

# AUNT CHLOE

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## His Father's Eyes

My oldest son has his father's eyes. They're small and bright and almost light brown with the exact same devilish twinkle. But somehow, they are still different in a way I've never been able to pinpoint. That began to change one lazy Sunday afternoon, before life was defined by masks and social distancing. That day, my two boys and I went for a drive, just to break up the day. Trap music filled the car, some song I liked—surprisingly. My 8-year-old told me that the rapper was DaBaby, or Lil Baby, or maybe both. I was curious, "are they brothers?" He didn't know, so when we pulled up to a red light, I picked up my phone to google it. I had not found the answer by the time the light changed and I put my phone down and drove off. I heard the siren before I saw the flashing blue lights.

I pulled over and as the police officer approached the car, I turned down the music, not wanting him to hear trap music blaring from my car. In the back, I could see my older son through the rear-view mirror. The jovial, light fun from moments before was gone. He looked terrified. I rolled down my window just as the officer stood outside my car and smiled. He was Black. Rightly or wrongly, this calmed me just a little. He asked me if I knew why he'd pulled me over and I told him I did not. He explained that in Georgia, you cannot pick up your phone at all while driving, including when you are stopped at a light. This was not the case in California where I used to live. You simply had to be at a complete stop. The officer asked for my license and registration, and I pulled out my wallet and gave it to him. Then I noticed that my son had both his hands on the window sill, in plain sight. He whispered for me to do the same, because he didn't want me to get shot. When the officer came back to the car with my license and registration, I told him what my son had said. The officer assured him that he was not going to harm us. He was a very nice man, even as he gave me a ticket. But I was mostly struck by how scared my son was, and the look on his face. As we drove off, he told me that I have to be more careful, that the police kill Black people and he knows this because he has seen it on the news. Though I could not argue with his words, I was so disturbed by them. It's a difficult thing, to not want your children to live in fear, but to know that they probably should. It was clear to me at that moment that my sweet, little boy was losing his innocence. At 8, he was already beginning to understand the complicated, often toxic relationship between Black people and the police.

I was a little older than Wyatt when I began to learn. On that June day, my father and I stopped by to visit with his Aunt Lois. As soon as we walked into her home, she said the words that I will never forget. "Helen's son...they're saying he killed himself."

Usually the adults in my family didn't talk so freely around the kids about such things, but I think she was still in shock. My dad looked ill and said, "Oh God," his standard response when he hears terrible, unimaginable news. He was quiet for a few moments before firing off a bunch of questions. How? When? Who found him? How?

"The police," she said. Aunt Lois explained that he had been pulled over for speeding, and the police arrested him and took him to jail. They said he hung himself.

I saw a different look in my father's eyes at the mention of the police, from sorrow to outrage in a blink. He started shaking his head in disbelief. "The kid that was about to go pro? Was it the Cowboys looking at him or the 49ers? That kid killed himself? In jail? No!"

Aunt Lois nodded her head knowingly. She also didn't believe it.

That kid was Ron Settles. He was a 21-year-old Cal State, Long Beach running back. His mother, Helen Strong Settles, was my father's first cousin. They were close, even though she left our hometown of Memphis more than 20 years before. She moved to Southern California after her high school sweetheart, Donnell, was stationed in Long Beach. They wanted a better life for their family and settled in Carson, just south of Los Angeles.

On June 2, 1981, Ronnie, as the family and close friends called him, drove his navy-blue Triumph TR-7 through Signal Hill, an enclave completely surrounded by Long Beach, on his way to Franklin Junior High, where he was a part-time coach of the 8th and 9th grade baseball team. Black people knew to avoid that area, but it was a straight shot to the school. He must have been running late, the only reason anyone could imagine he would have taken that route. The police pulled him over for apparently doing 47 mph on a 35 mph street. Some close friends, however, doubted he was even speeding. "Ronnie wasn't a speeder. We used to laugh about how he had that sports car, but didn't like to drive fast or get on the 405," one good friend told me. Whatever the case, the police stopped him. They claim he refused to show his driver's license, became violent, and came after them with a knife. They claim they found cocaine in his car. They took him to jail and two hours later, they claim he hung himself in his cell with the mattress cover. Another man in the jail at the time said he never saw a mattress in that cell, and he heard Ronnie getting beat up. Two embalmers from the mortuary that handled his funeral said his face had bruising and swelling that they covered before the service. During a coroner's inquest that the family's attorney, Johnnie Cochran, requested, the jury found that Ronnie died "at the hands of another." An inquest is very different from a trial in that its only purpose is to determine the physical cause of someone's death. Despite its findings, the LA coroner still maintained that Ronnie died by hanging. Therefore, there was never a criminal trial. No one was ever prosecuted in Ronnie's murder. A year later, the family exhumed his body and flew it to New York, where famed coroner Michael Baden did another autopsy. He concluded that there was no evidence that Ronnie died from hanging, but was most likely killed by a chokehold. The City of Signal Hill awarded the family a cash settlement, but at this point, all Helen and Donnell really wanted was the truth about what happened to their only child.

