



# MY SLIPPER FLOATED AWAY

*New American Memoirs*

*Edited by Justine Hope Blau*

Cover photograph: Joe Raskin

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## Introduction ~ Justine Hope Blau

Most of the students in my memoir workshops at Lehman College in the Bronx are immigrants, first generation American, and/or people of color. They come from the Dominican Republic, India, Gambia, Kazakhstan – all over the world – and their writing is rich with fresh perspectives and beloved customs. Whether their grandmothers soothed them with warm *parathas*, milk chai, feta cheese *bureks* or *Pastelon de Papas*, the writers in these essays evoke both their love for their background cultures and their pursuit of an elusive American dream.

Some of the writers left behind traumas in other countries only to face staggering difficulties in New York, including barriers to employment and drug laws which disproportionately target their non-white families. Now, when I read media reports that condemn people who break drug laws or use resourceful skills to survive in a hostile place, I consider too that the person may also have been a generous provider, who helped extended family members to pay their rent and buy groceries, despite having only an elementary school education and few work skills.

The title of the anthology comes from Steven Ngin's gripping story of his family's escape from the brutal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia when he was four years old. He rode on his father's back as they crossed the Mekong River and watched his slipper float away. Steven was malnourished, had witnessed atrocities and often endured the terror of being alone for long hours at night in strange houses while his mother was forced by soldiers to work in rice fields. The image of his slipper disappearing is seared in his memory and provides the visual and poetic hook to frame his story – but the lost slipper metaphor also works for the other essays because they too are permeated by the theme of people moving forward after sustaining losses.

In every class, students bonded over their efforts to transcend trauma through the healing power of storytelling.

When I first started teaching in 2015, I realized that many of my students didn't fully appreciate that their stories were compelling. But then they started writing about growing up hearing gunshots and sirens at night, using fire escapes as basketball hoops, and a ritual I'd never heard of: dancing at Thanksgiving. One student wrote about how he and his brother, at ages 11 and 14, had to fend for themselves after their father was deported. As the students listened to each other, mesmerized, they came to realize that their own stories have the same effect on other people. That motivated them to learn literary techniques to weave their experiences into cohesive, artful narratives.

Many of the writers have since graduated and have become teachers and nurses; others are still in school or, having graduated, are struggling to find the kinds of jobs that they envisioned having, once they had earned a college degree. Yet, however their careers and their lives pan out, they know that continuing to cultivate their writing will give them some measure of power. Their stories of resilience and creativity reflect how American culture is enriched by their presence. To know them is to love them.

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## **Rolling with the Punches**

## Jenifer Rodriguez



*Jenifer Rodriguez's fresh and vibrant essay comes from a prompt to write about summer in the city. Jenifer was born in Washington Heights (Upper Manhattan), but her mother is from the Dominican Republic. Jenifer's mother would be away for 10 hours a day at her job, so Jenifer and her sisters and brother were often on their own. Jenifer wrote about her experiences 12 years earlier, during the hot August night of the 2003 blackout. She revised and enriched this essay, adding the specific kind of beer that the neighbors were drinking (Corona), the type of music that was playing (Merengue) and gave an example of a Laffy Taffy joke, which brought the reader right back to that memorable night in the city, when the electricity was turned off and everybody communed together on the streets.*

### **Drums, Dominoes and Dulce De Leche**

The television announced that in a few minutes the Northeastern U.S. would lose power. It was Thursday, August 14, 2003 at around 3:40 p.m. and my siblings and I overreacted because we were all alone. My mother was working and we had no idea what to do. As we watched the news they warned us to buy all the necessary things for this blackout. So immediately my sisters and I got dressed to buy candles, water, canned food and a flashlight.

Our mother left us money but we had already wasted a large amount because we were hungry earlier in the morning. So, we broke into our piggy bank. We had just enough to buy two flashlights, candles, a pack of batteries and at least three cans of ravioli and meatballs.

At 4:10 p.m. our air conditioner turned off. “Don’t panic, we got this,” my sister said. Outside a man shouted, “*Se fue la luz*” (“The light went off”). My little brother was sleeping, so we were debating about leaving him while we went outside to get things. We argued which led to him waking up.

We went down the stairs and outside the temperature felt like 110 degrees. Walking towards Broadway on 160<sup>th</sup> Street was like walking in Times Square because there were so many distressed, confused people rushing around.

Our nearest 99-cent store was crowded and chaotic with 70 people filling their carts, running over each other, kids crying, people fighting over items. In less than 10 minutes the store went out of stock.

“Let’s go to Pancho’s store,” I said. Pancho is one of my mom’s childhood friends who owned a store four blocks from home. When we got there, Pancho called out to us, giving us a bag of all the things we needed for FREE.

“Take this home. Your mom has been calling and she’s worried,” he said. “She’ll be home soon. Just wait for her in front of the building.” We waited an hour for her, anxious and dehydrated. By 6:30 she appeared; it was the best feeling ever. We cried from excitement and fear.

Upstairs, we turned on the battery-operated radio. They warned us that water would probably go off as well. Instantly, my mother turned on the cold water in the bathtub, filling

it to the top. “In case the water goes off, we have just enough to shower,” she explained. She had also bought gallons of water for us to drink.

