

BOOK PROPOSAL

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY

Submitted by:

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Overview + Vision

Author: Ashley Ferguson

Title: *The Most Beautiful Alley*

Overview:

Like most ambitious twenty-year-old millennials, Ashley's life plan was set: she'd become a magazine intern, then a staff writer and eventually an editor. She'd followed the formula, too; worked hard, avoided distractions and did everything expected of her. However, when she finally gets the chance to move from Ohio to New York, the magazine hosting her internship folds and the path she'd planned becomes something else entirely.

Avoiding the advice of her college advisor, she goes anyway, secures multiple internship positions at major publications, and falls for a charming Brooklyn native. But, after only a short stint of walking in the rosy colored cloud of her dream life, she gets passed over for the staff position she was promised. Soon after that she learns she is pregnant and must return home for help to restart.

As she stumbles down the dark alley of single motherhood, she finds a new path to her true purpose, redefining her identity along the way.

Word count: 45440 words

Genre: Memoir. Creative Non-Fiction.

Reasons why people will care about THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY:

- It details the rough underbelly of single motherhood that often goes untold.
- It sits at the intersection of tradition and change; ambition and motherhood.
- It tells a coming-of-age story for *ambitious* impact-seeking millennial mothers.
- It shares the tender relationship between mothers and daughters.

Artistic Vision:

The story unravels as if the reader is in the shoes of someone walking down a dark alley. As light is shed on the narrator's situation, the reader quickly learns that the short cautious notes are addressed to her daughter, with whom she shares the biggest lessons of her life.

Flashbacks detail beliefs held, a deeper understanding of the author's whys and additional wisdom the reader and the daughter get to hold.

While it is not *Chicken Soup*, it is neither pain porn but instead a tender story that begged to be told about expectations, what it means to live an impactful life and the consequences of love in both directions.

I envision sparking conversations about the millennial's fixation on 'impact;' how women search for meaning in their careers, motherhood and/or both or neither; parenthood; and most importantly why creating a vision for oneself is important despite how it may manifest.

Synopsis

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY is a story about relentless ambition coexisting with single motherhood.

At 21, Ashley had it all figured out. She'd moved from Ohio to New York to launch her dream career as a magazine feature writer. However, when she falls for a Brooklyn native, loses her opportunity to work on staff at a major publication and discovers she will soon become a mother, she is forced to reevaluate her purpose and take a different route to her dreams. With her crumbling ego in tow, she returns home to Ohio to stay with her family.

She's surprised when the father of her child later joins her. The two attempt to build a family; but the feeling of the initial abandonment rots the foundation of their relationship. She finds herself in the alley of single motherhood. Reluctantly, she discovers how to keep moving through the darkness of uncertainty, accepting that her life plans are no longer her own. To provide, she accepts a position that pays the bills, burying her old dreams of writing to secure a decent life for her daughter. She navigates child support, debt, working multiple jobs, and the recurring theme of inadequacy but, finds peeks of light when she begins to embrace motherhood. She reapproaches her goals once she has redefined what it means to be successful.

The younger Ashley never would have believed she'd have to take an alley to get to the life of her dreams; but, this unconventional coming-of-age story explores how the power of vision, faith and determination can hold up through phases of abuse, brokenness, and confusion. It also slams the millennial curse of needing to have a career that makes an impact through the realization of her own mother's noble choice. Although, in the end she buys a home for her daughter, writes a children's book inspired by her, and gets a job as a writer; she realizes that none of it is good enough to protect her from disappointment. The complete text serves as an example that even if life isn't what you planned, it can still be beautiful. Similar to Maggie Smith's YOU COULD MAKE THIS PLACE BEAUTIFUL, this book

explores tender moments found within crushing disappointment and grief; but it examines single motherhood instead of divorce. Similar to Hua Hsu's *STAY TRUE*, this book flashes through memories of otherwise obscure cultural stories as if they were movie scenes, bouncing within a larger theme.

About the Author

Ashley Aya Ferguson is a writer most inspired by real life. In her poetry, children's literature and creative nonfiction work, she invites readers to live inside a feeling, creating access for connection and understanding.

