

360 Degrees

A Novel by Regina Neequaye

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Zero Degrees

I heard a loud, hollow pop followed by an eerie, echoing silence. I slowly walked into my parents' room. Momma was a folded heap in daddy's arms. Blood oozed out of her head and slowly dripped down daddy's bare shoulders. Daddy sat still; his mouth was wide open, but there was no sound. Tears rolled down his face one at a time. The house was so silent the quietness was more frightening than the morbid vision of my momma and daddy. I was numb and in shock. I did not feel anything. I was twelve years old; I knew I was supposed to be scared, crying or something, but I was numb. I left my parents' room and walked down the hall. Khalid stood still in the threshold of his bedroom door. His eyes spoke what his mouth could not. His eyes were blank, looking at me but not actually seeing me. He knew something happened that would end our lives the way we knew it. I ordered him back inside of his room. He walked backwards into his room, climbed onto the bed, and curled his body tight in a fetal position. I tip toed to his room and closed his door. I walked back into my parents' room and picked up the phone.

"911 operator."

"My daddy hurt my momma!"

"How did he hurt her?"

"I think he shot her with a gun."

"Honey stay on the line! Help is on the way!" The operator sounded frantic. I thought she was supposed to remain calm and reassure me. Instead, I felt the need to reassure her.

"Does your daddy still have the gun?"

“I don’t know.”

“Is your mom...?” I placed the phone down and squeezed my head between daddy and momma. The room was so quiet I could actually hear our hearts beat.

Blue lights flashed through the curtains. A faint knock echoed through the house. I could not move. I wanted to answer the door, but I sat still. I could not move. A loud bang reverberated through the house. I heard an army of footsteps coming down the hall towards momma and daddy’s bedroom. There was what seemed like a thousand policemen in full riot gear standing in my parents’ room.

“Turn the girl loose!”

“Let the girl go!”

Daddy did not move. He appeared oblivious to the small army occupying the bedroom. He continued to hold momma and sat quietly with tears rolling down his face. The police had guns drawn and pointed at daddy’s head. I heard the click of a gun and squeezed out of daddy’s arms. An officer abruptly grabbed me and rushed out of the room; the police officer did not wear the standard blue uniform. He was dressed in faded jeans and a sweaty, dingy, gray t-shirt. I felt cold, hard metal on my leg, as he held me over his shoulder and ran with me out of the house.

Everything went fast. The ambulance’s spinning red lights made me dizzy. I thought they were coming to take my mother to the hospital and make her better. I did not realize she was actually gone until I saw her neatly wrapped in a thick, black, plastic bag. I remember thinking; *I wish they would open the bag, so she can breathe.* I wanted to scream. I wanted to shout to momma *here I am please come and get me; I’m over here.* I wanted to cling to her and feel her soft chest close to my face one more time. I wanted to feel her warm arms tightly wrapped around me. I wanted to see her beautiful smile; her smile was always reassuring. I knew this was not going to happen

ever again.

I don't know how long I stood outside before the police officer brought Khalid to me. The sullen look on his face made me cry. It was a sadness I have never seen on anyone's face before. A deep, penetrating melancholy pierced my heart. I have never felt sadness like this before. Khalid and I were both crying. He ran to me. He jumped into my arms, tightly wrapped his arms and legs around me, and buried his face in my neck. He was almost as tall as me; I cannot believe my skinny legs were strong enough to hold the both of us. We stood outside for what seemed like an eternity while the policemen were talking to one another, going back and forth, inside, outside, and around the house before they took us to the police station.

Grandma was at the police station when we arrived. She sat in a dingy room; the musty smell of mold permeated the air. The walls were made of cinder blocks covered with chipping, gray paint that appeared centuries old. The room was sparsely decorated with a light that hung down from the ceiling over an old, wooden table. Grandma seemed small sitting at the table. Her eyes were puffy. It seemed as if her whole body was shaking. Khalid immediately ran to her. I stood motionless, unable to move. Grandma came over and gently touched my shoulders. She attempted to pull my rigid body close to her. I put up as much resistance as my thin body would allow.

"Don't worry baby; Grandma will take care of you. I am going to take good care of you." I could not respond. It was as if I were dreaming; the kind where at the end of the dream you figure out it's not real, but you still can't wake up and leave the dream. This was not a dream. I would not wake up and run to my momma and daddy's room and snuggle close between them where even if they didn't wake up, feeling their warm bodies made everything okay.

Grandma's house is no longer the same to me. My relationship to this house has changed; it was a place I used to come and visit but then return to my own house. Now I would have to live here. I was no longer going home to my own house to my own things to my momma and daddy.

I was lying in the bed tired but trying not to fall asleep. For the first time in my life, I was afraid. I was afraid, but I did not know what I was afraid of; it was not an object but a feeling I could not touch. I could not describe this feeling. I could not call it a name. There were no words to describe a feeling so sad. This was the first time in my life when I woke up, I would not know what the day would bring.

Momma was ritual. I knew every morning she would come into my room and gently touch me. Though I would already be awake, I would not get out of the bed until she came into my room. She would either make oatmeal or French toast on weekdays, or she would make a three course breakfast on the weekend, but I no longer knew what would happen. I was fearful, and I was hurting. It was an abysmal hurt that cut deep, a continual pain without relief.

The sunlight peeping through the blinds woke me. I scanned the bedroom looking for something familiar when I saw the blood stains on my shorts. The rose colored splatter brought me back to the present. I pushed my head back and deep into the pillow and cried. I cried because my momma would never hold me again. She would never part my hair straight when I cannot see the back of my head. She would never come in the bathroom and wash the part of my back I cannot reach. She would not see me grow into a woman and see herself in me. I cried because I wanted to be in my own home. I wanted to be in my own room in my own bed. Grandma came into the room. She attempted to touch me. I did not want her to touch me. She tried to hold me. I wiggled out of her arms and ran out of

the room.

“Thandisha! Thandisha!” She looked helpless, but I was too absorbed in my own pain to feel her pain. I ran down the hall crying and screaming, “I want my momma.” Grandma looked broken. She looked tired and worn. She came closer to me with her arms spread and her hands open in a come to Jesus stand like Reverend Deal does on Sunday at the end of church service when he invites the congregation to come to Jesus.

“No! Don’t touch me Grandma! Don’t touch me! I want my momma!” I did not want to feel anyone’s hands but momma’s. I did not want to feel old, hard, wrinkled hands. I wanted momma’s soft, perfect, and loving hands to touch me.

“Thandie, baby, your momma is with God. God has called her home.” She slowly walked towards me. I walked backwards and away from her moving my head from side to side in disbelief at Grandma’s words.

