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Spring 5-2021

Blood-Ties and Misfortune

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Recommended Citation

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Justin Frasier

Blood-Ties and Misfortune

I exited my mother's womb fighting against the pull of the doctor. With all the strength in my body I held on, not wanting to be thrust into this world. I was told that my crying sounded like the wail of a dying animal, like the whimper of a wounded dog. I could not stop crying because I knew what lay ahead for me—a life of pain and sorrow. Mama cradled me but that wouldn't help. She told me that I would scream so much that my body turned red. I know I shouldn't remember those details, but pain sticks with you no matter what.

As I look back now, desperately scouring my early memory for clarity, I see a boy who would've been better off dead. I often wonder about the entity that put me here whether it be God or something else, and I think about why I was born. Was it some sick joke? Were my tears sustenance and entertainment for some higher being? Why is existence so painful?

I sit here writing, because it is the only way I know how to cope with the pain. It is the only way I can confront the ugliness that I have experienced. I want to be able to put the past to rest, and in order to do that, I must face confront it.

Boyhood

My eyes were shut and my body, in fetal position, was cradled by the mattress. The blue comforter insulated me from the unheated room. A hand clasped my shoulder tightly and shook me gently. The grip was firm enough that I could feel it through my deep slumber. As I unraveled and turned over, I could smell my father's cigarette-soaked breath. The scent clung to his clothes tightly, as he leaned over me. Through the slits of my eyes, I saw his furrowed brow

behind the frame of his glasses. He moved the yellow curtains away and told me to go brush my teeth. His tone was quiet yet serious; I could hear the threat in his voice. I slowly moved my feet to the cold maple-hardwood floor. I peered out the window into the void of darkness. A block of light from the nail salon was glimmering unabashedly across the landlord's backyard. I got up and moved to the window to see if anyone was in the salon. No one was present and, I wondered why they always kept the lights on. But, as my train of thought was diverted, I remembered my task. Father would be upset if I wasted time, so I moved from the window and made my way to the bathroom. As I passed by Father and Mama's room, an image of her burly body popped into my head. Her face with its soft curves and gray-streaked black hair was cemented in my mind. A tinge of despair pierced my chest and sunk into my stomach. I kept walking in the direction of the bathroom.

I studied my face in the mirror, scrutinizing my skin and chubby cheeks. I quickly put on a gray sweater and some blue jeans. Father was already waiting by the door, his brow, wrinkled as usual, looked dissatisfied that I had taken so long. He was never content with anything that I did. I followed him down the stairs and into the white SUV, peering up at the insipid gray sky.

We took off from Harlem quickly turning south down Lenox, then Adam Clayton Powell until we reached Central Park. As we entered the park, I felt my body begin to jitter and my stomach tighten. Thinking about school, I saw the awful strips of fluorescent lighting which lined the ceiling too symmetrically. The lights would beam into my eyes with its comfortless hues. Mama's image forced its way back into my head again. I wished I could've gone with her when she left. I tried to distract myself from the thought, not wanting to endure that pain.

I peered out the window as the car rose up the bending hill. I saw bikers and joggers struggling to ascend. The trees loomed over us; its branches formed a protective shield against the ugliness of the grey sky. Some leaves fell in front of car as we came out of the bend.

We finally arrived at The Upper West Side. The people in this neighborhood were mostly white, and I could feel the shift in the air; like I wasn't supposed to be there. Once the light turned green, we turned left heading further south on Central Park West until we reached 81st street and down West End, where my school was located.

*

Father had a bad temper and It didn't take much to upset him. Mama would end up being the punching bag. He would come home on Friday's drunk and fuming. Whether it was the fact that it was raining that day, or that Mama had cooked an unpleasant meal, Father always griped about something on Friday's. On those days, I learned to steer clear of him, staying in my room reading or playing with toys. On the days when he wasn't drinking, he was quiet and in his own head. I was cautious around him, and made sure not to upset him, but always scared.

*

We sat in the car waiting for the clock to hit 8:25. There were kids littered on the sidewalk in their little cliques. Some stood there gossiping or talking about sports teams, but then there were the others, like me. The loners, the nobodies, the isolated bunch. We were the prey that served as nourishment for the groups to feed off of. They would torture us during recess, knocking the air out of our stomachs, or torment us during class calling us names.

Father turned the radio on; it sizzled to life. On it, there was a song playing that sounded vaguely familiar. It was "Roxanne", by The Police. As the song came to life, I could hear the

guitar riff in sequence behind the melodic tunes of the lead singer. I nodded my head inaccurately to every beat and started to hum the tune poorly. Father started humming too. He looked up at me through the interior mirror and I smiled back. The drums tapped steadily beneath the riff and the singer, making for a perfect union in sound. I wanted time to slow down or maybe even stop so that I could live in this happiness. I wanted Father's rare smile to be imprinted in my memories, so I stared at him trying to absorb every inch of his curved lips and crooked teeth. The doors to the school opened and a scatter of kids filed into the narrow doorway. I could feel something tickle the back of my throat; I thought I was going to vomit. My stomach was twisted, and my heart was thumping quickly to the beat of a galloping horse. Father's smile evaporated as quickly as it had been formed. My heart sank, I would actually have to go to class. I walked up the stairs to the 3rd floor and followed the rest of the 5th graders to our classroom. I placed my lunch and backpack in my cubby and proceeded to walk into the room. Once again, I was collided with the fluorescent lighting and its brutal, relentless blaze. I waited for the rest of the students to pile in. My teacher sat at her desk, passively greeting students. She was this blonde woman who always smelled like coffee. I could tell that some students had difficult lives at home. They would tumble into class, feet dragging and backs hunched, with the same clothes they came in with the previous day.

Before I knew it, it was lunch time and then recess. Some of us would grab our lunches from our cubbies while others would get lunch provided by the school. We would then file in a line and take the elevator down to the cafeteria. The lunchroom was divided—the boys sat closest to the door that we came through, while the girls sat towards the door leading to the playground.

As the rest of the students made their way to their groups, I stood awkwardly in the center evaluating which table would be appropriate for me to sit at. I scanned the room looking for an empty seat. I saw one but it was with the boys who towered over me with their big predatory eyes and white, saber-like teeth. I squeezed my cherry red lunch box tightly as my nerves began to ramp up. My palms started to heat and sweat swarmed my pores. My knees began to shake and I felt as if my legs would buckle under my own weight. I moved in, with an air of caution like I was going to disarm a bomb. I sat down; my heart beating. I tried to keep my gaze centered in on my lunchbox—blocking out the glares and looks of disgust that were inevitably showering my way. I wolfed down my Bologna and bread sandwich and drank my apple juice. I looked up, afraid of what I might see. They were glancing at each other and glaring at me. I was a baby lamb, lost from the herd. One of them, the boy sitting across from me, asked why the fuck I was sitting here. The expletive cut across my mind leaving me stunned and unable to respond. He repeated himself, this time adding more force to his tone. He got up and moved in my direction. He morphed from a 5th grade classmate into a baleful Goliath. I crouched into my seat, feeling the warm trail of urine cascade down my right leg. As he neared, I heard the saving grace of my teacher’s voice bellow from the other side of the room. We both looked in the teacher’s direction. The boy then looked down at my pants and started laughing hysterically.

“James just pissed himself!”

I peered down at my pants and saw the dark spot where the pee had been secreted. I wanted to roll up into a ball and press my ears in. The teacher, with a look of concerned pity, grabbed me by the arm and guided me upstairs to the principal’s office.

