

UNA MUCHACHA DECENTE

Jessie, born in Puerto Rico, emigrated to New York City with her family when she was a young child. She explores in this case how her strong family ties, others' belief in her, and her own commitment helped her avoid the possible dangers and complications of her urban community. She describes how she remains connected to her friends and family, despite her experiences with gang violence, indifferent teachers, and under-resourced schools. She watches friends drop out of school, deal drugs, and become involved in local gangs because they seem to lack the support systems she has. College provides a new set of challenges, as she faces the ignorance of others and the impersonal academic demands of the institution. Jessie's determination to succeed makes us believe that indeed she will.

I was 17 years old the first time I considered purchasing a gun. Many of my childhood friends were dealing by the time we entered high school and had already established contacts with gunrunners and black market dealers around the city. There was nothing to it, I thought. I would use what was left of my summer earnings to cop a gun from one of my boys and still have a little extra cash to thank them for their services. It would be as easy as going to the bodega to buy my mother a can of Goya beans. It was only a matter of stepping out of my house and speaking to Joey, Red, or Edwin and everything would be set. A gun guaranteed security, ensuring I would never have to prove my physical prowess to individuals who mistook my reticence for an inability to defend myself. I was tired of fighting. A flash of my gun would emphatically demonstrate my capabilities without necessitating the physical and emotional distress that every altercation induced in me.

One crisp Saturday morning when I was 16 years old, I was buying my mother a birthday present at a nearby mall when two female gang members attacked me. I can still hear my glasses crash against the floor as the first attacker struck my face with her fist. Disoriented at first, I quickly caught sight of my

assailant's face and employed the most crucial defense strategy my older brother taught me during childhood: never stop swinging. By the time the cops arrived on the scene, the officers had trouble distinguishing the perpetrators from the victim: one of my attackers fearfully stood over me while I threatened to take the life of her comrade whose neck was firmly locked underneath my arm. A female officer demanded that I loosen my grip but I would not budge. Two officers then restrained me while another officer helped the first attacker to her feet. After a few witnesses intervened to help explicate the situation, the officers arrested the gang members and advised me to press charges. I refused. Moments later the girls were released. The first attacker sauntered away, tears streaming down her cheeks while her sidekick cupped her hand over her bloody nose. I sat listlessly on a bench watching their figures diminish as the distance between us increased. A part of me wanted to catch up to the dynamic duo and apologize for their injuries. Another part of me wanted to keep swinging. When the girls were no longer in sight, two officers accompanied me to my apartment. My heart sank as I realized this incident could potentially mark a succession of violent attacks. It was only a matter of time before I would confront gang members seeking revenge for their kin. Gang violence never ends.

When I was 17, my attention dramatically shifted from myself to my family's welfare. The day before Mother's Day, I was practicing how to parallel park a few blocks away from my neighborhood when I received a frantic phone call from my mother—she walked into our apartment moments after a band of robbers had burglarized our home. Minutes later, I arrived at the apartment. I embraced my mother as she stared blankly at the debris concealing much of the floor. I slowly inched my way to my bedroom remembering I had purchased my mother's present earlier that morning. I searched through the rubble hoping to find my mother's necklace. It was gone.

Perhaps the most troubling aspect of the entire incident was unveiling the robbers' entry and escape routes. We live on the first floor of our apartment building. The burglars climbed through our living-room window, adjacent to the courtyard of our building. Our courtyard is one of the busiest spots in our neighborhood. People constantly pass through this area, play handball, smoke, drink and have barbeques and birthday parties. Needless to say, there were countless witnesses who were either in cahoots with the suspects or unwilling to speak up. A few days after the robbery, my brother's friend informed us that the attack was a mere warning. Local gang members in our neighborhood were after my brother. My brother was spotted wearing a sweater with yellow lettering during his last visit from college. Yellow was a Latin King color. Luckily, my brother returned to school the night before the robbery. Nevertheless, it was only a matter of time until our apartment was robbed again or any one of my family members was attacked. I refused to sit back passively waiting for the cops to notify us once they apprehended any suspects. My family was in imminent danger. I had to take matters into my own hands.

Although I had never officially joined a gang, I knew plenty of individuals in my neighborhood who would fight for me in the event of an altercation. My brother's "boys" assured me they were more than willing to defend me when and

if "anything went down." Nevertheless, I did not want to get anyone else involved. My family's welfare was my responsibility. On my way home from school, I found my friend, Red, at a pizzeria across the street from my building. Red had dropped out of high school two years earlier and started dealing when he was 16. He had heard about the robbery and asked if there was anything he could do to help. It was at that moment that I informed Red about my interest in purchasing a gun. Surprised at first, he asked what I planned to do with it. I did not know how to respond. I arranged to meet Red and his "affiliates" three weeks later in front of my former elementary school building. When the time came for the exchange to occur, I was nowhere to be found. As much as I rationalized my intentions for owning a gun, to the point of neglecting the potential consequences for purchasing an illegal weapon, something inside kept me from taking that final step. When the time came to protect my family, I was ready to put my life on the line. Nevertheless, I could not fight fire with fire.

