

INTRODUCTION: EMPIRE STATE OF MIND

The things that go through your mind as you're about to kill yourself are pretty interesting. My thoughts ran the gamut. *Did I prepare my will? Should I have left a note behind? What will my funeral look like, and who will attend? Also, did I flush the toilet after I pissed for the last time?* The idea of someone walking into the apartment after I was gone and finding the place wasn't tidy horrified me. Not to mention, I was concerned about the mess my brain matter would leave on the sidewalk down below.

No one ever said being suicidal was a rational state of mind.

This, however, was my mindset in October 2018 as I prepared to dangle from the twelfth story of my Manhattan high-rise, convinced this would be the end. Getting to this point, on the brink of my death, was the culmination of a mission that began as adulthood peaked and never relented. I figured it was my destiny to die at a relatively young age. I was forty-five years old.

There was nothing special about October 12. No reason that day was meant to be my last. I had just anchored the early-morning newscast as usual. I left ABC's Studio 3A, grabbed a taxicab for the short ride home, kissed my partner of nearly a decade goodnight, and crawled into bed as he left for work. A few hours later, I woke up, drugged on two Ambien tablets, and walked into the kitchen. I texted a friend to let her know I had prepared everything for this day, including filing my will and preparing my funeral. I ended the message by telling her I felt at peace.

This drug-fueled suicidal mindset was strangely orgasmic. It was as if my lifelong struggle with depression had been one long edging session, and this would be the **climax**. And why not now? I was at the height of my career, anchoring a popular network morning newscast. I had a beautiful apartment in New York City and was dating a gorgeous blue-eyed White guy, so I was basically living the "American dream."

I walked through the kitchen, stopping at the refrigerator to grab some leftover cheesecake, customary for me on those Ambien trips, and proceeded to the window ledge. The cool early autumn air did little to wake me from my haze as I opened the window. The city skyline had the

aspect of a real-life Instagram filter, with spectacularly spellbinding blue skies. I slowly reached the ledge, put my left foot over it, followed seconds later by my right foot, and grabbed onto the glass above me, my fingers going pale from pressing so tightly. Tears filled my eyes as I reviewed my end-of-life to-do list one more time before I committed to jumping onto a metro bus below.

I prepared to let go of the ledge. My fingers were already numb from the effort of holding on. I was ready to plummet to my death.

What a life I had lived, born in poverty in the Caribbean, growing up without television, immigrating to the United States, assimilating in whatever way I could, and joining the TV industry, achieving fame and fortune. But it was never enough to quell the darkness that had lived within me for almost as long as I could remember.

CHAPTER ONE BELIZE

I was born in Belize, the bite-sized country nestled next to Mexico and Guatemala and one of only two countries in Latin America where English is the official language. The country has been described as a Caribbean island that got lost at sea, and then got shipwrecked into the Central American coast. I spent my first five years living in a tiny, dilapidated two-story house with blue tarps covering the holes in the tin roof. My mom would never admit it, but I'm confident I was an accident. She was thirty-six years old when she had me, and giving birth at that age in a country with limited medical facilities was considered highly risky. Plus, my parents didn't need another child, especially another boy. After all, they already had six sons: Alrick Jr., Dean, Brian, Aldoray, Brent, and Marvin. My mom was confident she was pregnant with a girl while carrying me. She had picked out the name Kendra and was forced to go with a made-up variation of that name, Kendis, when I made my appearance.

"Another one," my mother exclaimed as this bawling, already balding, oversize baby boy (me) emerged. "Well, I be one eye be bwoy, I nuh believe dis, wow," my mom recalled telling the doctor. I still have

no idea what she meant, but it certainly didn't sound like excitement. A girl was the only thing she had prayed for and asked the "good Lord" to deliver. Little did she realize she had packed her baby girl in her last baby boy.

With its four small bedrooms, our house needed to be bigger to sleep four people, much less nine of us. Three bedrooms were on the second floor, but my brother Aldoray shared the one above our kitchen with two of my brothers and sometimes me. Aldoray's bed was up against a wall, and its height lined up seamlessly with the bottom of a windowsill. We didn't have air-conditioning and probably didn't even know it existed. We didn't have fans because we couldn't afford them, and the country's frequent blackouts rendered them useless. To cool off at night, we just slept with the windows open and prayed we didn't get bitten up by the mosquitoes.

