time that day that I had no idea where I was, in the city, in the world. That was the farthest I had ever been from home. Santa Barbara was about seven hours away by then, my real home, my parents and my sister, about nine. The fear within me only magnified.

We found the festival entrance on Polk Street, but there was no sign of Mr. Flores or Mikael. While Samy and I held each other to fight off the cold, I watched swaths of people descend down to the BART as police squads arrived at the venue by the dozens—fire trucks, police vans, and at least twenty cycles. We stood shivering in the foggy San Francisco arm for five, ten, fifteen, twenty-five, thirty minutes until Samy got a call from her stepdad.

"Uh-uh. You're where? How long. *Where?*"

Mikael's arm waved at us above the heads of the police cycles, and we ran across the street to meet them. With them, Alondra and Tati, arms crossed and giddy inside their hoodies.

Mikael's face dripped with tears as he swallowed Samy in his arms. He pulled me into a crushing hug next as Mr. Flores began rushing us away.

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"Oh God, we were so worried about you. Where were you guys? What happened?"

I walked quickly with her dads, retelling the tale again while Samy fell behind with her sister.

"Where were you guys when we left before you?" Samy asked.

"We got the lady to buy us drinks, what do you mean?"

The girls laughed, and I huddled into my jacket. I wanted to feel calm and relieved to laugh at the situation, but for some reason, I just couldn't.

When we got back to Samy's house, we found out that there were no shooting or bomb threats that day like we had assumed. I found out from Twitter, watching a video from under the covers of Samy's bed, freshly showered and raw: there was a fight that started at the Hip Hop stage, and an idiot who decided pepper spray was the solution. People scattered from the scene, and that fear butterflied.

"So there was no reason for us to run?" Samy scoffed.

"There could have been." Something in me needed to insist this.

"But there wasn't."

I said nothing back. How was she so fine? "I'm gonna call my mom, okay?"

Samy shrugged and returned to her phone, curling away from me but still close enough to hear. I turned the other way and listened to the line ring. I willed her to pick up, please pick up.

"Hello?" Relief was the scratchy sound of my mother's voice on the other end of the line.

"Hi, Mommy?" I gasped. "I'm at Samy's–I'm at my girlfriend's house. We got here yesterday, I'm safe."

"Oh, that's good." She sounded genuinely relieved.

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I waited for her to say something, anything, about what she was thinking about Samy. But for once, she didn't. It was like she was holding her tongue, but about what, I didn't know.

"We just got back from Pride, actually."

"Well, how was it?"

"It was.. it was fine. Good. I mean drove all the way to San Francisco, and then we had to park and take an Uber there, but they took us to the wrong location. The Uber driver thought we were going to a building called P.R.I.D.E, I think it was some kind of metal works shop, Oh, and I saw the outside of that big domed museum. It was really beautiful, except for some man that was on the lawn dancing in a thong."

"Well, you wanted to go to San Francisco. Those are your people."

"I know, I know," I laughed. "But, um, something did happen at the Pride."

Mommy paused. "Oh?"

I didn't quite know how to tell her what had happened. I didn't want her to live in fear of what would happen to me as I ventured further and further out into a world she didn't understand.

"Yeah, it was nothing, really. Just, like, there were people running from one of the stages, and some things got shut down. I guess they thought somebody had a gun or something. But they didn't."

Another pause. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. We are."

She sounded out of breath. "I'm glad you two are okay."

"Yeah, me too," I said, tears welling in my eyes. "Mommy, I love you."

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I hoped that was enough to say everything that went unsaid, that I was sorry that I missed her, that I wished things were good enough between us that we could be together. More than anything in the world, I wanted her.

"I love you too. Be safe over there, please, okay?"

I wondered what in her words went unsaid.

"I know. I will."

I hung up the phone and rolled over into Samy's arms, pressing my wet eyes into her chest. She wrapped her arms around me, but somehow, they felt frail and weak, so I clutched her harder.