*

3 Years Ago

It was late at night and I was waiting for the graces of sleep to envelop me. I suddenly heard the keys jiggle in the lock of the front door. I then heard the keys fall on the ground followed by a stifled laugh emitted from Father as he reached down to grab them. He finally got the door open and threw his shoes on the ground thunderously. Mama emerged from her bedroom door, which was to the left of mine, and shushed Father. I could hear the soft murmurs of words being exchanged. It escalated, with Father shouting.

“Bitch, get out of my face!”

Immediately, I popped out of bed and managed to wiggle myself out of my sheets. The clash continued and then I heard the heavy strikes of flesh being brutalized. There was a burning urge for me to witness the source of the beating. By the time I made my way around the corner, both Father and Mama were in their bedroom. Her head was locked in between his arms, as he squeezed. I could see the effort in his eyes as he tightened his hold. I ran to her aid; pulling his arms, but they were locked together by determination. He looked at my face, and through his drunken pupils I saw a fusion of childhood pain and immense anger. He thrust me onto the ground, causing me to slam my head. He then walked over me. He opened the front door and left. Mama came to me and held me tightly as she cried.

A couple hours had passed, and police had come and gone but they were no help. Day was breaking and I was on Mama and Father’s bed making a great attempt to fall asleep. I heard the front door creak open. My father’s head popped out, his eyes were pooling with tears and his nose dangled stringy mucus which spilled onto his shirt. He stepped towards his bedroom, where I was laying down, and called my name. I snapped to his direction and sat up on the bed. I edged

towards the wall, opposite of him. I somehow hoped that the wall would give me strength to fend him off. I could feel the bed sink as he applied his weight and crawled up to me. He looked at my eyes and pleaded to for forgiveness. I could hear him snuffle as he spoke. My breathing accelerated; I felt trapped. At the same time, I was worried that when Mama found out that he was home they would get into it again. Just then, Mama opened the bathroom door from within. I saw it as a chance to free myself, so I hopped of the bed with such a speed and ran towards Mama. She held me tightly, and I could feel the warmth radiate off of her body. I could also feel her heart; which sounded tired as it laboriously pushed out one beat after the next. She yelled at my father to get out. He responded with slamming their bedroom door shut. Mama pulled me into the bathroom with her and closed the door. I buried my head into her warm fluffy arms. She began to hum "This Little Light of Mine," and I could feel her chest vibrate to the tune of the song. I could feel the warm trails of tears sliding down my cheek. As she cradled me, I looked up to her searching for some hope in her eyes. What I saw was a woman who was slowly being drained; her eyes were bloodshot and her face pale. Her armor worn, bruised, and fading.

She brought me outside of the bathroom and led me to my room. She covered me up in my comforter and switched the lights off. The cerulean sky was seeping through the lemon-yellow curtains. When I awoke, I searched for her. I walked through all the rooms in the apartment, and she was nowhere to be found. I called for her, only to be greeted by the sounds of rush hour outside. I went to the bathroom and closed the door. My brain was in disarray, my thoughts battled each other for attention. My mind was inflating, growing to a size greater than it was supposed to be. I was dizzy and disoriented. The white incandescent light bulbs made my head hurt. I started to feel a rageful burn spread through my muscles as they tightened. Why

would she leave me? How could she leave me? My own mother, the woman who seemed to care so much, left me to fend for myself.

*

Jane was an old lady who used to be a colleague of my mothers who stayed close to us. She was the one who picked me up from school after I had my accident because Mama and Father were both at work.

My body tremored and my hands were unable to stay steady. I was wearing navy-blue sweatpants which were retrieved from the lost and found. They made my legs itch and insulated my legs warmly. I saw Jane make her way down the long hallway. I was slightly annoyed that she was here to pick me up.

Whenever she came to pick me up, she would always show me around and take me on these wild excursions. I was too polite to tell her the truth—that I just wanted to go home and watch TV. Today was no different, she picked me up with her bubbly personality, and said with a smile across her face:

“I have somewhere exciting to take you!”

I rolled my eyes in my head and just complied. I saw that she was carrying her William-Sonoma tote bag with her. I wondered if there were any treats in there. After we gathered my things and left the building, Jane opened up the tote bag and sure enough there were brownies. Their milk-chocolate brown made my mouth salivate, and for moment, I got a hint of their sweet smell which only tantalized my appetite.

We crossed the street honing in on the park's entrance. The sun was at its golden hour, and unlike the morning, there were no clouds in the sky. We entered and I was immediately immersed. The trees towered over us creating streaks of light which pounded the grass and pavement. The wind stroked past my nostrils gently, producing the slight aroma of grass. I could hear the birds tweeting as we passed by cute dogs leading their owners. I was a little cranky, but as I started feeling the sensations of nature's presence, my annoyance subsided. As we continued walking, through the trees, I saw a glass structure attached to a much larger marble structure. Its ivory color intrigued me, but I didn't really care for what was inside. Jane stopped me dead in my tracks and pointed at the building. It was the MET, she said, it was an art museum. I noticed the annoyed looks that people gave us for stopping in the middle of the walkway. Their annoyance manifested itself in me and I started feeling vexed at Jane.

This irritation did not go away quickly, but sizzled on after we had continued our journey. I didn't care for the MET at first. Would the MET fix my family life? Would the MET bring my mother back home to me? As we sat down on the stairs, Jane unpacked the box of brownies distracting me from my frustrations with life. The first bite was explosive. The sweet flavors of chocolate lathered over my taste buds. We shared them eating slowly so that we could savor the various flavors. I must admit, I felt better after the treat. I was even slightly looking forward to the museum and its exhibits.

Then Jane asked what had happened at school. I answered with silence not wanting to relive that terrifying moment. I didn't really feel comfortable pouring my emotions out to Jane, regardless of the fact that I knew her since I was 3. She continued to stare in my direction, as if waiting would force the answer out of me, but eventually moved on.

"Let's check out the museum." She said shifting to her tone to a higher octave.

The ceiling soared up and arched over us. I was captivated by the quiet, peaceful atmosphere which served as a thick presence. We walked through the various rooms. There was the medieval art section which was a wide-spaced area. All of the ivory-colored sculptures were in the open standing mightily. They basked in the natural light which poured in overhead from the stained-glass windows. Then, there was the armor section. Humans twice the size of me, armed with spears and swords, sat atop their horses forever in position. On our way out we stopped at the Egyptian room. I had never seen anything like it before. One side of the room was glass, letting the light reign in freely. I was enthralled by this room. My youthful angst had dissipated and been replaced by a fascination of this extraordinary exhibition.

In all honesty, I didn't want to leave, and I was in a state of dejection when I realized that I had to confront reality. As we exited the museum, facing the unrestrained bustle of 5th avenue, I thought about that apartment. I thought about the wickedness that the walls bore witness to. It made me want to escape my life and forget I had ever lived it. It made Jane's company bearable and even appreciated. All my yearning to be away from it all wouldn't change the fact that that was my home. This time, we caught the crosstown bus headed west and caught the 3 train back uptown to Harlem. Jane and I rode in silence. I stared out the pitch-black train window watching morsels of tunnel lights whip by as the train accelerated. Through the window, I could see my reflection. My twiggy body was a smaller replica of my father's body. My face had his wide nose and floppy ears. I looked in disgust; seeing parts of him in my face.

As we exited the subway, darkness was approaching. I didn't really like the night, it scared me; or rather, the things people did at night scared me. It seemed like a certain level of mischievousness flooded dusks aura. Jane led the way because she walked faster than me. We turned right on 126th street passing underneath the soft amber-colored street lamps. I enjoyed the

way the mellow, honey-amber lamp gently guided my path. I felt a comforting heat suffuse throughout my insides; almost as if my arteries were carrying a homey feeling alongside the oxygenated blood. We approached my apartment. Jane opened her arms for a hug, I reluctantly gave in. She squeezed me hard giving me a whiff of her floral scented perfume. I understood why she didn't stick around; Father didn't like her very much. He didn't like anyone very much.

