

I hadn't intended to head to Cary. I just knew I needed to get away. So, I did what I often do: hopped in the Acura and started driving. I loved my car, a gift to myself after passing the bar exam and getting my first "big girl job." It was the first major thing I'd ever bought myself and I made sure it was exactly what I wanted. The high-end audio package was a must. I turned up the music and relaxed into the soft leather. Before I had time to realize what I was doing, the car was flying north on I-85, like a bird on its migratory path in search of comfort and warmth. I was headed home. The Charlotte skyline receded in the rearview mirror, with the clouds that peppered the sky shielding the towering glass banking buildings from the harshest of the midday rays. I felt some of my tension receding, too. My shoulders climbed down from their perch near my ears, my hands opened around the steering wheel, cuffing it lightly, and I settled back into the heated seats. Although the 64 degrees my dashboard announced as the outside temperature probably didn't warrant them, I loved the way the warmth burrowed inside me, slowing my breathing.

Even as I felt that tightness release, I knew I was still holding onto some of it. Or maybe it was holding onto me. Now that I knew I was headed home, I felt the weight of unspoken conversations between my parents and me. I still wasn't sure this would be the visit when we would have *that* conversation, but I wasn't sure that it wouldn't be, either. I tried to lose myself in Whitney Houston, H.E.R., and the songbirds of old school R&B and new, letting the melodies and lyrics seep into my soul. And it mostly worked, as the two and a half hours sped by in a way not accounted for by my foot on the gas pedal. I normally loved driving along the stretch of highway between Lexington and High Point, feeling cocooned by the leafy trees on either side of the road, but today I barely noticed. I was too caught up in my music, trying to drown out the

thoughts I was trying not to think and the feelings I was trying not to feel. But once or twice—*okay eight times if I’m being honest*—driven by a verse or by an instrument riff or by nothing at all, my mind floated back to what I had just left behind. Who I had just left behind. Damn, if I couldn't hear Dr. Vance's voice echoing, telling me I had to be honest with myself if no one else. So, if I'm being brutally honest, it was *who had left me behind*. And each time, I felt the ache that made me want to run back to her. "Breathe...just breathe," I'd whisper to myself, wrapping my tongue around the words and rubbing them like a talisman until my panicky feelings calmed.

Throughout the drive I managed to rest in pockets of peace, though by the time I exited the highway onto Cary Towne Boulevard the fluttering in my chest and belly had returned.

I sat in the driveway for a moment as my thoughts sped by, searching beyond the stillness of the front yard’s dogwood tree. Electricity coursed through me, and I closed my eyes and placed one hand over my heart and the other on my abdomen like Dr. Vance had taught me. Eventually I found the rhythm in my breathing and took sips of air—not gulps—to fill my lungs. As I readied myself to leave the car my hand hovered above the trunk release button before finding its way to the door handle. The overnight bag that stays in my trunk, stayed in my trunk. I wasn't yet sure if I'd be spending the night, whether that would be an option after I'd said what I didn't know I was coming here to say. Shit. I guess today *was* the day for that conversation. The time had come for honesty, and not just with myself. Maybe deep down I'd known that all along. Shifting the items I was carrying to free up a hand, I rang the doorbell and was greeted by my mother's pleasantly surprised face. “What in the world...? Trinity?!” she exclaimed as she swung open the door wider. "Maurice, come out here. Baby girl is here!”

I had stretched higher than my mama's 5 feet, 4 inches when I was a freshman in high school. Still, it always surprised me to stand taller than the woman who ruled the Simmers household like Will Smith's Aunt Viv. I stepped into her embrace and handed her the small bouquet of roses I'd picked up from Trader Joe's. "Hey Papa," I said, accepting my father's gentle squeeze. He'd gotten thinner since Grandma Joyce died. That was three years ago but I still wasn't used to not having a sturdier frame to hold. I'm sure in those three years he wasn't used to not having a living mama, either.

"You brought Outback?" Daddy asked with a shake of his head. "If we knew you were coming, we would have cooked you something."

Shrugging off his concern I countered, "It's fine. I didn't even know I was coming. And now you don't have to cook."

Despite Daddy's mild protest, the food pick-up clearly was a winning idea as his ribeye and sweet potatoes and Mama's grilled shrimp and lobster tails disappeared from their plates with gusto. They were just about ready to start in on the cheesecake while I was still nibbling at my coconut shrimp and shifting my salad from one side of the bowl to the other. I tried to stay engaged as Mama and Daddy shared the latest happenings in the neighborhood, including the couple who'd moved in a few months ago with their yappy Chihuahua and the dueling factions of the HOA that lobbed verbal missiles at every meeting. Mama knew how to tell a good story and under other circumstances I'd have been thoroughly entertained by her impressions of the cast of characters. The meal I didn't finish left room for the knots forming in my stomach, like the taut line I'd learned to tie in Junior Girl Scouts that took me weeks of practice to master.