"Are you okay?" Samy asked.

I was happy to be alive and glad to be with someone I loved, but I desperately wanted to be somewhere that felt like home.

"Yeah."

I decided it was better to hold it all in. I didn't know what to say or how to say it, so it was better if I said nothing at all. Then, I would be okay. But really, I was still stuck in that state of fear. A large part of me felt like I needed to run. Since I couldn't, all I could do was cling closer to her.

Not long after the trip, I started to have anxiety attacks again, ones like I'd had back in high school or behind the abandoned truck in San Francisco. I wanted to turn to Samy for help, but something had broken between us.

When I left Samy after our Pride trip, I quickly began to spiral. The fear that never left my body translated into endless crying and a deep depression. Without her, most days, I was unable to leave my bed. But I was constantly on my toes when we were together, so high I could

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only anxiously await a fall. When we were good, we were each other's reasons for living; when we were bad, it felt like the world ceased to turn.

The longer we stayed together, the more we fought over money, responsibilities, friends, family, sex. Things always seemed to end in us hurting each other or ourselves: Our first breakup. My 20th birthday. The first trip to meet my parents. Our second breakup. When Samy got upset with me, she would smoke herself into oblivion and go silent, turning away from me and not speaking for hours. I'd sit in that silence, itching until it all burst, and I went ballistic, threatening to leave. Then it'd all start over again.

When my mom got an inkling that things weren't quite right, she referred me to a therapist from the clinic she saw in Long Beach. It helped for a while.

I'd log onto my Zoom therapy sessions weekly and tell my therapist, Monique, about my anxiety, my inability to socialize or eat or get out of bed, and the urge to hurt myself again, but never about Samy. Somehow, the inability to talk about my relationship with my family had morphed into an inability to talk about my relationship, period.

To talk about the relationship negatively, the relationship I had so badly wanted, had worked so hard for, felt like treason. It was as if I didn't truly accept all the apologies and promises to get better and believe that we were right together.

That year, on Thanksgiving, my mother met Samy for the first time. This time, Samy was coming to stay with my family. A few hours before all my relatives were meant to arrive, I went to my mother in tears. She stood in the kitchen in an apricot housedress, basting a large turkey, a spread of foiled containers lining the countertops. I said nothing but went into her open arms.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" she asked. I shook my head. My mother couldn't fix my relationship.

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She held me for a moment, smelling of warm lily petals and brine. When she pulled me back, I did not expect the stony look in her eyes. My mother held me by the shoulders as she spoke to me.

"Maya, some people are in your life for a season, a reason, or a lifetime. This doesn't have to be your forever."

I desperately wanted to be seen by her, but I felt suddenly fragile and pulled away. I knew she could see right through us. How often had I seen my parents fight in the same way? My mother was no fool.

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I turned my head so she could no longer see the tears in my eyes. "Please don't say that."

"Your grandparents are going to be here soon. Ask yourself what really matters."

But I still felt it was me against them, and I chose her.

So we all sat around the dining room table, pretending everything was alright. Samy arrived late, which only made coming out to my grandparents more awkward. But unlike the million catastrophes I'd imagined of this moment over the years, no one said a word. I wasn't a child anymore; my decisions were mine alone and mine to live with.

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Samy grimaced as we said grace. I'd known for a while that she didn't believe in that kind of thing. I just didn't think she would look down on my family.

As they did every time I left home, my father kissed me on the forehead, and my mother held back tears as she held me one last time. I knew, because my sister told me so, that she cried each time I left, just waiting for me to disappear around the corner before she let it show. For the first time in a very long time, I let myself cry too.

My girlfriend and I's relationship ended the day of our one-year anniversary. What I remember most clearly is struggling to hold her upright in the shower of my college apartment. Samy's short frame shivered against me as the steam rose from her skin, vibrant pink from the heat and yet so pale she seemed nearly dead. Her head hung against my shoulder, inky strands clinging to her face. I ran my fingers through them, but she wouldn't open her eyes. Her body against mine felt like a heartbeat: warm and soft, fragile.