We prepared a cooler with bottles of water and juice, tuna fish sandwiches, ham and cheese, chips, cookies, crackers, cereal. You name it we had it.

Thirty minutes into preparing all the emergency equipment we were hot and exhausted. Around sunset a hammer banged against something. “CLANK, CLANK, CLANK”. A lady said, “*Dale mas duro a esa pumpa, que me quemó del calor*” (“hit the pump [fire hydrant] harder, I am dying of heat”). The guys from my block had opened the fire hydrant. The entire block applauded. I asked my mother if we could go outside. We took our things and headed out.

It was dark and gloomy in the staircase. In front of our building was my entire neighborhood and they had a party going on. *Merengue* was playing from my godfather’s car. Four men were playing dominoes; the women were talking, eating, and drinking Corona beers. The kids were running, playing hide and seek. Minutes later my dad appeared. I felt safe and I was able to play and get wet in the pump.

The block was noisy and crowded but everyone was getting along. My sisters and I decided to walk around the block. Each building had their own thing going on. Neighbors from building 539 were playing Drums (Bongos), Guiro, Claves and a six-stringed guitar, playing *El Son Cubano*. The teenagers from building 537 were telling *Laffy Taffy* jokes (“What do you get when you cross a pig with a Christmas tree? A porcupine!”) as they played dice and smoked weed. Neighbors from building 541, the Catholic seniors, were praying, holding their rosaries, hoping the night would go smoothly. We were well protected. We had cops

patrolling the streets and for the first time we were able to do anything we wanted without getting in trouble. Around 9:00 we went back to our building .I saw a birthday cake. A Dominican cake to be exact, made of *dulce de leche*. The frosting was nicely decorated with patterns of flowers in my favorite colors; orange, plum and yellow.

“Oh snap, it’s my birthday, I almost forgot,” I said, out of embarrassment.

Everyone beamed their flashlights on me. All of a sudden my family and neighbors sang the Happy Birthday to me! Next thing I notice the entire block joined in too. It was the best birthday ever.

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\* Jenifer Rodriguez studied at Lehman College. Email: [rodriguez.jenifer14@gmail.com](mailto:rodriguez.jenifer14@gmail.com)

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## Abdulhaq Syed



[Abdul, front and center, with some of his cousins in New Rochelle, 2004.]

*Abdul: "Through poetic language I wish to make transparent my life in all the domains of my existence, as an intellectual, a pre-med college student, a son, a lover, a New-Yorker, and as a Muslim-American. I hope that my words can paint a beautiful story in the minds of my readers and set them free as it has done for me. To make transparent my religion, family, and culture to allow them to see and judge for themselves my life as a Muslim in the hopes of coming together, to accept and celebrate our differences because we are all human. We all have stories to tell and ears to listen with. These are glimpses of my life as a Muslim Indian-American, born to immigrant parents, growing up in New York."*

## **A Glimpse Under Our Hijab**

Coming from a life of poverty in Hyderabad, India, my father and his five brothers moved to New York to attain a better life for their families. The Bronx, with its cheap rent and rather large Muslim Indian community, soon became home. However, as gang violence grew rampant in the 90s and with our mothers being pregnant, my father and his brothers were eager to move their families out of the environment even if it meant living under a single roof. By 1997, they purchased a home in suburban New Rochelle and moved us out of the Bronx. As a result, there were five families and nineteen kids huddled together.

With always being around one another, teasing, joking, and playing, my cousins and I would always get into fights. Sometimes it was with Hamza; sometimes with was with Qadeer. “Stop cheating, harami! (infidel),” “You’re stupid!” or “Shut up, suwar! (pig)” would often roll off our tongues. With always getting into fights with them, I wanted to get my cousins out of my life; I wanted a new house.

Upon hearing my ungrateful complaints, my father was quick to remind me that he had nothing growing up. “I lived in a small shack and couldn’t afford shoes till I was eleven.” He repeated it so often that it made me think that that was his only answer to any question or demand I had.

When we weren’t busy fighting, my cousins and I were playing in our backyard. Every day was an adventure for us, whether we were playing hide and seek or baseball. On a typical summer’s day we played with a baseball bat and a Wilson tennis ball, shouting “Ball ko phenke! Ball ko phenke!” (Throw the ball!)

Living in New Rochelle, I became accustomed to its Eden-like environment; lush and vast green lawns, fresh piney scent, and pristine streets that were comfortable and serene. I enjoyed my early childhood days despite having an overcrowded house. We were fortunate to have an extensive backyard, fitted with basketball hoops and a view of the City Hall resembling a miniature Versailles.

Living in an area with such amenities and luxuries made me realize how deprived the Bronx was. When we visited my grandmother there, I strolled down its grubby streets, holding my breath in disgust, till the point when I had to gasp for air. Simultaneously, I wondered why I was brought there because I was absolutely sickened by the pervasive odor and filth.

My grandmother lived in old deteriorating building with graffiti covering the dark maroon brick walls. The bricks, the smell of piss and the sound of sirens wailing in abundance flooded my senses. It was a true concrete jungle.

The first time I came to visit Nanima there, cop cars swarmed through the streets. The siren of one cop car was soon replaced by a much louder one thundering away. So, I did what most six-year-olds would do, and sought refuge.