I didn't know Ronnie, even though I must have met him at the big family reunion in 1977. Everyone was there. But I was 6 and probably playing with the cousins my age. Since then, I have heard all about him. One high school friend told me when he would come over to her house, she'd open the door and he'd walk right past her, go to the fridge, get something to drink, and go to the den to talk to her dad. She was only allowed to go to parties if Ronnie was going, and she'd often have to bribe him to go by cleaning his room. Another friend, a guy he played football with at Cal State, Long Beach, said he was an amazing athlete and a kind guy who always greeted his fellow teammates with a smile and a handshake. He was silly and fun and they passed the time laughing and talking about girls. He was a health nut and his drink of choice was a raw egg.

By the time I moved out to Los Angeles in my thirties, I thought about him often. Every time I ventured to Carson or Long Beach, or anyone mentioned Signal Hill, I thought about him. Whenever I heard about another Black person dying while in police custody, I thought of him. When I found out I was pregnant with a boy, I thought of him.

Wyatt doesn't know about Ronnie. Maybe I haven't told him because Ronnie's death affected me so. It's hard to hear that something like that happened to someone that so many people you love loved so deeply. When his aunts and uncles, and his first cousins talk about the incident, the pain is still evident on their faces, the hurt seared into their eyes and their voices.

Wyatt is a sensitive kid. Like me, I know it will bother him. At 10, I was incredibly sad about Ronnie. It was a lot to deconstruct at that age. As I got older and began to understand our country more, I began to see more.

In high school, my younger cousin and some of his friends played outside their apartment in Louisville just as it was getting dark. A cop drove by and inquired why they were out late. The kids, all around 15 like my cousin, said that they were headed in soon, but must not have moved fast enough for that cop. They lingered and laughed, as kids will do. The cop then ordered all the kids inside except for my cousin. He threw him against the hood of his car, made him get spread eagle and tied his hands behind his back. My cousin was terrified to tears, not understanding what this cop planned to do to him. Or why. Luckily, one of the kids ran upstairs and got my cousin's mom. She came down and spoke with the cop, and he let my cousin go.

In college, my boyfriend told me that whenever he went home to Los Angeles for summer or holiday breaks, and drove his mother's Jaguar, he was constantly and consistently stopped by the police. Not for speeding, not for failing to yield at a stop sign. Often, the cops didn't even bother to create a reason. They would yank him from the car, throw him on the hood, and frisk him. When they found nothing and verified that the car was his mother's, they would let him go.

In grad school, one night I watched the film *Higher Learning* with another boyfriend. I was struck by the scene where Michael Rappaport's character points a gun in the face of Omar Epps's character. I asked my boyfriend if he'd ever had a gun pointed in his face and he chuckled, though his eyes strangely looked grave. He told me how Bay Area police would repeatedly stop him and his friends as they walked home from junior high school and hold them at gunpoint. They would interrogate them on the bad stuff they imagined they had done. They'd yell at these 12, 13, 14-year-olds, "You ain't shit, you ain't never gon' be shit. Cause your daddy ain't shit. You probably don't even know who your daddy is." I asked if his parents ever reported this, or contacted a lawyer. He gave that same chuckle with that same empty look in his eyes. It was just the way things were.