I felt like if I let her go for even a second, she would disappear, and I would be left with nothing.

It happened on the curve of the Ventura highway. The morning after our last fight, Samy no longer wanted to go on the trip I'd planned. She said it would just be a waste of money and energy. Why couldn't we just stay in? Why couldn't that be enough?

It was my punishment for pushing so relentlessly for the perfect anniversary trip. I didn't really even want it for us. I more wanted to prove that this relationship was everything I thought it would be. I needed the expensive hotel and perfect anniversary story to prove that I'd made the right choice; to my mother, who knew we were wrong for each other the moment they met; to my grandmother, who refused to remember her name; to my father who would still only call her my friend. But mostly to myself, as I still believed this relationship would fill my emptiness.

As we drove off from my apartment, I kissed Samy's hand and held it in mine. I thought, "If I love her hard enough, I can make it all better."

Two hours later, a swift jolt and the ear-splitting screech of crunching metal and glass woke me from my sleep.

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“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Samy was screaming, tears bubbling in the corners of her eyes. Her hands were covered in little cuts, and blood gushed from her top lip and gums. Above my head, her car’s windshield was splintered like a spiderweb.

How many times had I let her drive around in that car, kissed her in that car, screamed and cried in that car, only to see it totaled in the middle of a busy freeway–hood was folded up like a piece of tinfoil?.

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Time slowed around me like Jell-O. I could see Samy through the cracked windshield, fragments of her with her head in her hands, pacing in front of all that smoke and debris. I pushed myself out of the passenger seat, my arms and legs stiff, and flattened myself against the side of the car facing the busy highway. It was freezing cold and loud. Each car that skidded by vibrated in my bones. The owners of the Tesla she’d crashed into looked at us both without an idea of what to do. Their car was merely dented. Samy would have to pay for that later.

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I tucked myself into the backseat of the car, terrified of the highway rushing around me. Inside, it smelled like chemicals, and I choked on them.

I knew then that it was over. Without a car, our long-distance visits would simply end, and after those next few days, I would likely never see Samy again. But in the moment, that was too heavy a thought. For that night, I focused on lathering her hair with shampoo and washing the smoke from it, picking out pieces of shattered glass with my pruned fingertips.

For the next few days I would pet her head and coax her out of bed. I would hold her up in the shower and scrub her back. I would try not to remember that it was our anniversary.

At the end of her trip, Samy caught a ride back home from my roommate and left the BMW’s bones parked in front of my apartment. She gathered all that was left from her car: old ID cards, several pairs of sneakers, and a Ziploc bag of shrooms.

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We clung to each other and cried in a familiar way in the driveway. Then, we said goodbye. That was the last time I ever held her.

When the car had driven off, I crawled back into the backseat of Samy's BMW and held my knees to my chest while waiting. I wanted to feel something, smell some familiar scent, feel some familiar feeling. A comforting warmth. Home.

There was nothing left in that car but metal scraps and empty memories.

Death and Ancestors

As a child, grief was stored in my father's room, the thickness of incense sticks burning in a glass cup and a wall of old photographs and funeral pamphlets that stretched from the floor to the ceiling: his wall of ancestors.

I believe he prayed to them and spoke to them. Most of the Black Christians I have known do not seriously believe in witchcraft, magic, or voodoo, yet our culture has so many spiritual practices that predate Christianity. They persist despite it. Seep into us, make a habit of things others can't understand.

It's why we make collard greens and black-eyed peas for luck on New Year's Day and open windows to let out spirits we supposedly don't believe in; why we don't let young girls put their purses on the floor; why we hop the broom to honor our past and our ancestors.