Decisions, decisions. Verdicts like yes, no, maybe, sometimes, always, and never were shaped by the values and experiences that have influenced my upbringing. My life experience has taught me to value integrity, respect, and honor in any decision I make. My parents raised us in a pious home where these values were instilled in us from the moment we opened our eyes. Speaking respectfully and honoring our elders, believing in things unseen, caring for those in need, learning that love does not have a face, color, or creed shaped our perceptions and interactions with the world around us. While we did not have many material possessions, these principles were priceless as they carried us through difficult times and had even more significance when life was blissful. As I grew older, my love and respect for people and my faith enabled me to chase dreams I sometimes had trouble envisioning. Others' faith in my abilities was also a catalyst for my drive to succeed and make decisions that would not compromise my sense of responsibility and would bring me closer to my goals.

My friends, teachers, and loved ones believed I possessed the ability to change circumstances that threatened to undermine my quest to succeed. I had the potential, capacity, and intelligence to make it. There were "no ifs, ands, or buts about it," as my third grade teacher would often say. However, it was up to me to use my God-given talents without having to resort to the same methods and philosophies that many of my peers and family members were utilizing to resolve immediate needs they felt their parents, teachers, government, or society routinely neglected. While I grew up in an area where violence and criminal activity tainted my childhood with the uncertainty of a brighter tomorrow, at the end of the day there was a home I returned to—a support system that was unlike anything I would encounter throughout my daily treks to school or my childhood masquerades with neighborhood peers. I learned the greatest lessons about life within my Brooklyn tenement, our second home since migrating from Puerto Rico. Mom and Dad lived a life of faith that taught me I could move mountains—and over the course of my life, I would.

I was born amid a flickering light dangling from the ceiling of maternity ward C12 in *Hospital de El Distrito De Aguadilla*, in Puerto Rico. To my left was the

vast Atlantic—the waves slapping against the surf as gentle zephyrs pulled the tide further onto the shore. To my right sat my father, his rugged hands enveloping his face as he stared blankly into the eyes of his creation. Mom cradled me in her arms, her cheek pressed against my rosy forehead as she whispered a prayer. How could he possibly manage to support a family? There was no money. Nevertheless, in the midst of all the uncertainty, there was hope.

When I was living in Puerto Rico, my grandmother and I often sat outside right before the stars emerged. We would start counting *las estrellitas* one by one until the sky was flecked with a mosaic of radiant white flecks. By then there were too many stars to count. I remember wishing I could fit the sky into my pocket when I was a child. When we moved to New York City, the sky changed. At night, my Brooklyn sky did not reveal the sea of stars that poured out of my Puerto Rican sky. Nevertheless, sunny days were still as bright as my grandfather's sapphire eyes. Rays of sunlight glistened, reflecting from bottle caps and shards of glass strewn across broken sidewalks—remnants of street-corner brawls from the previous night. Although my surroundings were remarkably different, it was only a matter of time until I called my Brooklyn apartment home.

My first home in New York City was the maroon monolithic housing project at Mott Haven Avenue in Brooklyn. The streets were peppered with empty crack vials discarded from the binges of the previous night. Over the years, I became familiar with the colors of the caps: red, blue, green, and purple. The red caps were the most common. When my father had saved enough money from working as a custodian, we moved to another area.

Our situation moderately improved. The smell of urine in the halls of 2364 Decatur Avenue was slightly less pungent than in the Mott Haven projects. Unfortunately, the proportion of stabbings, shootings, and drug use in the area had not altered. Our apartment was broken into my senior year of high school and my older brother got mugged three times before turning 18.

I still remember the challenge of writing with mittens on my hands. On cold days it was the only way to finish the multiplication tables in my CIMS book. The orange glow of the space heaters was our only source of heat besides our coats. My father had explained that the landlord sometimes forgot to send oil to the building. Nevertheless, we needed to complete our homework, not because my parents nagged us but because it was the thing to do. To my siblings and I, it was what every child did before watching TV or going to church for *Missioneritas* or Royal Rangers (religious equivalent to Girl/Boy Scouts). The way I understood it, everyone in my family served a different function. As a child, my function was to complete my homework and tidy up the house before my parents returned from work. My parents' responsibilities included working, cooking, reading bedtime bible stories, and singing hymns and reciting prayers in the morning before we were off to school. Nothing got in the way of our roles and duties because we each contributed a vital component to our family's upkeep.

