Adventures in Everyday Life

Gregory David Fennell

Faculty Advisor: Margaret Sartor

Center for Documentary Studies

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Abstract

The following project consists of three sections. The first section is an analytical essay which discusses the role of culture in intimate relationships as depicted in literature. Two original, fictional short stories follow the analytical essay. The narrator of these stories has the same cultural background and life experiences as myself. In both stories, the narrator is the same character, though portrayed at different points in his life.

The central question of this project is “What role does culture and cultural difference play when two individuals come together to try to form a long-term intimate relationship?” The analytical essay explores this issue in depth, looking at novels written by Moshin Hamid and Jamaica Kincaid, as well as at my own two short stories. My primary definition of culture comes from Edward Burnett Tylor’s seminal work *Primitive Culture*. Hamid and Kincaid depict relationships that navigate complex social and cultural issues. My short stories are meant to accomplish the same objective.
An Introduction

The following will attempt to explain what this project is and what it is not. The genesis of this project, indeed the very conception, was an experience with one my best friends: Terry. Terry was a young, white, Italian girl with pink hair, black fingernails, and heavy black eyeliner. We attended middle school together and spent countless hours together outside of school. Terry loved me, but it was a filial love—a love between friends.

My relationship with Terry was important for many reasons. It taught me that it is possible for men and women to be friends in the platonic sense. Initially, this made no sense to the 12 and 13-year-old I was because I had no idea why this really attractive girl, so different from myself, would want to be my friend. In my juvenile mind, the only explanation could be that she liked me. It probably took me half a dozen failed attempts to start a physically intimate relationship to finally realize that this was not the case.

It was also my first real attempt to navigate through the muck and mire that comes with a relationship of any kind. To this day I cannot explain what made us so close. This is when I started writing about relationships. I was not writing complete stories at this point. I started writing to make sense of what was happening in my life.

The actual beginning of my project started six years after that, when I was a young bachelor in Boston. I began to write as I witnessed my best friend and roommate go through a two and a half month depression. I pitched to him the idea of writing a book together. I told my roommate that he needed to write his story, and doing so would help him cope. After a lot of pushing and prodding, I eventually gave up asking him. I decided to do the writing myself.

Fennell
What is it about emotional pain that propels humans to their greatest achievements, and why does it fuel the creative process? Human perceptions tend to be shaped more by our losses than our gains. The scars we bear, both physical and emotional, serve as better educators than any successes we experience.

How does pain affect, shape, and influence how we interact with people? As a friend it was painful to watch my roommate suffer depression after losing a woman he loved. Similar emotional pain has been the byproduct of many failed relationships I have experienced in my own life. It was this pain, however, that eventually taught me how to write and how to love.

I wish I could say that this was a happy project, full of stories with happy endings. This is not that kind of project. This work is also not an attempt to copy or replicate anything that has come before it. While the stories are about painful experiences, they are also about love. Junot Diaz is a brilliant writer. I hope this project is not compared to *This is How You Lose Her*, or other similar short story compilations, because my stories are something different and meant to stand on their own. My stories are about a boy who left home at the age of 13, and had to figure out the concept of love (through trial and error) on his own. And he made some huge mistakes along the way.

That same boy met a number of extraordinary women. Each and every one had an impact on his life, either minute or profound. Yes, my stories are about exploring different kinds of love, and the phases love can go through—from healthy to unhealthy. It is also about the pain involved in recognizing and knowing the difference. But in the end the relationships are what matter most.
Interpreting the World

Art, in its various permutations, helps us make sense of the world we live in. We write or read novels, plays and poetry to gain insight into the human experience; we take or view photographs to capture or visualize a specific moment in time or history; and we dance to outwardly express an inward conviction. Art becomes a way for us to express our personal experiences in this world. Art also allows us access to a perspective different from our own.

Science, like art, helps us makes sense our world, and the entire universe. However, science (unlike art) uses a very precise methodology to achieve this goal. A question, or hypothesis, is posed and tested. Empirical data, generated from testing the hypothesis, leads the scientist to a conclusion. While the scientific method produces data and statistics that can be studied, the scientist’s conclusion is often still an “educated guess.” Sometimes the data leads the scientist to the place she intended to go. Other times the data takes the scientist in a completely different direction than she anticipated.

The work of the scientist is to present evidence about how the world works, and interpret what that evidence means. Even after the interpretations are complete and conclusions are reached, the scientist still contends with her colleagues. They may agree or disagree with her interpretation. If the evidence presented is noteworthy, if it reveals something the scientific community is interested in, then it can be incorporated into the work of other scientists.
Both scientist and artist are looking to gain insight—to understand how the world works. However, the artistic process differs greatly from the scientific method. The artist attempts to capture or copy her perspective of the world and recreate it for her audience. This process of creating art leads the artist to a deeper understanding of her experiences. This is particularly true of a writer, who makes sense of life through the process of writing about it.

What my own writing attempts to capture and recreate—in other words, what is at stake for me in my own writing—are intimate relationships. More specifically, my stories address culture and cultural differences between two individuals as they establish a long-term intimate relationship. They explore and examine the impact of cultural differences within and on the relationship.

**Culture Defined**

Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, toward the end of the nineteenth century, aspired to drastically change and completely innovate an entire field of study. As the author of the two volume work *Primitive Culture and Anthropology*, he is considered by many to be the founding figure of social anthropology. Tylor, in a sense, sought to combine art and science. Prior to his work, science consisted of things done in a laboratory. Tylor took a social construct and placed it in the scientific realm.

Tylor believed there is a universal functional basis for the development of society and religion. He also believed that all cultures developed in the same manner, using the same step-by-step method. The scope of Tylor’s book is broad, and most of it will not be discussed in this
Tylor offers his definition of culture on the very first page of Primitive Culture and Anthropology. He states, “Culture of Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” For the purposes of this essay, there are a few key things to note about this definition, and they come at the end of this quotation. The key parts of the definition are “acquired,” and “society,” and not the list of terms in the beginning of the quotation. The things that define a person’s culture are not inherent, but “acquired.” The things that define culture do not happen in a vacuum, but occur within a “society.” While it is important not to forget the specific list at the beginning of Tylor’s definition, the two terms found at the end of the quote will be my focus.

Culture and Intimacy

My project is an examination of the impact of cultural differences on intimate relationships, and it consists of two distinct parts: 1) two of my own short stories and 2) this introductory essay. The short stories I have written depict the same narrator, a young, African-American male, at two different points in his life, as struggles to form an intimate relationship with a woman from a very different cultural background. By “intimate,” in this context, I am referring both to the emotional closeness of the individuals involved and to the presence of a sexual relationship. In each of the stories, the relationship in which he is involved is heavily affected by culture. This essay will examine how this situation, a clash of cultures within
intimate relationships, is depicted by myself and other writers. In an effort to accomplish my aims as I writer, to capture and recreate this complex situation, I look to other successful authors who have depicted the impact that culture plays in intimate relationships as portrayed in their stories. I am interested in the following question: What techniques do the authors employ to portray the differences in culture to the reader?

Hamid and Kincaid

Two works of literature in which the protagonist navigates complex cultural dynamics are *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, by Moshin Hamid, and *Annie John*, by Jamaica Kincaid. These novels are each written from a very specific cultural perspective, largely unknown to those who did not grow up in them. *Annie John* centers on a young girl growing up on the Caribbean island of Antigua. Hamid’s protagonist grows up in Pakistan, attends college in America, and returns to Pakistan.

Both Hamid and Kincaid portray a protagonist involved in an intimate relationship with someone from a very different cultural background. The narrator in each of my short stories also enters into intimate relationships with women from very different backgrounds and cultures than his own. In both stories, the relationship between the narrator and the woman he is involved with fails. Similarly, Hamid’s protagonist in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* is ultimately unsuccessful in his relationship. In *Annie John* an intimate relationship ends as well, though I would not classify it as failure. I will assert that culture plays a huge factor in the failure and end of all four relationships.
I now return to Tylor’s definition of culture. Tylor’s definition is important because he was one of the first to try to define what encompasses the word “culture.” Tylor’s definition works well, an impressive feat since it is one of the first, but it does not take certain things into account.

Tylor, in trying to define culture, is speaking in “wide ethnographic” terms. Essentially he is attempting to apply a scientific method to human understanding of how cultures develop. In order to accomplish this, Tylor had to use broad generalizations. He also compares underdeveloped or “primitive” cultures to others that are more “advanced”—ethnocentric labels that would be rejected by the scientific community today. However, there are some useful elements found in Tylor’s definition.

One crucial element that is missing from Tylor’s definition of culture is geography. Tylor speaks in the abstract. It can be deduced that the “society” present in the definition is located somewhere geographically on the earth’s surface. Tylor’s aim was to demonstrate and define the process of “civilization” and he believed that the process was the same despite location. For his purposes geography had to be eliminated from the equation. However ambitious Tylor’s aim, excluding geography from his definition weakened his argument.

It is difficult and problematic to define the term culture without including geography. It is my experience that geography plays a huge role in the culture a person acquires. The young, male narrator of my stories was born in and lives in America. There is no doubt that there is an American culture with which all Americans identify. However, the narrator in my stories was born and raised in the northeast portion of the United States. The narrator’s background is very different from that of his intimate partner Maria, who grew up in southern California. Although
both Maria and the narrator are American, and have an American frame of reference, they hail from two drastically different cultural backgrounds. Geography ends up playing a large role in the cultural differences.

Tylor’s definition falls short when he equates culture to civilization. His definition rests on the premise that all societies develop in the same way, as they progress from savage to civilized (Logan, Branch, 1). In fact Tylor never uses the plural form of culture, and ignores the role geography plays in the development of culture. Tylor’s definition does not recognize that culture develops differently in different parts of the world.

Despite this shortcoming, Tylor’s definition is still a good place to start. He starts with a list. Culture is, “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom,” (1). The items in this list provide a basis for describing and understanding the culture with which a person identifies.

Tylor goes on to state, “and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society,” and does not limit his definition of the aforementioned list (1). These “capabilities” and “habits” allow for unlimited expansion of Tylor’s list. Items that do not necessarily fall under or completely align with the proscribed list might include a profession/occupation (knowledge in conjunction with a skill or physical ability) or a duty/service (such as jury duty or compulsory military service). These things, one could assert, could fall under the category of “capabilities.”

The items listed in Tylor’s definition and the capabilities and habits that follow are “acquired by man as a member of society,” (1). As I stated previously, this part of Tylor’s definition is most important. The “complex whole” that Tylor is referring to is not God-given;
these things are not coded into our DNA. The items in the list (including the capabilities and habits) are “acquired” in “society.” Knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities or habits are always learned from other members of the society.