Kids in Belize didn't routinely sleep in cribs, and there was no room in my parents' bed, as they were increasingly growing (horizontally, not vertically). I was shy of six months old and sleeping in Aldoray's bed one night, but I kept getting pushed toward the open window. I eventually rolled over a few times and rolled right out of the window, plummeting two floors to the ground below. Apparently, some of my brothers heard my ear-piercing screams but ignored them for an hour until they couldn't stand the sound of my cries. "Da weh Kendis?" Aldoray asked as he walked around the house with a flashlight since the lights had gone out thanks to yet another power outage.

Aldoray suspected I had somehow ended up outside, but he searched the front yard. Once he doubled back to his bedroom, he finally thought to look out his window to the ground below. My big, white eyes appeared amid a sea of darkness. I had fallen into a life-saving pile of leftover food, dishwater, and trash. We didn't have indoor plumbing or a garbage disposal; everything was tossed through the kitchen window below my brother's bedroom. Over the years, that mix of dishwater, chicken bones, rice and beans, and everything not consumed at the dinner table gathered outside that kitchen window. The massive pile of waste cushioned my fall and saved my life.

Strangely, I never realized how incredibly poor we were during my childhood. Perhaps it was because we could afford someone to pick

up our shit from the outhouse. Most homes in Belize had outhouses; my family had a wooden one just a few steps away from our open-air vat, the primary source of fresh drinking water. In some societies, having an expensive Rolex or a luxurious car symbolized wealth; for my family in Belize, it was the nightly visits from Ms. Cynthia. I watched as she walked into our front yard wearing no gloves and grabbed the handle of the dingy white toilet bucket from our outhouse. Without much thought, she grabbed the bucket, occasionally put the lid on, and slowly walked through our yard, her body tilting to the opposite side of the bucket, depending on whether it was a heavy flow day for my family. She would make the two-block walk to the downtown canal—usually accompanied by others doing this walk of shame—to dump the waste into our country’s elaborate outdoor sewage system. It would be decades before the government invested in more septic tanks.

Despite being able to have the services of Ms. Cynthia, we couldn’t afford much more else, including health care. One time, I sliced open my foot with a broken beer bottle when I was just three or four, but there was no hospital visit. We had to pray for the best and hope it healed without infection. Praying, hoping, and traditional medicine kept us alive, but home remedies couldn’t cure everything, especially tapeworms. My brothers and I had tapeworms all the time, and nothing could ever get rid of them completely. Marvin had the worst experience. He was twelve years old when he started coughing at the dining table one night, seemingly unable to breathe. At one point, my mom thought maybe he was choking on a piece of food, so she performed the Belizean Heimlich maneuver. She pounded the crap out of his back, trying to dislodge whatever he seemed to be choking on. I was across the table, horrified yet curious about what was happening.

Marvin kept choking, and then he placed both hands around his throat and squeezed as he gagged and gasped for breath. I didn’t understand why he was squeezing his own throat if he couldn’t breathe, but then again, I didn’t understand how my mom’s pounding on his back was helping matters either. Just as Marvin was about to pass out, his body convulsing, he reached into his own mouth with one hand as if he could dislodge whatever was blocking his windpipe. Within seconds he withdrew his hand and with it, a slimy, thick, pale-yellow tapeworm

over ten inches long. His eyes widened, bloodshot and teary, a mix of shock and disgust crossing his face as he looked at the wiggling worm. My mom stopped beating his back and ran to the other side of the room in horror. The contrasting image of his dark, Caribbean sun-drenched skin and this squiggly, pale, flapping monster from the deep remains etched in my brain to this day, and in our family Marvin is still referred to as Medusa Marv.