When she is not writing, she is working to maintain her position as an advocate for literacy through frequent classroom visits and artistic collaborations with local community arts organizations. Her work, *Boy You Are Brilliant*, was selected by the Cincinnati Boychoir to be used in a public concert experience. In 2022, Artswave of Cincinnati awarded her a Truth and Inspiration Grant to produce her third book, *I Am Not Afraid of Spiders*. Additionally, the Revolution Dance Theater of Cincinnati chose Ferguson to write the story concept for one of its newest pieces, *I Dream of Me*. She is also a sought-after guest for local and regional events, including the African-American Read-In, promoted by the Cincinnati Library and Cincinnati Public Schools; the Books By The Banks book fair; the Buckeye Book Fair of Wooster; and Ohio University's Alvin Addams Symposium. Additionally, as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., Ashley has been featured twice in the Delta Authors Directory, extending her reach and influence to the far-reaching international member community.

Ferguson's continued commitment to honing her craft outside of the demands of single motherhood landed her in the 2021 Hurston Wright Writer's Weekend cohort under the instruction of the incomparable Imani Perry. She has also attended recent workshops with celebrated writers including Crystal Wilkinson, Maggie Smith and Hanif Abdurraqib.

As an active community servant, she also shares her time, talent and treasure with the Ohio University Alumni Association as a Board Trustee; and Cincinnati's Women Writing for a Change organization, where she serves as a facilitator and board vice president. This work enables her to lead writing circles while also working to expand writing workshops to members of underrepresented communities.

Ferguson currently resides in Cincinnati with her daughter, Nia.

Social Media

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Backlist & Publishing History

- Girl, You Are Magic! Children's picturebook
- Boy, You Are Brilliant! Children's picturebook
- I Am Not Afraid of Spiders; Children's picturebook

Inclusions & Affiliations

- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, Member
- Women Writing for (a) Change – Cincinnati; Facilitator, Board VP
- Ohio University Alumni Association, Board Trustee
- Cincinnati Books By The Banks Volunteer
- ArtsWave 2022 Truth & Reconciliation Grant Recipient

Recent and Upcoming Appearances & Workshops

- Alvin Adams Symposium Panel Speaker, Ohio University [2019]
- Hurston Wright Writer's Weekend Fellow [2022]
- 3CDC Story Walk Feature in Cincinnati's Washington Park, Ohio [Spring 2023]
- Kennedy Heights Arts Center Teaching Artist, Ohio [2023]
- Buckeye Book Fair – Presenting Author & Panel Speaker, Ohio [Nov 2023]
- Cincinnati Books By The Banks – Writing Workshop Facilitator, Ohio [Nov 2023]

Comparable Titles

You Could Make This Place Beautiful by Maggie Smith

This author breaks the fourth wall of literature and traditional memoir, speaking directly to the reader about plot, character, and form to help her authentically tell her story of love, loss, ambition and the beauty found in mothering through it all.

Stay True by Hua Hsu

Stay True flips through scenes from the author's memory and uses the reflection of other characters to tell his own coming of age story.

Marketing + Promotion

Some advisors warned me not to mention my self-published books here as they were not super mega successes; however, these books helped me cut my book promotion teeth. I would not be new to helping build a robust social media campaign, short film and videos, recording podcast episodes, knocking on doors and finding 'my people.'

I plan to promote this book to millennial mothers and children raised in similar situations. I can find these individuals through book clubs, sororities in the National Pan-Hellenic Council, social media groups and creative social media marketing. I will of course promote using my personal affiliations with Ohio University, Delta Sigma Theta Inc. and regional writing groups. Because the main character's story is one of resilience that clings to hope and faith; it will also resonate with women who may be

rehabilitating from trying situations and those following their dreams despite life's challenges. They may be found in women's centers, women's conferences, faith-based groups and more.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1

The reader is placed right in the middle of a co-parent drop-off. The mother, who is our author/main character has a clear disdain for her child's father. Her anger and memories are inescapable. A song that plays during her shift at her part-time job makes her think about how she got to this place. This leads to the introduction of the main character: a small-town girl who loved to write, rejected her mother's lifestyle choice, was obsessed with New York and went to journalism school.

We see her life as a college student interviewing for an internship position, but the magazine folds before she gets there. Her ambition moves her to go to New York anyway. This is the set up for the telling of the complete story of how she falls in love, then becomes a single mother all while never losing the ambition to 'be something.'