Why is culture important? The answer to this question is obvious. Culture helps people identify who they are. Even though the last sentence is clear and concise, it underscores the role that culture plays in any individual’s life.

Applying Tylor’s list to the narrators of my short stories, a cultural profile can be developed. My stories portray the same narrator at different points in his life, with a few years separating the two stories. The narrator is a product of the primary and secondary public education system of New York State and Massachusetts (knowledge). He was raised in a devout Christian home and his father and uncle served in a branch of the U.S. Military (belief). The narrator had access to art and theater found in New York City at a young age (art). The narrator’s ethical and moral code stem from the Christian bible, church doctrine, and his exposure to a military environment (morals). Finally, he is subject to the laws of the American justice system (law).

Tylor’s definition allows a generic profile to be generated for the narrator. A trained psychologist or psychiatrist would be able to take the information given above and extrapolate a general picture of the narrator’s mental state and abilities. It may even be possible to predict what the narrator would do in certain situations or scenarios. However, this general profile falls short in capturing who the narrator of my short stories is.

There are two key elements missing from this general profile. The first is race, something that was left out (intentionally I believe) of Tylor’s definition. The other element
that is missing is experience. It is important to indicate what I mean by experience. Experience, or more specifically in this instance life experience, are things that happen to individuals. Experience can be, and often is, classified as knowledge. Knowledge can be gained by what an individual experiences. However, life experiences are outside forces or stimuli acting upon an individual.

It is very peculiar that Tylor does not mention race in his Primitive Culture. Peter Melville Logan, professor of English at Temple University, points this out in “On Culture: Edward B. Tylor’s Primitive Culture, 1871.” He states

In his view, culture is synonymous with civilization, rather than something particular to unique societies, and, so, his definition refers to “Culture or civilization.” In part, his universalist view stemmed from his Quaker upbringing, which upheld the value of a universal humanity, and indeed Tylor’s refusal to accept the concept of race as scientifically significant in the study of culture was unusual in Victorian science. (Logan, 1)

Logan mentions that Tylor was creating a “universal” view, which I have pointed out earlier in this essay. This universal view could not include something as specific as race. If Tylor were to make a distinction for race, then it would imply that there is more than one “culture.” Tylor set out to prove that all civilizations progressed in the same way. Including the idea of race into that equation would have undercut his entire argument.

It is interesting to note that nineteenth century Victorian England was a much racialized place. The fields (I use the term very loosely here) of Phrenology and Teleology (which is the study of design in nature) designated white Europeans as the superior race. The budding field of anthropology was not immune to racial discourse, as Matthew Arnold, a contemporary of Tylor, frames his definition of culture on race and the racial superiority of white Europeans.
Race has been deeply imbedded into American culture since the first African arrived in Virginia in 1619. Prior to independence, America was a British Colony. Colonial England practiced slavery, as most imperial countries did during the late eighteenth century. When America was recognized as a sovereign country in 1783, the country quickly divided into the free north and the slave south. As the majority of slaves were imported from African countries, race came to identify whether a person was free or not.

This divide did not disappear after Emancipation and the end of the Civil War. The American South, dependent on the growth of cotton, implemented Jim Crow laws. These laws called for “separate but equal” facilities for black and white Americans. The black facilities were rarely equal, and these laws continued in force until 1965, one hundred years after the emancipation proclamation.

While overt forms of racism are less common in America, a deep social divide still exists. Discrimination and prejudice permeate all aspects of life in America. African-Americans still suffer prejudice and institutional racism in employment, education, lending, and housing.

How do people from other cultures experience and deal with race and American racism? We can look to literature to provide some answers. Moshin Hamid’s protagonist Changez, in his novel The Reluctant Fundamentalist, has to deal with American racism in the wake of 9/11. Changez is a Pakistani immigrant who is on the fast track to becoming a successful American. He attends Princeton University, and upon arrival declares “This is a dream come true” (Hamid 3). Changez graduates from Princeton summa cum laude, and moves on to a position at Underwood Samson. Changez falls in love with New York City as he begins his work as an analyst for the powerful consultancy firm. Everything seems to be falling into place for him.
Changez also meets Erica, a wealthy New Yorker, and is immediately taken with her. The two meet in Greece while on holiday, and Changez, “could not prevent myself from offering to carry her backpack—so stunningly regal was she,” (Hamid 17). The relationship that develops between Changez and Erica reflects the relationship that Changez has with America.

The relationship between Erica and Changez never fully develops. Changez meets Erica as she is recovering from the death of her fiancée Chris. It seems as if Chris has a hold over Erica from the grave, and her physical state worsens as the novel progresses. Despite her attachment to a dead fiancée, Changez cannot help but fall in love with her.

Changez’s love for Erica is an attempt to for him to fully integrate into American society. He is a Princeton graduate, has a job at a powerful firm, and he lives in one of the most expensive cities in the country. All that is missing is a marriage to a beautiful American woman.

However, despite his desire to assimilate, Changez never feels secure with Erica. Erica does have some feelings for Changez, as they do spend time together and she invites him to her home to meet her parents. Despite these things, Changez love remains unrequited. In fact in the only moment in the novel which the two are physically intimate, Erica has to imagine that Changez is Chris.

Changez is not embraced by Erica, the same way that he is not embraced by America. Erica’s rejection of Changez’s identity is similar to the rejection of all Muslims in America after the events of 9/11. Despite the Princeton pedigree and the powerful position at Underwood Samson, Changez is unable to become a full-fledged American.

There are two important things to note about this situation. The first is the role that culture (you could substitute culture for race in this instance) plays in Changez’s relationship.
Changez has accomplished a lot by the time he meets Erica. He has already graduated from one of the most prestigious universities in America with honors. Changez has also secured his position at Underwood Samson, and spends his bonus on the vacation where he and Erica meet. However, she is unable to accept Changez.

Moshin Hamid does not directly assert that race or culture play a role in the difficulty between Erica and Changez, but he does allude to it. Erica is still reeling from the loss of Chris, just as America is reeling from the events of 9/11. Attitudes shift toward Muslims in America after the fall of the World Trade Centers. Changez is not immune to this shift, as he is detained at the airport, “being of a suspect race I was quarantined and subjected to additional inspection,” (157). Changez is even called a “Fucking Arab” while approaching his rental car at a cable company (117). The tragic events of 9/11, and the radical shift in racial attitude by Americans toward Middle Eastern cultures, reflect the tragic loss of Erica’s fiancée. Culture plays a role in how New Yorkers view Changez after 9/11. Similarly, Erica never fully accepts Changez as one of her own.

The only way in which Changez can be accepted is by giving up his identity. This takes us back to the scene where Erica and Changez are intimate. Sensing that Erica was not fully engaged in the moment, Changez asks if she’s thinking about Chris. Erica nods yes in reply. Changez says, “‘Then pretend,’ I said, ‘pretend I am him,’” (Hamid 105). Changez literally has to become someone else, someone he is not, in order for Erica to accept him. Changez has to disassociate with the cultural things from his country that define him (customs, moral, beliefs, religion, and laws) and “assimilate” by assuming an American persona.

Franz Fanon, renowned psychiatrist and African intellectual, discusses issues of identity
in his work *Black Skin, White Masks*. On page fourteen of the introduction, Fanon states the following, “Another fact: some Blacks want to prove at all costs to the Whites the wealth of the black man’s intellect and equal intelligence,” (Fanon XIV). Changez engaged in activities to “prove at all costs” that he belonged in America. He does not fully disclose his family’s background and social standing. Changez explains to his unnamed companion that he, “conducted myself in public like a young prince, generous and carefree.” But he also “held down three on-campus jobs—in infrequently visited locations ...” (Hamid 11). Changez wanted others to see the public persona that he created. This persona was a version of himself, but it did not line up with the private facts. Changez’s family were once high society of Pakistan, but no longer held that distinction.

Changez went to great lengths to maintain this public persona. He goes on to remark that, “Most people I met were taken in by my public persona,” (11). None of his classmates could see through the façade that Changez presented. Changez alters his identity in an effort to fit in. He wants to prove at all cost that he belongs, and works three jobs to do so. Changez is able to deceive most of the people around him. The only person to see through his public image is someone that had a similar path: Changez’s boss Jim.

Changez loss of identity culminates when he tells Erica to pretend that he is Chris. This is something that he almost immediately regrets. “I felt at once both satiated and ashamed ... Perhaps by taking on the persona of another, I had diminished myself in my own eyes, “(106). Even though Changez went to the extreme to be intimate with Erica, he did not completely lose his identity. Changez realized that he will never fully be accepted by the woman he loves, in the
same way that he will never be accepted by America. Instead of remaining in a place where he is not wanted nor accepted, Changez returns home to his native land and culture.

It is important to point out that Changez chooses to return home. Feeling unwanted and out of place, Changez returns somewhere that is familiar. Changez goes home where he understands the beliefs, morals, customs, art, religion, and habits of the people that live there. Changez chooses to return to a culture that he understands.

Franz Fanon discusses what happens to Changez in the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks*. He outlines his purpose in the introduction.

The fifth chapter, which I have called “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” is important for more than one reason. It shows the black man confronted with his race ... In this chapter, on the contrary, we are witness to the desperate efforts of a black man striving desperately to discover the meaning of black identity. White civilization and European culture have imposed an existential deviation on the black man ... The educated black man ... feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him. Or that he no longer understands his race. He is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord, he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. (XVIII)

I quote this passage at length because it illustrates the process that Changez goes through in Hamid’s novel. Changez is confronted with his “race” (or more likely his cultural differences) after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Instead of continuing to distance himself from his countrymen, Changez chooses to rejoin them. As Fanon points out, this is the less common option.

Hamid does a masterful job of depicting this inevitable “confrontation” of race and culture. Hamid sets it up from the very beginning with the names that he chooses for his characters. Changez is the Urdu equivalent of Genghis. *America* contains the name of Changez’s love interest. The fact that Erica cannot get over Chris is also important. Hamid
associates Erica’s nostalgia with Chris with America’s nostalgia for Christianity. Changez’s confrontation was inevitable, because a warrior has to have a war to fight. His war with America begins after the events of 9/11.

Another novel in which culture plays a huge role in the intimate relationships depicted is Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*. Often classified as a classic Bildungsroman tale, *Annie John* illustrates the cultural and colonial issues present in the Caribbean. The story takes place on the island of Antigua, and chronicles Annie’s struggle to gain independence.