A-HEAD [Moving on up]

I knew I was different early on, but I never understood why. I loved *I Dream of Jeannie* because of Jeannie's belly-button-baring midriff and those puffy chiffon pants. I was fascinated by pageant queens, and I'd feel the urge to bury my face in the armpits of boys. The signals were always there, but it took me years to come to terms with them. Several factors contributed to my hesitation, including my family's strict adherence to an oppressive form of Christianity. We attended Wesley Methodist Church in downtown Belize City every Sunday. And despite my best efforts at faking being sick, Sunday school was mandatory. We had weekly prayer meetings, and each school day started with a prayer. My parents even selected a deacon from the church to be my godfather. At the earliest inkling that I might be a big homo, my mom imparted, "Jesus would rather me be dead than have a son who was gay."

Still, my early years spent living in that old house, with an outdoor toilet, Medusa Marv, and sleeping all on top of each other were among the happiest of my life. With every ladder of success climbed, my hold on happiness loosened considerably. That pattern started when we moved to a brand-new home on the city's west side. In Belize, the farther you get away from the sea, where the potential for a hurricane to destroy your home was greater, the more elevated your social status. Like George Jefferson, we were moving on up.

Our new house was a large two-story structure built from the ground up by my dad. The bottom floor was an all-concrete space my dad planned to turn into a bakery or a furniture store. For some reason, neither came to fruition. The upstairs was an all-wooden frame house, which was our living quarters. Everything in the house was so new and fancy by Belize standards that we felt like we had made it to the big

time. I mean, we even had a septic tank. What says high status in Belize more than saying goodbye to your outhouse?

The family room in the front of our house led to a concrete veranda with views of the neighbors' homes and the street below. On most nights, whatever was popping off in the streets would be the extent of our family's entertainment. We had a massive nineteen-inch color television that my dad bought on one of his trips to the United States and drove three thousand miles back to Belize. But we couldn't watch anything because Belize didn't have a single TV station at that time. That television became a pretty useless piece of furniture, except when we used it to play video games on cassettes shipped from the U.S. that we had to borrow from our friends.

My mom was happy with the house because she had a brand-new kitchen for all her needs. Water flowed through an indoor faucet. There was still no dishwasher, but at least there was no longer the need to toss wastewater or food out the back window on most days. Sometimes my mom still threw food out the window, but that was only to feed the resilient little stray dog, Blackie, who adopted our family (probably because of the scraps she fed him).

Upstairs, there were three bedrooms lined against one side of the building. My parents' bedroom was at the front of the house, my oldest brothers' was at the rear, and the room I shared with three of my brothers was in the middle. Our room had three beds, including a bunk bed and one for **one of my teenage older brother**. Al had his twin bed once again adjacent to the window, similar to the one I fell out of at our last house. I was so excited to have a bed to myself, I created my sanctuary on that bottom bunk with photos of Michael Jackson, Bob Marley, and Queen Elizabeth taped up on the wall. I loved spending time in my semi-gay sanctuary, but it soon became my torture chamber.

A-HEAD [Waking Nightmare]

My sixth birthday stands as a pivotal moment in that house. It was the first time I was celebrated with a real party, with a cake, a clown, and all my cousins in attendance. And it was also the first night I was raped by my brother.

I was fast asleep when I heard and soon felt movement from the bunk bed above me. My older brother quietly climbed down the steps from his bunk, but instead of heading to the bathroom as usual, this time was different. He slowly crawled onto the foot of my bed. As he inched his way up to my side, the mattress sank slightly lower with each move, and finally he pressed his teenage body behind me, whispering “shhh” in my ear. Aldoray was asleep less than six feet away. Back then, I slept in full pajamas, as many kids did, despite the warm nighttime temperatures. My pajama bottom got slowly pulled from my foot down and off, and my mouth was pried open and stuffed with a portion of those pants.

I had no idea what was happening as he started penetrating me. There was no substance to ease the physical pain, just a cloth in my mouth to quiet this child from screaming in excruciating pain from what was occurring. It was probably a relatively quick experience, but it seemed to last several hours. It would take decades for me to reconcile that this was my first sexual experience and to grasp that it was at such a tender age and by a family member. I tried to mumble questions to ask what happened, but he only whispered, “Be quiet.” He crawled back up the side ladder, and within minutes he was snoring as if nothing had transpired. My pajamas were still stuffed solidly in my mouth; my eyes began to well up from the pulsating pain in my butt. I couldn’t fall asleep that night.