“Abu! Abu!” I cried frantically. “What’s going on and why are there so many police cars?!” We lived behind the police station in New Rochelle but this was just madness and chaotic. What scared me even more was my father’s unconcerned response. “This is the Bronx, Betoo,” he sighed. He explained to me that this is as normal as us hearing the cicada during a warm summer day or the sound of our own breathing, desensitized and zoned out to our ears but one hundred percent present. I looked around to assess the environment.

People were laughing, shouting, swearing, and cars and buses were honking. Everyone and everything was so spontaneous. I kept looking around, analyzing all the simultaneous and rambunctious events.

Upon entering the apartment building, the lobby reeked of a nasty stench. “Abu!!! What is this horrible?” I cried out. “Get used to this smell,” he replied. “You’ll be staying at your grandmother's for the next two weeks to spend time with your cousins.”

As we climbed the stairs and stopped in front of the apartment door, I held my nose. I remember impatiently waiting for the door to open, “1G”, imprinted on the reddish door. Suddenly, the door swung open. “Assalamalikum,” my Nanima said as she hugged us and welcomed us in.

My father looked irritated as we entered and I wondering if he also was upset about his decision to bring the family to this smelly place. We were seated in the living room and I was told to go into another room where the other kids were. However, I didn’t want to leave my father’s side. I thought that if I stayed with him then maybe he would take me back home to New Rochelle.

I thought to myself how small this place was compared to my home. I used to complain to my father that our house was congested, but this place made my home seem like a palace.

While my father was sipping his tea socializing with my grandmother, I was again directed to head towards a bedroom at the end of the dully lit and narrow hall. Upon entering the room, my Gujarati cousins Mohammed and Aslam approached. They were ecstatic to see me but they noticed that I didn’t feel the same way.

“What’s wrong?” Aslam asked but I couldn’t share how I felt.. What really went through my mind was that I was stuck in a place filled with buildings, lacking parks, fields, basketball courts, or any form of outdoor activity for a kid to enjoy during the summer days. There was nothing to appreciate about the Bronx.

As I was ruminating, a loud thud came from the bedroom window, startling us. We immediately got up and looked out, where a thin Pakistani boy around our age was staring excitedly right back at us, a blue ball in his hand. “Yo, Aslam, water park is open!”

Filled with excitement Aslam yelled, “Yo Altaf, for real! I’ll be there in a sec!” Aslam grabbed me and Mohammed by our hands shouting, “Adventure!!” As he pulled me I was confused. Waterpark? Here? There’s no way, I thought to myself; this is the Bronx.

We ran to the lobby, and I began to hear the roaring of a mountain waterfall accompanied by the laughter and screams of children. Aslam then pushed open the front doors, leaving me in a state of awe. Beyond the glistening mist that showered the streets, was a rusted fire hydrant from which water was now gushing out. As the water continued to come pouring out and into the streets, Altaf and other neighborhood kids were running through its stream, getting soaked and jumping around as it pooled under them. Upon joining them, I was no longer blinded with intolerance.

Instantly the streets transformed from a waterpark into a basketball court. Teams were made and we all began playing a game of intense rivalry. While dribbling the ball, we rushed down the streets to the basketball hoops that were shaped like fire escapes! The rule was, the higher up the fire escape ladder, the more points you scored. This was completely different from what I experienced at home. I was amazed to see the Bronx kids using the

street and everything they had, to make it more thrilling and exciting. With no basketball court within the vicinity, they made a basketball hoop out of the spaces between the steps of the fire escape.

The next day I woke up to a delicious smell. In the kitchen to my Nanima was making fresh, warm, crispy parathas. My mouth watered as I sat down waiting for her to serve me one. I quickly devoured the buttery warm parathas. But what I enjoyed more than the parathas was my Nanima's warm and heavenly milk chai.

My cousins were already awake and they had already eaten breakfast. "Abdulhaq! Hurry up so you can come join us," said Mohammed. I quickly chugged down the chai that I loved so much to go ahead and join them. We headed out searching for more adventures.

During the next two weeks, I continued my routine at Nanima's house. Every morning after having my crispy parathas and warm milk chai, I roamed with my cousins throughout the streets, especially around Jerome Avenue. We would have our small adventures to the corner stores, pizza shops, all on our own with no adults. We played on the streets and spied on the neighbors of adjacent buildings through our bathroom windows.

After thinking that the Bronx was a dirt hole, I fell in love with it. For some the Bronx was an area of danger and disgust, encouraging them to move out of it, such as my father. But for me, it was a joy, an excitement, a thrill, a freedom, and strength. Although the Bronx was not the prettiest sight, or a welcoming area it still felt more like home. Every day in the Bronx for me during my stay felt like a daring adventure. Even with the odor of urine, the bundle of weave [artificial hair] lying on the floor, and the piles of dog poop on the sidewalks, I came to love it. I realized that despite looking deprived of many luxuries, within

its crowdedness the Bronx had a beauty and luxury of its own. Despite not having the amenities that I was fortunate to have, the kids of Bronx were able to have just as much or even more of an adventure. They helped me realize that I didn't need a large backyard or a basketball hoop to have fun. In all its filth, the Bronx left me with nothing but cherished memories.

