

AUNT CHLOE

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lately.

Lately I have had the strangest feeling
With no vivid reason here to find
Yet the thought of losing you's been hanging
Round my mind

My hair sprawled around my head like a dark, wooly halo as I lay on my bedroom floor, listening to the Stevie Wonder vinyl that ran laps around the

needle of the record player resting next to me. It wasn't unlikely to find me here on any given day, making a bed of a carpeted floor, falling hair first into a rabbit

hole of soul singing and somber lyrics. I had an affinity for Donny Hathaway, Al Green, and Luther Vandross; but Stevie was the master. Vibrant, colorful lyrics

stretched and made alive by a high, almost nasal tenor that both defined and satisfied the soul.

Far more frequently you're wearing perfume
With, you say, no special place to go
But when I ask will you be coming back soon
You don't know
Never know

A man like that could never be blind.

“Maya! I know you hear me! Food's ready!”

I was ripped from the rabbit hole before I could find rest there. My heart pounded rapidly as I jolted up, a placebo effect to the sound of Mama's heavy voice.

Raising the needle and abruptly ending Stevie's wailing, I hurried to the door to meet Mama in the kitchen. She was not one to repeat herself. I was not one to

test her.

Our Harlem apartment was as humble as the family it housed. Just Mama and me, two wobbly walls of an abandoned home, supporting half a roof and

trying to convince itself it still had something worth protecting. That was us, living in the aftershocks of Daddy's disappearance, pretending the earth never

quaked at all.

"Why you always act like you can't hear me callin' you?" Stern, one hand balled on hip, the other clutching a white dish rag at her side.

"I didn't hear you, Mama. I was listening to my music." The frown line in her forehead deepened as she shook her head, exasperated.

"You and that damn record player. Can't hear ya own damn thoughts. The house could be on fire and you'd be as good as dead."

She turned her attention back to the rickety kitchen table that took up most of the room in the kitchen, its old legs bowing under the weight of the fried

chicken, collard greens, rice and gravy, and pecan pie that sat on top of it.

Mama was a southern woman through and through, only ending up in Harlem chasing after Daddy and his Jeffersons-esque dreams of "making it." Family

issues took him from Chicago down to North Carolina, where he met Mama, married her, and swept her off to NYC with the promise of the glamorous city

life she had only seen on TV, made possible by way of his amazing music career that was sure to take off. It never did. Mama held on as long as she could, but

after years of no gigs and with a baby on the way, she demanded that Daddy find some "honest work" to take care of his family. A month later, he was a UPS

delivery man and the resentment that eventually led him into the arms of another woman began to build.

It started off slow; the shards of his broken dream initially left small stab wounds in their relationship. A forgotten date night, a heated argument over

something trivial, one less "I love you" during the day. By the time I was a teenager, however, my parents didn't speak a word to each other unless it was

absolutely necessary. And even the rare words they shared were laced with a deep, seething anger that, at that point, they had both forgotten from whence it

stemmed.

I was 16 when Miss April showed up at our doorstep, her belly out to Mexico with the son Daddy always wanted, and her pretty face set in a determined

pout. She was young, probably in her late 20's, with hazelnut skin, whimsical black curls pulled up into a considerable puff on the top of her head, and a pair of

green eyes that glowed with emerald interest as she regarded me. I clutched the doorknob tightly, unsure of what to say to the small woman who obviously was

at our home on a mission.

“You must be Maya,” she muttered, seemingly to herself, before she looked me up and down once more. “You look just like your Daddy, too.”

“Can I help you?” I snapped. I wasn’t sure who this woman was, but I sensed her presence would cause more trouble than good. Her pointed eyebrows

shot up in surprise.

“Is your mama home, little girl?” Her neck rolled in time with her words like the Senior girls at school.

“No, she’s no-“

“Maya! Who is at the door?”

Mama had come down the hallway from her bedroom before I could get rid of the strange woman. Her attention immediately turned to Miss April, then

to Miss April’s protruding belly, then to Miss April’s determined pout, and back to Miss April’s flaming green eyes, looking at the younger woman with what I

would grow to learn was realization. “Go to your room, Maya.”

That night when Daddy got home from work, a war ensued that rendered me prisoner to my bedroom. For months, I was left to drown out the sounds of

screams and decades-old anger freeing itself with a Stevie Wonder salve.