When we faced hardships, Mom taught us to count our blessings because "as bad as things get, they could always be worse." Mom and Dad knew all about worse—before being orphaned at 13 my father suffered years of abuse from his fa-

ther, and he did not own a pair of shoes until he was 8 years old. Sometimes a cup of warm orange tea (made from orange leaves in his backyard) was the only meal he and his eight siblings would have for days at a time. One of fourteen children, my mother grew up on a small farm in Puerto Rico. She was pulled out of school by the sixth grade to help my grandmother maintain her household. Mom has also experienced her share of hardships over the course of her life. My mother's advice continues to shape my perception of the world today. In light of my mother's counsel, I thought my apartment was just as good as any. I did not mind the nights I slept in the coat I received over Christmas with the matching scarf and hat Abuelita (grandma) gave me for my birthday. Home was home. I was happy to have a roof over my head, clothes on my back, and parents who loved me when life was good and loved me harder when life was not so good.

Growing up, I viewed my block as my playground. My friends and I played hopscotch and freeze tag in the courtyard of our apartment building and invented new games when old ones became boring. Sometimes we would sit on the front steps of my building describing the shapes, animals, and people hiding amidst the clouds. My younger brother, Manny, always saw puppies—most often Chihuahuas or baby pit bulls chewing on toy bones.

Before church service on Sundays, my friends and I waited for Mr. Frosty, the ice cream truck, to stop by. Sometimes the myriad of options overwhelmed us—there was the snow cone, the Mario Pop with a gumball nose in the center, strawberry shortcake, the choco-taco, the banana split, chocolate, strawberry or vanilla milk shakes, etc. So many options, so little time before Sunday school started. Most of us chose the timeless classic, the Mr. Frosty special—a vanilla ice cream cone with multicolored sprinkles. One afternoon I discovered that twirling the cone fast enough created a “rainbow tornado.” From that moment on, in remembrance of that momentous occasion, my friends and I would twirl our cones and admire our rainbow tornadoes before taking our first bite into Mr. Frosty.

When we walked home from school we were careful to tiptoe past Juanito's spot as he slept in front of the bodega, holding his plastic “change cup” imprinted with a faded Domino's Pizza logo—the red and blue ink was still vibrant, the green ink faded to a yellowish hue that reminded me of my elementary school's chicken noodle soup. When Juanito was awake he shook his cup like a maraca, his coins ringing like church bells that awakened me in the early morning when it was time to say my prayers and get ready for school. He told us stories of the good life in Puerto Rico, when he still had his right leg and would climb up palm trees to knock down ripened coconuts. Although he never told the same *quento* twice, his stories always ended with the same moral: “Be good to the ones you love, finish school, and never join the military.”

Summer vacation was the happiest time of our lives. When school was out, games of “hide-and seek,” “steal the bacon,” or “kick the can” filled our summer months. Only the kids whose parents *both* worked made trips back to Puerto Rico, Santo Domingo, or Florida for the summer. Nevertheless, when the sun beat down on our backs and plumes of steam began to rise from the scorching asphalt, nothing could beat dancing in front of open fire hydrants. When the sun hid its face, we

spent most of our summer nights teasing the sky as we tried to outrun the moon. It did not matter how long or how fast we ran—it seemed as if the moon was sitting on our shoulders the entire time.

For years this was my childhood. I lived to be outside with my neighborhood friends, cousins, and brothers discovering new adventures. However, as I became older my mother began to restrict my outdoor privileges. By the time I turned 12, I was forbidden to hang outside with my friends as I was “becoming a young woman and the streets were no place for *una muchacha decente* (a respectable young girl).” To this day, while I understand my mother’s intentions, I can still feel remnants of my resentment as I relive that brisk April afternoon when my friends stood in our courtyard patiently awaiting my arrival. I never showed up. In my eyes, this was probably one of the most abominable decisions my mother ever made. It was a source of contention between my mother and I for years thereafter. Why couldn’t I go outside and play with my friends? *Muchacha decente*? At 12 years old, who wasn’t a *muchacha decente*? I just wanted to play handball, basketball, stick ball, or freeze tag. What was so vile about playing hide-and-seek in our apartment building? I could not see how these recreational activities could threaten my status as a decent and respectable girl.