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\* Abdulhaq (Abdul) Syed is a Muslim Indian-American Student at CUNY Lehman College, majoring in Biology and Psychology. He aspires to become a physician in order to help underserved minority individuals to lead healthy lives. He also wishes to be a role model for children within these communities and provide mentorship to them, so that they may actualize their aspirations to become community-serving health professionals. Correspondence should be sent to Email: [abdulsyed611@yahoo.com](mailto:abdulsyed611@yahoo.com)

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## Joel Alvarado

*Joel wrote a riveting story about how he and his older brother had to fend for themselves, when they were 11 and 14 years old. His mother was only 14 when she had her first child, and both his parents had only elementary school education. While doing research for his memoir, Joel Alvarado learned that kids like him, who come from a family of low socioeconomic status and endure the disruption of having a parent deported, are at higher risk for emotional and behavioral problems later in life. Joel is beating those odds. He brought a dynamic, intellectual and mature perspective to the class discussion. After graduating in 2016, he became a middle school math teacher in the Bronx.*

### **Someone to Fight for Me**

When I was 11, my father got deported to the Dominican Republic for attempting to sell drugs to a federal agent, and my mother ran away with another man, leaving my brother and me to fend for ourselves. Growing up without parents made me extremely vulnerable and made me a statistic in the at-risk population for becoming a drug addict, at risk of becoming a criminal and at risk of being economically challenged.

Fortunately, I did not fall between the cracks. I was one of lucky survivors who was able to weather this traumatic experience of growing up without my parents.

At the time, my brother was 14, working at a grocery store making \$200 a week and was able to afford a room that we used to live in. We only spent what was necessary and budgeted ourselves very carefully. From the \$200 my brother paid \$75 for the room and we stretched the remaining \$125 for the rest of the week. I will never forget the foggy smell of that tight room, where the only things that put a smile on my face were the pigeons that nested in our big old air conditioner. We were both given the ultimate test that solidified our

bond. Although we were on an emotional rollercoaster, we made it through what we call the dry season of what was once a flourishing garden.

I was that kid at school that would always show up with the same clothes. I tried alternating clothes as much as I could, but there were very limited combinations; I spent about six months with the same black and red shoes. Looking back, at least I was lucky enough to have someone to fight for me. Seeing my brother struggle the way he did really kept me on task and focused on what was important at the time, school. I became so invested in my studies that I was the top student in most of my classes; however, that was not repairing the financial issues that we were facing. After about a year of misery, I managed to get a job at the store where my brother was working. I worked 25 hours a week and got paid \$75 for it. It wasn't much but I was able to buy my own things without depending on Jordan.

Slowly, I learned how to manage and how to budget myself in a way that nothing mattered besides the goal that I had in mind. Slowly, things were starting to get better. We moved into a bigger room and we both got better paying jobs working with our uncle. I became consumed with the idea that I never wanted to be broke again. I found myself working 70 hours because there was no going back. It got to the point where I was able to save enough money to become a partner with my uncle and invest in a bigger store that was built from the ground up. For the first time in a long time, I felt some sense of belonging. Although it wasn't much, I felt like I had invested in a multimillion-dollar investment such as Google.

Although I still carry the emotional scars that crushed my childhood, I did not allow it to consume me completely.

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\* Joel Alvarado is a middle school math teacher. Email: [joellife4@gmail.com](mailto:joellife4@gmail.com)

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## Gertrude Kobbah



*Gertrude melted everyone's hearts when she described how her father, when they lived in Ghana, would bring the kids pineapples and mangos -- and Gertrude would name each fruit after countries she wanted to go. Her father recalled, "Nobody could eat Zimbabwe until you were ready to eat it. Your siblings used to be so angry at you."*

### Pray Without Seasons

My family was trying to escape from armed rebels, searching for the refugees' bus, during a civil war in Liberia, 1993, when my mother gave birth to me in the bushes. My umbilical cord got caught onto a honey locust thorn and detached. They feared I wouldn't survive and my loud cries didn't make the journey any less stressful.

I was wrapped in an orange and black Kente cloth, a traditional Ghanaian gift from my Ashanti grandmother. On the lining it says "Pray Without Seasons". As my mother ran with me, she prayed no matter how loud I cried. At this point they had already lost their

home, some relatives, their jobs, their dignity and pride. They were determined not to lose my siblings and me.

Trekking for two hours with a parched, hungry and weeping newborn and other children was never a part of their plans but they made it work. On their way to refuge, they came across a barefoot young girl about fourteen years old who lost her mother while trying to escape. She was so scared and she barely had any clothes on. My father took off his slippers and gave them to her. My mother begged the girl, Yeneh, to come with us, reassuring her that my family would help her. She eventually told us that rebels forced her family from their home. Her mother was beaten and raped in front of her, as a bargain with the rebels to let her daughter go. She was concerned she might never be reunited with her mother again.

My mom and dad took turns carrying me. My dad stumbled upon some egusi leaves, a plant that restores good health and brightens eyesight. He mashed the leaves on a rock and gave me some in hopes that I would stop crying. I finally did. When they got closer to the bus station they stopped for a bit to get my mother situated. She was still bleeding from the birth. My father took off his undershirt and created a diaper to catch the blood.