“I hate God! Why didn’t he call you home? You are old and tired! I want my momma! Where’s my daddy? I’m calling him to come and get me out this house!” She walked towards me, a stream of tears flowed from her eyes and down her bronze cheeks. Her hands were together as if she was praying. I walked towards the phone screaming so loud I could hardly talk. My throat and neck were hurting. I picked up the phone and began to dial. I hoped daddy would answer the phone, come to grandma’s house and take me back to my own house with my own things. I wanted to be in my own bed.

“Thandie, remember last night Thandie!” She screamed while snatching the phone away from me. “Your daddy killed your mother! He killed my daughter!” Her words were piercing; they cut deep. They took away my final hope last night was a dream and That Day really didn’t happen.

“You’re a goddamned liar Grandma! Don’t say that

to me! Don't you dare say that to me! Don't you lie to me Grandma! You're a liar! Where is my daddy?" She slapped me so hard my neck popped. Her face was tight. It seemed as if every blood vessel in her face was at the surface of her skin.

"Don't you ever mention that man in this house again!" I ran to the kitchen, opened the backdoor, and ran out of the house. I ran hard and fast; Grandma could not keep up. She shouted to Mr. Nance, her neighbor, for help. Grandma and Mr. Nance ran after me. I ran faster. They were behind me. David, Mr. Nance's son, joined them. He caught me and tackled me to the ground. I kicked and screamed. They held me down, and I passed out. When I woke up, I was in bed with Khalid still in Grandma's house.

The funeral was quiet and quick. We were dressed to the nines in our mourning wear. Aunt Mary wore a black pants suit almost identical to Grandma's suit; the difference was Grandma wore a skirt instead of pants. Khalid wore his favorite black suit with a clip on tie. Daddy tried to teach him to tie a necktie, but Khalid could never get the hang of it. I wore a black dress and black nylons. People I have never seen before walked to the front of the church and said nice things about my momma. Older women in the church walked by Grandma and firmly placed their hands on her shoulder. I tried to be strong until Aunt Mary touched me. Tears begin to form in my eyes. I closed my eyes as tight as I could to keep the tears from flowing. I bit my lip in a futile attempt to stop the tears. I could not stop them. They quickly escalated from a slow drip to a full flow.

"Please God bring her back." Aunt Mary gently squeezed my shoulder. "Aunt Mary, please ask God to bring her back." The church was quiet. The minister stopped speaking and looked at me in a sorrowful, powerless way.

“Baby, the Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.”

“No, don’t tell me that! I want my momma! Tell God to bring her back, please. I will be so good. I will take communion every first Sunday. I will say my prayers. Tell God I will do anything just bring her back.”

No one had answers. The church was dead quiet. Then Mrs. Gigs, an usher who has been at St. James A.M.E., as long as there has been a St. James A.M.E., placed her arms around me and escorted me outside. Aunt Mary followed behind us. I stayed with Aunt Mary while everyone, including Grandma, went to the burial site. I sat on Aunt Mary’s lap curling my torso so I can place my head in her chest. The sound of her heart was a calming lullaby. I wanted to stay on her lap wrapped in her arms forever until God called me home. After the funeral, we returned to Grandma’s house. We did not go to the church for the huge dinner at the repast.

Everyone, including Grandma, stayed in their rooms for a week. Khalid and I ate cold cuts, cookies and potato chips the entire week Grandma was in her room. We had not gone to school in almost two weeks. I was not ready to go to school. I did not care if I ever saw another school again. Aunt Mary came every morning and stayed late in the evening to take care of Grandma. Khalid and I took care of each other.

“You know guys, we’re going to register at your new schools tomorrow.”

“Aunt Mary, I am not going to school.”

“Sure you are Thandie.”

“Oh no I am not. Besides, I don’t know anyone at the new school.”

“Yeah me neither. I am not going to school either. Am I Thandie?” Khalid repeated everything I said.

“Look guys do you think your mother would want you to behave this way? You know Riley wanted very much for you guys to have a good education.” Aunt Mary

had a point. Momma taught Khalid and me to read before we went to school, but I really didn't care what Aunt Mary said. I wasn't going to school, and in my mind, no one could make me.

Khalid and I refused to get out of bed and go with Grandma and Aunt Mary to register at our new schools. We were both plagued with a terrible stomachache and blurred vision. We were determined we were not going to school. I was sure Aunt Mary and Grandma knew our sudden illnesses were unreal, but we were allowed to stay home.

When Aunt Mary came back with our class assignments and bus schedules, Khalid and I were speechless. The thought of going to school terrified me. We had grown comfortable staying in the house all day. We had become accustomed to basically doing whatever we wanted. Grandma usually stayed in bed all day, and we basically had to fend for ourselves. Aunt Mary tried to get us to go outside to play, but we were not having it. There were a lot of children in the neighborhood. The children appeared friendly, but I really did not feel up to playing with children. My life was not a child's life anymore; my childhood was stolen in one second with one bullet.

Aunt Mary nagged Khalid and me daily about staying in the house. She constantly reminded us of the need for fresh air. After daily pressure from Aunt Mary, Khalid and I finally went outside. There were kids outside playing, but we stayed with each other safe in Grandma's yard.

"Hi I'm Ayanna. What's your name? You want to play Double Dutch?" We were standing outside when Ayanna jumped rope all of the way up the driveway. She looked silly. She had two ponytails, one on each side of her head, that flopped up and down every time she jumped the rope.

"No she doesn't want to play with you." Khalid stood military style; a menacing look covered his face. "Do

you Thandie?”

“No,” I looked at her and wondered why she wanted to play with a dead woman’s child anyway. She had a glow and an aura of innocence I no longer possessed.

Khalid and I walked back inside of the house, leaving her standing alone in Grandma’s yard. I looked out of the window and watched Ayanna play with some of the other neighborhood children. They played double dutch and filled the street with laughter and pre-teen conversation. I was envious of their happiness and jovial dispositions. I closed the blinds and played card games with Khalid until it was time for bed.

The next morning, Aunt Mary came for Khalid and me to take us to school. When she came into my room and woke me up, my eyes met her eyes with an intense blank stare.

“Come on Thandie, you and Khalid have to get up. It’s time to go.” I propped myself on my elbows and continued to stare at her. I thought to myself. *Where in the hell does she think we’re going? I told her I am not going to school.*

“What time is it Aunt Mary?”

“Six o’clock now get up!”

“For what?”

“You are going to school.”

“No, I am not going to school.”

“Yes you are! Get up!” She came over, grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the bed. I tried to grab onto the side of the bed to stop her. She snatched me up and firmly demanded I get dressed. “Don’t upset your brother. You have to go to school, and that’s all there is to it.”

Aunt Mary was right. Khalid would become upset if I am upset. He used my emotions to define his own. If I was happy, he was happy. If I cried, Khalid cried. So I knew if I put on a show, Khalid would join me.