For months I would stare outside from our first-floor window watching my friends play in our courtyard and longing to once again be a part of their world. They were only about five feet away from where I sat, and yet they seemed so far away from me. Sometimes my buddies invented basketball games where they used my arms as a basketball hoop. I held out my arms in the form of an oval from our living room window as Luis, Eddie, Tony, and Stephanie took turns shooting the basketball into my arms. They stopped playing when my friend Stevie accidentally missed my arms and busted our living room window. Nevertheless, I could not give up. Sooner or later I knew I would once again be allowed to hang outside with my comrades. I convinced myself that this was probably just a phase Mom was going through—she would get over it in no time.

Days, weeks, and months passed and there was still no sign of change. When I grew tired of waiting for my mom to come to her senses, I attempted to sneak outside on numerous occasions. Not surprisingly, there was always a neighbor or a *comadre* who would stop me dead in my tracks because my mother had already notified them about her decision to restrict my civil liberties. After a while I grew tired of fighting with my mother because I knew she would not relent. From that moment on, my block never looked the same. Over the years the friendships I had developed throughout my childhood subtly altered. I would often see my neighborhood friends in passing but as we grew older, the glow of our childhood innocence dulled to a subtle glimmer as handball and kick the can evolved into the formidable behaviors and activities we were too afraid to talk about when we were children. I realized that the girls whose parents allowed them to chill outside with their friends adapted to lifestyles that often undermined their safety and well-being and severely limited their prospects for success.

Throughout the years, many of my friends became the people we spent much of our childhood trying to avoid—the men who promised to buy us candy if we

delivered small packages in our backpacks; the feeble women with tracks of blood running up and down their arms who begged us for train fare or cigarettes; the gunrunners and gangsters we were too afraid to look at when we ran into the streets to retrieve our lost basketballs or handballs. Others died tragically before the age of 17. Some were killed during drive-by shootings, run-ins with rival gang members, or drug runs gone bad.

Unlike my friends who involved themselves in activities and behaviors that jeopardized their lives, my choir buddy, Anthony, was different. My sophomore year of high school, my chorus teacher invited me and three other students from our class to audition for the Brooklyn Academy of the Arts Program. Mikey, Anthony, Janelle, and I were told to arrive at the local community college one chilly Saturday morning to audition in front of six directors. When we arrived, there were approximately seventy-five to eighty students anxiously waiting to audition. We watched each student walk one by one out of the small auditorium, some with pink slips, some without. We soon learned that pink slips meant you made it. Luckily, for Mikey, Anthony, Janelle, and I, we all walked out of the audition with pink slips and bright smiles. Every Saturday thereafter we would arrive at 9:30 A.M. sharp (or risk being sent home) at the community college performing arts center for approximately four hours of vocal training and two hours of violin lessons. If we acquired more than two absences over the course of each semester, we were immediately removed from the program. There was no question—our Saturdays were grueling. Our directors were tough and oftentimes unforgiving. If any section was flat during a rehearsal, every individual in that section was required to sing the entire piece ALONE, until the culprit was discovered. Nevertheless, it was a small price to pay for making beautiful music. We learned about operas, symphonies, and other magnificent pieces of music created by composers we had never heard of before. We rehearsed classical pieces in foreign languages we didn't understand. And we loved every minute of it. Our chorus was well-known throughout the city and we would often perform at various functions and assemblies. We were on television on numerous occasions and in newspapers. We felt important. Mikey, Anthony, Janelle, and I looked forward to every Saturday (albeit with some apprehension). We were so thankful to have the opportunity to engage with a different type of learning experience and ultimately create something at the end of each semester that would make our friends and family members proud. Our performances were worth every embarrassing moment or seemingly endless rehearsal. We understood that at the end of every semester, our hard work paid off in a way that we never expected. Unlike school, where the benefits of our hard work were often not so clear, creating music in the All-America choir enabled us to embrace the fruits of our labor and show others a side of us we never really knew existed.

Although Anthony was ridiculed by many of his friends for spending his Saturdays *singing* in a choir, he felt the program kept him busy, away from his block and out of trouble. Anthony was determined to make it without dealing or engaging in illegal activities, and he involved himself in programs he felt would keep him "focused on doing right, you know?" We had "bright futures in our hands,"

he would often say. By our sophomore year, Anthony dubbed himself the "best tenor," while I was only a "mediocre soprano." Our beautiful music ended the morning I received the call that Anthony had taken his life. That afternoon I turned in my uniform. I could not bear the thought of seeing Anthony's seat empty during rehearsals. Young people are not supposed to die—especially not like this, I thought to myself.