When I met my husband, it was just on the heels of his encounter with the Brooklyn police. One night, soon after he'd finished graduate school, he left a neighbor's apartment late after watching an arthouse film. As he walked around the corner to his apartment, he heard someone say, "Hey, Big Man, come here." He glanced over and saw an unmarked car full of white men who he didn't know, so he kept walking. In the next moment, they were on him, their hands in his pockets, shoving him, searching him roughly, screaming, "Where's your gun? Where's your gun?" He yelled that he didn't have a gun. Then one of the men said, "Here's your gun," and held a gun over his head. He didn't know if the cop was trying to plant the gun on him or shoot him. His friend heard the commotion, ran out, and attempted to convince the cops that he had done nothing wrong. Eventually they handcuffed him and took him to jail, arresting him for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest.

And still there are more.

Certainly they don't compare to the severity of cases like Ronnie's, but as a Black person, you live with the knowledge and fear that an intimate can be taken at any moment. In his book, *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates said "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body." That quote conjures up images of white people, mobs of them watching, smiling, jeering as bodies of Black men and women hang from trees, necks broken, or bodies burned, the smell of charred flesh pungent even in a photograph. I have often thought it ironic that Black people are somehow the ones depicted as savages, brutes, thugs, with this kind of tradition in America.

Ronnie's family had a tradition they coined Bean Night. Every Tuesday, Ron's father, Donnell, would make navy beans, and Helen would make chicken or some other kind of meat, and they'd invite other family and friends over to bring more side dishes, Mac and cheese, greens, potato salad, whatever they choose. The day Ronnie was murdered by the police was a Tuesday, so everyone was at his house wondering where he was when his parents got the call. They waited at the house until Helen and Donnell returned hours later. When they did, they confirmed that Ronnie was dead, and Helen screamed that her child, her only son, was barely recognizable. Their tradition shattered in anguish.

As the latest wave of racial unrest and protest took center stage this summer, with Arnaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Christian Cooper, and George Floyd in the news, I became almost addicted to the TV. I

was aware that often my oldest was around listening and would change the channel quickly if reporters went into too many details. But it was hard to turn away. I felt that this time, things were a little different, and part of me wanted my oldest to bear witness to the movement. He asked questions and I answered. Carefully and tactfully. Then amid all the protests, two college students from Spelman and Morehouse went out among the demonstrators, got pulled from their car by the police and tased. My son became really focused on that story, almost obsessively so. I caught him googling the video on my phone a few times. The students weren't even doing anything, he said again and again. And the cop was Black. He seemed really confused.

But of course he was. His father went to Morehouse and his mother went to Spelman. His cousins are at Morehouse and Spelman now. And he says he wants to go to Morehouse. So I knew this was the time for another talk. He needed to understand. Just because a police officer is Black, that does not make him good and fair. And Black people are often doing nothing wrong when they are targeted. I reminded him that his father was just walking down the street when he was attacked by the police. Wyatt looked up at me and I looked into his beautiful eyes, and in that moment, it became clear. Wyatt's eyes lack pain and trauma. I've seen it for years in my family, in Ronnie's aunts, uncles, first cousins, in most of the men I've known, in my community. The eyes look different in people who have either survived a trauma at the hands of police or lost someone to the police. Those eyes represent the unfortunate repetitive narrative that permeates the Black existence. Is it too much for a mother to wish that her sons never have the look that so many Black men and women wear as a badge of their trauma? When you are harassed and attacked and violated, or when you lose someone to violence, by the very people who are supposed to protect and serve you, something happens to your soul that you cannot get back. You can never not know. You will never see the same again.

Right now, Wyatt's eyes are a bit fearful, a little unsure, but there is still a glimmer of innocence, of hope. He is searching for clarity and understanding. And I'm good with that. I want him to learn to be cautious and aware. I want him to be smart in his dealings with law enforcement. What I do not want is for him to have his father's eyes. I don't want him to see what his father has seen. And maybe, just maybe, if we stay in the streets, "make some noise and get in good trouble," he and his brother won't.

Elyce Strong Mann is a multi-faceted writer and producer who has worked in news, online magazines, scripted television, and independent film for almost three decades. She has produced many short films, including her award-winning directorial debut, *Amber & Andre*, which she also wrote. She has an M.F.A. in creative writing from Antioch University and a Masters in screenwriting from the University of Southern California. Recently, she returned to her alma mater, Spelman College, to teach screenwriting and fiction writing for a few years before leaving to work on her debut novel.