“Come on Khalid; it’s time to get up. You’re going

to school.” She woke Khalid.

“Thandisha, are we going to school?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I didn’t want to upset Khalid. Besides, Aunt Mary was serious. We were going to school.

Aunt Mary made oatmeal and toast with a bowl of fresh fruit on the side. We ate breakfast in silence.

“Thandisha, do you need help with your hair?”

“No, I can do it myself.” I didn’t want anyone’s hands to touch me but my momma’s.

“Well it’s time to leave the table and get dressed, so we won’t be late.” A wide smile covered her face; I hoped she was not expecting one in return. I did not see anything to smile about. I was not ready to go to school and really didn’t care if I ever went again. I wanted to stay safely tucked away in my room with my brother forever.

We took Khalid to his new school first. I did not want to upset him, so I smiled a lot pretending I was okay. I wanted him to believe he would be okay. Actually, if he felt anything close to the way I felt, it was amazing he went inside of the building. Surprisingly, Khalid was smiling when he got out of the car and gleefully waved goodbye to me and Aunt Mary. I felt betrayed. After we dropped Khalid off, it was my turn.

“Thandie, you will be okay. I know it has been hard for you and your brother, but you will be okay.” I ignore Aunt Mary. At this moment she is not exactly my favorite person in the world. I sat staring out of the passenger side window holding my book bag tightly to my chest.

The building was humongous. It looked more like a prison than a school. I sat in the car with my head turned away from Aunt Mary; I didn’t want her to see me cry. I wiped the tears away from my eyes and opened the car door. I wanted to step out of the car and run, but I knew Aunt Mary could probably catch me. I grabbed my book bag and got out of the car without saying goodbye. I walked in the building and followed the directions to the

guidance counselor's office as Aunt Mary instructed. I have never gone to school alone on the first day before. Momma always came with me on the first day.

The guidance counselor gave me a class schedule, a school map, and sent me on my way. I was on my own. I walked down the hall looking straight ahead with my belongings held tight against my chest. I didn't want to see faces, and I didn't want anyone to see my face. I wanted to melt and disappear into the yellow, cinder block walls. I wanted to become an inanimate object that did not feel, like the round, brown clock that hanged lopsided above the counselor's desk. The halls were crowded. I was scared. I wanted to go into the bathroom and stay until it was time to go home until I saw Ayanna.

"Hey girl," Ayanna acted as if we were the best of friends.

"Hi," I didn't look at her. I continued to walk staring straight ahead with my book bag held tightly against my chest.

"Where are you going? What class do you have this period?" She grabbed my schedule from my hand. "Okay let me see. Girl, we have English together; come on let's go." She took my arm and dragged me down the hall.

That was five years ago. Ayanna and I have been friends since. She has been my anchor to the outside world for the past five years. My grandmother says that we are conjoined twin because we do everything together. In junior high school, we were inseparable. Now in high school we are still best friends. I love Ayanna and Ayanna loves me because I love her. I thank God for this relationship. She never asks questions about my momma and daddy, but I am sure she knows. The fact she never asks is an indication she knows.

Ayanna is very popular in high school. I stand in the background. She is a cheerleader; she runs track. I go to the games to see her cheer, and I go to the track to see her

run. I attend church with her some Sundays to see her sing in the youth choir. Ayanna is the younger of two children. Her life reminds me of what my life would have been if I still had my parents. She is happy and enjoying her life. I was happy enjoying her life that is until I met Andreas. Before Andreas, I didn't really have a life of my own. My life was Ayanna's life and whatever made her happy made me happy.

When I first met Andreas, I felt like he was an angel sent directly to me from God. He is tall and muscular with perfect, white teeth. He had a fellow classmate by the collar pressed against the wall. There was something about the way he gritted his teeth that caught my attention; they were pearly white, straight and perfect.

"Come on man, let me go." The guy was not resisting.

"Hell no! If you fuck with my sister again, it's me and you!" Drake, another classmate, tried to separate them.

"Come on man, let him go! You don't need to get in trouble. Your sister gone do what she gone do." Drake manages to pull him away, and they walk down the hall passing me as I stood by my locker. He didn't notice me; I started playing detective. Andreas was the subject of my investigation. I learned he is a senior; and as fine as he is, he didn't play school sports. He lives on the south side of Atlanta in Zephie Phillips Homes, one of the toughest government housing neighborhoods in Atlanta. It is rumored the police will not go there. Andreas Booker works after school for one of the factories to help take care of his mother and younger sister, Jazmyne. I dreamed about him day and night, and he does not know I exist. I have already decided when we will marry, the number of bridesmaids, grooms, and the number of little Andreas I will have; and he doesn't even know my name or that I occupy a spot on the planet.

Ayanna, who was conducting an investigation of

her own, found he did not have a girlfriend. One day during lunch, she invited him to our table. I begged her not to, but she wouldn't listen.

"Thandisha, I am tired of your ass asking me about the damn boy; it's time y'all met." She stood and motioned for him to come to our table. I tried to pull her back down to her seat. I grabbed her arm, and she quickly snatched away.

"Oh my God, he is coming." Initially, I couldn't talk. He sat down at the table; I noticed his arms were very muscular. He looked like a grown man as opposed to a high school senior.

"Hey, I'm Andreas." I was mute. "Ayanna said you wanted to meet me." I looked down at the table too afraid to look up. Ayanna nudged my side with her elbow.

"Oh yeah I've been seeing you around, and I wanted to meet you." I looked up and was blinded by his pearly white teeth. I was so mesmerized I didn't see a complete face but a blurred image. I tried to control my breathing because I felt as if I would pass out at any moment.

Before I could continue the conversation, his classmate, Drake, came over.

"Hey man what's up?" Andreas stood and turned around to greet Drake. "Hey I'll see you around, and what did you say your name was?" I couldn't speak; I smiled and stared at him until he was out of my view.

"Come on Thandisha; let's go before we're late to class." I walked to class with Andreas on my brain. I sat through English, Math, Science, and Social Studies daydreaming about him. I saw him in the senior hall while changing classes for about two months. He would speak to me but that was it. He did not engage in conversation with me or show an interest in me.

I didn't have a conversation with him again until I saw him at Ayanna's backyard pool party. My grandmother is strict; I couldn't wear a swimsuit. I felt awkward as

everyone was dressed for the occasion but me. Fortunately, I found a pair of almost too short shorts, so I did not look like a complete odd ball. He glided over to me. I looked down at his muscular thighs and bulging calves up to his six-pack stomach and then at his pearly whites.

“Hey Thandisha, what’s up girl?” I couldn’t say anything. All I could do was smile.

“Where is your swimsuit?” He looked down at my legs.

“I’m too skinny to wear a swimsuit in public.” I lied; I couldn’t very well tell him my grandmother wouldn’t allow me to wear one.