Over the years, as familiar figures in my life continued to fade, it took some time to accept that death meant coming to terms with the reality that I could search every corner of the earth and never find these people again. As difficult as it was to say good-bye to people and memories that I cherished so deeply, I accepted these losses as something that would only make me stronger in the long run. I came to the realization that this was life and I needed to accept it in order to move on. My family's support and my mother's guidance helped me to keep moving as she reminded me "*hay remedio para todo menos la muerte*" (there is a solution for everything except death). I decided that nothing except death itself would stop me. I prayed that my loved ones and their families would find the strength to keep moving. I understood that such tragedies have a tendency to eclipse hope with anger as unanswered questions and grief oftentimes evolve into a bitterness that compels many to seek revenge, thus perpetuating the cycle of hate that news reporters and journalists so easily publicize in newspapers and two-minute news segments that depict the ghetto as a lost world without hope—without real people who hurt, feel, speak, live, and breathe like everyone else.

As the years progressed, I witnessed many of my friends lose sight of their goals and aspirations amid trying circumstances that rendered their determination futile. As hard as I tried, I could not figure out where it all went wrong. Many of us believed we would grow up to be doctors, astronauts, scientists, lawyers—big-time people who worked downtown and donned fancy business suits. Others dreamed about becoming hip-hop singers, actors, and actresses—people we only saw on TV and on magazine covers. There was no doubt in our minds; we were going to make it big. However, there were others whose parents believed they would "turn out just like their fathers—no good, lazy, good-for-nothing, low-lives who will probably die young or spend the rest of their lives in jail." I can still hear Darren's mother yelling over his music: "that's right—you gonna meet yo father in jail—good fo' nothing, bastard." I believe many of my friends internalized these negative perceptions and were afraid to try because they were convinced they were going to fail. Darren wanted to be an artist but he dropped out of high school and started dealing at age 15. He has been shot on numerous occasions and has been in and out of jail since the age of 16.

* Unfortunately, our schooling experiences gave us the same impression; we were not expected to succeed. I attended a large, overcrowded public high school made up of about five thousand students. Gang violence haunted my freshman year. My high school was a hotbed for violence between rival gang members who often clashed during our lunch periods. We were often forced to hide behind parked cars as we waited and waited for police officers who never showed up to secure our surroundings. Metal detectors, security guards who unjustly criminal-

ized us, and dilapidated facilities were part of our daily reality. From the outside, our school resembled a prison. All of the windows above the first floor were barred with aluminum gates. Our lab rooms were a joke. Half the time we did not have materials to carry out experiments and would have to "estimate" our results. Our schools lacked essential resources and suffered from teacher deficits that tainted our educational experiences with disappointment and strife. We were lucky if our teachers showed up to class regularly. My senior year of high school, my physics teacher often walked into class about half way through the period and after taking attendance would take an "extended lunch break"—he would not return until halfway through the period the following morning. Furthermore, we were blessed if our teachers were qualified to teach the subjects they taught. Given these conditions and the varying needs of the student population, our schools were ill-equipped to manage the obstacles affecting students' lives outside of the classroom. Many of my friends walked into their schools carrying a world on their shoulders that kept them from seeing any tangible benefits in schooling. Their motivation to adhere to school demands dissipated in light of difficult circumstances that skewed their perceptions of a brighter future. Broken homes, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and drug and alcohol abuse were but a few of the challenges that marred students' life experiences.

School environments that are incapable of assessing students' needs and experiences cannot provide students with an effective educational experience. Many of my friends and family members could not engage with school culture because teacher expectations and academic standards were sometimes inconsistent with their needs or experiences. School, the one place where students could escape the negativity surrounding their lives, if only for six hours, was not prepared to deal with their needs. Our school conditions told us we were not worth the expenditure because we were destined to fill the ranks of our predecessors. While there were not enough math textbooks to go around for everyone, metal detectors greeted us at the entrance of our schools supervised by security guards who treated us like the gang bangers, drug dealers, and criminals we were destined to replace. Our schools helped reaffirm our place in society—and our place was the streets, jail, or death.

Despite these circumstances, I enjoyed participating in my school's social scene. During our lunch periods we were allowed to eat outside on the main avenue made up of numerous stores and restaurants that overflowed with students when school was in session. When Foot Locker and Footaction publicized the release of new Air Jordan sneakers, Timberland boots, or Nike classics, we were always the first ones to know. During my freshman year of high school many of my friends and I found after-school jobs. I was employed at a pharmacy in Manhattan where I worked as an expert gift-wrapper and a stock clerk in the cosmetics department. At the age of 14, I was able to begin to assist my family financially. There was no greater feeling than being able to contribute to my parents' financial needs. My overtime also gave me the opportunity to purchase clothing my parents could never afford to buy me. I felt so independent and confident.