Chapter 2

Here we briefly learn more about the author/main character's mother. A short memory explains why the stakes are so high for success. She didn't want to be restricted by others' beliefs about her abilities, like her mother was. This chapter details her arrival to NYC, the setting in the West Village and the quest to find work in magazines. She lands a job, while learning the language of the city, then an internship while starting to enjoy it.

Chapter 3

A short memory about the main character's father explains why pursuing a career in a field that she is passionate about is risky and unconventional. The scene cuts to her talking about her new part-time job to ensure she can finance the rest of her stay. The rest of the chapter details how the main character meets the man she quickly falls for at the part-time job.

Chapter 4

Here the reader gets to see more of the scene of the West Village and learn more about the many shifts happening in her to help her fit into the city life. The reader also becomes a fly on the wall of the early relationship between the main character and the Brooklyn native as it grows. When the main character scores an additional internship, the reader is moved to believe she is taking all of the right steps to land her dream career in magazines.

Chapter 5

In this chapter the reader feels the tension and intensity of our main character needing to land a job or something more secure in order to stay in New York after graduation. She leans on faith to pray about

the job and here we learn about the history of her relationship with God. She believes if she is a good person and does the right thing, God will reward her and good will come to her. She lands a paid internship at Martha Stewart Living and finds a slightly scary apartment in el barrio.

Chapter 6

As the main character's job as a fact-checker begins, the reader gets to see the inside of Martha Stewart Living from the intern's point of view: white space, test kitchen samples, perfectly stacked diet cokes and an occasional sneak peek at the woman herself through a glass-walled office. The main character is learning more about magazine duties and how decisions are made. The reader also learns of the open editorial position that the main character has practically been waiting to walk into all of her life. She is asked to complete tasks and audition for the role.

Chapter 7

Here we learn that the path that the main character did not get the position. The main character is crushed and communicates how this feels like the end of the world for her. The reader quickly understands how and why she is closest to the Brooklyn native now as he helps her heal from this disappointment. We get to learn more about his character, why he is resilient, how she admires him and finds safety and protection in him.

Chapter 8

The main character feels compelled to begin again. She scores another internship but feels like working for free is a bad idea now that bills are a real thing. When she is asked to write a celebrity story, she feels like the internship is a complete waste of time. She begins looking for opportunities outside of magazines for some sense of security. Now that she has graduated and she and her boyfriend are living together most of the time, the increase in expenses causes stress and urgency to lock a trademark research job down. It is at the end of this chapter that we learn she is pregnant.

Chapter 9

The main character learns life must soon change. Her dream career is no longer within reach. She now also lives with the shame and embarrassment of becoming pregnant unexpectedly. We learn about her experience with sex education conversations and her unpreparedness for this chapter of her life. Here we see the juxtaposition of the life she wanted to live ending and the life inside of her beginning, complete with the violence of morning sickness on the subway and trying to hide the inevitable from her coworkers. The reader starts to see the transformation of girl to mother after the first heartbeat of the baby is heard. This sets up the larger shift taking place in both characters as they make decisions about who they will be.

Chapter 10

When it is time to tell others about the pregnancy, the main character writes a letter in preparation for the holiday season. The awkward delivery of the message reflects her mixed feelings and unsettled nature. She visits home with her boyfriend and deals with it as best she can. At Christmas she visits his family because she cannot afford to get home, but is miserable as she continues to ponder her reality and how she has bonded her life to his so quickly. She understands now how others see her, as just another girl who got knocked up, no longer special or on a journey of her own.

Chapter 11

Here readers see more transition: in the weather as it becomes winter; in our main character as her hips are widening and she decides to cut off her permed hair. The reader also sees a change in the Brooklynite. When he doesn't get the police job he applied for, he soon thereafter decides he is not interested in living the family life with the main character. He vows to always be there for his daughter but is not ready to live together with her and be part of a family. The breakup makes the winter even colder and our main character, pregnant and alone ponders what she will do next.

Chapter 12

Although it is the main character's desire to stay, as soon as the break up is solidified, her mother works on getting her out of New York. She arrives in the early spring with a van and her older brother to pack her stuff and leave the city. After her apartment is cleared out and she shares a sad goodbye with the Brooklyn native, she is safe in her hometown, in the home she grew up in with her parents feeling the love.