“You’re small framed, but you’re not skinny. You’re what I call slim-fine. I bet you look good as hell in a swimsuit.” He looked at me from head to toe. I didn’t say anything; I couldn’t say anything, so I smiled. Then the DJ played my favorite slow jam. I surprised myself by asking him to dance.

“Sure but Thandisha I have never slow danced before.” I was shocked; I imagined he was mature and experienced in all things that had to do with males and females.

“Well I remember hearing someone say you simply sway to the rhythm of the music.” We swayed side to side. I placed my arms around his bulging shoulders. His big hands felt light as a feather on my waist. The song was over, but my face was still buried in his chest. He stepped back and away from me.

“You’re a good dancer.” I was still mute. I simply smiled. I remember this night as if it were yesterday. I felt happy and sad at the same time. I know that sounds oxymoronic. I couldn’t explain this feeling. I walked back to the table and sat with Ayanna; he followed me.

“You want something to drink?”

“Sure,” he glided to the refreshment table. I didn’t take my eyes off of him until he was back at the table and

sitting next to me.

“Thandisha, you belong to someone?” I didn’t know what to say; I simply smiled.

“No, she doesn’t have a boyfriend.” Ayanna intervened just in time.

“That’s good.” He smiled. It was getting late; I knew I had to be home by 11:00, but I didn’t want to leave.

“Girl, it’s 10:45; we told your grandmother you would be home before 11:00. Come on let’s go; I’ll walk you half of the way home.” Ayanna is always responsible. She stays out of trouble. I guess that’s why Grandma was happy when we became friends. Ayanna is my first and only friend since I lived with my grandmother. Other children in the neighborhood simply stared at me. They were never mean, but it was obvious to me they knew about That Day. I didn’t blame them or become angry with them. I am sure they were afraid to befriend me. Maybe they were afraid my daddy would kill them or their mommas. They stayed away and simply didn’t talk to me, but not Ayanna. I was mean to her and rebuffed her initial invitation for friendship. But when I saw her on my first day at the new school, she was exactly what I needed. If it were not for her, I probably would not have made it through the first day.

“Where do you live?”

“Around the corner.”

“You want me to walk you home?” I stand, start walking, and he follows me. I am so mesmerized I do not tell Ayanna I am leaving. I try to walk as slowly as I can to savor the moment.

“You live in a nice neighborhood.”

“Thanks,” Grandma took some of the insurance money and paid off her house. Momma was so smart. She had over \$200,000 in life insurance plus a good bit in a savings account. She left Khalid and me \$50,000.00 each, but we cannot touch it until we are twenty years old.

“You’re very pretty Thandisha.” When we reach the driveway, I want him to kiss me; instead, he gently reaches for my hand. “I would like to spend more time with you.”

“Thandie! Thandie!” I look over my shoulder; Grandma is standing in the threshold of the door in her robe and slippers. She does not have to say anything. I know she means for me to come inside of the house.

“Coming Grandma.”

“Hello Ma’am.” She quickly slams the door without acknowledging Andreas’ greeting.

“Thandie?” He smiles torturing me with his beautiful, pearly white teeth.

“That’s what my grandmother and brother call me. Actually, when my brother was small, he could not say Thandisha, so he would call me Thandie.”

“Well Thandie what are you doing tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure. I have to see what Ayanna says, but we will probably go to the mall and catch a movie.”

“What time? Would you like for me to give you guys a ride?”

“I would love that, but Grandma doesn’t allow me to get into cars with boys.” I wait for him to say something about the strictness my grandmother imposes, but he does not.

“If you want to meet us at the mall, we will be there probably around 11:00.”

“I’ll meet you guys at the Taco Stand say around 12:00.”

The door opens again. We both look at one another and smile.

“Thandie, get in here!”

“Coming.”

“Now!” I look at him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.” I walk up the driveway. Grandma stands at the door waiting for me.

“Who is that boy?”

“Andreas,” I walk into the house and pass Grandma who is still standing in the threshold of the door. I really do not want to elaborate on Andreas. I know she will find something wrong with him.

“How old is he?”

“He is 18 Grandma.” I am trying to get away from her. I walk down the hall to my room. She follows me into my room and continues to ask questions.

“He looks like a grown man.”

“Grandma, he is 18.”

“Where does he live?”

“Down the street.”

“I have never seen him in the neighborhood.” She is getting on my nerves; I really am not in the mood for twenty questions.

“He works after school Grandma; that’s why you never see him. Besides, you never come outside anyway.” I know not to tell her he lives in the projects; she would go nuts. She stands in the hall outside of my room. I walk pass her and go to the bathroom. I turn on the water, so I can get away from her. I am careful not to wash both of my hands. I want to smell the scent of his hands on mine. I look forward to tomorrow, so I can see him again. I go to bed praying I will see him in my dreams.

When I wake up, Khalid is laying at the bottom of my bed. Khalid is 13 almost 14 years old. He hasn’t been able to sleep all night alone since we lived with Grandma. Grandma used to punish him for crying when it was time to go to bed. I made a deal with Khalid when we first moved to Grandma’s house; after Grandma went to bed, I would come to his room and get him, so he could go to sleep in my bed with me. I used this to bribe him all of the time. When he wouldn’t do as I asked, I would threaten to make him sleep alone in his own bed. The truth is I needed him close to me probably more than he needed me.

When I open my eyes again and look over my

shoulder, he is laying behind me with his head propped in his hands.

“Morning.”

“Morning.” I fall back on the pillow.

“Did you have a good time at the party last night Thandie?”

“Yeah I had a great time. I talked to a really nice guy. I think I’m in love Khalid.”

“I’m going to tell Grandma.”

“You better not!”

“Thandie, can you take me to the arcade today?”

“No, I am going to the mall with Ayanna.”

“There is an arcade in the mall.”

“No, I’m not taking you.” I get up and push him off my bed. He hits the floor hard. I proceed to make my bed. He gets up from the floor with his arms folded across his chest.

“If you don’t take me with you, I’m telling Grandma you’re in love with a boy.” I hit him on his shoulder with my fist.

“Grandma, I have something to tell you.” He walks towards the door threatening to disclose my secret. I grab the back of his T-shirt, pull him back inside of the room, and quickly close the door.

“You better not tell!”

“I’ll be ready in twenty minutes.” He stands with his arms folded across his chest; an annoying smirk covers his face. I am mad as hell. My little brother is now bribing me, and he has me.

Ayanna and I walk down the street to the bus stop; Khalid follows close behind with a victorious smile. He does not seem to mind we are totally ignoring him and excluding him from our jokes and laughter.