Up ahead hundreds of people were crying and hugging each other. Yeneh recognized one of her mother's friends. She quickly ran over to her and the lady told her that her mother had died while trying to escape from the rebels. She was found lying naked in the mud in the middle of the woods. My mother grabbed her and hugged her, reassuring her that we were her family now and she wasn't alone.

My parents left their birthplace not by choice but because they were forced out. They settled into the city of Accra and began rebuilding what they had lost.

In Accra, if you lived in a hut, it meant you were poor; if you had a house made of cement you were middle class; if you lived in a two-story cement home with a fence around it and a gateman, you are considered affluent. I was content with the house my father built for us. We were middle class people. We didn't have a fence, or the proper roof, but we believed that we would progress by moving elsewhere someday. Deep down inside my parents knew they wouldn't be in Ghana for long.

My mother was a fisherwoman, and my father was a construction worker and a full time student. At six years old I was thinking of ways to help my parents bring in more income. I convinced my father to build a garden in our backyard, assuring him that he wouldn't have to worry; it would be my responsibility. He agreed and I was more than delighted to take on that task.

I grew tomatoes, onions, peppers and mangoes. Later I asked for a swing and a bench. My father never turned down my requests. On most days I slumbered in the garden until my father came home. My family was separated during mornings, but together at night. I anticipated those nights. My mom would cook a delectable meal and we would all share one large bowl and talk about our day with our mouths full. Those are the times which I vividly remember.

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They lied. They told me the United States would be very clean and I could press a button on a machine and chicken will come out. I can select the flavor I wanted whether it's spicy or

honey glazed, the machine would provide it. It was all a ploy to motivate me to be eager to come here. I was devastated that Yeneh did not come with us because she was pregnant and wanted to stay back home with the love of her life. I first arrived in the United States at age eight, in the fall of 2001. We were stuck in the airport waiting for my aunt; her car had a flat tire in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge. We were stuck at that airport; so many thoughts were going through my head. “Does this mean no more chicken?” I asked my dad “Don’t worry you’re going to get all the chicken you want” he replied. I tried to stay awake and be content and hopeful but ended up falling asleep on his lap. I woke up to the sound of my mom’s voice; she kept saying “Woowww” in amazement. The cool breeze hit my face as I looked out the window at tall buildings across the large body of water. It was absolutely stunning, such a wonderful site. I was so used to seeing huts and houses with zinc roofs, that I wanted to jump out of the car, run across the body of water and just hug the buildings. I suddenly wanted this never-ending bridge to come to an end.

A month later I enrolled in PS 316, very excited to wear a navy blue and white uniform. I was the only African in my class, I spoke a different language, and I always isolated myself from my peers. I never did like the lunches; they smelled like garlic mixed with hot dogs especially the beef patties. The only thing I was fascinated by was the pizza and fried chicken, of course. Even though I didn’t receive the chicken through a machine, I was absolutely pleased with the taste. The cheese and the crust of the pizza was my favorite. I use to peel the cheese off the pizza and rip off the crust and eat it. I thought broccolis were trees and I just couldn’t bring myself to consume trees.

I was never able to walk home from school by myself, even though it was five minutes away from home. My dad was so overprotective and he had every right to be. There were lots of awful things going on in that neighborhood. Every day there were fights and some nights I would hear loud noises that sounded like fire crackers, but there was no celebration afterwards, just ambulances and cop cars.

No one told me about winter or how brutal it could be. My family wasn't rich and it was hard to find a jacket that would keep me warm at an affordable price. I use to wear layers over layers, just to prevent my body from becoming numb.

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I went to sleep away camp in New Hampshire. Trees surrounded the camp; we had to drive at least an hour to start seeing city lights. There were bunks, cabins, tents and all of my peers from different parts of the world, that's why the camp was called "World Fellowship". I met kids from China, Germany, Poland and Madagascar. It felt great getting away from my parents. I felt a sense of independence; peace and most importantly I didn't wake up to my mother demanding that I completed my chores prior to going outside. It was always scorching hot outside, and the trips to the pond were so long, by the time I got there I was discouraged to swim. I tasted things I didn't know existed. I started eating things like roasted duck with a hint of hot sauce, and spring rolls that were filled with vegetables and snail. I would sit in the tree at times and read my favorite saga *Twilight*. Some mornings, I woke up to birds chirping. My favorite weather was the rain, for some weird reason I loved it when the rain hit the zinc of my bunk. Not being around social media and technology made me feel more in tuned with nature. I understood the importance of quiet, I heard my

thoughts more and for me I valued that a lot. Coming from a city that never sleeps, I appreciated the difference.

I was sleeping when my cell phone rang in my dream. It was 11:00 pm and my mother's voice sounded so desolate. I knew it was serious because she called me by my native name, saying, "Nyemadie grann ou te mouri". It felt unreal, I thought I was still dreaming. Reality hit when my warm tears dripped on my thighs. Hearing her say that my grandmother in Liberia had passed away took a toll on my whole being. I wish I could've prevented heart failure. My heart burned and I asked, "Why God?" It felt like the world collapsed on my chest. I couldn't breathe properly. My bunkmates woke up in fear, hearing me sob. When I told them the bad news they shared my sorrow, staying up with me until the sun came up.