For me, religion has always been the old, wood church in Santa Monica where my father and his siblings were raised. For years, I had told myself that it was that church that had separated me from my family. I remember my uncle Damone, our pastor, telling the congregation that his brother, who liked men, was condemned to hell. That day, I excused myself

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to the bathroom as I couldn't keep myself from crying. I was only 13, but I told myself that I would never willingly step foot in that church again.

As years passed, I did my best to make good on that promise. By the time I returned from college, the church hardly felt mine to claim anymore. I only ever visited our church in Santa Monica when it was time for a funeral. The first was my Grandad. Then Auntie Corkie. Then Uncle Paul. Though the church was hardly mine to claim anymore, it was still where we came to lay our dead to rest. It brought us together for better or for worse.

ItMy whole family–grandparents aunts uncles, as well as distant cousins and family friends–gathered in the space for mourning time and time again. It was my grandmother's soulful mezzo-soprano rising above the church pews in the hymn. It was Sunday dinner in the church classroom, trying to guess whose sweet potato pie was on the menu and if it was store-bought or homemade. Those were the moments when I felt something; I just didn't have the words for them then. It was all too complicated.

For my father, the eclectic history teacher, religion and mysticism often became one. He was a Black history teacher who devoted several years to painting a giant map of the world onto his classroom wall with drawings of indigenous artifacts and flags. His classroom was a museum filled with wooden busts, African drums, and finger instruments. My dad was also known to get into theological debates with his brother, our pastor. In my atheistic, rebellious phase, I liked the way that he poked holes in the logic of the Bible and the timeline of Christ. I felt satisfied in my belief in nothing. As I got older, though, it was his wall of ancestors that stuck with me the most.

I remember the day I walked into my father's room and saw my Grandad's funeral pamphlet, newly added to the wall. Not his father, but my mother's father. After my Grandad

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passed, it felt like our whole house went through a heavy depression. I suppose it was mostly my mother's to bear, but nonetheless I felt it well into my teen years.

It was my dad who took us outside to the stream behind Grandad's funeral home and told us not to cry when my mother could barely speak and did not want to be touched.

I didn't know at the time what kind of complicated relationship my mother had with her father; I just knew that he was my Grandma's husband and my Grandad. He had the arms of a sailor, big and covered in tattoos that he'd use to swing me around as a child. He taught my sister and me to fish, the right kind of bait to use, and how to cast the rod. He once even taught me that when the bad sitcoms we watched on Disney Channel used laugh tracks, it was because their joke really wasn't that funny, and they wanted to convince us otherwise. Sometimes, he'd leave for a long time and then reappear, but he'd always come back, and he'd be sitting on the couch with a TV table and whatever my grandma cooked for dinner, ready to crack a joke or dispel wisdom.

One day, when I was 10, my mom took us out for frozen yogurt after school and sat us down at our dining room table, me on her lap and my sister leaning over us. This was in the rented house I lived in through middle school that none of us really liked. It had weird brown carpeting and the stain of cat piss on the dining room wall behind where we sat. It was the house where we got robbed one day–with nothing much to steal besides Daddy's camera that held a bulk of home videos and my mother's nice gold jewelry. And it was where Mommy told us that Grandad had cancer.

It could have been weeks or months after that that she sat us down in her bedroom and let us know that Grandad was dead.

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When my mom lost her father, she became the first model for grief I had. I watched that sadness fester inside her, turning everything in that house dark. I was too young to really understand all that death had changed around me. Instead, I felt the displacement deep within, an emptiness that grew without explanation or announcement over the next few years.

I never got to know my Grandad as an adult or even a teenager. To me, he was an unfinished painting, splashes of color over a rough sketch with the white of the paper always peeking through.

Yet, for years, I couldn't listen to songs that had played at his funeral. Bill Withers, *Just the Two of Us*, and *As* by Stevie Wonder stuck with me the most. Just the first few notes of *As* could bring me to tears–unbearable, choking tears. The feelings songs can bring out of people have always had a spiritual quality to me. In the church I grew up in, we never sang with a choir. We were to lift up our voices in praise of God so that my tiny voice meant something.