By month three, Daddy had waved his white flag. He and all his things were gone before I came home from school on a Wednesday evening. The only

residue of his life with us was my record player, a gift for my 13th birthday that solidified my inherited love for music.

That night, Mama moved around the kitchen the same way she does now; frantically cleaning spotless countertops, shuffling a perfectly set table, cooking

far more food than two people could eat. She moved like a woman who did not know how not to be a wife, like a woman groomed her whole life for a role she

no longer occupied. She moved like she didn’t know any other way to exist.

We don’t talk about Daddy. Two years had dragged by without so much as a post card, and we continue to live just the same. I have healed in silence,

resolving to believe that things were better this way, that I shouldn't take Daddy's leaving personally, that the death of our relationship was simply a casualty in a

war that began long before I was born. I say to myself all the things I like to believe Mama would if she could hear anyone's pain other than her own. I mother

myself for the sake of not becoming her.

"Come on, sit down and eat this food." She had sat down now, gestured towards the chair directly across from her and I quickly joined her at the table. There

is nothing that we can talk about for too long; her life is too intertwined with the memory of Daddy and my life is too molded by music—which only serves to

remind her of Daddy—so we resign to the same "how was your day" choreo that we know like the back of our hands and that smoothly leads us through an

interaction without an argument.

"You graduatin' next month. You look into any colleges? I know you wanna go, you smart like that." A new dance step. Fresh choreography that throws off

my footing and leaves me unsure of what to do next.

"I, uh—"

"Be honest, Maya."

I want to ask why she wants to know. She hadn't shown the slightest interest in my life since I was 16. As long as I was obedient and on time for dinner, there

wasn't much else she bothered to ask about.

"Juilliard." I spit out the word that was most heavy on my mind for months now before I lost the resolve to do so.

"Huh?"

"The J-Juilliard School. I got in. I'm going for Music. Vocal Arts, to be more specific."

Silence.

"It's right over in Manhattan, ya know. Upper West Side. Just a 20-minute train ride from here. I didn't wanna go too far and leave you by yours—"

"I ain't by myself." My mouth snapped shut. "Why, why you ain't tell me?" I met Mama's dark brown eyes that were glazed over with something I hadn't

seen in a while. She looked hurt.

“Mama, I...I don’t know...school’s been a lot right now and...I know how you feel about music and everything...” She sat back in her chair suddenly, her

dainty fingers pensively rubbing across her lips. I was lost; we were totally off-script and I couldn’t decipher where the conversation was going next. At that

moment, I wished for nothing more than my foolproof choreography.

All of a sudden, a deep chuckle rose from Mama, her full chest bouncing as her laughter gained momentum. She sat there, thick lips stretched in a grin,

revealing strong, white teeth I praise God I inherited, shoulders dancing in time to the cadence of her joy. My jaw loosened as I watched her. It was the first

time I’d seen her laugh in over two years. It was still as round and infectious as it had always been, and I couldn’t help the stretching of my own lips as her

laughs birthed something sweet within me.

“Don’t nothing get past me, girl, don’t you know that? They sent that letter over a month ago. I read it then sealed it back up real nice and put it back in

the mailbox so you could get it when you got home from school. You ain’t have to hide it. The whole world know you love music...and the way you be singin’,

it’d be a shame if you ain’t do nothing with it.” She sighed, more sober now, “Now, that Juilliard is a good school, I know that much. A lot of them folks you be

listening to went there...Nina Simone, Miles Davis...now you.” I met her eyes to see them swirling with something.

“I’m...I’m proud of you.” My heart leaped from the affirmation I had convinced myself I wasn’t missing. I smiled gently, not wanting to show my surprise

too much, and nodded my head in appreciation.

“Th-thank you, Mama.”

“Mhm. So, what you wanna do with a Vocal Arts degree anyway?”

Our forks clacked against our plates as I answered every question Mama threw at me, her eyes shining brightly with curiosity. She didn’t have a musical

bone in her body, but she asked the types of questions that would make one believe she was planning to apply to Juilliard the next semester. My heart warmed

with the realization that her interest lay not with the school or with music, but with me. It was somewhere between Mama joyously recounting a memory of me

as a toddler singing Aretha Franklin’s “Ain’t No Way” into a rat tail comb and me explaining what an arpeggio was that I exhaled, fully surrendering myself to this

new dance we were creating.

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