*

I often look at pictures of Mama and Father when they were young. There's one photo in particular that I like. It's a photo of Mama, smiling with Father's arm wrapped around her waist. They are on a boat, The Circle Line, and you can see the city skyline to the right. They look at the camera, unaware of what the future holds. Unaware of the pain that they will suffer once the love has eroded. I wish I could go back and warn them about how unhappy they would be, but then I wouldn't have been created; maybe that wouldn't be a bad thing.

Sometimes I cry when I look at those photos. Am I the reason they are so unhappy? No, it must be something else, I reassure myself. I cry because their happiness looks so pure it seemed unalterable.

Mama had met Father through my uncle when she first came to America. Mama was from Barbados and left seeking a better life. Mama told me that when she first met Father, he was this handsome dark man, whose quiet demeanor was magnetizing. She was attracted to his eyes which seemed to hide behind his glasses. When she peered into his eyes, she saw something lovable, a certain comfort that kindness emits. I wished I knew that person. I wonder what went wrong, why he turned out to be so angry. If only she looked into his eyes hard enough, maybe she would've seen the rage lying dormant.

*

Father opened the door. I could see his face flush with relief once he saw me. I guess he was worried that Jane wouldn't bring me back. I followed him upstairs and into the apartment. From the doorway, I could smell the sweet tangy scent of barbecue chicken. I threw my backpack on my bed and took my shoes off. I decompressed now that I was home and that this day was almost over. I made my way to the living room where my food was sitting on the beige wooden table. It was much too large for the apartment and served no practical purpose given that no one came over. I sat down in my chair and began eating. I could see father cleaning up in the kitchen. He asked what had happened at school. I heard his question but his menacing presence rattled my brain, preventing me from answering. So, I just sat there and stared at him not knowing what to say. I didn't have an appetite anymore but kept picking at my food. I felt the need to respond.

“I don't know...I was just scared.”

He kept cleaning the kitchen as if he hadn't heard anything. Suddenly the doorbell rang; it was Mama. Father put the dishes down and walked past the front door to their bedroom. I got up and buzzed her in. I could hear the echo of her sneakers trod up the stairs heavily as she held her stout body up with each step. I saw her face, which beamed with excitement but was deprived of breath. She took a minute, before entering the apartment, to compose herself. I felt animosity emanate from within as the memory of her leaving clouded my mind. She gave me a hug, but I didn't reciprocate. I stood in her arms, a dead husk, feeling the full wrath of loathing fill my heart; turning it cold. I ended the hug, because I couldn't stand being held by her. As I pulled back and looked her in the eyes, I saw beneath the façade of her calm demeanor, an element of guilt. I wanted to see her writhe in pain for leaving me. She made her way into the

apartment. I closed the door behind her and retreated back to my room. I could hear her footsteps move towards my bedroom. I wanted her to feel my neglect so I just sat by the window, looking at the salon across the way. She was getting closer and I could feel the rage building. I was going to unleash all of my fury onto her because I wanted to hurt her. But, as she made her way to my doorway, Father opened up his door. My heart skipped a beat. Was he in his violent mood? At that moment, regardless of the hurt that I wanted Mama to feel, I also wanted to protect her from him. He asked to speak to her, but she was understandably hesitant. She said that she wouldn't talk in the bedroom but would rather speak in the living room. Father peeked his head into my room and explained that they were going to talk. I was suspicious of this, so I went to the edge of my doorway to eavesdrop. I could barely make out what they were saying, until I heard Jane's name brought up by Father. I tried to move my head closer so that I could get a clearer sense of their conversation. Father said that he didn't want me to see Jane anymore because he thought she would turn me against him. This was utterly absurd and, if anything, revealed a trait of paranoia and distrust. Jane didn't care about Father enough to want to turn me against him. I was so surprised that I didn't hear Mama's response. I quickly returned to the window. Mama came into my room. I inquired about the conversation they had. She sat on my bed in bare silence. After a couple of minutes, I turned around to see if she was still there. To my surprise, long trails of tears seeped from the corner of her eyes. I stood there unable to register my own reaction. The guilt had surfaced in her. Her crying face was contorted in an ugly way.

“James, I-I'm sorry. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. But I need you to understand that I couldn't... I couldn't—”

I was beyond furious. It took her 2 years to finally apologize, and she wanted my forgiveness. I couldn't believe my ears. I responded:

“You left me and now you want me to say sorry?”

Her body sunk in defeat. I stood there, studying her slouched body. I almost felt sorry for her. She looked grotesque and pathetic. Her tiger orange coat, which barely fit her, was draped over her big body. Her hair was in disarray with strands sticking out haphazardly. Her thick thighs seemed to be on the verge of tearing the polyester grey pants which matched with her suit. She needed to leave. I turned away from her and peered out the window again, seeing the aggrieved look on my face in the reflection. I could hear her stand up and walk out of my room. The front door creaked open and she was gone.

Father came out of his room and stood by the doorway. I had no energy to deal with him. So, I changed into some comfortable clothes and laid in bed. He switched the lights off and closed the curtains. The salon's block of light glared into my face, it was almost festive, and helped ease me as I prepared for sleep

*

There were some weeks where I would have trouble sleeping. I would lay awake, feeling energy pulsate from within. The energy would be so intense that I couldn't lie in bed. I would pace for hours with grand thoughts occupying my mind. Thoughts about ruling everyone, thoughts about being able to run faster, jump higher and be smarter than anyone in the world. I believed all of that was true. My mind felt like a fine-tuned machine that had just been recently oiled and was able to operate at speeds faster than it ever could before. These were the good days, when I would feel like a ruler in a world that I created. Colors would be more vibrant and saturated. Trees would swing in the wind harmoniously. The sunlight would grace me with its blessed light. But that never lasted. After a span of a couple weeks, I would swing down into

despair. I would sleep for hours and have trouble waking up during the week. I would feel sluggish and I would be preoccupied with death. I thought about my own death a lot. What it would look like and when it would happen. There were sometimes where I even welcomed it, because the pain I was in was unbearable.

*

Months had passed and Mama and Father's relationship seemed to be getting better. Every time she came over, they would talk in the living room and I even caught wind of possible marriage counseling. She eventually moved back in with the compromise that she would sleep on the couch. She was still uncomfortable sleeping next to him, or so I thought.

I was laying on the couch watching tv. The world was drained of any color and had a bland and unsaturated tint. Mama and Father came down the long hallway from their bedroom. I was caught off guard, because they never walked around the apartment together. Mama was trying to suppress the energy in her face and Father stood behind her. She called my name but I did not have the energy to care. I wish she would see the pain that I was in. I sighed and picked my head up looking in their direction.

"James, we have some news."

"What?" I said unenergetically

"You're going to be a big brother!"

I wasn't receptive to the news, so I laid my head back down and continued to watch tv. Mama got angry. She started going on about how I needed to stop moping around and how I

should be grateful for what I had. I wanted to go in on her but I didn't have the strength. So, I just laid there and tuned her out.

I could see Father getting upset. I was genuinely afraid of him. I didn't know what he wanted from me—to fake excitement at the news when I was in such emotional agony. My head snapped in their direction when his voice thundered.

“Get off that couch! Get off! Go to your room, I don't want to see you right now!”

I wish they understood, if only they were aware.