I could not sing those songs.

At age 11, I walked into my father's room and saw my Grandad's funeral pamphlet among my great aunts and great grandparents in orange-tinged and black and white photos. He was the first face I could recognize. His voice was the only one I could still hear in my head if I focused hard enough.

I often went into my father's room to stare at the wall when he was not home. If I spoke to my grandfather, I would always scurry out after. I felt that if someone caught me and saw me, then it would be less real.

I know that my father added him to the wall for us. To give a way to grieve. To keep him alive.

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Over the years, as the idea of church became more poisonous, I began collecting eclectic little rituals. I never told anyone about them because I felt no one around me would understand them as anything but silly. I even struggled to believe in anything seriously.

Still, I've saved and dried every flower I ever got from a lover. At night, when I get nightmares, which I often have, I place lavender and rough, raw stones below my pillow and pray for calm sleep. Like my father, I've developed a proclivity for burning incense sticks; wherever I move, I must always have family portraits on the wall.

When I put the first portraits up at the beginning of my time at university, there were three in my apartment. One was of my sister and I, taken just before I left home. The second was of my parents, my mother smiling with her nose scrunched up the way I so often do now. The third was a Johnson family portrait from last Fourth of July we celebrated before I left. The last one with all of us: Grandma and Grandpa; all seven of their children, their partners, children, and dogs; and close family friends. We all stood or sat beneath my Aunt's trellis in her backyard in Inglewood. Only one person was missing: my Uncle Paul. He was standing on the edge of the trellis, cut out of the frame of my perfect 4x4 print.

It was as if he fell from the photo.

Now, when one of the portraits falls, I get nervous and antsy. The last time that portrait fell, I immediately called my dad to check in on my grandmother, who had been in the hospital for some time. This superstition came because of Uncle Paul.

It began the night I left work in November, when I startedmy junior year of college with a familiarly homesick lull.

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I was getting started at my new job. I left the restaurant in a slump of flour and exhaustion when I got a call from my dad. At this new job, my parents never knew when I was working, and when I was not, it could be at twelve a.m. or eight in the morning, and so they started every call with the same script:

"Hey love–are you busy?"

I told my dad I was out of work and continued walking home, past the Starbucks storefront glowing in green neon light. His voice sounded different than usual; sniffly and strained. I didn't know my father to be a man who often cried.

"You know Uncle Paul has been in the hospital again."

Yes, I knew, I told him. Perhaps I had been too caught up in my own bullshit again to pay close attention, though. I knew that Uncle Paul had been in and out of the hospital since the beginning of summer.

That June, he had come to pick me up from the Union Station to take me out to lunch. He didn't say why, there was no special occasion. He just wanted to see me.

When he first arrived, he seemed boisterous as ever, cracking jokes and making conversation with strangers in line as I knew him to do. It wasn't until we left the restaurant that I noticed his skin was fading in color, and the smile lines on his face seemed deeper than before.

From the start, he had kept his energy levels up for me, even made that long drive from Riverside to Union Station, a drive so long in his condition that I don't even know now how to comprehend it. On our way back, he talked of the expectations everyone had of him and how they were weighing on him in those days. I didn't realize that he was dying.

Us Johnsons always seemed to bounce back. It would be a slow recovery, but a recovery nonetheless.

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"Uncle Paul," my dad said slowly. "He–he's passed."

Something left my body. My legs went weak, so I gripped the ramp to stay upright.

"No. No, I thought he was getting better. That's why you waited to tell me he was back in the hospital, why I didn't go home."

It was just the next in a series of surgeries from which he would recover. Until that moment, I hadn't even begun to entertain the possibility of death.