Chapter 13

As she settles into being in her hometown, our main character visits her brother and his family nearby. There she is surprised by her daughter's father who previously talked with her parents and has decided to live with her as she prepares to give birth. This confuses her as she remembers him distinctly breaking her heart and telling her he did not want to be in a family, or to be together at all anymore. She has no choice but to embrace him as her heart strings are still attached.

Chapter 14

As the main character nears her due date with her child's father by her side she is experiencing a range of emotions from shame related to personal judgement; to joy, confusion, sadness and happiness. The details of the birth story are shared here; emphasizing her fear and feelings of being unprepared to become a mother. Although she loves the experience, inadequacy and ambition haunt her.

Chapter 15

After giving birth, the main character has something to prove. The itch to return to work and to return to New York began to irritate her child's father until he eventually moves out of her parent's house. She follows behind him after agreeing that they will work, save money and try to get an apartment there. He rented a room, a single room in Brooklyn and she left her four-month-old daughter with the hopes of eventually bringing her there, too. It didn't work. The plan was doomed from the start considering that they would have to work and not spend money in one of the most expensive cities. An scary episode also made her also realized he wasn't responsible enough to manage a household, a dream or even a small goal. By November, the couple was back to Ohio.

Chapter 16

After the first Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday with their new baby, the couple moves to Cincinnati. The two get settled into their first apartment together. Her daughter's father finds a job at a law firm and the main character finds an open assistant editor position at a trade magazine, next to one of the top daycares. The suburbs are much different from the city but she is excited to work with words again;

even if the topic is not inspiring or interesting to anyone outside of the industry. The job sparked her interest in writing, reading and researching again. However, because the magazine industry wasn't safe from the recession, and her child's father was recently fired, she made the decision to choose another path in a marketing career.

Chapter 17

Now that she is completely out of her desired field, the main character is putting on a show, living a life she didn't really want but felt like she had to live. She works downtown in Cincinnati and feels as empty as it does. She is going through the motions of work and motherhood, watching others in their 20s enjoy their lives. Because of this and feeling trapped, she occasionally falls into depression until she can't manage to put on a show anymore.

Chapter 18

A quick memory about the main character's mother helps readers understand the struggle she is having with motherhood. Her measure for being a good parent is incomparable and unfair. She decides to take advantage of a temporary contract position for work in Philadelphia to escape her current life and to determine if she can make it as a single mother. She brings her daughter along with her and the two get to know each other better during the adventure. She is faced with a decision of whether to stay or to go at the end of the term.

Chapter 19

A weekend trip to DC, which was meant for fun, instead forces the main character to realize she might not be ready to break into the dating market, or to be single. Her fear helps make the decision to move back home after the contract is over.

Chapter 20

Upon returning from Philadelphia, our main character who is afraid of being single, decides to focus on keeping the family together and ensuring her daughter gets the best education. However, this is when the life she thought she wanted actually falls apart. Her daughter informs her that she'd rather be white and her child's father has begun to move on without her.

Chapter 21

When she decides to move out, she is met with the reality that she may not have enough money to do it alone. She humors herself and goes to see an apartment in the neighborhood she wants but just outside of her price range. This is around the same time as her daughter's fourth birthday. The celebration of the birthday collides with the end of the relationship, visits with family and an apartment full of boxes as she prepares to move out. The birthday party goes on and although the couple is clearly over, a fight in the car ensues; making it very clear that she has made the right decision to leave.

Chapter 22

A brief memory about what home feels like, is propped up next to the view of the duplex our main character has moved into. She describes some of the early challenges of not having a bed, but having a mattress; of not having enough money to afford all of the bills; of feeling angry and jealous at her carefree friends; and of failing at work because of the mounting stress.

Chapter 23

We revisit the opening scene. The flashback has met the current moment in time. We learn more about what it feels like to have a second job and miss out on time with the child. We also learn about how she struggles to afford a semi-decent life for her daughter.

Chapter 24

After some time, the main character has developed a routine she is proud of but also kind of despises. We also see the dynamic between mother and father and her reluctance to put him on child support, even though she really needs the help. She replays the scene at the jobs and family services office. She also shares her renewed confidence and how a former man friend has taken note. She is able to quit her job and start writing as a side hustle instead of working at The Container Store.

Chapter 25

The author makes the connection between the alley she's been walking through and the alley she has to walk through to get to work. She concludes that sometimes alleys are not so terrible. She tells us about her first editing client whom she visits in Columbus, and how she learned a bit about forgiveness from her. In this chapter she also shares a story about how her child's father terrorized her and her boyfriend, breaking the glass on the front door and cutting his tires; eventually ruining the relationship.