It is almost impossible to separate race from culture in the depiction of Antigua in *Annie John*. H. Adlai Murdoch, Professor of Francophone Studies and the Director of Africana Studies at Tufts University, discusses the bond between race and society and places it in historical context. In his article “Severing the Mother Connection: The Representation of Cultural Identity in Jamaica Kincaid’s *Annie John*” Murdoch states, “The islands of the Eastern Caribbean, most of which are former slave colonies of Great Britain, are made up of remnants of slave societies, and thus always have had populations that are mainly black in most cases, but which are quite mixed in some others” (Murdoch 326). The end of Murdoch’s statement is important. *Annie John* is set in Antigua, which retained a black majority of former slaves. Dominica, the island where Annie’s mother was born, has a richer mix of race and culture.

Kincaid uses the relationship of the protagonist with her mother to depict cultural differences in the Caribbean. The difference of race and culture are present in the difference between mother and daughter. Antigua was under British possession (more or less) from the beginning of colonization in 1632. Dominica on the other hand, where Annie’s mother is from,
was exposed to extended French influence and a subsequent Anglophone and francophone biculturalism.

Kincaid does a skillful job of depicting the cultural difference through Annie’s relationship with her mother. The mother-daughter relationship also shows the importance of race in society and cultural identity. As Murdoch explains, “The legacies of such colonial domination inhere in the persistence of cultural differences within the island chain, differences whose most immediate result has been to perpetuate perceptions of intra-regional insularity, especially in the domains of language and racial appearance as markers of cultural identity” (Murdoch 327). Race becomes a way to identify with one’s culture. Race is one way that Annie identifies with her society, her culture. It is also what she uses to differentiate her mother from herself and that same society.

Race, culture, an insular location, and a history of colonialism play a role in Annie’s development and growth. These things also factor into her intimate relationships. The historical context of colonialism cannot be ignored, as Annie rejects this system and engages in small acts of rebellion. These acts of rebellion include the person she chooses to be intimate with.

Instead of choosing the established Victorian model of a heterosexual relationship, Annie chooses a different path. Annie chooses to express her sexual desire within her gender, and act in opposition to the colonial system. This is represented by her relationship with Gwen and, to a lesser extent, the Red Girl.

*Annie John* is a classic bildungsroman tale. It is important to remember that the protagonist of the story is a child trying to find her place in the world. Annie’s intimate
relationship cannot be extricated from this context. I mentioned earlier in this essay my definition of intimate relationships includes the presence of sexual relations. The definition does need to be qualified in the case of *Annie John*. While there is no direct mention of overt sexual acts, I stand by the inclusion of Annie’s intimate relationships in my definition.

Annie becomes involved with Gwen shortly after a drastic change in the relationship with her mother. Annie’s mother’s attitude toward Annie shifted as Annie matured, and was “launched into young-ladyness” (Kincaid 45). Her mother’s demeanor transitions from caring, compassionate, and considerate to distant, rigid, and unsympathetic. Annie meets Gwen at this time, when she no longer held her mother’s affections.

Despite Annie’s emotionally vulnerable state, there is little doubt that she falls in love with Gwen. Annie admits it when describing herself and Gwen walking to school together.

As we walked together, we told each other things we had judged most private and secret: things we had overheard our parents say, dreams we had had the night before, the things we were really afraid of; but especially we told of our love for each other. (Kincaid 48)

It is clear that Annie loves Gwen. The two young ladies become inseparable and share all of their most intimate secrets. The relationship between Gwen and Annie is not just a friendship. Annie finds a soulmate in Gwen.

Annie becomes a very popular girl in school shortly after she meets Gwen. Annie was very shy and introverted before she meets her soulmate. This changed rather quickly, as she, “went from being ignored, with hardly a glance from anyone, to having girls vie for my friendship, or at least for more than a passing acquaintanceship,” (Kincaid 48 – 49). Annie and Gwen form a clique that includes six other the girls. This group spends a lot of time in an old cemetery. The girls share and experiment in this special place.
The cemetery is hidden by trees in a nook, which gave the girls privacy. The girls gossip and talk among the tombstones. The girls’ actions are not limited to gossip.

On our minds every day were our breasts and their refusal to budge out of our chests. On hearing somewhere that if a boy rubbed your breasts they would quickly swell up, I passed along the news. Since in the world we occupied and hoped forever to occupy, boys were banished, we had to make do with ourselves. What perfection we found in each other, sitting on these tombstone of long-dead people who had been the masters of our ancestors ... Sometimes when we looked at each other, it was all we could do not to cry out with happiness. (Kincaid 50)

It is clear in the quotation that the girls were exploring the sexual parts of their body. Annie does not explicitly state that the girls rubbed each other’s breasts, but it is clear that is what happened when the girls met in the cemetery.

Even in this most intimate moment, the colonial past cannot be separated from the current events. Kincaid provides a powerful image of these black girls rubbing each other on the “tombstones of long-dead people” who were “the masters of our ancestors.” I stated before that Annie engages in acts of defiance of the colonial Anglophone system. Sexual experimentation with another girl (Gwen in this instance) on the burial ground of dead slave owners is just one of the many examples of Annie’s defiance. Perhaps, it is the most powerful one in Annie John.

Annie goes on to make it explicitly clear who she loves. In the very next paragraph after the last quoted passage, Annie states “My own special happiness was, of course, with Gwen,” (Kincaid 50). Combining this quote with the last affirms that Annie’s relationship with Gwen does fit the definition that I proposed earlier in this essay. Annie does engage in an intimate relationship with Gwen, and it does include a sexual encounter.
Annie also indicates that she wants to spend her life with Gwen. Even though she is very young and naïve, her desire to be with Gwen should not be dismissed as trivial. Annie states, “I said that I could not wait for us to grow up so that we could live in a house of our own. I had already picked out the house. It was a gray one, with many rooms, and it was in the lane where all the houses had high, well-trimmed hedges,” (Kincaid 51). This is a profound statement for a child of nine or ten years of age to make. Annie’s relationship with Gwen is much more than a friendship. It is an intimate relationship, one that Annie desires to be in for the rest of her life.

Unfortunately Gwen is not as defiant and independent as Annie is, and this leads to the end of the intimate portion of their relationship. Unlike Annie, Gwen does not reject the traditional aspects of her life forced upon her by the colonial history of Antigua. As the girls mature, Gwen choses to mold herself in the image of her own mother. Gwen accepts the established social order, and the existing colonial system. Annie realizes this the day the Gwen suggests she marry her brother.

The conversation takes place as Annie and Gwen walk home from school. Annie was recovering from sickness and had not been to school in a long time. As a result, she and Gwen were in different grades now and they were different people. Gwen said to me that her brother Rowan had mentioned how much he liked the way I had conducted myself when I was asked to read the lesson in church one Sunday. She then launched into a long speech about him, and I did what was fast becoming a habit when we were together: I started to daydream ... when suddenly I heard these words come out of Gwen’s mouth: “I think it would be so nice if you married Rowan. Then, you see, that way we could be together always.” (Kincaid 92)
Annie is shocked by Gwen’s statement and does not know how to respond. Gwen mistakes Annie’s shock for acceptance, and responds with pleasure thinking that Annie liked the idea. It is at this moment that Annie realizes that Gwen has changed, and the girl she fell in love with no longer exists.

The colonial imposition on the culture in Antigua plays a huge role in the intimate relationship present in Annie John. Annie’s refusal to accept the existing cultural and societal rules that stem from colonialism makes it difficult for her to maintain a relationship with Gwen. The history of Antigua places additional constraints on the culture found on the island. Kincaid does an exemplary job of illustrating the effect that culture, colonial history, and an insular location have on Annie’s intimate relationship.

Differences in culture are bound to have an effect when any two people try to come together and share the most intimate parts of themselves with someone else. We see this in the relationships found in the novels of Annie John and The Reluctant Fundamentalist. The protagonist in each novel comes from a place very different from America. In my own stories, the protagonist is American, and his culture is representative of that.

The narrator in each of my stories is the same person, at different stages of his life. In the first story that follows this essay, titled The Hard Stuff, the narrator is in a relationship with woman six years his senior from the other side of the country. There are huge cultural differences present in the story. The knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits are not reason why the relationship between the narrator and Maria, the woman he is involved with, does not work out. However, they do have an effect.
Both the narrator and Maria, the woman he is involved with, have very traumatic experiences in their respective pasts. Maria experiences abuse as a child, and she has to deal with her family imploding when her father comes out of the closet. The narrator experiences the loss of a close friend at the age of eight, and growing up in a family with very little money. Add the difference in culture on top of these traumatic experiences and you get a relationship that is destined not to last.

The second story, titled The Last One, has a very different set of cultural differences and implications. In this story the narrator is trying to establish a relationship with a woman from the Caribbean. The Last One shows how cultural differences can indeed destroy a relationship.

The narrator is dating Diana, a woman from St. Kitts, and her entire family. The narrator is a few years older than he is in The Hard Stuff, and is looking to settle down. He asks Diana to marry him, and she agrees.

Diana’s family comes between her and the narrator. Diana is very close to her family, as is the case in most Caribbean cultures, and she is her mother’s primary caregiver. When Diana informs the family of her impending marriage, none of them offer support or congratulations. Instead they choose to make her feel guilty, as they feel she is abandoning her mother and leaving her in Boston to die. Despite all of this Diana is still willing to leave. It is the narrator who calls the wedding off.

In my two stories, as is the case in Annie John and The Reluctant Fundamentalist, culture plays a huge role in the intimate relationships found in each work. Moshin Hamid and Jamaica Kincaid explicitly make culture and cultural difference a large part of their work. Like those two
very successful authors, I want my work to address our understanding and the influence of culture and contribute to an ongoing dialog about the complex issues that are involved.
The Hard Stuff

I got a problem. Shit we all do. I’m talking about something specific though. A problem I’ve had all along—and I never really realized it was a problem. But it wasn’t just me. My parents had problems too.

I did some things when I was young—too young. These things caused some damage, a phrase Maria would use, to the girls I did them with. They never told me it did. I never bothered asked. Fuck em right. I should’ve though. I should’ve asked if what I did, we did, hurt them.

I probably should’ve known better.

She had problems too—and maybe that was why I was drawn to her. Maria’s problem was a lot like mine, but really not like mine at all. I made choices. Maria was forced to do shit she didn’t want to. She told me it hurt. More so because it was done by those close to her. Right from the beginning she hurt like hell.

Look, I gotta be honest. I’m not going to sit here and make excuses. I knew exactly what I was doing, even though I was five my first time. I knew that it was wrong—nasty according to my parents and their friends. I knew it was a sin according to the good book. I was curious, young, male and stupid. So I figured fuck it. Hell can’t be that bad, right?