On Saturdays the living room TV flip-flopped between MSNBC and college football, and once we were done eating, we walked in to find Reverend Sharpton on the screen animatedly making a point to his guest. We sat and watched for a while, listening to him press his argument for efforts to strengthen voting rights protections. Mama's voice drew my attention away from the Reverend toward where she was sitting across from me, noting that I was looking a bit tired and probing for a potential reason. “You know how things are. Not much going on, and a lot all at the same time.” I smiled weakly as I paused, trying to find my words. I could feel the heat rising from my neck to my face as I struggled with what to say next. The weight of Mama's gaze hung on me, and I shrank a little deeper into the recliner. I looked over at Daddy, finding comfort in his open face and a tiny surge of strength to keep talking. “I’ve just been really stressed. Work is a lot. I thought being a second-year associate would be easier, but it just feels like a different kind of hard. I feel anxious a lot and I'm not sleeping that well.” Pulling in a long breath and holding it for a second like I was inhaling from a cigarette, I slowly metered it out and added, “And in my personal life, I've just been feeling...adrift. I started going to therapy again.” I watched Mama's body language as she took in my words, and I tried to determine which ones she might be reacting to. She had been a little dubious when I first started therapy during college, maybe about the power of therapy in general, maybe specifically about my need for it. She was a staunch supporter of the “never let 'em see you sweat” philosophy and its Black play-cousin “put an H on your chest and handle it.” I think she believed me when I told her it was helpful, but I wonder if she was just impressed that I'd stood my ground about going, something I wasn't in the habit of doing with her.

Mama was nothing if not pragmatic, and that made her a great advice-giver. She knew how to drill down to the root of a problem and give you step-by-step instructions on how to fix it. It was no surprise, then, that she encouraged me to think analytically about what might be leading to my anxiety and attack those things head on. And because she always went the extra mile, she even diagramed ways to structure my time differently so that I could squeeze in a few more moments of sleep. I loved that about her and felt grateful that she was so ardent in her help. But in all her practicality, she didn't know how to hold me. Not emotionally. Or maybe I didn't know how to let her. I always felt a little too delicate for her, worried she'd miss the "fragile" label stamped on me and I'd break in her too-strong hands. I'd learned to wear carefully constructed armor that blunted incidental bruising and how to fog the window that would have allowed her to see inside. So, when she followed up with, "And listen, I know relationship break-ups are hard. It can't have been easy to lose a love you thought would last a lifetime. I know you'll eventually find your way forward, but just give yourself some time," it felt like she could see the piece of me I'd always wanted her to but never felt like I could show her. And my heart stood still. But the problem was, she only had it half-right. Because I knew who she meant, and I know who I meant, and they were not the same person.

"Thanks, Mama. I really appreciate your suggestions. And especially that last thing you said. That means a lot." I paused for another sip of air before continuing. "This is not about Donovan, though. I mean, not really. I loved him, but he was never the person I was meant to be with. He and I both know that and have made peace with it." This time, rather than a sip I took a long swallow. It felt like intermission at a stage play as I let the silence stretch, thinking carefully about how much more I wanted to share and scripting the next act on the fly.

"I think I'm having a quarter-life crisis," I chuckled, my voice low and slightly shaky. I attempted to explain what it meant for me to be lost, to experience the sensation of being unmoored as I tried to figure out who I had been and wanted to be. I told them how trying to live up to expectations—theirs, mine, *everyone's*—felt exhausting and most days I just wanted to let go but fear kept me hanging on. I stole glances at their faces as they tried to make sense of what I was saying, appreciating their earnestness but sensing I was losing them. I had never wanted to lose them, even at the expense of finding myself. But it was too late for that. I was already on the road to self-discovery, wherever I was in that journey. I could only hope they would travel it with me. There was nothing left for me to do except to say the words I didn't know I was coming home to say. I found myself wishing I'd prepared more, that I'd practiced looking at my mama and daddy, even if just in my imagination, as I invited them into my queer identity. But instead of wondering what words I would or should use or how to make it go down smooth, I just said it. No ice to water it down, no chaser to blunt the burn. I kept my gaze averted, though, not yet ready to meet their eyes and see what they might see in me.

And then it was my turn to wait as Mama and Daddy waded through the silence to meet me on the other side of my disclosure. I began to tremble, feeling like the inflatable man outside the Cary Auto Mall: collapsing as my energy flagged and boosting myself back to attention in quick succession. “Breathe...just breathe,” my mind urged. I lifted my head, taking in the softened features on Daddy's face and sensing that things might be okay. But he was never who I was worried about disappointing. My eyes shifted to the right and, not being able to read the blankness that was draped across her countenance, I waited for Mama to say something.

Anything, really, that might decrease the temperature in the room a few degrees and slow the drizzle of sweat sliding down my back.

It turns out I hadn't wanted Mama to say just *any old something*. Certainly not that she'd "known all along" this thing I had been too afraid to tell her, because "a mother has a sense about these things." Or that she loved me and also felt compelled to dispense Biblical proverbs, which landed more like hostility than hymn. In those moments as I listened to her talk, rather than contracting like I usually did, I felt myself expanding a bit. The dutiful daughter garments that throughout my life had fit me flawlessly, as if perfectly sized by a personal shopper, now pinched and pulled a little at the seams. I openly wore my discomfort rather than smiling pretty for the family photo.

"Mama," I started, closing my mouth before beginning again. "I appreciate you, and that you've always loved me well; the best way you know how. I wish that was all I needed now. But in this case, it doesn't feel like enough. It's...not enough." The tears flowed then, but not because I was angry or even sad. I just knew I wanted and needed more: not tolerance, but to be seen and accepted for who I was. Fully. Unconditionally. I wanted a home. And I'd finally said so.

When I was younger, I thought my home was and would forever be the gray-bricked house on Victor Lane with the dogwood tree out front and Ronnie Simmers at the helm; and maybe one day it will be. But right now, I'm building my own with a different set of bricks, with rooms that have space for me to grow.