Suddenly mornings were so cold. Rainy days felt lonely, sad and uncomfortable. My grandmother was on my mind every day, my heart always felt heavy. I barely ate, food didn't taste so important anymore. I walked into my camp leader's office breaking down and said I want to go back to New York. I wanted to be there for my mother.

Traveling on that bus back to the city was bittersweet. I was on that bus thinking of things to say to my mother to cheer her up. I remembered thinking, "When I get home I'm going to do all my chores before she even tells me." I wanted to do everything and anything to help her. In the back of my mind I missed my World Fellowship friends. I missed the pond, reading in the trees and picking berries. As soon as I arrived in New York City, 42<sup>nd</sup> Street was so noisy with cars, tourists, children and families everywhere.

I finally arrived home and embraced my mother with a warm hug and told her, “I’m here for you”. That look on her face was priceless. I saw hope and I felt needed. That feeling of knowing that I was helping her get through such a tragic time by just by being there was the most amazing feeling in the world. I missed World Fellowship, but I knew I was welcome to come back anytime.

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\* Gertrude Kobbah will graduate from the University of Rochester School of Nursing with a BSN, RN degree in the summer of 2020. Email: rachealkobbah@yahoo.com

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For the next two weeks, we had to sit in the EAU from 4 pm until 8 or 9 pm. That was the time the big yellow school busses arrived to pick us up and drive us to crappy hotels in various parts of the city.

One hotel was more like a nasty, scary townhouse in Harlem across the street from a Kennedy Fried Chicken. The floors screeched as we walked over them and the stairs were so old you had to hold on to the railing in hopes not to lose your balance and bust your ass. I was already over it. I wanted my queen-size bed on Union Avenue. The bathroom was full of roaches and the toilet had shit smeared on the wall. I could barely brush my teeth without gagging. I couldn't believe we were going to live in these conditions until further notice.

Every morning, we had personal alarms, knocking our doors from five to six in the morning. "Uggh!" I've never been a morning person and now even less. I didn't want to awake to my misery. My mom rushed us to get ready before the bus left without us. We got ready within ten minutes, grabbed all our belongings, and rushed down to the yellow school bus. That was only the beginning of our day. From the hotel, the bus took us back to the EAU to check in, and then we could go about our lives. My sister and I walked to the 149<sup>th</sup> Street train station together every morning. She kind of made my morning with her jokes about how she loved being in the shelter. I'd laugh but as soon as we parted ways my misery would sink back into my soul.

Two weeks in and out of shitty hotels, my mom's case worker finally told her she had a permanent hotel for us to stay in while our application was processed. That same day, after school we moved into a hotel on 101<sup>ST</sup> street and Broadway. She said it was like a studio

apartment, we had our own kitchen bathroom and room. I wasn't too excited but I was sure it was cleaner and safer than the places we've slept in.

Going to school was the easy part, leaving was the hard part. I used to ride the train with about three close friends who also lived in the Bronx. Although I no longer had to ride the train to the Bronx, I did so anyway. I didn't want my friends to notice any changes in me. I took the train to my regular stop and headed to my cousins' house to wait for my mom to pick me up. She hated that my sister and I did this. She complained about our school being closer to the hotel than our cousins' house. I didn't know my sisters' reason for going there but sure knew mine.

Three weeks later, I became familiar with the area and got used to living in that big hotel with hundreds of mini studio apartments. It was starting to feel like home. One day I walked in to notice Mami bought new blankets and quilts, curtains, a shower-curtain set with matching purple rugs. She brought my TV and Playstation and my sister's 3-way pager. I knew she was trying to make it feel like a home for my sister and me. That was the first day I felt at ease, the first day I felt comfortable calling this place my home. I remember taking a shower, getting into bed and playing The Sims before going to sleep.

The next day after school, my sister and I went to Evelyn's house. The doorbell rang and once again it was my father. This time he wasn't as quiet as the first time; I guess he thought we were over the whole shelter thing. He informed us about returning to the EAU. I was pissed off. "But why!!!" Those were the only words I could utter. My face immediately filled with tears. My dad hugged my sister and me as he said he was sorry but things would

be just fine. I didn't want to go back to that stank place or to the shitty hotels. I wanted this nightmare to be over but it was only the beginning.

Raymond and Samy, my two older brothers, decided to get off the streets and into the system with us. My mom told us that was the reason we had to leave our studio apartment on Broadway. I hated them for this.

“Why did they decide to come now? You offered before we got in the first time and they said they would be just fine!” I was furious. I couldn't stand to see any of their faces. I wanted to run away, far but how far could I've really gone before the cops found me and returned me to my misery.

We went through the school bus process, back and forth to stinky hotels but for only a week. I guess they found us a place in a hurry due to our family size.

A bus had transported us to the Lower East Side. On our way down the FDR Drive, I was imagining how the place would look. I asked myself, “Would it be like the studio apartment on 101<sup>st</sup> or ghetto like the EAU?” As we arrived in the neighborhood, the van took a turn into the projects. I was scared as fuck. We pulled up to a huge building which looked like a school. When we got in, there was a line of people checking in. The security guard told us we could step out to grab a bite if we'd like. My brother Sammy insisted on getting Chinese food. We bought the food and returned to the place. The guard immediately directed us to the cafeteria. It literally looked like a school cafeteria, a huge open space with tables, six microwaves, no stoves, four sinks and a television. I could barely eat the fried rice after noticing I'd be eating in this cafeteria for God knows how long. I didn't see myself

living in this place. My mother didn't like that part but she didn't say anything until later that night.