Although the bus takes its usual route, it seems as if it is taking hours for us to get to the mall as opposed to the usual thirty minutes. I am anxious. I look forward to seeing

Andreas again. When we finally arrive at the mall, Ayanna and I take Khalid to the arcade. I actually enjoy the arcade. It is filled with teens, but I am uncomfortable with Khalid's new found power, I cannot enjoy it. I do not want to play my favorite games.

Ayanna is engulfed in a conversation with Darryl, a boy in our chemistry class. They are playing video games, but I am busy obsessing over my anger at my little brother taking control to join in their conversation. It is 11:50; it seems as if it is taking hours for the clock to reach 12:00.

"Come on Ayanna, let's go." She brushes me away. I fold my arms across my chest and roll my eyes; I am mad as hell. I want her to leave Darryl and come with me to the Taco Stand. She flips her hand again, turns her head, and continues to talk to Darryl. I sit on the bench outside of the arcade. I look at my watch. It is 12:04. I am increasingly angry and irritated with Ayanna. I walk back inside of the arcade. Ayanna is playing Trooper with Darryl standing close behind her with his arms around her waist.

"Ayanna!"

"What?"

"It's 12:04."

"So?"

"So let's go; Andreas is meeting me at the Taco Stand at 12:00."

"He isn't coming here to see me fool; he's coming to see you. You go ahead; I'll stay here with Khalid." It was 12:05. I walk Olympic style to the Taco Stand until I reach the entrance to the food court. I slowly look around the corner, and I see him sitting at a table sipping on a soft drink. I use my fingers to brush my hair back before I turn the corner. When he sees me, he smiles showing all of his perfect, white teeth.

"You want something to eat?" He stands and greets me, as I reach the table.

"No thank you; I am not hungry." I lie; I have not

eaten all day. I was too excited; I didn't eat breakfast. I am actually famished.

"How about a soda?"

"Cool that will be nice."

"What kind?"

"Strawberry," he walks to the counter and orders the food. I watch him from the time he leaves until he returns to the table with four tacos, a taco salad and a burrito.

"Are you going to eat all of that?"

"Girl, this is a snack." He smiles. *God those pearly white teeth.* I laugh. "Why don't you help me eat?" He removes the wrapper from the burrito, and puts a small portion inside of my mouth; some of the refried beans fall on the side of my face. He quickly takes a napkin and wipes the beans off of my face so gently I barely feel the napkin touch my skin.

"So what movie are you going to see?"

"I don't know something mild since my little brother came with us."

"You're very pretty Thandisha." He sits still and stares at me. I blush so hard all 28 of my teeth are showing.

"Thanks you ain't so bad yourself." The words are coming now. I can actually speak.

"How old is your brother?"

"He is 13, but he will be turning 14 in a couple of days."

"You only have one brother?" He looks surprised.

"Yes I have one brother; it's just me and Khalid."

"What about you?"

"I have four brothers and three sisters. I'm the oldest at home. You know my sister, Jazmyne, don't you?"

"Yes, I have English with her."

"She told me." My heart flutters. Now, I know he is interested because he is discussing me with his sister.

“She says you’re very smart and one of the uppity girls.”

“I would not say I am uppity.” I laugh.

“Hey ain’t anything wrong with that. If you got it, you got it. Me, I don’t have it, but I am trying like hell to get it. I work the second shift full-time, Monday through Friday. I’m trying to get my own business.”

“Really!” I try to sound interested.

“Hell yeah. You don’t make money working for the man. The man gets rich, and you still struggle.”

“What kind of business do you want?”

“A lawn service. Oh it is more than cutting grass. See I’m taking horticulture at school. I have four commercial clients already. I’m trying to save up for a riding lawn mower, so I can get some big accounts. I want a zipper. Have you ever seen one?” He is so excited he does not allow time for an answer. “Well they go about 30 mph. You can cut a football field in about an hour. That’s what I am saving for.” He sits back in his chair with his head cradled in his hands. “So what do you want to do when you graduate?”

“I want to be an artist. Grandma says it is a waste of time. She says I’m going to college.”

“So you can draw?”

“Oh yeah. I drew all of the art in our house. I’ve even sold paintings to members of our bible class.”

“I’m not saying anything against your grandmother, but I don’t see anything wrong with wanting to be an artist if you have the talent.”

“Really?” I smile. No one shows genuine interest when I speak of my goals not even Ayanna. Though I tell her I want to be an artist, she brushes it off. She has already made plans for us to be college roommates and pledge the same sorority. She hasn’t decided on which sorority she wants us to pledge; she will decide when we get to college.

“Hey look at Cynthia St. James, Charles Bibbs those are some pretty cool artists. My favorite is Paul Goodnight.” He actually knows about art. I am impressed.

“I love DT Turman.”

“I never heard of him.”

“Grandma bought one of his original paintings for my 15th birthday. He’s great. He uses raised oil paint mixed with fine granules of sand splattered on canvas.”

“Wow I’d love to see it.” For some reason, I didn’t picture him being the kind who enjoys art. Though he has a gentle spirit, he looks hard. I think it’s his eyes. They look old and kind of weary as if they have seen a lot of pain and disappointment.

“Hey Bro, what it is?”

“What’s up?” It is Jazmyne, his sister.

“Give me some money Bro; hell I need to get my damn nails done.” She is dressed in a bright orange, tight fitting jumpsuit, bright orange matching shoes, and big tarnished, gold plated, hoop earrings. Grandma would call her a ghetto hoochie.

“I told you to stop putting that fake shit on your nails.”

“Niggah, just give me the damn money.” She props herself on one leg. He gives her twenty dollars; she smiles showing three gold teeth in the front of her mouth. Her gold teeth look odd and off centered. I have seen people with one gold tooth. I have also seen them with two, but I have never seen three. I stare into her mouth as she talks trying to figure out the pattern, but I realize there is no pattern.

“You need to tell Keekee to get a damn job.” She sucks her teeth, rolls her eyes, and walks away.

“Damn that girl drives me crazy. This boyfriend that boyfriend and that damn Keekee; I don’t even want to go there.” He rolls his eyes toward the ceiling and shakes his head. “How many boyfriends do you have?”

“I have never had a boyfriend.”

“Baby, you don’t have to play me like that. You are way too fine not to have a boyfriend.”

“Seriously, I’ve never had a boyfriend.” I don’t understand why he finds that so surprising. I mean I am not ugly, but no one ever talks to me except for Ayanna. I always thought people were too afraid to talk to me because of That Day.

“That’s hard to believe, but you don’t look like a liar to me.”

“I need to check on my brother.” I look at my watch; it is 1:33. We stand at the same time. I wait for him while he cleans the table. He gently places his hand on the middle of my back and escorts me through the maze of tables and out of the food court.

“Where is Khalid?” Ayanna is sitting in front of the arcade on the bench with Darryl.

“He is still in the arcade winning tickets trying to get a prize.” I walk into the arcade; he follows me. Khalid is playing a video game with a long line of tickets flowing from the machine.