The following day at school was just as painful. Trying to sit in class for eight hours was excruciating. The entire day, I couldn’t sit still because of the pain and asked if I could stand in a corner. My parochial corporal punishment school saw that as disobedience, and my teacher ordered ten hand lashings. The anal bleeding lasted several days, even after the pain subsided. While I was too young to come to terms with what took place, I was well aware of the traumatizing fallout from the abuse—and it was not the end.

I was still not fully healed when it happened again one week later. My older brother quietly crawled down the steps to my lower bunk bed again. He pulled down my Flintstones underwear and, again without mercy, penetrated me violently and repeatedly for several minutes. This time, his hands were over my mouth instead of the pajamas to prevent me from making noise. I tried fighting back because I was still very

much sore. While my comprehension of what was taking place didn't increase this second time, I knew enough that the pain was too much for me to handle. Despite his hands covering my mouth, I kept making noises, hoping he would stop. After several minutes, he stopped, slowly pulled away from me, and crawled back to his bunk. He was again asleep and snoring within a few minutes while I suffered another restless night.

I tried different tactics to repel his advances as the weeks and months went on. I pretended to be asleep on other occasions, but in the end, it didn't matter if I was awake. My body was just a vessel for him. I dreaded the nights my brother Al stayed over at his girlfriend's place, because it meant the sessions would last longer, and any noises I made were in a vacuum. My abusive brother usually sat across from me at the breakfast table and pretended the previous night's assault was a figment of my imagination.

The assaults continued every week for nearly a year. I never told my parents or other brothers what was taking place. As a six-year-old going on seven, how exactly do you explain this? I assumed it was a normal part of childhood. Finally, I became frustrated by the unrelenting attacks and decided to resist his assaults. One night, Aldoray was in bed when my other brother crawled down from his bed and began the formulaic process. By this point, he had stopped stuffing my mouth with my clothes or covering it with his hand. As he started to rape me, I screamed "no" at the top of my lungs—loud enough that I figured Aldoray would hear it, wake up, and come to my rescue. My scream immediately forced my brother to back off and quietly rush to his bunk.

Back then, my bawling didn't immediately wake Al, nor did my screams of "no." But it was enough to scare my rapist brother into stopping the assault that night, and eventually he permanently cut out the behavior. Each subsequent evening and for weeks, I would go to bed dreading it would happen again and resiliently contemplate how I would stop the next assault. Eventually, he found a young neighborhood girl to date, and I realized the assaults would never happen again. Perhaps it was a version of Stockholm syndrome, but I was somewhat jealous of his new girlfriend. I started to wish it could all happen again, and one night I even crawled up to his bunk bed to try to instigate the action. In

hindsight, I'm happy he never did it again, but I believe this was when my sleeping issues began.

My brother went on to marry that girlfriend and have several children with her. To this day, I've never confronted him about it. And perhaps it eventually contributed to us having the least cordial relationship among my six siblings. I fear that by not speaking up, it may have happened with others over the years. Or perhaps it was a crime of convenience in a country where any sexual proclivity could get you shunned by the church.

Indeed, it was not easy to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual in Belize. In section 53 of Belize's constitution, drafted in 1981, homosexuality was officially outlawed by using an old British colonial rule that banned "carnal intercourse against the order of nature." As such, it made sexual relationships between adult men, even within the confines of their own homes, illegal and punishable by death. The architect of section 53 and much of the constitution was the father of the country, George Price. He was a successful politician who lived to age ninety-two, never had a female companion, never married, and never had any children. But Belizeans didn't need a law on the books to make them homophobic then. It was part of the country's—and much of the Caribbean's—culture. Beyond my parents constantly bashing their swishy son for his ways, kids in school would often call me a "batty man" as they beat me in schoolyards or on my walk home most days. In Belizean Creole, the word "batty" refers to your butt. And if you were a "batty man," it meant you liked butt sex with other men.