My best friend, Frankie, was my better half throughout my public school educational experience. We had known each other since the third grade and over the

years had grown closer than sisters. We were involved in everything together. From hanging out, studying, attending club meetings and outings, tutoring each other in areas we struggled in, and attending church services and youth group meetings, we were one another's sidekicks—we were “joined at the hip,” Mrs. Ruiz, Frankie's mother, would often say. Our temperaments also complemented each other. While we were both shy, somewhat quirky, I was a little more assertive and at times more impulsive than Frankie. She would always encourage me to step back and analyze situations and “slow down” before making any brash decisions. Throughout elementary and middle school, Frankie usually stepped in before altercations at recess erupted into fights. I was quick-tempered when it came to defending myself and Frankie often encouraged me to utilize positive strategies to resolve conflicts. Conversely, when I felt Frankie was being too much of a pushover, I encouraged her to stick up for herself and take risks. We were a dynamic duo who would one day become “famous physicians and discover the cure for AIDS and cancer.” We were each other's support network. While many of our friends and family members were not as involved or engaged with school, Frankie and I kept each other grounded because our goals and aspirations were in the same place. We wanted to succeed to be able to help friends and family members who were unable to make it. We believed getting an education was the only way to make our goals come to fruition. A couple of days before going off to college, Frankie and I made a pact that we would “use whatever skills, talents, gifts, God has blessed us with to change the world and make it a better place—for everyone.” We called this pact, the “No More Ghettos” contract.

* | Although many of us came from different ethnic backgrounds, we all came from the same kinds of neighborhoods and many experiences united us. There was no such thing as a social hierarchy. We were all working-class people of color going through many of the same struggles and challenges in our daily lives. Many of our parents were immigrants escaping a past of destitution and despair. Our parents pursued dreams and goals that might someday become manifest in the lives of their children. However, many students did not have a support system that helped them buffer much of the negativity surrounding their daily lives. It was all the more difficult for my friends who came from single-parent homes, who were foster children who experienced abuse and neglect, who were victims of domestic violence, or whose parents were substance abusers. Many of my peers who lacked a support system that would enable them to envision prospects for a more promising future just lost hope. Crystal Ruiz, one of my closest friends during middle and high school, dropped out and started dealing drugs because she did not believe that school would help her get anywhere. Crystal needed “money now to help my family, myself, and my mom—aint no one else gonna do it for me—I can't sit on my ass waiting for school to get me what I need . . . what my family needs.” Crystal felt she did not have time to wait around for diplomas or college degrees because she felt she was neglecting the immediate needs in her family. She had four younger siblings to look after and a mother who was mentally ill. She never met her father. Her family's well-being was her responsibility.

Although many of the students in my class dropped out of high school before graduation, some of us still worked hard toward envisioning prospects for a brighter future. Something always told me there was more to life outside of my present reality. Although I did not know what that reality looked like, I hoped for a better tomorrow, dreamed of a brighter future just over the horizon and always tried to change the circumstances I had control over. When I was a child I imagined I had the world in my hands—I could change almost anything so long as I worked hard and prayed harder. I carried this blind determination with me throughout my life believing there was always something I could say or do to change situations that had the potential to undermine my goals or aspirations. Nothing would get in the way of my future. As I grew older, and the situations surrounding my life continued to change, I sometimes struggled to accept those things I could not change. When circumstances threatened my sense of responsibility, my determination to secure important aspects of my life would skew my rationality.

When it came to college, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The fact that I was going to college was already a huge step for a young woman in my family. Not only was I going to college, I was going to one of the best liberal arts colleges in the country. I had no idea what that meant. It was not until I arrived that I felt the sting of isolation that accompanied my awareness of color and the implications of difference that separated me from the majority of my peers.

Move-in day at college was an experience I will carry with me the rest of my life. Just as I crammed the last box of my belongings into the trunk of my mother's Mitsubishi Galant, my brother drew my attention toward a fern growing in a tiny fissure between the sidewalk and the wall of my apartment building. "See Jessie, that's you right there. You gonna make it." I stared at the fern for moment wondering how life could sprout in such a miniscule, virtually arid world. I admired the fern for its strength and determination—for its ability to thrive despite such unfavorable conditions. Nevertheless, I realized the fern stood alone. Questions began to flash through my mind: Where did everyone go? Where was my brother? My cousins? My childhood friends? Growing up, I was convinced we were all headed toward the same goals, destined for a chance at a better life. Enmeshed in my quest for success was the safety and well-being of my loved ones. When I arrived at college, I realized I was alone. All of the familiarity that surrounded my everyday existence at home was gone. I was dreadfully alone.