*

Little Brother was born at 2:35 AM on a Sunday. I was awoken by Mama's screams. I was breathing shallowly and I could feel my bones shiver. Flesh striking flesh echoed in my ears as I remember that dreadful night when Father unleashed his rage. I heard commotion in their room. It felt like a repeat of that night three years ago as I hopped off the bed. There was liquid all over Mama's pajama's and the mattress. She was going into labor. I stood there, with too many thoughts to act. Father yelled at me to get dressed and to meet him by the car. As I made my way down the brownstone stairs, I could feel the brisk night's wind caress my goosebump-ridden skin. Nighttime always had a distinct scent to it, which made me wish I wasn't so afraid of it. I hopped into the car and Father sped off to Mount Sinai. As we made our way onto Lenox, we passed by the nocturnal shadows of the night. They were people who didn't have anywhere to go, or were running way from something. Nobodies, just like me, who were empty inside. I felt a certain unity that occurs when you see one of your own.

We arrived at Mount Sinai, and guided Mama to the emergency room. Father waited with me in the waiting room. Jane's face popped from the around the corner. She was Mama's other

emergency contact. I was relieved to see her. However, I was worried about how Father would react. His forehead was shaped with surprise. Was he really that afraid of Jane? She came and gave me a hug. I hugged her back; partly as a way of pissing Father off. She handed me one of the coffee cups she had. It was hot chocolate. I burned my tongue when taking the first sip, but that didn't stop me from indulging. Father asked how Jane was doing, in a cold, uninterested tone. She divulged her life story to him, which neither of us cared about. She then asked about Mama. The conversation went on as normal as it could to an outside observer. But to me, I saw two tigers gearing up to go at each other's throats. After some awkward silence, one of the nurses walked in with a smile across his face. He said that she was ready to see us. Father gently pushed me forward with Jane following, when Father turned around and told her that she couldn't come in. She was stunned. The other people in the emergency room shifted their attention to us, as we stood in the middle of the room. Father put his hand on my back and propelled me forward. I looked back at Jane's face, which had a look of defeat. I felt bad for her, because she genuinely cared.

He was 7 pounds. His body was slim and red as a tomato. His cheeks were puffy, it made me want to squeeze them, or gnaw on them with my teeth. He cried endlessly, but stopped when he was wrapped up snug against Mama's bosom. I crept over to say hi, but was afraid that I was going to break him. Mama encouraged me so I reached out to his tiny hands, cautiously, like a wild animal meeting a human for the first time. He squeezed my finger with all of his might. I giggled; it was the introduction to a relationship that would hopefully last my lifetime.

3 days later they came home from the hospital. Mama had invited Jane over. Mama and I were sitting on the couch and Jane was standing by the edge, closest to the kitchen. Father was in the kitchen. I was playing with Little Brother and Jane was looking over my shoulder. Father

came from the kitchen to the couch. I could see him out of the corner of my eye whisper something into Jane's ear. She ignored him. He said it again, this time, all of us could hear.

“Get out of my house.” His tone was calm.

I stood up from the couch and let the “fuck you” rip out of my mouth. Father pulled me with all of his might, dragging me on the floor. We went into the bathroom, and he locked the door. He un-looped his belt and lashed me until I could feel my bottom on fire. But the belt wasn't harsh enough. He threw it on the floor and proceeded to lay in on me with his fists. His eyes were pinholes as he muttered words underneath his breath, all fueled by his inner rage. He was going to kill me, I thought to myself. I could feel myself giving into the pain. The struggle to keep living had evaporated as death faced me in the eyes.

*

Father was panting as he towered over me, his fists still curled. I lay, in a ball on the floor, barely able to move. My back and legs ached in pain and the side of my face had blood spilling out. I unraveled and peered up at his face in horror. He was staring at his fists, which had my blood on them. I racked my brain thinking of what I should do, but nothing came to mind. I was in a haze, a stupor, unable to process what had just taken place. I heard banging on the door, it was Mama and Jane. Thump, thump, thump. The banging got louder.

I stood up quickly, and unlocked the door. I was enveloped in Mama and Jane's arms as they checked on me. I still stared at the man who had just beaten me. He peered up at my face frightfully, realizing what he had done. Mama ran up to him and started screaming in his face. Veins popped out of her neck as she yelled for him to get out. He stood there staring at me. Our eyes held their connection, and he seemed to be speaking apologetically through them.

He looked down again and slowly walked out of the bathroom. Mama was already on the phone with the police.

“I’ll be back for my things.” He said, and walked out of the front door.

Mama explained to the police what had happened, and they put out an order to have Father arrested. I pleaded with her to drop the charges. As much as he hurt me, I didn’t want to see Father in jail.

When he was released, he came to pick up his things. Mama insisted that I be absent when he arrived, but I knew I wouldn’t be seeing him much after. I wanted to be there to see him off.

I could hear him packing his clothes into his suitcase in their room. I was too nervous to approach him. Mama stood beside me, with Brother in her arms.

He moved his last box, which hammered in the realization that he was leaving. He climbed up the stairs one last time and approached me. We locked eyes just enough so I could notice the redness of them. I knew he regretted his actions deeply; it was written over his face. I could see that he wanted to hug me, to show me that he was sorry, but Mama wouldn’t let that happen. He turned his back and moved towards the door. He had lost everything, and I almost felt sorry for him. I watched the man who created me, walk off into the world, and I didn’t even ask where he was going.

Teenage Years (5 Years Later)

It was Friday night, both Mama and Brother were fast asleep. Mama was snug against the wall and Brother was lying between us. We were on the queen-sized mattress in my parent’s

room. The bed in my room had broken and we couldn't afford to fix it. Father's scent of cigarettes and cheap cologne was slowly fading; he hadn't been around in 5 years. I was unable to put my mind to rest. Through the bedroom window, I could just make out an office building. I started counting how many floors were illuminated: One floor, two floors, three floors. I heard some commotion outside—a glass bottle breaking, the violent verbal exchanges about who got the last drop of liquor, a plane's engine decelerating, a dog barking for mercy, a screech of a car tire, and the wail of an ambulance. My unchecked 15-year-old mind, firing on all cylinders, tried to picture a face or image to each scenario. Dear God, I thought, I want to sleep; what I would give to be away from my mind for a few minutes. I didn't want to hear those unholy people out there who preferred the guise of darkness over the purity of day.

Brother turned over, taking the sheets with him. My slim body, with my dark blue sweatpants and white t-shirt, lay exposed to the sweltering summer's heat. I would get up, but paranoia had me feeling like there was someone rummaging through the apartment. What would happen if he heard me? Would he rush the door releasing his terrors upon us? I imagined what Mama's scream would sound like; what Brother's terrified face would look like—his eyes bulging out and his mouth agape in shock. I clasped my head, pressing in, trying to make the intrusive thoughts go away.

I looked over at Brother, his big body resembled that of Mama's. In his face, I saw her face and I felt envious of that. I was envious of a lot of things he had—the fact that he could sleep, the fact that he was smarter than me, and the fact that he didn't carry the terrible memories.

*

I desperately tried to hide my madness from them. I didn't want Mama and Brother to judge me; to think I was crazy even though I was. I would wait until nighttime to unleash my inner monster—the Bipolar monster. I knew I was Bipolar because I started sensing something was wrong and fell down a rabbit hole online. After hours of plugging in my symptoms—extreme sadness juxtaposed by elation—I came across the disorder. I didn't like to identify as “it”, but it's what I was. I knew it, but Mama and Brother didn't. They chalked up my strange behavior to teenage moodiness.

It had gotten worse with age. The depression manifested as suicide and the mania bordered into psychotic breaks. I was being tossed around in a tempest of changing moods. I felt like I was twirling in a washing machine, unable to reorient myself in my ever-changing reality.