The term was used as a slur against many as they were beaten and, in some cases, killed for being gay in the country. But as was evident from my own experience in my household, plenty of so-called batty men lived on the down-low. Belizeans would sing patriotic songs, including one for the biggest holiday of the year on the tenth of September, St. George's Caye Day. It recalls a famed battle fought by the British colonialists against other invaders from Spain. To commemorate the day, we were all taught a catchy song that recounts the struggle at St. George's Caye on September 10, 1798. However, the hook for that song had an unsavory gay-bashing line at the end. Everywhere we celebrated the holiday, people would scream at the top

of their lungs, “Hip hip hooray,” followed by the homophobic trope “yuh batty gay.” In short, it was as inhospitable an environment in which to grapple with my sexuality as any you could imagine.

A-HEAD [A Boy Named Manny]

Perhaps it was my discomfort with my sexuality or my childhood introversion, but I didn't have a lot of friends. At my first home in the alley, most of the kids I played around with were cousins who lived in our massive family compound. My days at school were spent fighting bullies due to my sexuality but also because of my relative smarts. I'm not saying I was a genius, but I did skip two grades and was not too modest to remind classmates about it. At home, despite having so many siblings, I always felt like I grew up as an only child because there were nine years between me and my next youngest brother, Marvin.

I slowly made friends in the new Lake Independence neighborhood. I attended parentally mandated Sunday service every week and found some friends in church school there, but little did I realize the one person I would hit it off with was right across the street. I was about eight when I got my first bicycle as a Christmas gift. I had no idea how to ride the bike, and my parents spent hours one late afternoon chasing after me, trying to teach me. I was alone just as they were about to give up on me getting the hang of it.

I rode without anyone holding on to the back of the seat and started peddling rapidly with the biggest grin. That smile reflected my incomparable feeling of joy and freedom as I rode down Santa Barbara Street and briefly looked back at my parents, who had let go. I was so excited I paid no attention to what was ahead of me, which turned out to be my neighbor Manuel, who couldn't avoid my erratic bicycling. I ran straight into him. We both crashed into the rusty-colored dirt road. I had met Manny, his mom, and his brother before, but we had never hung out as we attended different schools and churches. I got up and said, “Why are you going to run into me like that?”—an aggressive accusation he didn't take too kindly to. “What are you talking about?” he responded. “I was walking on the street and you made me run all over the road to avoid you on your cheap bike.” Until he pointed it out, I thought I was

riding a rather expensive BMX bike, but the fake BMX sticker peeled off in the crash.

I was too embarrassed for myself and my parents to admit the bike was a cheap rip-off of the expensive bikes we had only heard about, so I said, “Boi, sorry,” picked up my ride, and walked back to my house, my head firmly lowered in shame, but also a bit of intrigue. Manuel was my age and probably some sort of Latino mix, as is customary in Belize. He was a skinny kid and unusually tall for an eight-year-old, nearly five feet, with long black hair just a few inches shy of his shoulders and the most beautiful smile. He was your typical Belizean Blatino blend that didn’t speak Spanish but had all the blessings of mixed-race features.

I didn’t understand my emotions whenever I saw Manny, but I knew they were honest and fantastic. I experienced tingling, hair-raising goose bumps and a high heart rate whenever I saw him. I am fairly sure he felt dread at the sight of me. We were too young to know about girls, sexuality, or our desires, but whenever I saw him, I had a rush of emotions I had never experienced or could comprehend.

Manny had lived in the neighborhood years before my family arrived, but there was rarely an opportunity to see or interact with him. I was so happy that my bike-riding skills inadvertently forced us into a friendship. We started spending many post-school afternoons in his and his brother’s bedroom, playing on the streets with our bikes and doing the old-fashioned paddling of tires with a stick while running behind them. One of our favorite things was walking about a half mile from the house down this long dirt path lined with thick forest, often a dumping ground for people’s trash toward the Belize River. Like a scene out of *Stand By Me*, we would walk to the river with his brother and a couple of other neighborhood kids, skip rocks, chill by the water, and have the sort of deep discussions you’d expect eight-year-olds in Belize to have. That trail through the woods to the river was our favorite hangout area as kids in that neighborhood because it was remote enough to provide a jungle escape from our homes and parents yet just a mile away and easily accessible by foot. And despite all the broken glass and debris on the trail, we often made it to the river barefoot. We had plenty of shoes back home, but running barefoot felt more natural.