“Khalid!”

“Yeah?” He never looks up.

“Come on it’s time to go.”

“I’m not ready.”

“I don’t care. Let’s go.” I look down at the tickets running out of the machine and notice another bag full of tickets next to him.

“Boy, did you spend all of your money?”

“Not yet.”

“How much did you spend?”

“Thandie, will you leave me alone?” I snatch him away from the game. He jerks away from me. When he touches the button again, the game ends. “Thandie, look what you did!” He sits on the floor and rolls all of his tickets into a doughnut shaped circle. He smiles from ear to

ear as if he has found gold. He turns, looks at me, and then looks at Andreas. He doesn't speak to Andreas; he looks at him with a long stare.

"Hey man what's up?" Khalid takes his tickets and walks away.

"Khalid, come here!" He continues to walk as if he does not hear me. "Now!" He slowly walks over to me.

"What?"

"Let's go and get something to eat. I know you're hungry."

"I want to play some more; I'm not hungry." Andreas reaches into his pocket and pulls out five dollars. "No thank you," he looks at the money and walks back to his game and insert more coins into the machine.

"Khalid, I'll be sitting on the bench in front of the arcade entrance. When you finish, come out here." Andreas and I sit on a bench, across from Ayanna and Darryl. He tells me his story and shares his dreams. I listen; at the time, I wasn't able to tell him mine. I have not dealt with my story yet. I still have nightmares about That Day. I made a conscious decision a long time ago not to deal with it, not to think about That Day. I rationalize if I don't think about it then the memories can no longer hurt me. I didn't realize tucking the memories away, deep inside of me, without dealing with them almost cost me my life. It is only now I know life is 360 degrees, a full circle. You have to complete the circle. There is no escape. There is no diversion from feeling the pain. The pain cannot lay tucked away forever. The memory will resurface, sometimes at the most inopportune time, and if you don't have the tenacity to deal with them, they could kill you. Not quick, but slow and painful. You have to look at them veraciously, and if you don't, you will have to go back 360 degrees until you truthfully face them.

"Andreas is such a unique name. I have never heard of a black person with that name."

“It comes from my daddy. He’s the best gambler in the world.” He smiles as if this were an admirable trait.

“Are you like your daddy?” His smile quickly disappears.

“I don’t really know because I try like hell to be the opposite. I work hard; I help take care of my mother and younger sister. I don’t have a bunch of baby mommas. I figure my dad has to be pretty sick. He says he loves women, but I don’t see it. I figure if you really like women, you would want to savor one particular woman. You love everything about one particular woman. Besides, you all are too complex to deal with more than one at a time.”

“What do you mean by complex?” I laugh, but I am slightly annoyed at the generalization.

“I have three sisters and a mother. Women are something to deal with. Once you think you know what it takes to satisfy a woman, she changes to something else. Women are very hard to please.” He pauses and looks directly at me. “Are you hard to please?”

No one ever asks me anything. So I really do not know how to answer this question. All of my decisions are made for me, or people make decisions and do not care how they affect me.

“I don’t know. No one ever told me I was hard to please; no one ever said I wasn’t.”

“Thandie, I’m hungry.” Khalid walks behind the bench and taps me on the shoulder.

“Okay wait a minute.” He waits all of three seconds.

“Thandie, I’m thirsty.” I look over Andreas’ shoulder. His arm is around me. Khalid walks in front of the bench. “Man, get your hands off of my sister!” He gives Andreas a mean, nasty look.

“Okay bro. I’m sorry; I don’t mean any disrespect.” Andreas moves his arm.

“Let’s go Thandie!”

“Sit down Khalid, or I will never take you to the arcade again!” He sits down on the bench next to me pouting. I try to ignore him. I am embarrassed. Khalid is 13 two days shy of 14, but he is very immature. I know other 13 year olds that are much more independent. I have always tried to be patient with him. I believe he regressed about five years after That Day. There are times when he acts his age, but at other times, I swear he acts as if he is nine or ten years old.

“Hey bro, do you want me to walk down to the Taco stand with you? That is if you like tacos. If not we can go someplace else?” Khalid’s demeanor suddenly changes; a big smile covers his face.

“Give me some money Thandie.” I reach in my pocket and give Khalid five dollars. Khalid and Andreas leave me and Ayanna on the bench in front of the arcade. When they return, Darryl is gone, and Ayanna and I are sitting on the bench in front of the arcade.

“Girl it is 3:00; we missed the movies.”

“Yeah I know; we better get ready to catch the bus.”

“I can take you home.”

“We don’t have to be home until 6:30.” I told Grandma I was going to the movies. If we come back too early, she will know I lied.

“We can go to the park, and then I’ll drop you guys off at your bus stop.” This is a good idea; we still have time to hang out before Grandma expects us home. Besides, I really want to spend more time with Andreas.

“We walk to the end of the parking lot to his car. He drives a candy apple red, 67 Thunderbird. As old as it is, it does not have dents or scratches, and it is clean inside and out. He walks to the passenger side of the car and opens the door for me. I have never ridden in a car with a boy. I feel grown up and mature. I reach over the seat and unlock the rear door for Khalid and Ayanna.

“Put your seat belt on Khalid.” He rolls his eyes and fastens his seat belt. He used to do everything I told him to do without rebuttal, but now he is beginning to challenge me.

We drive by his home in Zephie Phillips Downs. His grandmother’s apartment is two buildings over from his, and a cousin stays two doors down from the grandmother. There is what looks like a thousand children playing outside. Women, young and old, are sitting on their porches, and a couple of men with worn faces stand bent over looking under the hood of a rusty, old car that appears too old to consider repairing. There are a lot of people that live in his apartment complex. I have never seen so many people in one place before.

We drive onto highway 85 then on highway 20; I can see the outline of the park from the interstate. It is beautiful from this view. The trees are green. From this angle, the litter blends in well with the landscape. The abuse of the park is undetectable until you get up close. Then you can see the park’s vulnerabilities. The remnants of paper bags half filled with food are obviously litter and not part of the landscape. A faint scent of urine hovers in the air. I really don’t understand how people can abuse something so naturally beautiful. There are empty trashcans all over the park, yet the landscape is filled with litter.

In spite of being surrounded by litter, I enjoy this time with Andreas. We find an old, oak tree that generously provides shade from the sun. We park under the tree and listen to reggae music. Reggae really is not my thing, but I am enjoying Andreas’ company.

Khalid has fallen asleep; we leave him in the car. Ayanna finds some people she knows from church and leaves Andreas and me alone. We sit on a picnic table next to the car. I sit next to him and stare into his eyes. He kisses me without warning. It feels good. His lips are soft and damp but not too wet. I have never kissed a boy before

and am surprised at how natural this is for me.