We returned to the lobby where my mom was to check us in. She spoke to the guard while the social worker finished with the family in front of us. It only took for the guard to tell my mom my sister and I were too beautiful young ladies, to get us out of there, not to spend one night there, he insisted this wasn't the place for good girls like ourselves. My mom didn't play when it came to her girls. My brothers could defend themselves, but my sister and I were her precious babies. The social worker called out, "Ms. Nieves, you're next". My mom wasted no time in telling her she was not spending the night. She gave the excuse of there being no elevator in the building and showed her doctor's papers to prove she is medically ill. Thankfully the social worker took it well and asked the driver to escort us back to the EAU. At that point I wasn't upset as I heard the conversation between the guard and my mother. I even noticed how the people who lived there looked at us as if we were fresh meat. I was happy to return to the EAU. Before we left, my mom showed her appreciation to the guard by giving him a hug and about ten dollars to buy dinner.

On our way back, all I could hear my mom say was, "Thank God I didn't stay. Thank you for that guard, Lord, and my girls, Lord." My lady would do anything to make sure we were safe and I couldn't be upset with her because of that. Back at the EAU, we made jokes on how bad our day had gone. We didn't know what was worse, the Chinese food or that cafeteria. We embraced everything about the EAU and I was okay with sleeping in another shitty hotel for the night. My mom's case worker told her there was a place in Spanish Harlem but it wasn't ready for another day. She looked at us and we smiled then she

proceeded by telling the lady she will take it. That night we ended up in a hotel on Central Park West. It was one of the cleanest we've ever slept in. I thanked the lord because I knew he made that possible. We fooled around the entire night, we made the best of our situation and for once I was okay.

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\* Raquel Torres studied at Lehman College. For correspondence email: rtorres0228@yahoo.com

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## Monroe Anderson



*Monroe Anderson had been a rapper who'd achieved some success, so when he wrote about that, he instantly gained status in the class. He maintained our admiration though, because his gift for storytelling extended to his prose. He also listened keenly to the other students and provided astute insights.*

### Everyone Calls Me Melvin

There I stood, nothing much more than a needle in a haystack. At least that's how I felt as a 26-year-old man among nearly 30 other men who were older and presumably far more experienced in life than I. However, I was named to be in charge of their well-being for one full night that I'll remember for eternity.

My mother introduced me to Gracepoint Gospel Fellowship Church during one of the roughest periods of my life. Eventually I was baptized there and we both became members.

She was heavily involved in the media ministry where she videotaped Sunday services.

During one of the tapings she'd heard that there was a ministry to serve homeless people

being held at Gracepoint so she volunteered to serve food. The president of this operation, Jenny, informed my mother that they also needed men to stay overnight as chaperones. I decided to help out.

I grew up basically middle class, and shunned homeless people and viewed them as drug addicts. I've seen people sleeping on sidewalks plenty of times but I had never spent significant time or had an impactful conversation with one. I didn't know what to expect of this night. I truly believed that I'd signed up to watch over a bunch of limping hunchbacks who spoke in slurs and smelled like an alleyway. I thought that somehow it would be just my luck that I would have to break up a fight or stop someone from kneading through someone else's bag.

When I arrived it was nothing like I expected. I walked into the gymnasium where Sunday services were held, and where on Wednesday evenings some members played basketball. This is where the homeless men would be staying overnight. My mother was smiling, and standing behind a long gray folding table, serving food alongside a few other church ladies. The lights were bright and nothing smelled funny. "Am I in the right place?" I thought to myself.

Several men were sitting at different tables eating their food quietly. Some of the men had already begun to lay down their belongings so they could rest. Another simple-minded idea came to mind: "Wait, you guys have belongings," I thought.

One of the church's staff approached me and gave a the rundown of what the night should be like. "Just be present and supportive if they need anything. This is a good group and shouldn't cause any trouble." I decided to sit in a chair and observe as much as I could.

A sense of serenity circled throughout the atmosphere of the gym. Some of the men were quiet and stayed off to themselves, laying in a sleeping bag as if it were the most comfortable of mattresses. Some of the men were reading or listening to music with headphones. Some joked with each other with a six-inch voice in their native language, and others went to the bathroom from time to time. I selfishly thought to myself -- what's the point of being here? I'm not doing anything; this is a waste of time. But, I said I'd stay for the night so I just sat.

As I stared into the reality of my surroundings empathy started to fill my spirit. The fact that by this time I was the only person sitting in a chair while so many others were sitting or lying on the floor bothered me. I became more disheartened when I noticed many of the men were preparing sleeping bags or a cushion of clothes and towels to sleep on the floor.

Meanwhile, I had a comfortable bed with pillows and sheets at home.

One man was still awake and sitting on a set of stairs near the church's altar. He was thin and dark-skinned with cornrows, and looked to be in his 50s. His hands were veiny but his face looked strong like a flexed muscle. I thought it would be a nice gesture to at least acknowledge him.