*

My relationship with Mama started to change. My animosity towards Mama evaporated when Father left. Seeing her cry at the fractured state of our family forced me to forgive her.

I awoke, not feeling fully rested. I rolled off the bed feeling the weight of our poverty on my back and shoulders. Brother was still asleep. I looked out the window, and saw the tall reddish-brown office building basking in the Saturday sun. I could hear the clanking of dishes in the kitchen. I brushed my teeth and went to my room to put on some clean clothes. I looked out my window and peered across to the beauty salon. I remembered those evenings where I would stare at those lights; satisfied by their warm hues which produced a soft, comforting, burning sensation. I walked to the kitchen and there was Mama. I opened the fridge and saw that there wasn't much inside. She combed through her purse and found 10 dollars.

“Get something for all of us from the deli.” she instructed.

I walked down the stairs warily trying to avoid our landlord. I inhaled, feeling the warm September air fill my lungs. The air was cool and smooth and my spine stood erect as manic energy oscillated through my bones. Goosebumps perked up on my forearms, and in my chest, I felt a giddiness; an anticipation, like something amazing was about to happen. The trees stood bold, glimmering slowly in the most graceful fashion. I could feel a presence with the trees, they were my kin. I hopped gleefully off the last step and peered up at the tree on the sidewalk. I could feel a connection to it, like a long lost relative you have rediscovered.

As I made my way to the deli, which was on the corner, the wind whipped past my face caressing my goosebumps. I felt alive. I felt limitless, like a bald eagle soaring over the Rocky Mountains. I picked up some buttered rolls and headed back home. I wanted to stay out longer, but I knew Mama and Brother were hungry.

We ate the buttered rolls while watching old Martin episodes. Its lightheartedness served as a reassurance that life could have funny and happy moments. We watched the show until noon. I wanted to go to the park to feel the visceral sensations of nature. I asked them if they wanted to go. Mama was caught off guard by this, given that a couple days ago I wouldn't leave my bed. She looked puzzled, and even paused before answering.

“Take your brother with you, I want to clean the place up.” Brother groaned a little, but conceded nonetheless. I grabbed a Frisbee and we left.

Mount Morris park was a place where drug addicts and kids gratified their needs. In the playground, children would run energetically, embracing the powers of their imagination; while in the grass, one could find syringes and small cylindrical caps used to carry coke. It was a

sanctuary for the homeless, who huddled together in their small camps. With all the problems that this place had—a community intertwined in drugs, and on the verge of collapse—it was a place that I cherished.

We entered the park at noon. The heat was blazing unforgettingly. Brother looked up at me.

“You’ve been acting weird the whole way here. You keep looking up at the trees and you seem really happy.”

I was surprised at his bluntness. I didn’t even notice that he was watching me. I shrugged it off but he wouldn’t let up.

“Are you sure? Because Mom is worried about you.”

I looked at him and smiled a little bit, but reassured him that I was fine. Once we found a sizeable patch of grass, I told Brother to go far to receive the frisbee.

“I wonder how dad is doing.” He muttered suddenly.

Admittedly, Father had been in my thoughts recently too. I didn’t know how to respond, but clearly, Brother wanted to talk about it. It was strange that he brought it up considering he didn’t know Father.

“I don’t know.” I responded.

We passed the frisbee back and forth a couple more times.

“I really wish I knew him better.”

I didn't know where this conversation was going, but I didn't feel comfortable talking about Father.

"Why is Mom worried about me?" I inquired.

He said that she saw that I was depressed and was worried. I smiled uncomfortably, knowing that my actions were being monitored. I suddenly felt like a patient under observation. Yet, despite being uncomfortable, I thought that it was safe to confide in my brother.

"I think I'm Bipolar."

He looked at me blankly, unable to parse through the medical term. Would I really have to explain further? I shouldn't have expected him to understand considering he was only 5.

"I think I have an illness."

"What type of illness?"

I rolled my eyes in frustration.

"Never mind."

"Is that why you are happy one minute and then sad the next?"

Maybe he would understand.

"Yes. Sort of."

I felt the pressure of an elephant's foot raise off my chest. I felt a deep exhale, which had been pent up my whole life, flush out of my lungs. The months of holding that knowledge in and the fear of telling others had caused me to feel trapped.

"Just don't tell mom. I don't know how she would take it."

“Okay.”

I didn't know why I trusted this small child with such a secret, but somehow, I knew he wouldn't tell.

*

I had my first breakdown during winter break. The pressure of starting high school was getting to me and I felt lonely. I floated to my classes like a phantom, unnoticed by my teachers and classmates.

As the fall skies rolled in everything developed a tone of despair. There was a drab lifelessness to the world; a certain monochrome tinge that made my stomach twist in disgust.

I stood waiting for the train after school had ended.

“The 2 train is approaching the station.” The automated voice echoed flatly

I peered down into the tracks; I felt like I was being forcibly pulled towards them. I was determined to jump. I stood there thinking about who would remember me. I glanced down the tunnel, watching the train's lights inch closer towards the station. Would I really do it? What would Mama think of me? How would she explain to people what happened? I could hear the rhythmic beat of the wheels clanking on the track. The sound was getting louder; the pressure was building. I inched closer to the edge of the platform.

I felt my will being overtaken by some mysterious, insidious power. I edged closer as the train's engine moved in. But, as I stood there waiting to jump, Brother's face came to mind. What would his life be like having lost his older brother? I pictured what his wails would sound

like if he got the news that I was dead. Who would he look up to? Who would guide him? The suicidal fog, which clouded my judgement, seemed to dissipate. The train rushed past my face, snapping me back to reality. I exhaled deeply, registering that I was still alive.

I closed the door to my room and threw my bag on the ground. I navigated my way through the scattered papers on the floor; hopping over the dismantled bed, I knelt by the window. There was an earthy, fresh scent permeating through the air—rain was coming. The patters of water showering on the neighbor's backyard calmed me a little. I pictured those train tracks again, imaging what my mangled body would look like. I could see my blood seeping between the tracks and mixing with the dirty sewage. My face was contorted in pain. I could picture it clearly like I was there. I sat by the window with my own carcass etched in my mind. I wanted the image to go away, so I shook my head and squeezed my eyes shut. Nothing would make it go away.

My thoughts started scattering and colliding with each other at immense speed. There was so much movement in my head, I couldn't control any of it. I wanted to scream. My stomach knotted in pain as I started crying. The dead body, Mama's face, her screams, Father's face; all of it swirled around with each image causing its own impact. I was curled in a ball unable to escape the emotional typhoon. As the chaos ramped up in my mind, something snapped. An energy started to surge from within; a wild energy that gripped me. I suddenly felt a surge of power, like I was a god. Laughter erupted from the depths of my chest. I was god. I was able to gain control of my thoughts again; only for them to speed up.

The door opened, I could hear Mama and Brother's voice. There was no way of suppressing this. I knew they would find out about my disorder, but I didn't care.

"James, are you in there?" Brother asked

The door creaked open.

"Are you okay?"

I sat there laughing so much that I couldn't catch a breath.

"What's so funny?"

But then, I felt the laughter drain and the deep sorrow ooze in. My laughter stopped just so that the crying could begin again. Brother called out to Mama.

"James, what's wrong?" She asked in a concerned tone

"He was laughing just a minute ago." Brother replied

"Something's wrong with me." I managed to spit out through the sniffles

"What's wrong with you?"

I couldn't respond, I was drained of energy.