When I reached my dorm room, I remember standing amidst my belongings not knowing where to begin. My roommate's family all joined in to help Olivia get settled. Mom left the instant I transported all of my belongings into my dorm room. One terse good-bye and she was off. No surprise there. She was afraid I would see her cry. Out of the corner of my eye, I observed my roommate and her family as they unpacked and organized her belongings. My bedroom at home was nowhere near the size of my dorm room. Where would I begin? Making my bed seemed like the simplest feat to accomplish at the moment. As I unpacked my bed set, I stared off into the distance for a moment as I remembered my mother's final words: "Don't ever forget who loves you, who you are, and where you come

from." At the time, my mother's counsel seemed more like an admonition than a word of advice. I awoke from my reverie when my roommate's sister tugged my shoulder and offered to help me arrange my belongings. I do not remember responding but sure enough Nicole began to help me set my bedsheets. A few moments later I began to converse with my roommate and her family. I learned that my roommate's father was an engineering professor at Dartmouth and her mother was a stay-at-home mother with a college degree. After asking me a couple of questions about my neighborhood and background, Mr. Hanneman immediately commented on my use of *slang* in my vocabulary: "so—what exactly do you mean by *mad* hot?" Silence. What didn't he understand?

"Well, umm, I mean that . . . umm—I mean it's like . . . its really warm."

"ohh . . . ha ha ha . . . Ok—well then," he replied as his wife interjected:

"And your parents . . . what do they do for a living?"

"Well, my dad works as an assistant cook at a hospital. And my mom, she's a cashier at a pharmacy downtown," I responded.

"Oh, ok. That must be nice . . . uh . . . to work in Manhattan."

I mean if you enjoy being treated like a second-class citizen, I suppose it would be nice to work on Madison Avenue. Customers often denigrate employees like my mother because they are perceived as dim-witted, incompetent, and altogether uneducated ghetto trash because of their accents. Yes, Ms. Hanneman, I can see how working downtown would be nice for individuals who enjoy that type of maltreatment on a daily basis. As much as I wanted to speak my mind I held my tongue. I merely nodded my head after her response. I was beginning to get accustomed to the awkward silence that followed my responses to their questions. I did not understand why, but they seemed a lot more uncomfortable than I was. Mr. Hanneman and his wife left later on that afternoon. Mr. Hanneman's final words: "You might want to write down some of those slang words and definitions you commonly use—I have a feeling Olivia will return home sounding a little like you." I smiled and shook Mr. Hanneman's hand.

A couple of hours later my hallmate's mother invited me into her daughter's room. "I saw your picture in the student directory—it says here that you are from Brooklyn . . . I am so happy my daughter lives right across from you. You are Latina, right? Maybe you can teach my daughter Spanish, I dunno—teach her about your culture . . . I'm so excited!" Once again, I responded in silence. I nodded my head, shook my hallmate's hand, and walked back to my dorm room. I never felt so confused in my life. That day set the precedent for the interactions and events that would shape my college experience thereafter.

My relationship with my roommate and hallmates started out fine. I treated and spoke to them just as I communicated with my friends from home. However, it was not long before I began to understand the implications of our difference. I could not relate to many of the subjects they discussed because I never encountered many of the authors they studied throughout their educational careers. They often made references to American classics that I had never heard of: *Anne of Green Gables* was among the most popular. They were astonished to hear that I had never read or watched such a "timeless classic."

I was told I had a Spanish accent, that I used "interesting street vernacular," that I spoke "urban." I was asked if I was ever shot at or stabbed, if I was "mixed or half-black," if I had any children. One student also asked me how it felt to be a product of affirmative action. I tried my best to ignore many of these comments. I needed patience because I realized I was also learning from their experiences and backgrounds. However, when I was called a fugitive, my relationship with my roommates and hallmates changed indelibly. That afternoon I had my headphones on as I worked on problem sets for my math class. My roommate and a couple of hallmates trotted into our dorm room. "There's my little fugitive," my roommate blurted out. One of my hallmates intervened and inquired why she called me a fugitive. "I mean, she's Puerto Rican. She understands." Everyone giggled and laughed and I ripped off my headphones. For a moment I feared my temper would get the best of me. I did not understand what one thing had to do with the other but something inside me burned. Nevertheless, as much as I wanted to say something, anything, I could not utter a word. I was perplexed. Why am I a fugitive? Because I am Puerto Rican? Or is it, I am Puerto Rican because I am a fugitive? Does being Puerto Rican somehow imply that I am a fugitive? And if so, HOW AND WHY?