These things happen in the Big Apple. Things move faster. You grow up quick. You don’t have no choice. Innocence is lost at an early age.
The first time was special. It seems like it was last week even though it was years ago. Long enough to forget why I did it. But I couldn’t forget. I was in my grandmother’s garage, sitting in that black ‘79 Cadillac Deville. My first time was with Amy Hill.

I was five and Amy was eight. Amy was a tall, light-skinned tomboy. Her hair was brown, not black like her sisters. Amy also had an amazing ass, even at eight. It wasn’t too firm or soft. It was just right. Her butt had that nice curve too. It peaked high at the top, and gradually came back around to rejoin her legs. Amy’s ass was so beautiful that she had to cover it up most of the time. Even the old heads would holla at her when she walked by, even though she was eight. Some of these guys were in their forties and fifties. Dirty old men. They knew how old she was. Her ass was that unreal.

Even back then I was fascinated with girl’s asses. I loved the shape. I loved the way they felt in my hands. I loved laying on them.

I know what you’re thinking. How does a five year old get away with this kinda shit? Well most of the asses I touched were on girls much older than me. Some of them would tell me to stop. Most of them laughed it off at first, but still let me touch them. I think these older girls thought it was cute.

Amy was not considered pretty. She was ignored by most boys in South Jamaica, Queens. She was tall for her age, and so fucking clumsy. Amy would trip on things that weren’t there. Amy also got her period when she was eight. I had no idea what that meant back then, but her sisters talked about it constantly. Amy’s face became a mixture of freckles and pimples.
You could only tell the difference between the pimples and the freckles when you were real close. Most guys didn’t bother getting that close.

Her soft, smooth, caramel skin was something all the dark-skinned brothers crave. If Amy didn’t have the pimples and freckles all over her face, all the guys on the block would have been after her. She had that ass and that good complexion—and those piercing blue eyes. It was the eyes that would hook you. Eyes that no boy ignored; eyes that sucked you in. All these things would work out well for Amy later in life. She would never lack the attention of men of any color.

New York was always hot in July. The garage was dark and cool even though it was 90 degrees outside. I call it a garage, because that was where my grandmother kept her car. It was more like a small shack with a sliding front door. My grandmother was the only person on the block that had a garage. Everyone thought she was rich because she had one.

“I know y’all rich, your g-moms got a garage.”

This dumb shit would always make me laugh. That this piece of shit garage never put a meal on the table. Yet we were millionaires because it was there behind my grandmother’s house. This is something that never made any sense to me back then.

The stagnant air in the garage was heavy, and smelled like mold. As Amy and I looked at each, I remember thinking “it’s about to go down.” I had no idea what was going to happen. But I knew something was about to.
A small window provided the only light; enough sunlight for us to see each other. We were both sweating hard. Occasionally a body part would stick to the leather seat.

“Relax, I just want to see it,” Amy said as she took off my shirt my blue and yellow X-Men t-shirt. I remember her breath smelled like peppermint. Even though I was breathing hard I wasn’t nervous. Amy unzipped my blue jeans and pulled down my white, fruit-of-the-loom jeans. She looked for about thirty seconds, pulled up my underwear, and zipped my pants.

“Wow! Yours is small. I’ve seen bigger. But you got some big balls kid!”

Amy was the first. After her, I was off to the races. Nicole was six, Sarah was seven, and Olivia was eight. These three girls also showed me their pussies, and I showed them my dick, even if it was small. I didn’t just look with these girls though. We tried to do all sorts of things. Kissing, groping, rubbing—all the things we saw in the movies that we had to sneak to watch. None of us even had pubes yet. Looking back I realize I was an idiot. If I had known the consequences of what I was doing, I wouldn’t have done shit with those girls. I wonder if what we did scarred them. I wonder if I fucked these girls up for the rest of their lives.

I was too young to understand. But it became real when my sister Lila told my parents that our cousin Digger had forced himself on her. I think I was about eight or nine at the time. That was when it hit me. I remember thinking “did I rape the girls I was messing with?” The word rape became a part of my vocabulary.
I’m pretty sure Maria was raped. She never said the word. Maria may have mentioned it one of the stories she let me read. I know for a fact she was dealt a crappy hand at an early age.

I’m not defending my actions. I was a curious kid trying to be cool. All the guys on the block talked about women, and the things they did with them. My best friend Ronnie, who was two years older, made me smell his fingers that were covered in pussy juice. He was bragging about how he fingered Stacy, this bad Italian chick from Red Hook. I chose to mess with those girls back then. And I never forced them. They were curious too.

Maria was not given a choice. She wasn’t messing around in her grandmother’s garage. Maria was forced to do things—adult things—when she was just a child.

Maria never gave me all the details. She avoided talking about it. When Maria did talk about it, I got bits and pieces of her story. There was never any sequence or order; it was more like random strands of memory. I don’t think Maria was holding back. She was probably telling me only what she remembered. What she had allowed herself to remember. The rest was buried deep. I could see it. I had shit buried deep too.

I asked and asked Maria what happened. I wanted to know. I figured it would help me understand her. I figured I could help her. I wanted to help her. Maria didn’t need my help though. She needed my love. Maria needed to feel secure.

It was so simple, but I didn’t get it back then. Maria needed me to love her.
Maria was close to home the first time something happened. She told me that. The dirtbag that did it was a family member—an uncle or cousin. He took Maria someplace dark and shady; someplace he knew he could get away with it. It was either an underpass or tunnel. Maria was no older than four or five.

Maria told me everything unexpectedly. She was sitting buck naked on the couch in front of me; her gorgeous pussy staring me right in the face. Maria was looking for some comfort and reassurance. She wanted me to tell her everything was going to be ok. But I’m not a liar. At least most of the time I’m not. I couldn’t lie to her. Everything probably wasn’t going to be ok. Maria didn’t want the truth. She wanted reassurance. I get that now.

The rape, assault, or whatever the fuck you want to call it pissed her off. It should have. Maria was a kid. It’s hard to recover from something like that. She never quit being angry about it.

To make matters worse, when Maria became a teenager, her father comes out of the closet. He announces to the world that he’s gay, a homosexual, a fairy. Maria’s mom did not take this well. The family split after that.

Someone had to step up, and that’s what Maria did. It’s not surprising that she did; Maria was like that. Maria was a fighter. You wanted her in the foxhole with you, watching your back. Maria went from being part of a nuclear family to being the head of the household practically overnight. Maria’s life was real fucked up after that.

How would you deal with something like that at that age? Maria’s family just fell apart. No warning; no quarter. Like I said, Maria got angry. She got downright pissed off and
funneled that anger toward something useful—she became fiercely protective of her younger sister. She stayed in Cali long enough to make sure her sister could take care of herself.

In California, there was no one else to rely on. Her sister was too young. When Maria’s family fell apart, she did what she had to. She held it down. I don’t think she got any help.

When her sister was old enough, and her job was done, Maria left. She packed up her stuff and moved to Boston. I think Maria tried to leave her anger, her rage behind—in California where it belonged. I don’t think it worked

It’s amazing the things you forget about when you’re growing up. The mind is crazy. It forces you to forget things. The mind does this in order to protect you. Lately I’ve been remembering a lot of things I forgot.

When I met Maria, I was angry also. We had that in common. I was angry about growing up poor; moving from house to house when I was a boy. My dad left a couple of times when I was young. Mom couldn’t afford a nice place to live with one income. I have no idea if my dad even sent us money back then.

I was nine when my friend Paul was hit by a car as we walked home from school one day. The four of us walked home every day: me, Ronnie, his younger brother Joey, and Paul. We were crossing the last two lanes of a four lane highway. The crossing guard told us to go, thinking everyone would be safe. She didn’t see the cherry red Mustang that was flying down the road in the empty lane closest to us. At first none of us realized the Paul had stopped in the
street to pick up a toy he’d dropped. Next thing I know Ronnie drops everything in his hands and takes off. He was too far away. Even though the driver slammed on the breaks, the car still struck Paul hard enough for him to clear the car and land on the hard pavement behind it. I remember most of his teeth flying out of his mouth while he was airborne.

Ronnie tried to grab him. He was just a second or two too slow. I was glad he didn’t reach Paul in time. Ronnie was my best friend. If he had reached him, there might have been two funerals.

Paul getting killed didn’t piss me off. It made me sad. Paul and I saw each other every day. He lived on the same block, right down the street from my house. What did piss me off is that nothing happened to the woman who killed him. No jail time, no community service, no probation—nothing. Not a damn thing.

The woman who hit Paul was white. Paul wasn’t. Her father was a deputy sheriff, and had deep ties to the police. The defense lawyer was a good friend of the family.

So, I was angry about watching a friend die right in front of me and the woman who hit him walking away scot free. I was angry that my best friend, Ronnie, accidentally killed his mother. I think Ronnie just meant to hurt and scare Vic (his mother’s name was Vicky). Even though he didn’t mean to kill her, Ronnie was sentenced to life in prison.

That wasn’t all I had to be angry about.
I was also angry about my first real relationship falling apart. Pissed at that selfish bitch who stole and sold every single thing I owned so she could move back to Texas. She also fucked my best friend Bob before she left.

I was angry when I quit college, with a 3.0 GPA, because I couldn’t afford it anymore.

I was pissed at God; I blamed him for most of it.

That’s how I was back then. That was the guy Maria met.

So here we both were. The twenty-four year old, black, angry guy from New York. And the thirty year old, white, angry redhead from California. I met Maria in American Literature at UMass. I don’t believe in fate, I believe in God. Maybe God is the ultimate administrator of fate. Hell, I don’t know. Fate, in tragic, Greek sense of the word, brought me and Maria together as Boston grew colder.

It was the first class, and I’m late. I hate being late. And of course the class was packed. I walked in and quickly scanned the room. The only open seat was across the room. I remember making eye contact with Maria. It was an accident, at least on my part. I was conditioned to avoid eye contact at this point. Maria looked at me for about thirty seconds with those beautiful blue eyes—and she smiled. I couldn’t believe it. She actually smiled at me.

Look you don’t understand. Smiling at a complete stranger does not happen in Boston. Boston is a cold city. Boston is notorious for cold weather and even colder people. I didn’t know this when I first moved there, but I’m a quick learner. After enough people told me to
“fuck off,” I stopped making eye contact—with anyone. From that moment I knew Maria was different.

It took the whole semester for me to gather the courage to speak to Maria. She was sharp and witty, and would belittle anyone if they made a stupid comment in class. I was intimidated. I can admit it.