Our nights in Belize were spent sitting with our family, eating dinner, playing card games, or listening to the radio. Our school didn't emphasize homework, so we rarely had that to occupy our time. The country would often suffer blackouts, so we didn't spend too many nights up late. Manny and I would occasionally play along with his brother well past nightfall until the blackouts made it impossible to see our own hands, much less each other. And unlike in the United States, sleepovers weren't common, and not with someone who lived across the street. Yet, as my fascination with Manny grew, I knew I wanted to spend an overnight with him, perhaps hoping to do the same thing my brother did with me a few years earlier. Whatever that was.

One evening after dinner, after a blackout hit Belize City, I told my mom and dad I would head over to Manny's place to hang out with him and his younger brother. I crossed the street in the dark and walked upstairs to their candlelit second-floor apartment. Although their home had candles burning, many in the country often waited out the blackouts by sitting around in the dark, using it as an opportunity for conversation. However, I used this blackout as a chance to spend time with Manny. It turned out that evening's blackout lasted for several hours, well beyond what would normally be our bedtime. His mom decided to go to bed early along with his younger brother, with whom he shared a bunk bed but that night decided to crash in his mom's room. His mom made a deal with us that we could stay up, but the candles would have to be out.

Manny and I never had a romantic vibe, but I certainly had feelings for him. I was still too young to understand what those emotions meant and scarred from physical interaction with any other person, especially another male. But there was something about the energy of that evening that made me feel something would happen, so I was in no rush to go home. After hanging in the dark and talking briefly, we decided to head to the kid's bedroom at the front of the house, where the moon provided a touch of lighting. I figured I would spend the night at Manny's and see how things developed. The two of us lay down next to each other with our heads buttressed against each other. Our arms were so close that I was fairly sure he could feel the goose bumps. My heart raced so hard whenever we stopped talking; I was sure he could hear the loud, rapid beating. I was sure Manny was into girls, even though he had

not interacted romantically with them. We used to talk about the girls in his class he had crushes on, and I would pretend to have similar feelings. Still, I felt confident I could hold his hand, so I went for it, using my right pinkie finger to test the waters and perhaps be the sacrificial lamb if my advance was rebuffed.

My pinkie twitched his finger, and much to my excitement, both hooked on to each other. I slowly moved the others into the fold of his left hand, and before I knew it, we were holding hands and slowly started squeezing each other's hands. At that moment, an overwhelming thought came over me: *What the hell am I supposed to do next?* It was equally new to Manny, because clearly he didn't know what to do next or what to make of the events either. We fell asleep for a bit, holding each other's hands tightly when, finally, the lights came back on and woke us up. I decided to get ready to go home to bed but wondered if I would ever have this opportunity again. With my heart palpitations rapidly increasing, we were both staring at the bed bunk above us when I offered the disclaimer, "I don't know what I'm doing or what we did, but I hope it's okay." After disavowing responsibility for my actions, I slowly lifted my head and hovered my face over Manny's, who had his eyes wide open. I lowered my lips onto his and slowly kissed him. I made the weird smooching sound I'd heard people make in the movies when they kiss each other. Both our eyes remained open as we moved our lips around in the awkward dance you'd expect from two people who didn't know what they were doing. Those goose bumps initially triggered by my excitement returned over the seconds-long kiss that felt like a lifetime. I've experienced the emotions I had during this first kiss only twice in my life: that moment with Manny and when I won my first Emmy Award more than a decade later.

As quickly as it started, it was over. I pulled my lips away from Manny's and continued to stare into his eyes. I assumed all that tingling that vibrated through my body was love. Manny kept to the same stone-faced look he had even when we were lip-locked. I couldn't tell if he wanted to kiss more, hug, or throw up, as his face showed no emotions. Finally, after a few more seconds, he said, "Dat mih nice," which allowed me to be relieved and warmed my heart and everything in my body. "Good evening," which for us meant good night, and I got up to

leave, at which point he grabbed and hugged me tightly in his arms. In some strange way, it hearkened back to thoughts of my brother attacking me a few years earlier. But for the first time, I realized there could be a positive interaction in bed with another human.