I don't think I ever really left that night, breathless, holding myself up against the ramp rail. Later that night, I picked up my phone to call Samy, but I had nothing to say to her. She didn't feel like home to me anymore. I curled up alone in my busy apartment and cried myself to sleep from grief and guilt and wondered why I hadn't been there.

I felt so alone at school, grieving in an apartment of five girls, none of whom really knew me or could support me, my family, miles and miles away. I felt for the first time that need for something higher. I wanted, needed, to see things in things, higher coincidences. I began to collect little rituals like my father, hanging portraits on my wall and burning incense sticks, hoping the smell would heal me.

I thought of speaking to my father's wall and understood his need to have them there, to always see them, so they didn't just disappear. I no longer wanted to push it away. I wanted to remember it all. To hold onto them all.

When I lost my uncle, he had become one of my favorite people. He was the one that introduced me to my favorite movie, *The Wiz*. When I was much younger, we would watch it each time he visited, at my request, so I could hear Diana Ross sing "When I Think of Home" in that sweet gospel tone. It reminded me of my grandmother. It felt like home.

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He was the one who made my favorite food: slow-cooked, dry-rubbed pork ribs. When he bar-be-qued, he'd have to make pounds of them, portioned out into metal tins covered in foil, which got distributed to everyone he knew, bought and fought over.

When I was a scrawny middle-school student, stretched-out like a green bean, Uncle Paul tried to get me to join his basketball team, and drove me out into Los Angeles to awkwardly shoot balls. It's because of him that I passed that unit in PE. "Just aim for the backboard," he told me.

In high school, he took my sister and me to our first and only baseball game in Dodger Stadium. Uncle Paul bought tickets for us and his nephew and took us all over L.A. from Watts to Union Station. He was the first one to ever walk me through Union Station all those years ago. It was, to me, so breathtakingly grand and bustling, like taking a big step into some unknown new start.

The last time I saw him, my Uncle Paul took me to get French-dipped sandwiches and pie at the same restaurant we went to on Dodgers Day. As I knew him to do, he talked to just about anyone he could in line, even the cops behind us. I'd always considered myself as shy and so sheltered, but Uncle Paul made everyone feel like they could talk to him.

I told him about my girlfriend that day, one of the first ones in my family I came out to. I thought the way he reacted to this new bit of information about me was funny, telling me stories of his player days in high school as if I was suddenly just a nephew to him.

He was one of the funniest people I knew, even though all my Uncles are very funny. They each have their own type of funny, and Uncle Paul was a mean type of funny, but he was a

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good enough man to shit-talk anyone within spitting distance and still be overwhelmingly beloved. His nickname for my mom was Auntie shit. When she was on the phone with him, I'd always hear her howling with laughter from her room. If I remember the story correctly, I think he might have been the reason my parents met at one of his parties, where my Mom's friends knew Paul, because *everyone* knew and loved Paul.

I wonder what it means that my Uncle Paul is an ancestor, too now. He was always godly in a way. He knew everyone and how to do everything. His funeral was a large gathering at the church, each wooden pew filled and huge bouquets scattered at the pulpit. His basketball team held another celebration for him afterward. I am far from the only one who loves and misses him and thinks of him daily.

I think of him when I cook; when I straighten the portraits on my wall; when my mom laughs on the phone with my uncles and when my dad barbeques in the backyard. And I think of him every time I walk through Union Station, finally heading back home again. I think of him stopping by the communal piano, bathed in that ringy, angelic sound, cracking jokes at the scruffy man singing along to Stevie Wonder.

Though I can't be sure, my brain likes to believe the song was *As*, simply for my own sense of something higher, though it was likely something more upbeat like *Superstition* or *Isn't She Lovely*. Instead, I like to remember it as if it was plucked from a hymn book on the back of the church's old wooden pews. I wish I could still hear it, let the sound of his humming repeat on:

(Until the trees and seas just up and fly away) always

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(Until the day that eight times eight times eight is four) always

(Until the day that is the day that are no more)

Always.