“I’ve wanted to do that all day.” He smiles while licking his lips. I could stay with him all day. He is fun and kind. He is easy to talk to and very considerate. His conversation is not the kind of conversation I am accustomed to. He is totally different from anyone I have ever known.

I am having fun, but I have to get home before it is too late. I see Ayanna and yell for her to come back to the car. Khalid is still asleep when we reach the car. He alternates between watching me and watching the road. I am glad he is a good driver because as often as he glances at me, he does not drive off the road. He drops us off at the subdivision entrance at 6:45; we are late. I coach Khalid on what to tell Grandma. *The movie was good and scary. We went to see Dinosaur Horror. It was about big scary dinosaurs. It was so scary; I can’t talk about it.* When we reach the driveway, I remind him one more time what to say to Grandma.

“If she asks anything else what are you going to say?”

“Grandma it was so scary; I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay that’s good.” When we get home, Grandma has already made dinner. I am normally the cook. Grandma never seasons her food. Her food is always bland. Grandma cooks out of obligation. You cannot taste the love in her food. She made fried chicken, rice, and broccoli. The chicken tastes like chicken and flour. The rice is crunchy and needs more time to cook. The broccoli is plain, no butter or cheese. I hate her cooking because it makes me miss my momma. Momma enjoyed cooking. You could taste the love in momma’s food. She always took her time and seasoned the food perfectly. The table is quiet as usual. We never really talk to each other, and when we do, it was never about anything meaningful. Our

conversations are always forced and superficial.

After dinner, I wash dishes, take a shower, and go to my room. I watch television and wait by the phone praying Andreas will call me. I sit on the bed and look in the mirror often glancing at the phone just in case he calls. I observe my facial features. I am a mixture of momma and daddy. My skin is paper bag brown like daddy. My hair is jet black and thick as a rope like momma. I was so glad when Grandma finally allowed me to chemically straighten my hair. Now if I could only convince her to allow me to cut it. It does not have a style. I always wear it in a bun in the back of my head. I put a rubber band in my hair to make a ponytail then twist the ends into a bun. Grandma once said when I took my hair down, I look like momma. After she said this, I did not wear my hair loose again for years.

“Oh my God Thandisha, you are waiting by the phone.” I pick up the phone on the first ring; it’s Ayanna. I can hear the television show Grandma is watching in the den. I hate when she listens to my conversation before she hangs up.

“Grandma, I have it.” She knows the phone is for me. The only person she ever talks to on the phone is Aunt Mary, and that is not often because Aunt Mary is usually here.

“Thandisha, today was so much fun.”

“Yeah Ayanna I had a ball.”

“That Darryl is a trip with his fine self.”

“He ain’t fine as Andreas.”

“Child please, Andreas is not that fine; he’s too black.”

“What do you mean too black?” Ayanna’s phone clicks.

“Girl, that’s Devontae. Ooh I love him.”

“I thought you loved Darryl.”

“I do.”

“Well you can’t love both of them.”

“Why not? I am not trying to marry nobody. Thandisha, we are in high school. We’re supposed to have fun.” My phone beeps. I quickly press the flash button to answer the incoming call.

“Hello.”

“Hello, may I speak to Thandisha?”

“This is she.”

“Hey, what’s up?” His voice is low and deep, yet soothing.

“Nothing I am just sitting in my room watching television.”

“I was waiting on you to call me. I decided maybe you wouldn’t call, so I called you. Were you busy?”

“No, I told you; I was watching television. I was waiting, kind of hoping you would call.” He laughs.

“I really had a nice time today. I really dig you girl.”

“I kind of like you too.” We talk on the phone for over an hour when my line beeps. It is Ayanna.

“Girl, I am sitting and waiting to see how long it would take you to call me back. You know you are through.” She laughs, but I can tell she is annoyed.

“I’m sorry Ayanna. I’ll call you back in 20 minutes.” Twenty minutes turn into an hour. I cannot get enough of Andreas.

Forty-Five Degrees

Everything in my life has changed. In fact, it is hard for me to remember when my life was not like this. I feel as if I have been an orphan forever. My other life is buried deep inside of my memory, and I can't touch it. I can't go back that far to reach it. This new life is odd and peculiar. I feel as if I will wake up at any moment and find I have been dreaming. The foundation is shaky in this new life. My life does not feel real. It is as if I am looking in a mirror or an audience member in a theatrical play watching the different characters in my life performs. I have no friends in my life from before That Day. Perhaps if I did, they can remind me who I used to be. I have totally forgotten. I have not gone back to my old house since That Day. I don't know what became of that house.

I found a way to survive in this new life. With the exception of my relationship with my brother, all of my relationships are superficial. It did not matter because I need the people in my life to keep me anchored. My sanity is shaky. Ayanna is my superficial best friend. She is happy with our friendship because she is the center of my attention. Living Ayanna's life is appealing to me because I don't have to live my own life. I do not have to think about That Day or myself. I don't think I would have survived if I didn't have Ayanna; she is the center of my attention. Actually, she is the center of everyone's attention including her own.

She is definitely the center of Mr. Williams' attention even at the expense of her older sister, Dee. Ayanna's father gives her a lot of extras. She has the best

of everything. Clothes, jewelry you name it; Ayanna has it. She says it is one of the perks in being the baby of the family. Her parents are still together. Her oldest sister, Dee, and her two children moved back home after a nasty divorce. I am sure Dee feels like a failure. Ayanna has a way of making all of Dee's faults known. In spite of her self-centered nature, I love Ayanna. I know her significance to my life.

Ayanna's home has a peaceful ambiance. I enjoy visiting Ayanna's house. I believe if That Day had not happened, my family would have been like Ayanna's family. Ayanna is very close to her father. She is a straight A student. Her primary goal in life is to make her daddy proud. Their relationship is beautiful to me. It is as if he is a king and she is his princess. When her father drives us around to the many events Ayanna is involved in, he always opens the door for Ayanna to get in the car and opens the door for her to get out of the car. Ayanna does not consider this treatment special or out of the ordinary. She expects it.

Ayanna's mother is like a shadow. Not only is she in the background in Ayanna's life, but she is in the background of Mr. Williams' life as well. Ayanna rarely speaks of her mother. I think it is shameful. She obviously does not understand the special nature of a mother. I pray she will never feel my loss. I enjoy sitting in the kitchen talking to Mrs. Williams. It wasn't often I spoke to her. Ayanna would always want to go into her room when Mrs. Williams came into the kitchen, our normal hang out. She acts as if she does not want me interacting with her mother as if she is ashamed of her mother. I do not like the way she speaks to her mother. It is as if Ayanna is the mother, and Mrs. Williams is the child. The sad thing about their relationship is Mrs. Williams appears to accept it. I don't remember my mother being as docile as Mrs. Williams, but her soft nature is very appealing to me. She is inviting and

kind, and I often want wrap my arms around her skinny, frail body. I never did it, but I always wanted to embrace Mrs. Williams, and I would sometimes imagine what it would feel like for her to hold me close with her arms tightly wrapped around me.