I squeezed down in the teal-colored chair. It sat low to the ground so my head was just above the doctor's polished wooden desk. He was much younger than I expected and gave a soft smile when I entered. His brown eyes were narrow and seemed to pierce through to your soul. I was intrigued by him.

“Hello James, how have you been holding up?”

“I could be better.” I responded, giving a light chuckle

“This must be a very strange and stressful time for you but, I am here to help. Do you have any idea what happened to you?”

“I think I had an episode.”

“Do you know what kind of episode?”

“I think it was a bipolar episode.”

“Yes. How do you feel knowing that you’ve had an episode?”

“I...I’ve known that I’ve been bipolar for a while, but...I’ve just been too afraid to confront it.”

He explained there could be various reasons that triggered the breakdown. I felt relieved knowing that he understood. It was like scratching a mysterious itch that had tormented me for my whole life. As the meeting was coming to a close, he told me what medication I would be on. It was called Lithium and Abilify to help with the manic episodes. An excitement burned inside of me because I wanted to be fixed; I wanted to feel what it was like to be normal. As I got up and left, I could already feel my life changing. For the first time, I felt a glint of hope, a possibility of things getting better.

I changed back into my jeans and white Nasa t-shirt. I was confident that I was ready to ease back into my life. I followed the nurse through the labyrinth of white coated walls lit by cheap fluorescent lights. We passed through the double doors and walked into the lobby. Mama

was talking to Jane. It was good to see familiar faces after a week of being among strangers. As I got closer, Mama snapped her head in my direction and they both rose from their chairs. The doctor came and explained the diagnosis which stunned Mama.

The following day, Jane went with me to pick up my medication from the pharmacy. The anticipation ramped up once we got home. I was instructed to take two pills at 8pm and 8am. I was also instructed to eat before. I eagerly paced back and forth waiting for the clock to hit 8pm. I whoofed down my pulled pork sandwich and got the pill bottle. I tried to twist the cap open the first time, but my grip was too slippery from the accumulated sweat. I finally got it open and sniffed it, wondering if there would be a distinct smell, but there wasn't. The two pills popped out, but I didn't swallow it. I sat there staring at them; what was I waiting for? A thought struck me as I sat there—I would probably have to take these for the rest of my life. Was I ready for that? However, I was confident that I wanted things to be better. This was the way for me to achieve happiness. I threw the pills in my mouth, got some water, and gulped them down. Foolishly, I was expecting some immediate results. But that wasn't the case. I felt slight elation followed by a return to baseline. It wasn't supposed to be this way, I wanted to feel changed, I wanted to feel better.

As the weeks rolled by my emotional pendulum started to slow down. I had psychological consistency, and when I looked back, I noticed how volatile my life was. However, as the manic energy discharged from my body, I started to miss it. I missed the intense surges of euphoria that would seize me. I missed the fluidity of rapid thought. Things felt duller and deathly mundane. I tried to scavenge for that energy in every part of my life, whether it was by drinking coffee or 'accidentally' missing a dose. It was dangerous to play with strong medication, but I yearned for that familiar surge that made me feel unstoppable.

Jane helped in every way that she could—from paying for my meds to helping around the house. Mama and Brother walked on eggshells around me. She no longer asked me to go get breakfast for her or to take out the trash. I enjoyed it for the moment, not having to do any chores, but I wished she would see me as her son again, not her Bipolar son. It hurt seeing that my diagnosis had remolded our relationship.

It had been 3 months when I stopped taking the medication. The yearning for a high preoccupied my mind in different forms. I wanted to see the beauty of the world gain. The first couple of days were fine, until I started feeling the clutches of depression slowly grip me. Days passed and I started to spiral down. I would sleep 12 hours a day and not eat. Mama started getting worried. She walked into the bedroom and kneeled beside the mattress rubbing my back.

“James, what’s going on? Have you been taking your medication regularly?”

“I’m fine mom.”

“Please just tell me you’ve been taking your meds.”

I would have to come clean, but I was justified in my reasoning.

“No, okay. I haven’t been taking them. I’m fine the way I am.”

“You’re not fine, you need to take them.” She strained

I didn’t need them, I thought. I wanted to be happy without having to rely on medication. I wanted to be normal. I saw the pain on her face as she saw her son in pain once again. That look, with her lips quivering and her eyes flooding with tears, struck me. It was powerful, and it

made me want to do better; not just for me, but for her too. I got up and went to the medicine cabinet to retrieve the meds. I never expected my happiness to come at a price.

Because of my hospitalization, I had to make up school work. Sometimes during the school year, Father would send me emails. There would be no subject to them and they would simply say— ‘hey there’. I would never respond. The abuse of the past was fresh in my mind. The emails disrupted my emotional equilibrium. I got triggered remembering the tormented life that I lived. I often wondered about his situation when those emails arose. I wondered where he was, what he was doing, or who he was with. Regardless of the pain that he had caused me, I still cared for him. Would I ever see him again? Would I even want to see him?

*

Father

The bus turned onto the highway. We had just passed the Mason-Dixon line headed north. I already missed the low trees and sweet sun of Savannah, but Sonny said that it was time that I head back to the Bronx. I felt the crumpled 50-dollar bill that he had handed me in my pocket. A lump sat at the back of my throat as I reminisced about the peace at his house over the summer. I didn’t have to worry about Laura and her delusions. I could sleep comfortably at nights. As I reeled my focus back to the bus, I realized that I would be returning back to my tumultuous life. Would Laura be off of her meds again? How many more times would I have to deal with the mysterious men she brought home?

The bus pulled up to the garage in Penn station. My 17-year-old mind had been used to traveling by myself, but it always took time to readjust to the bustle of the city. People moved quickly, bumping past me determined to get to their destination. I hopped on the 2 train then

switched to the 1 headed to 242nd street. The train emerged from the tunnel once we left Manhattan, and was exposed to the unfiltered golden sun. My car was empty which relieved me. The train turned, exposing the Manhattan skyline. I could just barely make out the Twin Towers. I slouched down letting the sunlight warm my face.

I put my cigarette out and buzzed in. I checked my watch, it was 5 pm. Henry's voice came through the intercom.

“Who the fuck is it?”

“It's your brother.”

“Gil, is that you?”

“Let me in already, will you?”

The door clicked open, and I walked into the building. The stairway reeked of weed and piss, but it was nothing I wasn't used to. I walked into the apartment and bottles were strewn across the floor. Evidently, Laura wasn't home, thank god for that. The blinds were down so I could barely see my path. I threw my duffel bag down on the charcoal black carpet and sat down on the red leather couch. Henry sat next to me and pulled out a joint.

“How was Savannah?” Henry asked.

“The usual. You know how Sonny is; always giving money to make himself feel better about leaving.”

“Yeah, that's the truth.”

Henry passed the joint over to me. I took a small inhale.

“How’s work going?” I asked.

“You know, same-old shit...Boss is a pain in the ass.”

“Laura been taking her meds?”

“What do you think?”

“Judging from the look of this place, she hasn’t been.”

By the time we were finished with a couple of joints it was 8 pm. I managed to lift my weight up from the couch when the world started shifting and swaying. My mouth felt like sand paper.

When I awoke, I heard high heels clomping around the living room. The clanks of bottles being thrust into the trash pierced my ears. I checked the clock, it was 3 am. Who was making so much noise? My eyelids were heavily weighing on me, so I gave in, drifting off to sleep again.

Blinding lights assaulted my eyes, but eventually they adjusted. Laura was standing in the door way. Her hair was straightened and her eyes were bulging out. I could feel the intensity of her gaze as I looked back at her. She looked well put together in her red dress and her brown, oversized faux fur coat. She looked like the incarnation of something evil; the way her eyes were reduced to pinholes that scorched through your soul.