Before heading home, I jumped out of bed and briefly looked back at Manny. I had no idea this would be the last time I saw him. I ran across the street and tiptoed into our house, only to realize my dad was still awake playing solitaire. My dad always had sleeping problems, an unfortunate trait passed down to a couple of my siblings and me. It was well past midnight on a school night, so I ran straight into my bedroom, but I couldn't sleep. I kept replaying it in my head every second of the night, and with each rerun, the smile on my face grew even bigger. My internal conversation at the time ran the gamut. *What are these feelings? Does it mean we are dating? Is this what love feels like? Oh shit, am I now a batty man?* The questions did nothing to quell my excitement.

That night was the first time I wrote down my thoughts. I pulled out the pages at the back of a textbook and started writing down my feelings and hopeful thoughts for our future. I guess it was a diary, but I didn't even know what that was. I just wanted to commemorate the moment somehow in my most beautiful cursive writing. The only thing that could get me to sleep was the thought that the quicker I passed out, the sooner I would wake up and be able to see Manny. I thought perhaps I'd see him early before we both went to our respective schools in the morning. I knew for sure we'd see each other at night, and God willing, we would have another country-wide blackout, and I'd have an excuse to sneak across the street and cuddle with Manny. I've rarely gone to sleep so happy to be alive.

The next day was Wednesday. I'm not entirely sure why I remembered that little nugget. Perhaps because I thought it would be a day that would build on the previous day's excitement. Little did I know, as I woke up that morning with a glow still on my face, that I'd eventually remember that day for all the wrong reasons. As I left my house, my school uniform seemed extra crisp and white. I looked over to Manny's house, but the kids' bedroom curtain seemed unmoved from when I'd left, and there were no signs of him or his mom and brother.

I walked to school with some pep and could barely concentrate on the lessons. I rushed back home and looked again at Manny's place as I entered my house, but there was no sign of anyone. I didn't think anything of it; even in hindsight, there wasn't much to take away. Manny and his brother weren't out that Wednesday evening playing, as was usually the case, and the lights were not on at their home. My family and I spent a reasonably mundane evening under the lights as there were no blackouts, but you would have thought differently when looking at Manny's home. The lights didn't appear on all night.

The next day, I glanced over as I headed out to school and again didn't see any activity. I went to Manny's and knocked on his apartment door that evening to hang out with him. It turned out his mom and brother had been home but were spending most of their time in the back living and bedrooms of the house. "Good night, Ms. Gloria," I greeted her in the traditional way. "Amih dih look fuh Manny."

"It nuh deh home. Ih mih gone since yesterday," his mom said, which was the first time I learned that he had been missing since Wednesday morning when he went to school. His mom and brother didn't seem concerned about it, so I assumed he had gone to see a grandparent or other family member.

When I went by Manny's home the following day, his mom once again said he wasn't there. Again, she seemed only mildly concerned, but my concern grew this time because other family members at the house hadn't heard from him either. That evening, I told my parents he was missing, and that news also was met with an equal lack of concern. I, on the other hand, had an elevated level of angst because of what happened during our previous interaction. And then that Friday, my mom told me that Manny's mom had called the police to investigate his disappearance. I didn't go to their apartment that afternoon, because it seemed like the disappearance had finally taken on an uncomfortable level of despair.

Over the weekend, there was no increased police activity or search party gatherings. His family probably assumed he had run off and would eventually return. I started panicking that my actions forced him to run away. I may have been one of the last people to see Manny, and one of the last actions he made before running off was something that he

didn't necessarily want to do. I relived those seconds we'd spent in bed, but with a different scope. Was he staring at me while we were kissing because he was experiencing inner turmoil about what was happening? By advancing on him, did I assault him just like my older brother had done to me years earlier?