I lost trust in my roommate and many of my hallmates after that day. While we all remained friends, I kept them at a safe distance and our conversations did not deviate from normal everyday exchanges. As different as their experiences were, I never made generalizations or erroneous interpretations about them or their backgrounds. I resented the comments they made about me, my experience, my ethnicity, my speech patterns, my style of dress, etc. I hated every minute of it. The majority of the time I simply did not understand how anyone could have such perceptions about my people or me. I also could not believe how such intellectually gifted people could make such misguided generalizations and assumptions. What I found most frustrating was their attitude toward my annoyance at their ignorant statements. They often chastised me for being "way too sensitive" and assured me that they could make such comments because they were my friends and meant no harm.

Those initial interactions with my roommate and hallmates affected my interactions with my peers thereafter. As the semester progressed, I heard more and more comments that undermined my self-esteem. I was no longer as confident as I once was. I became much more reticent and reserved. I did not want to share my perspectives with anyone because I was afraid it would give people more reason to judge me. I just wanted to chill with my peers and not worry about difference. I did not want to be different any longer. My difference made me stick out like a sore thumb when all I desired to do was chill and fit in.

When it came to academic life, I quickly learned that my best was not good enough. Quite frankly, my best could not get me a D in chemistry. I came into school wanting to be a doctor. That was my lifelong dream. However, when our chemistry professor informed us he would start the semester operating on the assumption that we learned chapters one through five in high school, I knew I was in for trouble. I was lost from day one. However, I was determined to learn what I

did not know and ultimately catch up to my professor's lectures. Lab work was another story. I had never seen half of the materials and gadgets we were using to conduct our experiments. When I asked my lab instructor how to use certain tools or equipment, she would not bother to answer my questions. She often shook her head and told me to "hit the books" and get a personal tutor. I dropped chemistry after failing the numerous quizzes and lab exercises that I tried so hard to pass. I had never tried so hard at something and still failed. I became angry at college for taking my dream away from me—for making me feel incompetent and lazy. I also struggled in my other classes because I did not have the writing skills that my professors expected.

After a while, I stopped caring about my education. I felt so guilty for leaving my family and friends only to enroll in an institution I did not fit into. After a while, I did not want to fit anywhere at this college. I wanted to leave and forget all about my disheartening experiences. If this was what college was really supposed to be like, I wanted nothing to do with it. After my freshman year, I decided I would drop out and get a job to continue to support my family. This decision seemed sensible at the time. I knew I was capable enough to work. I had worked since I was 14 years old. I was tired of putting my all into something that failed me time and time again. College showed me I could not measure up to my professor's expectations even when I gave it my best. It was not my fault that the schools I attended were underfunded and that the math, science, and English curricula were consistently watered down to help more failing students pass state exams. When I arrived at college, I could not think, speak, or write like my peers. Who was I kidding?

At the end of my freshman year, though, I got to know students like me, some of whom came from neighborhoods that were in close proximity to my home. It was refreshing to find people who had experienced many of the same hardships upon arriving at college. It felt good to know that I was not the only one. I was not making things up. By my sophomore year of college there was a group of about ten of us who ate, studied, made *arroz con habichuelas* (rice and beans), watched movies, went bowling and often vented about our experiences at Swarthmore and our struggles to balance our sense of responsibility back home with our academic obligations. This support network helped us to stay focused on the greater goals ahead of us and overcome the difficulties that often demoralized our efforts to succeed. We were destined to make it—no matter what the cost.

The second semester of my freshman year I also took my first education class, where I started learning about students like me who came from inner city areas and attended public schools that lacked essential resources and suffered teacher deficits and administrative support. I also came to know professors who were willing to help me learn how to write and think about concepts that were important to me. When I interacted with these professors, I did not feel dumb or incompetent. A precious handful of professors helped me to understand that my lack of preparation prior to college did not reflect my intellectual capacity and that it was only a matter of time before I would be able to compete confidently at the level of my peers. My professors' drive to help me write, think, and speak college helped me

to embrace the reality that I had the potential to achieve anything so long as I was determined to work hard and keep moving.

The morning I decided to meet Red for the exchange, I could hear my mother reciting the psalms and hymns she loved so much. As hard as I tried, I could not shake off one verse: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil . . . for thou art with me." When all was said and done, I realized I was far more afraid of the consequences of owning a gun than I was of anyone harming my family members. In the hood, violence never ends. I refused to feed the cycle of violence that claims the lives of thousands of children, young people, and adults living in hoods like mine across the United States. I had faith that my family members would be safe and I prayed for their protection every morning and every night. Today, while we live on the same block, in the same apartment, my family is still safe. In one form or another, purchasing a gun would stand in the way of my future. I simply could not let this happen.

There is no question: I will succeed. My success is based in the hearts of myriad friends and family members who continue to live out their hopes and aspirations of a better tomorrow through me. While I do not think I am special, I am loved by many people who believe in me. I cannot fail. I will not fail. There is just too much at stake.