“Gil, get up.” She uttered coolly.

“Mom, is that you?”

“Stand up. Right here by the side of the bed.” She instructed.

“Why mom? I’m tire—”

“Did I ask how you were feeling? Don’t you want your mama to see you? You’ve been gone for a long time now.”

I sighed, hoping the tiredness would drain from my body quickly. I stood up. She was my height because of the heels, and her presence felt much larger because of it.

“Look how beautiful my boy is with his strong muscles. You look just like me, you know that?”

“Look mom, couldn’t this wai—”

“Don’t you fucking start now! I just want to look at you, so stop giving me shit!”

She brought her hand up to my face and brushed my forehead a little. I could see tears pooling in the glands of her eyes.

“Mom, have you been taking your meds?”

“Look how beautiful you are.”

We stood there for a minute, when I heard Henry’s voice from the other room.

“Mom...what are you all doing?” Henry asked as he walked into my room. He was rubbing his eyes forcefully.

“I was just checking in on Gil.” Laura answered

“Laura, I think it’s time for you to go to bed.” Henry said carefully, reading the uncomfortable look on my face.

“Henry, why don’t you go back to sleep, and let a mother check in on her son!” She responded violently.

“Mom, clearly Gil is uncomfortable and tired.” Henry moved towards her to guide her out of my room.

“Get the fuck off me! Henry, go away, nobody asked you to be here.”

“Fuck it, I don’t have the energy to deal with this shit tonight.”

Henry walked into the corridor back to his room.

She brushed my face again followed by a smile and then exited through the doorway. I exhaled letting the relief wash over me.

I was still jarred from Laura’s strangeness the following night. I looked out the window to see darkness setting in. I turned the tv volume higher to tune out the sounds of sex coming from Laura’s bedroom. The moaning and creaking of the bed rung in my ears like tinnitus. I considered leaving but I didn’t have anywhere to go. I wished Henry was here, but he was working his taxi job.

The noises seemed to get louder until I couldn’t take it anymore. I slipped into my blue bomber jacket and marched out the door. As I trotted down the stairs I wondered where I would go. The park seemed peaceful. I would find a bench and wait until I thought she was done. Everything was quiet aside from the occasional passing car. I stayed on the bench for an hour and then headed back home.

As I made my way down the hallway to the apartment, I passed by an older man heading in the opposite direction. He was wearing a tweed bucket hat and a thin khaki trench coat. He was dressed quite formally for a figure of the night.

“You Laura’s son?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?”

“No, I was just wondering. Your mom is quite something.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Listen, I just wanted to say, I feel for you. She isn’t an easy woman to deal with.”

Was I supposed to thank him? Why was he even speaking to me? I kept walking in the direction of the apartment.

He yelled to my back, “My name is John, by the way.”

“I didn’t ask for your name.”

When I entered, Laura was sitting on the couch in a robe with her legs crossed. She looked irritated, like I had done something wrong.

“Gil, where were you?” She muttered sharply.

“I just went out.”

I proceeded to my room.

“Hold it.” She ordered.

“You think you can just come back into my house, and do whatever the fuck you want?”

“Ma, I just went because you had some—”

“Who do you think you are? You think I wanted you here? I begged Sonny to keep you. I didn’t want you; I’ve never wanted you.”

I stared at her unflinching face, scouring her eyes to see if she meant what she said. Staring at her was like looking at a wall, there was an inability to read her. My heart panged sharply in pain. I searched for words to respond but my mind was blank.

“Get out of my face. You look pathetic standing there!”

I dragged my feet back to my room, feeling that lump in my throat again. I knew I shouldn’t have taken her words seriously, but this was the first time she said she didn’t want me. She had her mood swings in the past, but it was clearly getting worse.

I snuck into Henry’s room, and found a bottle of tequila. Henry drank all of the time, and occasionally, I joined him. It didn’t feel good to drink, but it did the job. I took my first swig, feeling the burning sensations scorch my throat. That lump of sorrow was drowning; its power was suppressed by the Jose Cuervo. I took another swig, this time the burn wasn’t as strong. I could feel the world sway as the indifference seeped in. But, as I continued, I felt resentment kindle into flaming hatred. I could feel my breathing pick up when Laura’s face popped in my head. I wanted to tell her off, but I knew that there would be major consequences. So, I just kept drinking.

As summer came to a close, the drinking became a habit. Laura’s irrationality was pushing me further into liquor’s grasps. Drinking started becoming the only way I could bear living with her. I was swinging down into this abyss unable and unwilling to see a way out.

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Adulthood (5 Years Later)

It was 6:25 pm and the winter's darkness set in a while ago. I waited for the light to change as snow cascaded over me. I could see Carmines white, block-letter sign; it looked packed inside. Broadway was desolate and the only ones I did see were probably hurrying home. I was nervous, mostly because I didn't know what he looked like. My memories of him had faded; what was left was a shadowy figure. When I told Mama that I was going to meet him, she said she understood but to not get my hopes up. I heeded her advice and maintain a cautious mindset. I knew that he hadn't changed, people like that never do, but I needed to put him to rest. I guess time had healed some deep wounds. After recognizing my own disorder, I realized that he had similarities. I realized that he swung on the pendulum just like I did, facing the ugliness of depression and the rage of mania.

I trudged my way across the street and got to the reserved table at Carmines. I waited anxiously, tapping my feet and biting my nails. I was eyeing the entrance so that I would be prepared. I had rehearsed this meeting for months in my head—picturing the different ways I would greet him—all of them awkward. I checked my watch, it read 6:30. He should be walking in any minute, I thought. Was it too late to back out? A man, in a black peacoat, which came down to his knees, entered and stomped the snow off his boots. He was wearing a plaid navy-blue scarf and a black turtle neck sweater. He had a beard which was littered with grey hairs. Something told me it was him—whether it was that we were blood or that he was the only other black guest waiting to be seated—I knew he was my father. I thought of waving him down or holding the menu up so that I wouldn't see him come over. The latter felt less awkward. I could

see him being directed to my table out of the corner of my eye. I still hadn't processed that this was happening. The waiter came up to my table.

"Here's your table." He told my father.

I looked up from my menu and Father was standing by the edge of the table. He had different glasses this time, the kind that Malcolm X used to wear—the brow line frames. He had a big smile on his face and through the frames, I saw tears. I stood up, not knowing whether to hug him or shake his hand. I stuck my hand out just to be seized by a hug. He held me tightly and sniffled. I thought back to the time when he had hurt Mama—he used those same hands. I tried to get rid of the thought, wanting to believe I had put that to rest. After a long embrace, he stood back and studied me.

"You have my face, you know that?"

I nodded, remembering the hatred that used to arise when I saw myself in the mirror. We both sat down. It was odd seeing someone who used to be miserable showing affection and beaming with happiness. He wrapped his peacoat around the back of his chair and unraveled his scarf. He adjusted his glasses and picked up the menu. There was an energy to him, like he had been reinvigorated just by being in my presence. I put my menu down and stared at him, the same way I did when I was a kid.

"How's your mother and brother doing?" He asked suddenly.

"They're fine." I said, not knowing whether he wanted more of an answer.

"I wanted to see you both, but you wouldn't reply to my em—."

"Listen, we don't need to go there right now. Let's just order something first."

I perused the menu looking for something appetizing. I saw they had chicken parmesan, and my mouth watered. There was a silence as we both looked at the menu.

“What are you getting?” I asked

“I’m thinking about the margherita pizza.”

“Sounds delicious.”

I called the waiter over and we both gave our orders. After he left, we both stared at each other blankly. I didn’t know where to begin.