Chapter 26

The author-main character is celebrating the first paid invoice from her work as a freelance editor. She has officially launched her side hustle into a business. Later she talks about how important quality time with her daughter is, which demonstrates how she is falling in love with motherhood. She also shares how important the village is as a single mother.

Chapter 27

This chapter features a scene about the child wanting her mother to make her pancakes. This request triggers the main character as she is reminded again that she is not her mother. This time, however, instead of feeling bad about it, she is moved to make something of her own (waffles), just as she makes her brand of motherhood something of her own.

Chapter 28

This chapter opens with a typical elevator scene. On her way into work, the main character is asked how she's doing but pauses when the truth eeks out. She is barely making it: financially, mentally and emotionally. Things are shifting. This chapter details her journey of seeking a new place to live. She gets intrigued when a coworker talks about home ownership but knows her finances aren't in the ideal place. She discovers that her finances are actually in the exact right place and could be eligible to receive a grant for first-time homebuyers. The chapter concludes with the amazing (and divine) synchronicities involved that helped her home purchase go smoothly.

Chapter 29

This chapter details the final walkthrough and closing of the main character's purchase of her first home. Her fears of being alone during her home purchase were completely eradicated when her village

showed up. The family celebrates with a party together as it falls on the Saturday before her daughter's birthday. As she looks back on where she's come from, she is overwhelmed with emotion, but grateful for the progress she's made and the person her daughter has become.

Chapter 30

Now that proper housing has fallen into place, it's much easier to notice how out of alignment her job is with the life she desires. Although she's tried, she is having trouble getting a job in a field she prefers. Her depression is triggered by living a life she feels like wasn't in front of, choosing. To top it off, the accomplishment of buying a house feels great but doesn't ease the loneliness.

Chapter 31

The scene is the chaotic environment of a home recently moved into. Some parts are hers; others are remaining pieces of the people who used to live there. Purging and organizing is an invitation for her to be more intentional. Her continuation of a quest for a job working with words finally yields an interview. This chapter details the interview and feelings afterward; almost sure she's secured the position.

Chapter 32

In this chapter we meet our main character at her new job. She is finally writing for a living and enjoying it. Now that she's not unhappy, she's able to pay more attention to her daughter and notice when something is off. After an incident she is inspired to write a poem for her daughter. She makes the poem into a book and discovers that without her daughter, she would never have the meaningful life she now lives.

Sample Chapters from *The Most Beautiful Alley*

I.

This book answers that question you had for me.

I clutched the steering wheel as I swerved into the Payless parking lot. It already stung, needing to work two jobs just to make it. But being late to that second job because of the man who had ruined me, well that felt like an unnecessary kick after he'd already knocked me down.

He got out of the driver's seat of his girlfriend's car wearing a blue suit I'd never seen before. We used to go shopping together and pick out each other's clothes. I knew where the stains were on every shirt he had, and where the heels were worn on almost every pair of shoes. It had a sheen to it,

that blue suit, it was crisp and tailored. The white buttoned shirt inside was a little wrinkled, giving me the impression that he'd worn this outfit the day before. The sepia shoes complemented it well. His eyes were low, he looked tired, which I could understand because his graduation ceremony was the evening before. He, however, didn't have a job and just a few days ago told me that he hadn't enough money for gas to drive you from his house to school for the three days he was supposed to keep you. I knew these were new clothes he had on. Fuming, I watched as he lifted your tiny four-year-old body, beaming and happy to see him, up for a hug. I was on my way to sell home organization products.

I was still glazed over from my anger, which made the fifteen-minute trip feel like I was floating as I drove. I parked and floated still, through the store, then the locker room and eventually to my place on the sales floor, without remembering how I got there.

“Hey there Delilah what's it like in New York City...” I stood there, dazed under an unnatural amount of fluorescent lighting, while the popular song played. It was my third week at The Container Store and the awkward introvert in me was just getting the hang of approaching people. I stopped and listened to the words. I imagined my college best friend singing this to me. My life flashed before my eyes – I couldn't move. I was paralyzed while thinking about all of the mistakes I'd made that led me to my second job here at The Container Store now, at 27. And, although it is a fine institution, I was supposed to have it together by now. In my mind, I wasn't supposed to be in the position to need two jobs. I picked up a product to cover for myself while I continued to daze, allowing the feeling. My mind was playing back the reel of how I got here.