I also wasn’t sure if we would get along. Maria liked those love stories—all that gushy crap. Maria loved *The House of Mirth* and *Pride and Prejudice*. I hated reading those books. Those books just seemed like old, disgruntled spinsters spinning their marriage tales. Hemmingway and O’Hara were my kind of American writers.

But there was something about Maria. Something that drew me to her. I can’t remember if it was her Cali swag or her keen intellect. I knew she was older than me. I couldn’t tell how much older she was. I didn’t care. Maria was the first girl I had ever met that was smarter than me. Bottom line: Maria was a challenge. And I liked a challenge back in those days. I reveled in it. I wanted to prove I was up to the task. Now, I just want shit to be simple.

I was standing outside of Warner Hall, between the two red, brick columns in front of the entrance. I spotted Maria approaching as I smoked a Newport. We made eye contact again. No smile this time; just a nonchalant grin.
“You know you don’t have to take the final if you don’t want to,” I said as I blew out the smoke in my lungs. It was so cold, I couldn’t tell the difference between the smoke and the moisture from my warm breath as it hit the cold air.

“What are you talking about?” Maria asked as she walked over to me. She was still grinning.

“Professor O’Connor is sick and couldn’t make it. His TA is up there with the final exams, but since he’s not here he gave the class an option.”

“An option? Not to take the final?” Maria was confused.

“Yeah, you can either take the final or not take the final and he will average the grades of your first two papers. That average will be your grade for the final exam,” I explained.

“Well I got A’s on my first two papers,” Maria said as she pulled out a pack of Marlboro lights from her pocket.

“Oh yeah? Me too.”

I lit the silver Zippo in my hand. Maria stepped closer and placed both of her hands on my wrists. This is the closest we had ever been. I remember her hands were soft and they felt warm in the arctic, Boston air. Maria was inches away from me, and I could smell her. She smelled great; her shampoo, perfume, or whatever it was gave off a light hint of apricot. Maria’s cigarette finally lit and she inhaled long and deep. Maria looked directly at me for a few seconds.

“So have you ever been to Bukowski’s?” she asked.
“Bukowski’s? The bar in Back Bay?” I asked

“That’s the one.”

I remember the first time I went to Maria’s place. She lived in Somerville, right outside of Davis Square. It was not too far from my place in Malden if I had a car. Public transportation made it a pain in the ass to get there. I could wait in frigid winter weather for a bus that might show up, and get there in fifteen minutes. Or I could take the Orange line all the way into town, and then catch the Red Line back out. This option was about forty-five minutes one way. I usually chose the warmth of the T.

Maria met me at the Davis Square T stop. She had all the winter accessories: hat, gloves and scarf. Maria’s eyes glistened in the brisk air. Maria told me she found the place online as we walked back to her apartment. It was her first spot away from Cali. Maria settled terms and packed up all her stuff for the cross-country trek. Two months later she was in Somerville. I think that Maria’s apartment in Somerville was a haven for her—a safe place away from all the bad shit in California.

Maria’s room was on the second floor, past the kitchen and up a narrow set of stairs. Her room was bigger than any room I had lived in. It was a decent size, possibly twelve by fifteen feet. But there was so much stuff. The room was filled with everything Maria owned.

There were two rows of boxes, stacked at least four feet high, in the far corner of the room. Maria had two dressers that were filled to the brim. Some of her clothes were falling
out of the drawers. That didn’t include all the clothes hung up neatly in her closet. The worn, brown loveseat, which faced Maria’s queen size bed, at some point may have been a shade of red. And I cannot forget the lamps. Maria had lamps everywhere. There were six lamps in the room: two floor lamps, three desk lamps, and the lamp on the nightstand. Maria liked a lot of light in her room.

I never felt cramped in Maria’s room, despite all the stuff in it. I usually get antsy when I’m in tight places and I feel my movement is restricted. I don’t have a nervous tick, or tap my foot or hands repeatedly—no stupid crap like that. When I feel restricted, my shoulders tense up. I have to constantly remind myself to relax my shoulders, or they’ll start to hurt. I kept expecting it to happen, there in Maria’s room. But it didn’t. In Maria’s room I was comfortable.

Only one of the lamps was on. We both sat on the floor facing each other. The only space available was next to her bed. We were within arm’s reach of each other. Maria smelled like raspberries that night. We were listening to some music she had picked. I was relaxed. Actually it kinda felt intimate.

Maria sat with her legs crossed. I tried to do the same, but my legs fell asleep. She was dressed in all black. Her red hair was dyed brown, but her copper colored roots were showing. The black tank top exposed a Chinese glyph tattoo on Maria’s right shoulder, which increased her hotness factor by half a point. I won’t explain what this means, or my scale right now. It would take too much time. The point is that tattoo looked great on her. I really wanted to touch it—and touch her.

“Who are we listening to?” I asked
“Coldplay. A Rush of Blood to the Head,” Maria replied

“It’s pretty good,” I said.

“Well considering it’s been out for a year... You don’t listen to a lot of music outside of hip-hop or R & B do you?” Maria asked.

“Of course I do,” I replied.

“Sure you do.”

A few months later I helped Maria move from Somerville to a studio apartment in Brighton. I borrowed a cab and trailer box truck from my roommate Scott, who was the shop foreman at a shipping company. The apartment was small, and really nice. A lot nicer than her old place. And it came with a large price tag too.

“How much is your rent Maria?” I asked as I stood on the curb in front of her old apartment.

“It’s a little less than a thousand,” she replied nonchalantly.

“What! You’re paying a g for a studio?” I asked amazed.

“Well yeah, it’s in Brighton and it’s pretty big.”

I was in shock for a few more minutes. I couldn’t wrap my head around paying that much for a studio, regardless of how nice it is. I don’t think it was the price tag that shocked me. Brighton is a rich suburb. I didn’t think that Maria could afford to pay a thousand a month.
I knew I couldn’t afford that. Apparently Maria made a lot more money than I did, even though we worked for the same damn company.

“Damn Rick, you told me you were going to get a truck. We can probably do this in one trip.”

“I told you I was going to help you move. I meant it,” I replied

“You weren’t lying.”

Maria said that this was the one thing I did that she remembers. It’s the only instance she remembers me putting her first. She didn’t come out and say it. In fact, Maria didn’t say it at all. I wasn’t important enough to get a chapter in her own story. Helping her move got me one fucking paragraph.

I think of it this way: Our relationship was not destined, not ordained to last. Maria and I were at opposite ends of the spectrum of sexual exploitations. Maria was abused; I abused others.

Quite simply, the way I see it now, I was a predator. These girls I messed with as a child; I knew they were vulnerable. I preyed on them. Two of them (Sarah and Olivia) were in big families, none of them were very social, and all of them were curious. All three were that slow or sick Zebra at the back of the herd that the lion pounces on. They were easy targets—and somehow I knew that.
I won’t go so as far to say I stalked them. It wasn’t like that. I didn’t force them to do anything they weren’t already thinking about. However, even at that young age, I was intentionally isolating the outcasts.

Nicole, well, she lived one block over from my house. Both of her parents worked long hours. Her babysitter was a piece of shit. If Nicole was dying, her babysitter probably wouldn’t even have dialed 911. Nicole was basically unsupervised, and could get away with murder when her sitter was there. This gave us all the opportunity we needed. We would “make out,” licking and kissing each other. I would have Nicole pull up her shirt up, even though I knew she had no titties.

I have no idea why she agreed to do any of this crap. I would love to ask her. What we did was funny as shit looking back on it now. We were trying to imitate what we saw on The Young and the Restless, The Bold and the Beautiful, or some of the other corny soap operas my mom used to watch. At the time I imagined I was being romantic. It looked romantic on TV.

Things went a little further with Sarah. Sarah was one of either nine or ten kids, and six of them were girls. She was also backseat Amy’s younger sister. You know, the girl that told me I had big balls. We both got naked in front of each other. I looked at her hairless, innocent vagina feeling both awestruck and terrified—because I was supposed to put my penis inside of it. I’m sure Sarah observed my penis with similar feelings. We stared but we didn’t lick each other’s privates, nor stick anything anywhere it wasn’t (or was) supposed to go. I think I was too scared to go any further. I speculate but only God knows what she really felt.
Sarah was the last girl I messed with before puberty—when I was supposed to know what I was doing. As an eight year old, I knew the way things were supposed to work. My best friend Donnie, who was two years older than me, had explained in detail exactly what I was supposed to do.

I was supposed to “do it” with Sarah. But what I did with Sarah scared the shit out of me. Scared me enough to make me stop. The guilt didn’t go away either.

Years later I found out that both my parents struggled with similar issues as young adults. By issues, I mean sex. They did not experiment as early as I did, but then they were part of a different generation. And it seems that as time passes, kids start doing things earlier and earlier.

My dad and I had one conversation about women—ever. I was around fifteen or sixteen and was home from boarding school for the summer. I accidentally walked into the bathroom while Dad was getting out of the shower. Needless to say it was an awkward moment. After he dressed he came to my room, which was in the basement of our house. Yes, I had the basement to myself and it was awesome. That day my dad confessed to me that he struggled with the idea of being faithful early in his marriage to my mom. I told him that I thought every man did that; the struggle was a normal part of most relationships for men. I’m still of the opinion that monogamy is contrary to human nature because we really are just animals with higher cognitive functions.
My mom, on the other hand, says addiction to weed and alcohol contributed to her promiscuity (that is her word, I just call it sleeping around). When she was young my mom was an A-type personality—a lot like Maria. She also suffered from abuse early in life. Although Mom’s abuse was physical not sexual. When I was growing up, Mom would often tell me stories of how Grandpa Mack would come home and beat up her mother, brothers, and her. My grandpa was fond of sticking a nickel-plated .38 revolver in her mouth, while reeking of alcohol, and pulling the trigger. I guess playing Russian roulette with his own life did not appeal to Grandpa.

As you can imagine, this made my mom an angry girl. The drugs and sex were her way to act out, get free, and assert herself. It also kept her out of the house and away from Grandpa Mack. The anger also helped my mom focus; she was determined to get what she wanted—at least she was then. What she wanted was to have a good time.

Mom told me that it was Jesus who delivered her—he literally saved her life. Mom brought all of this up with me when I was nineteen because she did not approve of the choices I was making at that time. I was back living under her roof for the first time since I was thirteen and I wasn’t about to let her tell me what to do. Mom tried to subject me to her Rules of the House. She wanted me home at midnight when I was used to heading home at 2 am. Mom imposed the same church going schedule on me that I was forced to abide for the first thirteen years of my life. What she didn’t realize was that I was not a kid anymore. I’d rather be damned then let her tell me what to do.
After being home for three months, I moved in with Holly. Holly, the selfish bitch who sold everything I owned to move back to Texas. Ok, so mom happened to be right about this one (everyone gets lucky at least once). I considered myself a grown man. I appreciated her effort, but Jesus’s salvation was not a viable solution for me at the time. Like Mom was when she was nineteen, I was angry too. I was focused and determined. I was too busy having a good time.