“Hey, how are you?” I said.

“God is Good young man.”

I expected him to say, “I’m fine,” or maybe something to the effects of, “I’m trying to maintain.” His response didn’t seem to mirror his circumstances.

He said that he’d run into financial difficulties after losing his job and so many other people experience the same. He would usually stay at his sister's house but she was out of town during that specific weekend. He had the Holy Bible in his hand filled with pen marks as if he’d been studying for a midterm exam. He eagerly spoke to me about what he was reading and how important it was for people to study the bible and understand what God wants from us. He was extremely knowledgeable and spoke with deep passion. I asked him about his take on the end times and what signs he thinks we will see before Jesus returns. “The signs are here, the stage is already set, fire from the sun will breach the Earth when he returns,” he said. His words scared me but they also enlightened me. We talked for over two hours before I asked him his name. He said with pride, “Everyone calls me Melvin.”

Then and there I realized I was in the right place at the right time. In no more than a couple of hours my gratitude and view of the world changed. My chaperone-experience and conversation with Melvin was filled with valuable lessons that would somehow come to be beneficial in my future. It was clear that I was so naive and oblivious to the world around me

for thinking homeless people had no family or were alcoholics, crackheads or drug addicts who would probably live out their life in whatever condition that caused them to fall short of their goals. How ignorant of me to attach the label of drug addict to the homeless as if the two are a pencil and eraser.

I learned that peace of mind shouldn't be governed by the comfort of being able to lock my bedroom door. I was thankful and proud of what my parents were able to provide for my sister and me. I understood that many people, including my parents, were a few misplaced paychecks away from being homeless as well. I returned home to my mother grateful that she invited me to volunteer for the homeless ministry.

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\* Monroe Anderson is an African-American teacher who uses his background in mathematics, basketball, and music to educate underprivileged youth. Email: [monroeranderson@gmail.com](mailto:monroeranderson@gmail.com)

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## Eric Agyenim-Boateng



[Eric is at left with his wife and children.]

*Eric Agyenim-Boateng's generous spirit and storytelling panache enriched our class in the summer of 2017. This essay reflects his daily life in New York City as an émigré from Ghana, a husband, a father of three, a taxi-driver, and a student working towards his bachelor's degree. Eric is now a middle school math teacher and he also tutors math and runs annual workshops for prospective math teachers at Lehman College.*

### Chaos on the Grand Concourse

By the time my alarm went off at 6:00 a.m., my son Kaikle was already dressed and almost ready to leave for LaGuardia Airport. His flight was not until 8:45 a.m. and I had informed him the previous night that we would set off from the Bronx at 7:00 am. He would be traveling alone for the first time to the Rocky Mountain High School on a scholarship trip for the next six weeks. He'd never been away from the family for that long.

LaGuardia Airport was currently under major construction, so I could not park the car and spend the last few moments with Kaikle before he got on the flight -- but I was on

standby until he finally sent me a text message when he boarded the flight. It was a privilege to have him in the "High School Squared Summer Program" through the recommendation of his academic advisor.

After monitoring Kaikle's flight I started my work day. I needed to work very hard to catch up on rent that week. The city was quiet for a Friday, a getaway weekend because of Independence. It was also when you see the most tourists in New York City. My working day usually starts at 7:00 a.m. and by 1:00 p.m. I expect to make close to \$150. But that day I had been driving for two hours without a ride request. My car--a black Mercedes Benz GL 450, 4.6 liter--is not very friendly on gas in such a situation.

I personally do not like the summer, especially in the New York City because I feel very uncomfortable with the way some people dress, the garbage left on the sidewalk tends to smell very bad and I spend more money on gas in business. Meanwhile, more and more people tend to walk and use Citi Bike ride share -- which also means a plummeting in income.

I found a great parking spot at Central Park West by 72nd Street so I took a break. For the next hour or so, I walked around and occasionally leaned on the four-foot wall around the park, watching joggers, cyclists, couples kissing, parents and children running around amid the trees and grass. As I stood by the Children's Zoo, I thought, why not go home and take Chacha to a park on this beautiful day? Chacha is my baby girl. She turned seven last April and is getting ready for second grade.

As I walked towards my car, my cell phone signaled an Uber SUV ride request and I accepted. Then my wife called.

"Hello sweetheart," I said,

"There is chaos on the Grand Concourse in the Bronx, so please avoid it if you can," she told me. "A doctor has been shot and many others are injured."

While I was on the phone with her, I heard a big bang at the apartment door. It was so loud it seemed like someone was trying to break into our apartment. She was quiet for a moment and my daughter ran to her in the kitchen, terrified. My wife decided not to answer



















[Photo: Barbara Ehlers]

Justine Hope Blau is the author of the memoir *Scattered* (Hand Whistle Press, 2012) and has written for *Rolling Stone*, *Oprah Magazine*, CBSNews.com and The Huffington Post. She teaches memoir at Lehman College in the Bronx and holds an MFA in screenwriting from Columbia University School of the Arts.

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Douglas K. Schoenberg, I am lucky to have you by my side.

Deep gratitude to all of my former students. You are writers. Please remember what Anne Lamott said, “*You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories.*”

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