It was winter quarter of my senior year in Athens, Ohio. I was not concerned about finding a job so much as I was concerned with finding a job that I would enjoy. I was trained to be a reporter but I didn't enjoy it. I enjoyed writing. And I was relentless. Some of my professors had me believing that

I'd be broke for quite some time if I majored in English, or followed my dream to just write; but it was all I'd ever wanted to do. I wrote to process. I wrote to understand. As I learned more, I wrote to tell stories beautifully. I believed I'd found the way in when I discovered magazine feature writing as a path. I absolutely loved magazines. I had a collection of old magazines like VIBE, Source, Seventeen, Honey – really anything I could get my hands on when I was a kid. To me, they were the guidebooks to life outside of my small Ohio hometown. Magazines let me know there was so much more to the world than what I'd known and seen for myself. I was inspired. I lived for the stories feature articles would tell. It was an art to cast scenes against glossy pages with language; scenes that held smells, thoughts, feelings, presumptions, sounds, and living history in a container of words. I was a dreamer and magazines gave me the film for my viewfinder. Through the stories of others, I learned what it was like to travel to Europe as a teenager, how to become a pop star at the age of 15 and how to find out if my crush was true love with a ten-question quiz. I'd also learned about life in the Big Apple, where all of these magazines were. So as soon as I was able to start applying for magazine internships to begin my editorial career, I aimed for NYC. It was the only place with the jobs that would be right for me.

I'd learned fast that most people who ended up working in magazines got their start as an intern and then worked their way up the ranks or were lucky enough to just be there when an entry-level position opened up; but as a senior in college, I was running out of time to get my foot in the door as an intern.

As spring approached, my intensity grew. It was all I thought about; and how I spent much of my time.

“So if I'm homeless, can I sleep on your couch?”

I asked my friend Jordan as we walked from the Carriage Yard apartments to the Childs Cultural Center.

We walked leisurely over the road that led from the outskirts of campus toward the stadium heading near the locally-famous cobblestones, many marked 'Athens block' that lined the streets.

"I mean I would buy you something to eat, like I would do for any other homeless person," he said.

I twisted my face.

"That's cold."

This was a question I had been shopping around to many of my colleagues who I knew would be successful.

When we reached the cultural center, we went our separate ways. He was off to complain about some Greek org drama with some Alphas and Kappas. I said my hellos, bopped my head in acknowledgement to everyone inside before I headed to the computer room to print and prepare my resume and clip packets for internships. In minutes, I had piles consuming the floor and some of the tables when a couple of freshmen asked me about what I was doing.

"I'm trying to get a magazine internship," I said.

I have to send these to all of the magazine editors and hope that one gives me an internship or a job for the summer.

"Ohh okay," they still looked confused. "Can you show us how to print?"

"Sure..." I said.

I was as nice as I could be before I dodged off to take a call for a potential spring internship.

Hope and ambition mixed with desperation made my voice quiver as I answered the call for the telephone interview from what I hoped would be my magazine home base in New York.

“Hi! This is Ashley,” I sang.

“Ashley, this is Jane from *Budget Living*..”

I'd been through this a few times before so I knew the drill; though I'm not sure I could achieve the level of awful that anyone needed to be to mess up an offer to work for free; but the culture of internships in New York made even unpaid work competitive. My work and background must have sufficed for this magazine, which was not very old but still established as a title.

I was always going somewhere.

Although I loved television just as much as any 80s kid, I didn't have a real fascination with celebrity and stardom. I had an obsession with moving forward. I believed if I worked hard at school I could create a path to my dream life. I knew at a young age that the town I lived in was too small for me. Especially since I am known for being the baby's baby of the Bell family tree.

I am the third child.

The blessed baby girl, after two knucklehead boys.

I like to believe I was prayed for. I like to believe there was always a place for me.

Dianne is my mother. She is the sixth of six. Her parents were Sam and Bobbie.

Richard is my father. He is the second of seven. His parents were Richard and Barbara.

As children of the fifties, they raised us old school with obedience and a dash of fear. Both were born into big families; neither of which they would call perfect, but they knew what love felt like before they met each other.