Let me get back to Maria.

Maria and I were drawn to each other. The black angry kid was dating the angry redhead from California. Moth to the flame. Or was it flame to moth? Anyway, there were other similarities besides the anger. Maria was unbelievably reliable. If she said she was going to be there; she was there. If Maria was not going to make it, she would let you know beforehand. I’m the same way— and that why Maria stayed and let it play out. She wouldn’t have stayed if I wasn’t someone she could count on.

Maria was prompt. Like me, she hated being late. I valued time, mainly because I did not have a lot of it. I worked two jobs while going to school as an undergrad. Time was a luxury, and I treated it as such. Maria felt the same way.

But there was the too-young-for-sex thing.
I knew Maria was interested in me after the night at Bukowski’s. Once I knew that, I pursued her. She was the prey and I was the predator. I’m thinking this is what drew us together; the unacknowledged origin of our raw, magnetic chemistry.

Still two angry people in a relationship doesn’t work. Maria was more focused and determined than ever I was—something I had not seen from any woman before her. And she was a boss! I mean that in the most literal sense. Maria ran shit; she got shit done. Maria worked a full time, took night classes, and was dating me. She made it look easy.

Once Maria was locked in on something she wanted, she was like a missile. She rarely missed her target. And she obliterated whatever the target was.

Our relationship quickly became a struggle for supremacy, like the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War—or two planets trying to inhabit the same orbit. Maria was used to dominating the men she dated. I was not one to be dominated.

There were plenty of other things that added stress to our relationship. When Maria moved to Brighton, my commute to her house was long. It took about one and a half hours to get to her place. Sometimes it took two.

Maria had a car, and she offered to let me drive it. What she didn’t know was that I had an issue with a prior roommate’s car. My former roommate accused me of stealing his car, when all I did was move it over one parking space. This made me a little gunshy about borrowing her’s—especially if something happened. I could not afford repairs if her car got damaged while I was behind the wheel. I couldn’t afford much of anything in those days.
The main problem was control. I yielded a lot of control to Maria, but occasionally the New York would spring up inside me. Occasionally I would get that “fuck you” attitude, and not cooperate with whatever it was Maria wanted to do. I had not yet mastered the shift between Alpha Male and Beta Boyfriend. And there was the lie I told about my age at the beginning of our relationship. That didn’t help.

I like to think that I’m pretty observant person. Maria’s issue was so blatantly obvious. She wanted to control everything: where we ate, where we slept, whom we would hang out with, where our dates were, and everything else.

I say her issue, because I did try to yield control to her in order to make things work. Most of the time, I would let her run it. Things went smoother this way. Maria was like Achilles in the Trojan War; she needed to be unleashed. Like Achilles, she was just as unpredictable—and uncontrollable.

So what’s the problem? I know that’s what you’re thinking. Well Maria wanted it both ways. Her control was a subconscious thing. And if she was aware of it, then her scale was way off. Maria just couldn’t see how much control she had to have—needed to have. Even when she let me take control, like planning a date for instance, she would complain about each and every choice I made. Eventually I gave up. Maria needed a lapdog, a punk, a pussy. She needed someone that was willing to lay down on command a little more than I was.

To be honest, Maria probably should have walked after our first real date. I showed up to the movie twenty minutes late and piss drunk. It was Friday, and happy hour at Sissy K’s had
$1.50 drafts of Bud Light. Sissy K’s was about three blocks away from where I worked, and our whole department was normally there every Friday. I lost track of time after the eighth beer.

I wish that was it. But I have a bladder the size of a raisin. I think I had to take a piss four times during the movie. After the movie, I somehow managed to have another person successfully throw up on me. I was in the bathroom, taking a piss, and the guy in the next urinal just pukes on my leg. If I was Maria, I would’ve walked right then and there. All sorts of alarms should have gone off in Maria’s head.

Maria called the ball about seven months after our relationship started. She said she never wanted to speak to me again. And Maria meant it. When I would see her occasionally at work, she would look right past me. I respected her wish even though we still worked together (it was harder than I thought it would be; usually I am the one cutting people off). But that is what she wanted. The last time I saw Maria was in the elevator, a week before I got fired.

I do not think that Maria and I could have made each other happy. Not then, when we were both so unsure about each other and ourselves. We didn’t understand what we needed from each other. We were doomed from the start. But there are times I think about if I could have done a little more—been a little more patient and passive.

Maria and I did reconnect at the end of my second tour in 2012. I was in Kuwait, getting ready to come back to Fort Hood, Texas. We spoke on the phone for the first time in seven years. I even got to see Maria’s beautiful face on my Ipad when we did a video call on Facetime. She still looked amazing—like she hadn’t aged a day.
Maria was, and still is, a writer. She sent me her stories in an email, and I replied to her email with mine. After all these years we finally reached some mutual understanding. I got a chance to read all about what happened to Maria growing up, and during the years we lost contact with each other. Maria told me about her father, the childhood sexual abuse, her physically abusive relationship with Timmy (one of her boyfriends after me), and how she left him and moved back to where it all started. I was able to tell her that I loved her then and still do now.

We made a plan to meet in Vegas. Once again Maria called it off, but this time she told me why. Then Maria disappeared again; I haven’t heard from her since.

It sucks because I need her—if only to help me write this story.
The Last One

I’m not good at a lot of things. I’m not a handyman. I can’t fix a car, a leaky faucet, or a light fixture. I could never be a carpenter; you wouldn’t want me building your house.

I am pretty good a tearing things down though. I was on the deconstruction team for a summer in Upstate, New York. I loved it. Swinging a ten pound sledgehammer all day let me work out my aggression issues.

I used to swear a lot when I was younger. It still comes out when I get really mad. I have always liked to cuss. I’m not sure why. I’m pretty sure I get it from my Mom. I used the word Nigga a lot when I was young too. I never saw anything wrong with the word. It was in all the music I listened to, and all my friends said it too. All my black friends anyway. I fancied that I was taking the word back—overcoming the negatives attached to the actual definition. When I called someone my Nigga, it was a term of affection.

I remember the last day I said the word. It was my freshman year at Umass. Greg, who everyone referred to as Rainmaker because that was his D.J. alias, was a tall, light skinned junior. I always called him Greg because calling him Rainmaker seemed stupid to me. He had survived two years living in Gorman Hall, the multicultural dorm on campus. Believe me when I tell you that this was no small feat.

Greg and I bonded one night when we had a paper due for the same class: The History of African Americans in the South. Our professor was hard, and she rarely gave A’s. We decided to stay up all night to write our papers as we shared a handle of Seagram Gin. I considered him a friend after that night.
A few weeks later, I walked into Greg’s room. His girlfriend Danielle was sitting in a chair in the corner as she listened to her man spin. He was amazing on his Technique 1200 turntables. He was doubling a record with ease, a D.J. skill I had yet to master.

“What up Nigga!” I proclaimed as I entered his room.

“Who are you talking to? There ain’t no Niggas in here.”

Greg looked me dead in the eye when he said it. It was the same flat, monotone that I had gotten used to my first few months at Umass. But something was different. Every word, every syllable was precise. Greg wanted to make sure I got it.

That was it. That was all it took. He didn’t need to say another word; we never brought it up again. In fact, Greg didn’t say another word the rest of the night. I haven’t said the N word since.

It was logic that allowed me not to say that word again. I looked up the definition, and I understood the hatred it portrayed. I saw the association with black, darkness, and evil. After that, I couldn’t say it anymore. Even when I hear someone say it now, it gnaws at me. It’s like nails on a chalkboard.

It was also logic that stopped me from cussing all the time. I still may use the word “ass” in reference to the beautiful behind of a female. I might drop an F bomb for emphasis. But what I realized many years ago is that a cuss every other word made me sound unintelligent—ignorant. I didn’t want to sound like that anymore. I didn’t want to be that way anymore.
As I got older I became conscious of the way other people see me. No matter how open-minded a person may be, my black skin will automatically generate certain stereotypes and associations in their head. The race of the person looking at me doesn’t matter. In most cases black people can be the most prejudicial. The more conscious I became of others, the more observant I became as well.

When you observe people you begin to notice patterns. I’ve gotten to be pretty good at this, and I can usually predict what a person will do in most situations if I know him or her well enough.

Noticing patterns helps me predict behavior. When you combine being observant and predicting patterns, you have a person who’s an effective negotiator. When you can predict what people want to do, finding that middle ground becomes easy.

That’s exactly what I had to do a few months ago. It was a Saturday morning in February of 2012. I had just gotten back from a 14 month deployment in Kuwait. The deployment was rough; my wife and I separated when I got home. I got a phone call from her at 8:30 in the morning.

“I need you to come over right now!”

“What the hell is going on? It’s 8:30 in the fucking morning,” I said.

“My Mom is trippin again. Could you please come over and talk to her?”

I got out of bed wondering what I was about to walk into. I felt like I was being set up. I arrived fifteen minutes later, and it took about two minutes for me to figure out what was going on. My mother-in-law provides daycare for our daughter Susie, but she didn’t feel she
was getting the respect she deserved from my wife. My wife didn’t feel she was being given enough respect as Susie’s mother.

I worked it out. That’s what I do. I solve problems and make things happen. I nailed it that Saturday in February. But I’m not perfect. I don’t nail it every single time.

They call it the butterfly effect. It’s used in reference to time travel, and I really don’t know what the fuck it means. As I understand it, every choice a person makes effects their life. A single choice can have a ripple effect, drastically altering a person’s fate.

I was ready to settle down, right on the cusp of my thirtieth birthday. At least I thought I was. I may have been trying to convince myself.

Anyway, I was tired of being a dilettante—dabbling when it came to relationships. I wanted my life as a bachelor to be over. I wanted her.

In 2000 I moved from Upstate New York to Boston at the young age of twenty. I was broke, I needed a job, and I figured job opportunities were better there. I also wanted to finish school. I knew that Umass-Boston would accept all my credits from Umass-Amherst. This made Boston the easy choice.