Grandma says women make the best friends. Though our relationship is superficial and centered on Ayanna, she is my best friend, and I love her. Not the way Grandma loves Aunt Mary. Grandma never told us she and Aunt Mary love each other the way a man and a woman love each other, but we know. Aunt Mary and Grandma have loved each other for years even before I was born. Their relationship began shortly after my mother was born. I never met my grandfather. Grandma never spoke of him. I have a picture of him with momma when momma was little girl. But I never saw him face to face. I have never seen Grandma love a man.

Aunt Mary never spends the night. They do not display physical affection, but I know. It is the way they look at each other. Aunt Mary is very masculine not because of her hair. Grandma wears a short natural too, but Aunt Mary does everything like a man. Grandma is tall and slim like momma and me. Aunt Mary is just as tall as Grandma, but she is heavier. She always wears jeans and male shirts. Aunt Mary never carries a purse. She carries a man's wallet that fits snugly in her back pocket. Grandma is more feminine. She carries a purse, and unlike Aunt Mary, she is soft and graceful. She is very meticulous about her appearance. Aunt Mary and Grandma's relationship is beautiful to me. They are lovers and best friends. They are very respectful of their differences, and they equally embrace their commonalities. Grandma does not appear as comfortable with their relationship as Aunt Mary. Maybe it is because Khalid and I are now living with her. I think Aunt Mary has been a lesbian forever. She was probably born this way, as there is not a feminine bone in her body.

In fact, she is often mistaken as a man.

Though Grandma is my blood relative, I feel more comfortable with Aunt Mary. She makes me feel I am okay. She harnesses all of my talents. She loves me and loves my art. She frames all of my paintings. Aunt Mary makes me feel it is okay I do not want to go to college. Grandma plans for me to attend college after I graduate from high school. I think it is because she wants me out of the house.

Grandma and Khalid get along great. But Grandma and I are always guarded with one another. She never says anything mean. She is not unkind, but it takes a lot of effort for us to communicate. I wish Grandma was more like Aunt Mary. I enjoy doing special things for Aunt Mary because she always notices the most latent things in me. She discovered my gift for cooking; and because of this, I enjoy making special desserts for her. I make pastries, cheesecakes and any kind of dessert they make in the bakery. She always brags on my cooking. When members of our bible class comment on her weight gain, she attributes the extra pounds to me. Sometimes bible class members place orders for my sweets and pay me to make them.

Once a week, Aunt Mary orders a cake or pastries for someone on her job. Aunt Mary says I am a natural artist, but Grandma is determined I am going to college. I could go to college. My grades are good, but I want to go to culinary school to master the art of cooking, and I am determined I will be a renowned visual artist. My paintings are abstract. I never enter competitions, but I know my art is prize winning. My art comes from my soul.

At times, I feel as if Grandma is jealous of my relationship with Aunt Mary. Aunt Mary does not have expectations of me. She never pressures me to be anything or anyone I do not want to be. Our only disagreement is my choice of Ayanna as a best friend. Aunt Mary acts as if

she hates Ayanna. She complains that Ayanna bosses me around too much. She refers to Ayanna as “*the Bitch.*” Grandma loves Ayanna because she is Grandma’s idea of what a girl should be. She constantly comments on Ayanna’s stylish clothes and modern hairstyles. Aunt Mary gets angry with Grandma when she makes comparisons between Ayanna and me, as she often does. She wants me to have Ayanna’s outgoing personality and her confident disposition, but I do not have those qualities. Maybe I used to, but I don’t have them anymore.

I do not feel Grandma’s love. I know she loves me. She has to; I am her only daughter’s daughter. But I feel she hates me for being my daddy’s daughter. Although I cannot remember a lot of detail, I do remember a strong feeling for daddy. I believe we were very close. I remember I was labeled a daddy’s girl, and I remember every Friday he would bring Khalid and me presents.

Initially, I tried to please Grandma. I tried to make sure the house was always clean. I was extra careful to season the food properly when I cooked. No matter what I did, it was never good enough; whereas, Aunt Mary is simply cool about everything. I love Grandma in spite of how she makes me feel. I love her because we share the same grief. I love her because her daughter was my mother. Momma was her only child, and I know she is still in pain. Sometimes at night I can still hear her crying, especially on June 9, momma’s birthday, but we never talk about That Day. Everyone came to their own conclusions and made their own reality.

I often worry about Khalid. He has no male role model. I have been hearing people talk about black boys needing good, male role models, and I am concerned. This is one of the reasons I am glad I met Andreas. Aunt Mary is masculine, and she can shoot a basketball as good as any man. Aunt Mary is not a man, but she is the closest thing to a male role model Khalid had until I met Andreas.

Andreas is definitely something good in my life. He makes me feel good. I feel alive again. I enjoy talking to him. Unlike most of my relationships with people, my relationship with him was real from the start. I am very comfortable with him. Although he does most of the talking, he is not self-centered. He often asks questions about me. He is genuinely concerned about my thoughts and feelings. Although I rarely have much to say, he at least asks me questions. Unlike Ayanna, he does not give me the answers to the questions he asks.

Andreas and I are diametrical. Unlike me, he is centered. He knows what he wants. I come from a background of excess; Khalid and I have every material thing we want. With all of the material things I have, I am not anchored. Andreas' family is poor. He works a full-time job to help support his momma and younger sister and still attends school daily. Andreas describes a life full of needs, but he is happy and confident. He knows what he wants to do with his life.

His mother, unlike Grandma, is nice and pleasant. She always answers the phone with a kind voice. His sister, Jazmyne, is a different story. It's hard to believe they are related. Andreas is calm and subtle. Jazmyne is loud like an explosion. Not only does she talk loud, her whole demeanor is very attention getting. She is always over accentuated. Instead of one nose ring, she has two, one in each nostril. She has a gold stud earring in her chin and a silver stud in her tongue. She wears those awful crochet braids; her braids are colorful and move like a mop with the slightest movement of her head. I am not against braids. Actually, I like braids, but the crochet braids are cheap and tacky. I am not trying to put Jazmyne down; we are actually quite similar. Like me, Jazmyne is deprived of something she strongly feels she needs. Unlike me, Jazmyne screams loud for what she needs.

Andreas is very protective of Jazmyne. He is

willing to throw a punch at anyone he considers a threat to her. He loves Jazmyne the way I love Khalid. Andreas attempts to be a father figure to Jazmyne just as I am trying to mother Khalid. I know it's crazy, but sometimes I find myself jealous of Jazmyne's relationship with Andreas.