“So, how have you been?” He asked kindly

“I’ve been good. I’m looking for work currently. I just finished college in the spring. How about you? Where are you living?”

“I... Well it’s complicated. I just moved back to the city. I was married, living in Georgia for a little bit, but that didn’t work out. I’m living with my brother Henry at the moment.”

“Oh,” I said, realizing how pitiful his life had shaped out to be. He was a man in his mid to late 50’s living off of his brother. I took a drink from my water, trying to do anything to break the discomfort. I should’ve felt angrier towards him for not being there, but seeing a man who only had his brother, made me feel sorry for him.

“There was a lot you missed.” I said candidly.

“Listen, I want to say sorry...for the way I treated you and your mother way back. I know this apology won’t make up for that.”

I didn't know how to respond. Whether to accept his apology or to berate him for how weak the apology was.

I wanted him to know more about me, to know the struggles that I went through, but I didn't know how to ease into that conversation. As I pondered, the waiter returned with our food. My chicken parmesan looked delectable, causing me to salivate immensely. Father's margherita pizza looked delicious too. We dug in; all that could be heard were sounds our forks and knives against the plate. Once I couldn't eat anymore, I had made up my mind and decided to be blunt. I needed him to know about my Bipolar Disorder. He had a right to know.

"While you were gone, I learned something about myself." As I said this, I thought that there could've been a better way of shifting topics. But I had already started.

"Oh yeah? What was that?" He said taking a small bite of his pizza

"I learned that I...that I was bipolar... that I am bipolar."

"Oh." He responded, looking sorrowful.

I tried to read his face, to scour beneath those glasses into his soul. I didn't know what I was searching for. I wanted to see if he would accept me for who I was, in my entirety.

"Your grandmother had a similar...predicament." He said staring down at his plate.

Why didn't he look me in the eye when he spoke? Was I no longer the son that he desperately wanted to meet? Did my disorder make me spoiled goods?

"I didn't know that." I responded, waiting to see if he would look up.

"How's your mom and brother doing?" He smiled as he looked back up at me.

He had already asked that, I thought to myself. My heart sank. How foolish it was to think that bringing up my disorder would make things better. The conversation was going south. I wished I hadn't come. I dropped my head, feeling a lump of sorrow form at the back of my throat. I no longer had an appetite, so I just picked at my food.

"What's wrong?" He asked with a concerned look on his face.

"I wanted this to go well, and I feel like it's not."

"No, no, this is fine. We're catching up. We're fine." He said frantically

He finished his pizza and leaned back in his chair while rubbing his stomach.

"That was good. What about you? You didn't finish your meal."

"Yeah, I ran out of space. Want to head out?"

"Sure."

The waiter eventually came around and I paid for our meals. Father grabbed his coat, I grabbed mine, and we walked out of Carmines.

"Which way you headed?" He asked, rubbing his hands together to warm them up

"I'm going to catch the 2 on 96th street."

"I'll walk you there."

We started walking uptown, slogging through the slush and snow. It was disgusting how quickly snow was tarnished by the grime of the city.

"Listen, I wanted to ask you a favor, but I didn't think it was appropriate to say at the restaurant." He uttered suddenly.

“Well, it depends on what it is.”

“You know how I told you that I was staying with my brother? Well, I just wanted to know if...if I could get some cash. Just so I can stay afloat.”

“What!?! Is this why you agreed to meet with me? Just so you could ask me to front you money?”

“No, no son—”

“Don’t fucking call me son, okay?”

“Okay. But listen, I genuinely wanted to see you, but I just need some help, okay?”

As I stood there staring at him, his face morphed from a man that I had begun to accept to a pathetic panhandler who happened to be kin. I wanted nothing to do with him. The whole affair at Carmine’s was a front; a way of luring me into giving him some money. I was duped and hoodwinked into believing that he wanted to meet me. I turned away, feeling the icy tears trickle down my cheek.

“Wait, wait, wait. James, I still want to know you. Listen, forget about the money, just let me walk you to the train.”

I couldn’t stand to look at him. I didn’t want to believe that I was his blood. I felt like I was going to throw-up. He lightly grabbed my arm, but I pulled away.

Once I entered the station, he gave up. He watched me pass through the turnstile. I could feel his eyes trail my back as I descended down the stairs to the platform. I waited for the train. My mind was in disarray. I hadn’t felt this mental fog since I was a teen off of my meds. I just wanted to go home, to be with family that cared for me. I entered the 2 train and sat in a corner

seat. The train lurched forward and all I could do was stare at the ground. I kept replaying the moment in my head. Was his hug at the beginning of the dinner genuine? Was this all just an ulterior motive for getting some quick cash?

The glow of the tv reflected off of Mama's skin as she watched attentively. The lights were off in the apartment and she was seated on the couch in the living room.

"Hi honey, how was the dinner?"

I didn't answer, and plumped down on the couch right next to her. I leaned my head on her shoulder, and let the cascade of tears wash out of me.

"What's wrong?" She asked turning her head to me

"I don't really want to talk about it."

"Okay."

Law and Order SVU was just starting. The iconic opening theme initiated, but I didn't have the stomach to watch such a gruesome show.

"I'm going to lie down."

"Okay hon."

I made my way down the long hall, remembering the years of pain that I had experienced here. I walked into my room. The lights were off and all that could be seen from the window was the salon with its golden light. I walked up to the window and stared into that salon. There was a warm, comforting heat that permeated in my organs. It was a heat that let me know that I would

be alright. I wanted to bathe in that golden hue. I changed my clothes and went to the mattress in Mama and Father's room. Brother was already asleep. I laid down next to him hearing the inhales and exhales of the city that never slept.

As I laid there, feeling the warmth of the heater next to me, I looked back on the life that I had lived. I reminisced on the relationship I had with Father. I loved him, but he kept letting me down. I was his blood, so we would be tied to each other for life. I wanted to feel the fatherly love that other people felt. I wanted to have a male figure to look up to. As I laid there, I realized a piece of me had been incinerated when he left. I realized that I would always be partly empty, partly broken, and entirely unfixable.

I looked over at Brother, who was sleeping, and I thought about our lives—intertwined and bound by a shared childhood. I would never want him to feel the emptiness that plagued my life. I didn't want him to have to face the same demons that I faced. I wanted to protect him with all my might. My mind began to ache, sleep was slowly consuming me. I turned over, facing the window, and sighed. I felt at peace as my mind dozed off, with the image of that salon at the back of my mind.

Letter to Father:

I hope you read this one day, and if not, then that's okay too. I want you to know that I love you, but you have caused me immense pain. I have been teetering between two poles of hating you and forgiving you. For the longest time, I saw you as a monster—a beast who only knew hate. But as I have grown, all I see is a man in pain; a man much like myself. When I would look into the mirror, I saw you in me and I was disgusted. As I have grown, I desperately try not to hate you, so that I can accept myself.

I have always wanted your love, even when you didn't show it. And I will always search for your love until the day I die. As I write this, I realize how much I miss you, how much I missed those small nuggets of joy that we shared. Those moments will forever be etched in my mind. But they will always be overshadowed by your actions.

I know that you couldn't always control what you said or did, I know you were grappling with the inner monster. That's what makes this hard; I hate you for hurting me, but I understand what it means to be out of control.

I hope that one day we will make more moments, but I know that is unlikely. I must destroy all hopes of forming new memories with you in the future, because you refuse to change.

Father, with all my love, I must put you to rest. I must place you on the shelf and look ahead. My internal battle of forgiving or hating you has taken up too much energy. With that I wish you the best.

- Your eldest,

James