I also wanted to be in a city again—a big city. I was thinking that Boston, being smaller than New York City where I grew up, would be cozier and friendlier. Cozy and friendlier was something I was looking for. In New York, I was anonymous. I thought Boston would be different. Boy, was I wrong.
It took me three days to figure it out. Boston sits next to one of the coldest bodies of water on the planet. The North Atlantic keeps Boston cold for nine to ten months of the year. Boston is a cold city. And so are the people that live there. They are probably the closest thing in this country to Vikings. Bostonians have to be hard.

I said hello to everyone I saw those first days in Boston. I was either ignored or cussed at. Soon enough, I gave up on trying to be friendly. I adapted to my environment.

People in New York City get a bad rap. New York is a fast city—trains move fast, boats speed across the harbor, and people walk fast. If you can get a New Yorker to slow down, say by asking them where the closest subway station is or how to get to Times Square, you realize they’re nice people. They probably won’t walk with you to make sure you find it, but they’ll do their best to help.

I don’t blame Bostonians for their attitude. Boston’s latitude is 42 degrees, 21 minutes north of the Equator. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, or NOAA, the average temperature of the Atlantic at Boston’s latitude is 42 degrees during the winter months (December, January, and February). Seaside, Oregon, the closest costal city to Boston’s latitude, sits at a shade under 46 degrees (45.998 in case you were wondering) north of the equator. Its average water temperature during the winter months is 49 degrees. At a higher latitude, the Pacific is still seven degrees warmer.

The bottom line is that the North Atlantic makes Boston a truly fucking cold place to live. Frigid air, the kind that freezes your nose hairs, blows in from the Boston Harbor. There is no defense for it; nothing can stop it. Only the Arctic Ocean is colder in the winter. That’s right, the damn Arctic Ocean.

Fennell
Anyway, I spent most of my professional career in Boston working at banks. My friend John hooked me up with my first job at Boston Capital Investments. The office I worked at was in Braintree, a suburb of Boston and a thirty minute drive south on I-93. I was also staying with John at the time, and he lived in Weymouth. Weymouth was the next town over from Braintree, so my commute to work was only a fifteen minute drive. Of course this depended on how bad traffic was.

Boston Capital Investments sounds impressive right? But it sucked. In fact they didn’t invest at all. Anyone who worked there was a paper pusher, or they managed the paper pushers. We scanned the documents for the real financial institutions like E-Trade, ING, and Metropolitan. The job was a joke, but it paid twenty dollars an hour. The job I left in New York, as a cook in a restaurant, paid me seven.

I stayed a little over a year before I moved on to City Street Corporation. City Street was big time. My friend and fellow fraternity brother T-Bags was a recruiter there. I think his real name was Tommy, but everyone, even his co-workers, called him T-Bags. That’s how he was introduced to me the first time we met. T-Bags pushed my application to the right people. I was hired a week later.

City Street, like Boston Capital, is also on the South Shore. The main complex is located in Milton. City Street is one of the biggest custodial banks in the greater Boston area. Besides the gigantic complex in Milton, there is a headquarters building downtown. Any corporation in Boston’s massive financial industry had an office building downtown. If they didn’t, they weren’t shit.
City Street also leased a few floors in a downtown building on Milk Street. This is where my wonderful cubicle was. I lived in Malden at the time, which was north of the city. Getting to work was simple. It’s a short, twenty minute ride from the Malden Center stop on the Orange Line to Downtown Crossing. The worst part of my commute was standing on the elevated platform—waiting for the Subway train to show up.

My job title was Portfolio Advisor. It was on my desk placard, and on my nametag. However, I didn’t advise shit. The Callie Group, whose account I serviced, advised me daily on exactly what to do.

Still, the job was way better than pushing paper at Boston Capital. My co-workers—Antonio, Gregg, Donny, and Joe—were a great group of guys. Kelly was the only co-worker who I didn’t get along with. She had this high, shrill voice, like a lark or any other bird with an annoying song. After work, you get a couple of beers in her, Kelly was mad cool. At work, we couldn’t stand each other.

My boss Gerry was the best. Gerry knew the job inside and out, didn’t micromanage, and knew how to handle the young hothead I was back then. I had issues with authority in those days. I didn’t take shit from anyone. It didn’t matter what your name was, or if they were a manager, associate, or vice president. I can think of two dozen instances where I was arguing with someone and Gerry would intervene. He usually brought me back to his office and let me cool down. Gerry would smooth things over with whomever I pissed off. He saved my ass no less than fifty times and I worked hard for him because of it. Gerry was one of the best bosses I’d ever had. He is still to this day.
Despite all the good things, I eventually got tired of the job. The monotony wore me down. I did the same thing, at the same time, every single day. I reconciled the balance in the morning, processed capital stock at 10:30 am, sent the funds available after lunch, and settled the short term trade at the end of the day. That was the schedule every day. There was no variation—except the liquid lunches on Friday.

In 2003, during one of the coldest winters in Boston, I decided I had had enough. Temperatures hit negative ten or below (with the wind chill) for 30 straight days. My roommate Scott had a thermometer to the right of the door to our apartment. I checked it every day hoping to see if the temperature was above zero. It didn’t happen the entire month of January.

I was tired of the wind slicing me apart, in the wind tunnel that was Downtown Boston. Every time I walked to the office and took that left onto Federal Street, artic blasts of wind would greet me. Despite the eight layers of clothing I was wearing, the wind made its way through all of them. Walking into the lobby of the building, past the security guard who checked my badge and made sure I worked there, was my time to thaw.

So, I had my girlfriend at the time, Maria, hook me up with a job in the financial aid department of a local trade school called Bell Institute. I figured the change of scenery from banking to financial aid rep would be good for me. At least I could escape the wind tunnel, help people solve real financial issues, and not worry about the bottom line anymore (or so I thought). I met her there—the person who this story is about. The person that changed my life forever.

Diana.
We met at the best worst job I ever had. Bell Institute was located in Brighton. To get to there from Malden, I had to take the B Train on the Green Line to Commonwealth Avenue. Driving wasn’t an option anymore. I had recently taken my car off the road. Car insurance was high. Too high. I was paying more than $3,000 a year. You have to make bank to own a car in Boston or at least to insure one.

Boston’s Green Line had four trains that headed out of the city. All trains on the Green Line eventually went above ground. On the street the trains were subject to Boston traffic. Overnight, my daily commute doubled from twenty to forty minutes. It took a couple of weeks, and a verbal warning from my boss Jack, for me to realize that I had to start getting up earlier.

The job was easy, but my boss was a jack-ass. Jack was six feet, six inches tall, with a few strands of grey hair partially covering the top of his bald head. Jack had two or three spare tires around the midsection, even though he went to the same gym I did. The two times I saw Jack at the gym, he was always on the elliptical. And I never saw him sweating.

Jack had a habit of slamming his coke-bottle, thick glasses on the table when he was frustrated. This happened practically every time I was in his office. Usually I was pointing out work he should be doing on these occasions. Jack would ignore my comments. I ignored his glass-slamming. Our exchanges were common and became more frequent as time passed.

Jack was the head of Financial Aid. This authority allowed him to delegate many of his responsibilities to us—his black subordinates. Jack often had us attend his meetings, run his financial reports, and conduct his exit interviews with students. Most days I wondered if Jack did any work at all.
So if you haven’t guessed, Jack was the worst part of the job. The best part of the job was my co-workers—Diana was one of them. She was the Senior Financial Aid Rep, and Jack’s second-in-command. I remember the first time I walked into her office. I remember it like it was last week even though it was years ago.

“’ello Mis-tah Feen-nell,” Diana said in her thick West Indian accent as I walked into her office. There was a large window behind her desk. The sun was shining so brightly that I had to squint and could barely see her at first. As Diana walked from behind her desk, and out of the sunlight, I could finally see what she looked like. And she looked fantastic.

Diana was wearing a short, blue skirt and a striped, brightly colored tank top—in the dead of winter. The short skirt accentuated a striking pair of muscular legs and an impressive rear end. Diana extended her hand to shake mine, and I caught a faint wiff of perfume. It was a very light scent and smelled like the natural body oils my Mom used to buy on Jamaica Ave. It could have been a musk, either Egyptian or African. Her hand was soft and she shook my hand like a lady would in another country. Diana lightly gripped my fingers and gave my hand one shake. I had seen this before when I was in Spain for a high school field trip.

I do have to back up for a second and talk about one of Diana’s features: her aforementioned rear end. You need to understand. This was no ordinary rear end. Diana’s butt was perfect. It was round, but firm. It sat high, and had that cuff—the kind of cuff that made you want wrap your arm around it just to see what it felt like.

Anyway for the next three months, it was the four of us: Nicole, Mariette, Diana, and me. Dom would join us after that, bumping the group up to five. The financial aid department was all us black folks.
Looking back at it now, maybe Jack wasn’t as dumb as I thought he was. I don’t think it was an accident that his whole department was black. Jack might have hired us all on purpose. He could push all his work down to us and probably figured we wouldn’t complain—that we would be grateful just to have a job. I imagined that’s what he was thinking when he hired me. But I wasn’t that guy.

We were the niggers at Bell, and we were a tight group (you know how I feel about that word, but here it’s appropriate). Besides us, there were only four other black people that worked at the whole school: one teacher, one secretary, and two others in accounting.

That’s why we had to stick together; if we didn’t we would have failed as a group. And we weren’t going to fail. We covered for each other’s late night and Saturday shifts. If I was running late, I knew Diana or Nicole had my back. Our work was communal; we shared equally. On paper, we each managed a section of the student population. I had the students whose last names began with the letters A through F. But in reality, we all knew every student all of the time, because we never knew who was going to ask us a question. We were determined and our Financial Aid department had second best numbers in the state.

It was only a matter time before we started hanging out after work. We all attended Nicole’s engagement party, once Tony had finally proposed after six years of dating. Some of us (especially me) got a little too drunk during Mariette’s daughter’s graduation. Even I cried when Dom’s mother passed away.

Nicole was the closest to my age. She was twenty-five, two years older than I was. Nicole was a detail-oriented Jamaican with a very short fuse, which is probably why we got
along. We had the short fuse in common. She initially trained me. Nicole had dark skin, darker than mine, and spoke with an accent.

Mariette was the senior stateswoman of the group. She would never admit her age, but we all knew her daughter was a senior in high school. Mariette was light-skinned, an inch under six feet tall, and a former Coastie (member of the Coast Guard). She was nice, but she knew when to be tough. Mariette was also very sneaky (later she would plagiarize Diana’s resume to get a better job). Of all my coworkers, Mariette was the one I trusted the least.

Dom was a veteran of Desert Storm, a member of the U.S. Army. His service earned him a three-inch scar above his right eye and a purple heart. Dom had a slight stutter and was normally in a good mood, except when he was detoxing from his latest crack binge.