I was increasingly filled with stress and guilt. I rode my bike to my *Stand By Me* trail through the nearby trees to chill by the river and clear my head. It was a beautiful sunny and typically hot and humid Caribbean day, but the emerald-green Belize River was a little swollen beyond the banks following several days of rain. The heavy downpour brought a lot of trees and debris from upriver, which is why I didn't make much of the toy doll I saw trapped in a tree branch about ten feet out in the middle of the river. The doll had a clenched fist in the air; the rest of the object was below the waterline. The more I stared at it, though, the more it didn't add up. What kind of doll is so pale white and has a clenched fist? At no point did I fathom that object could have been Manny, but I still rode my bike straight to his mom's place.

When I walked in and approached his mom in the kitchen, she was surrounded by family members. "Ms. Gloria, I was at the river, and I saw a doll in the water, but it didn't look like a normal doll. It may be Manny in the water," I told his mom. Even as the words came out of my mouth and I told her that I suspected the doll in the water was her son, I didn't believe or comprehend the magnitude of what I was saying. His mom didn't understand what this eight-year-old was saying and immediately dismissed me. I figured she either didn't want to think about the possibility of her son being dead and trapped in the river or didn't want to take a kid's word for it. I left there, and for the first time, it hit me that Manny was that doll and that he was dead. I didn't return to their home over the next few days and tried not to focus on the situation.

Unbeknownst to me, that following Wednesday, a week after Manny's disappearance, his mom convinced the cops to finally check out the tip I had offered over the weekend. That afternoon, we learned police had recovered his body from the same river spot I had pointed out. Police said the rushing water had wiped away any skin-color tone Manny had, and his hands were in a fist because he appeared to have

been fighting. But what was he fighting? The police in Belize didn't do much of an investigation and chalked up Manny's death as a simple drowning. But many questions remained. Why was his body in a defensive pose? And how did he end up in the water in the first place? I had my own questions, including: Did he kill himself? Did someone in our ultraconservative and super-homophobic culture know about our interaction and kidnap and murder him? I couldn't sleep for weeks, and I could never explain to my family the extent of the trauma I buried within me.

Manny's funeral was one of the saddest things I've ever experienced. I felt a potent mixture of guilt, sadness, and fear. In our culture, showing emotion, especially crying, even at funerals, is frowned upon. I could barely hold back the tears as his tiny white coffin entered the church at the end of our street, just steps away from the forestry trail that led to the riverbank where **I found his body**. I sat on the end of one of the pews in the front because I wanted to be as close to him as possible in these last moments, as there would not be an open coffin. After all, he had been in the water so long. As the coffin passed within inches of my face, with his mom and young brother pushing it from behind, I placed my hand over my eyes to hide the tears.

The coroner's report confirmed the police findings and ruled Manny's death an accidental drowning, but that explanation did not convince his family or me. His mom and brother moved from the neighborhood a few months later, fearing something more nefarious was at work. She didn't want to take any chances with her surviving son, and I never saw them again.

A-HEAD [Coming To America]

I have no idea where my ambition to seek success came from, especially as a poor kid who grew up in a mud house, but I'm sure it had to do with the confluence of Manny's mysterious death, the PTSD of my sexual abuse, and my desire to have a life that looked as different as possible from the one I was born into.

My other brothers all pursued blue-collar careers, but I followed the ambition gifted to me by my creator in pursuing my goals. I also manifested getting out of Belize as a fight-or-flight response to my

uncertainties regarding my sexuality in a homophobic country and culture. Fortunately, my mother had a plan over a decade in the making. Before I was born, my mom saved her tiny weekly earnings and paid “coyotes” to illegally smuggle my oldest brother across the Mexico–U.S. border. My brother Alrick Jr. joined the military and sponsored the entire family, including my five other brothers and parents, for U.S. green cards.

Landing in New York City for the first time at eleven years old on a chillier-than-normal early June morning marked the start of a period of personal wonderment, growth, and attempts at assimilation into my perception of American culture. It all combined for a reasonably tough adjustment. Although I thought I was escaping poverty and personal problems in Belize, it would be decades of spanning more than a dozen locations before I realized my struggles had less to do with my physical location than with my psyche.