Dom and I were the closest, mainly because we were the guys. The student population at Bell was easily 85 percent female. We were two of eight guys on a staff of forty. We were the only guys in Financial Aid, besides Jack who really didn’t count anyway. I liked Dom, and I wonder now if there was anything I could’ve done to help him with his addiction. I still can’t believe that I never picked up on it.

So that was the crew. We were the Financial Aid department at Bell. We made our boss look good. We worked hard.

Ok, so about the thing I mentioned earlier. Yeah, I was already in a relationship. Maria, she worked upstairs in Placement. Since she worked upstairs, in a different department, there was not a conflict of interest.
Personally, I don’t think was wrong that I had a thing for Diana even though I was dating Maria. It’s not like Maria and I were getting married. Maria had issues. I had issues. Things weren’t going well. Besides, Diana was with someone at the time too. Someone not worthy to lick the bottom of Diana’s shoe.

Tyrone was Diana’s boyfriend when I started at Bell. They were together while we were coworkers and after I was fired. Tyrone was a light-skinned, Jamaican man, with really dark freckles on his face. He dated Diana for years. Now that I think of it, they were already engaged when I met Diana. Well I’m fairly sure that they were engaged.

I only met him once, but I didn’t like him. Tyrone reminded me of people I grew up with in New York; people who were always looking for an angle—trying to exploit whomever and whatever they could to get ahead. I got a bad vibe from Tyrone from the start.

Tyrone. Every time I heard his name it made me think of the Erykah Badu’s song about her deadbeat boyfriend’s best friend. In the song, Tyrone spends more time with his friends than his girlfriend—performed live in Badu’s classic singsong style accompanied with striped down keyboards and minimal percussion. I would later learn that Diana’s Tyrone was even more trifling and grimy than the one Badu sings about. When I learned the truth, when we all learned the truth, I wanted to kill that asshole.

The week before the wedding, Tyrone sat Diana down on her bed and told her that he was already married. I heard that Diana went into shock; she felt as if her world had collapsed on itself. Depression followed. I’m not sure how long Diana was depressed because I had
already left Boston. We hadn’t kept in touch. I didn’t find all of this out until I was already living in North Carolina.

Getting fired from Bell was tough for me, and that’s why I didn’t keep in touch. I loved the people I worked with, and I thought they would be ashamed and disappointed in me. Instead of trusting them, and realizing that they still cared for me, I chose to move on. Back then, I didn’t confront difficult situations like I do now. I just ignored them. That’s what I did—what I used to do.

I also knew I was leaving. I moved to North Carolina in December of 2005, the same month I graduated from Umass-Boston. I was relieved that I had finally graduated and could finally put my hatred of Umass behind me. I had no desire to attend graduation, and walk with the rest of my class. I was as tired of Umass as I was of Boston. Tired of the snow, the eight to nine months of cold Massachusetts weather, of the bureaucracy of college administration, and the politics I had to play with certain professors. I wanted to live somewhere warmer. I was done with school. I needed a change.

The drive down to Fayetteville was long—about thirteen hours. I remember it was the last week in December. I packed all my belongings in a white Ford E350 box van I had rented, picked up my co-pilot Kimberly, and drove to Staten Island. My going away/Christmas party was the night before, and I hadn’t slept at all. The bump of cocaine I took prior to leaving the party kept me awake during the drive. Kimberly’s mother lived in Staten Island, so we had a free place to stay for the night.
Kimberly and I finished the drive the next day. I remember there was a lot of green as we drove further and further south. Tall pine trees, that hadn’t dropped all of their needles, lined Interstate 95. There was plenty of short grass, and even some unfrozen standing pools of water—despite it being December. The “Welcome to North Carolina” I saw entering the state was green.

Diana and I started dating shortly after I moved. This was after Tyrone left. After he told her that he was already married. After she lay in the bed for a week straight—not eating, barely drinking. Sleep was the only thing that interrupted Diana’s sobs.

Diana went back to work after that week, but Nicole and Mariette could tell she was not the same. Nicole told me over the phone that it took Diana three months to hold a conversation that was longer than two sentences with anyone.

It was my first trip back to Boston, and I wanted to see my friends who I terribly missed. I had gotten a job as a government contractor at Fort Bragg, and scheduled this trip around Labor Day. The holiday allowed me to use less vacation time.

Autumn in Boston is my favorite time of the year. Brown, orange and red leaves are strewn all over the grey city streets. The temperature is usually higher than twenty degrees, though sometimes it drops below that at night. The Red Sox were playing meaningful games, trying to make the playoffs. Boston in September is magical.

I can’t remember where we were that evening, but it was in Cambridge. Diana and I met somewhere on the Red Line, between the Central and Harvard Square stops. I believe it was the Pho Republic.
We sat at the end of the bar.

“I can’t stay sitting here, can we get a table?” I asked after a few minutes.

“Why do you want a table? We’re not getting any food,” Diana replied.

“I might freak out if I have to sit with my back to the door.”

Diana took my PTSD-laden confession in stride. It was Sunday night and the place was empty. The Pho was a college bar, and most college students had Monday morning classes. The bar top was painted dark red, and the color matched the seats of the bar stools. The Pho was dimly lit, like most college bars.

“Can I ask you a question?” I asked as we sat down at the table.

“Of course you can, isn’t it why we’re here?” Diana asked in response.

“Will you come to my high school reunion next year in Amherst?”

“Is that all you want? I was expecting a lot more,” Diana replied; her big, brown, beautiful eyes staring straight into mine.

“Well, that’s not all of it. When you come, I want to introduce you as my fiancé.”

“Yes!”

So that is how it began. For the next hour Diana and I began to plan the rest of our life together. We had challenges ahead, but I quickly found out that Diana was committed to the idea of us. We left the Pho with a solid plan in place. I left the bar with one feeling: hope.

Diana, the oldest of six children, had borne the brunt of taking care of her mother for most of her life. Diana was raised in St. Kitts, a small but beautiful island in the Caribbean.
Diana’s mother divorced her husband when Diana was still pretty young. I remember her mentioning it once, that she had not yet turned ten.

“I never got to appreciate how beautiful my island was as a child,” Diana told me during our nightly phone conversations between Boston and North Carolina. “I had to start working when I was 14, at an ice cream parlor. I got paid $75 weekly. From that I would give my mother $35, I would keep $5, and put the rest in the bank.”

“What did you do with the money you saved?” I asked.

“It was saved for emergencies. Like when we would come up short for the grocery we took on credit the week before. Or when we wanted fresh bread instead of the stale bread we could buy much cheaper. Usually the emergency involved us eating.”

Diana moved from St. Kitts to Boston when she was 19 years old. She explained the drastic adjustment, but I struggle grasping her situation till this day. She had to adjust to the weather, a completely different society, a large city (something she had never seen, let alone lived in, before) in which she knew two people.

When Diana made her first trip home to St. Kitts as an adult, she was finally able to appreciate where she was raised. Diana could enjoy swimming in the crystal clear, blue water that surrounds the fifty-six square mile island. She could hike up the lush, green trails, which all lead to same place—the hills and mountains in the island’s center. Diana could enjoy talking to the many friendly people she met or knew.

In 1998, while Diana was visiting her mother in St. Kitts, she noticed that her mother didn’t look well. She gathered the family and was told that her mother’s health was failing.
Diana told me, years later, that she was already making plans to move her mother to Boston after the conversation. She was a little frustrated that no one told her sooner.

For a while, in Boston, Diana’s mother did get better. She could do one thing she hadn’t been able to do in the previous sixty-nine years of her life: rest. Eventually Diana’s mother looked better, her color and appetite returned, and her health improved.

Unfortunately the improvement was short-lived. The issue was her lungs. Her mother had moved from St. Kitts in the summer, when the weather was warm. Boston only gets about two good months of summer, and the return of cold weather brought with it complications. Although her health got worse, Diana’s mother was settled. She had packed up and moved to Boston. She did not want to move again.

When I proposed to Diana in 2006, I was tracking that it was package deal. I, like Diana, already had plans in place to move both of them to North Carolina. I thought the final hurdle was coming up with the cash.

I didn’t know there would be other opposition. There are a variety of ways to deal with change: venting, preparing, adapting, avoiding, and resisting. Diana’s family chose to obstruct.

The nature of the Caribbean family is different from the African American one. The Caribbean family operates as a unit. The Caribbean family usually lives in the same geographic area, and shares everything. Meals, moves, marriages—big decisions and small—are decided together. The African American family once worked the same way, years ago.

Once Diana made the decision to bring her mother up in 1998, she owned that decision. The family agreed, but the rest of them did little to help. They didn’t give her any
money to cover the expense of moving. When they came to Boston to visit, they barely picked up after themselves. Occasionally someone besides Diana would cook a meal, but they didn’t buy the groceries. Nor did they clean up after everyone ate. Diana’s siblings, her brothers and sisters, gladly saddled Diana with the sole responsibility of caring for their mother. They were not happy for her when she told them she was moving to North Carolina to be with me.

"Why are you moving down there? Your husband should move up here."

"Who will take care of Mommy if you leave? You can't leave her behind!"

One of the younger daughters was told by another sister, "Don't take on the responsibility of Mommy. You shouldn't saddle yourself with that."

"You’re abandoning me!" Diana’s mother’s wailed.

So here comes my mistake—my choice. I took the decision out of Diana's hands. In January of 2008, twenty-three days before I was scheduled to depart for Basic Training, I told Diana that she should stay in Boston. I told her we should not get married. I know I should have noticed the heartache in her voice, but my mind was made up. And once it was, I rarely changed it. I would notice the heartache later, looking back at what went wrong.

They call it the blindside because you never see it coming. I thought I was so good at seeing the patterns and predicting the behavior of other people. Did I know there was going to be some friction? Fuck yeah, I knew that. But in this situation, with the stakes being this high, I missed it. I got blindsided.

What did I do after I told Diana that we shouldn’t get hitched? I did what I always do in these situations (at least back then). I ignored it. I ignored the pain, the anger, and the frustration of feeling completely helpless. I ignored the thoughts of flying to Boston, St. Kitts,
Virginia, or wherever the hell Diana’s brothers were at, and kicking the crap out of them. I ignored the emails Diana sent claiming that she still wanted to be friends. The nine months I spent Basic Training and AIT helped me ignore everything.

Eleven months later, Diana married someone else. She was also pregnant by then, despite her previously diagnosed infertility. Her mother had been dead for two months when she married. Diana had a boy. Not long after, she earned her Master’s degree, graduating Summa cum Laude.

Diana was supposed to be the last one, and she wasn't.
Works Cited