I didn't like that everyone in my town knew my momma's name, and I couldn't deny her because I stole her face. By the cut of my nose, the depth of my eyes, the elders knew my grandpa, my uncles, my grandmama. Even later as I grew, I was still "so-and-so's little sister."

Inside I knew I needed to do more.

I needed to be more.

I wanted my own identity.

If you asked anybody I grew up with they'd tell you, she was always going somewhere.

So I went. I landed that internship at that budget travel magazine in the great city of Manhattan.

And, fueled by little more than adrenaline and hope (meaning, I was a naive college student), I moved to New York to pursue my dream of working for a major magazine.

I had even planned to go to the city against the advice of my college advisor. She told me very distinctly to, "...aim lower." She said that New York was no place for a journalist just starting out. She told me to try Chicago and write for trade magazines instead. That didn't sound like writing that would be very inspiring or world changing. She didn't get it. I didn't want to settle for anything less than the big leagues so it was my goal to prove her wrong. I needed to see my name on a masthead, and I would. I even discovered a way to use my tuition for 'intern instruction' while in NYC so my adventure would be paid for. In my mind, my journey would begin with an editorial internship, then a staff position, then an editor title.

Everything was set for me to begin the career path I had dreamed of. But I had to get over one small obstacle. That magazine, where I landed an internship? Yeah, it completely shuttered; it closed, or, in magazine industry terms, it folded just a couple of weeks before I was scheduled to arrive. I had about three weeks to decide if I should go or just follow through with spring quarter on campus. It was like everything I wanted was right in front of me, but it also wasn't.

I decided to go anyway.
This is where my story begins.

II.

You won't know where you're going. Just promise me you won't turn back.

When I was a young girl, I asked my mother what she wanted to be when she grew up. Maybe I was curious, maybe I was looking for ideas. She said she wanted to be a carpenter. She said she loved working with wood and building things.

I thought out loud, "Why didn't you do that, then?"

"Well back in those days, women were not encouraged to be carpenters -"

I stared at her, confused.

"My mother told me to do something ladies do."

"So, I signed up for typewriting and have done clerical work ever since."

I thought about my mother. She was always the one cleaning, doing laundry, taxi-ing us to doctor's appointments, picking us up from the babysitter's house, going to PTA meetings, cooking dinner in her nice work clothes after work and making my dad breakfast every Sunday morning.

I decided at that moment that my life would always be my own.

I wouldn't let anybody tell me that there was something I couldn't do. For any reason, because I am a woman or otherwise.

I was going to be something. I was going far -- not only for me, but for her, too. And, for every woman ever told no, they couldn't be what they wanted to or live the life they'd dreamed of.

All of my life I was running furiously away from becoming my mother. Though I adored her, I wanted to correct what had been done to her, more than I wanted to become her.

I found a roommate through the university's network of students who were hoping to spend time outside of campus and together we found a room in the city through an online forum. We'd be sharing a two-bedroom apartment in the West Village...with two other people. Everyone I'd asked about the West Village raised an eyebrow as if it was a good place so I felt good about it – sight unseen. After a couple of meetings, we'd arranged to fly together. I traveled to Stow, Ohio, to meet her; slept on an air mattress in a guest room until it was time for her boyfriend to drive us to the airport at an ungodly hour. He asked me what I wanted to hear. I didn't believe he knew any of the music I liked but he surprised me by playing Erykah Badu's funky smooth, *Steady on the Grind* as we bolted into the dark of the morning. Little did I know it would be the theme song of this era of my life I didn't know much about him, my new roommate, New York, or what was coming next.

But I made it.

I safely arrived in New York.

It's amazing, the kind of accommodations you'll accept when chasing a dream. I shared a very small room with a younger fellow student who fortunately didn't want to kill me, or steal anything. I remember waking up with nothing to do -the overachiever in me cringing- and feeling like this was my Eminem-you-only-get-one-shot moment. I couldn't mess this up. I didn't know a soul and I didn't know the city but I did know that I had to work nonstop to find a new internship. I sent email after email. I tapped into every professional network and bugged every contact I'd made in my four years of college. I emailed Robbie Meyers, who I'd met on a job shadow trip with my college during junior year. Her assistant and I went back and forth for a while about how she was very interested in helping, but the meeting never happened. I scoured every job board and called every long-lost friend until I got an internship position at an events website company called Shecky's. It was like no place

I'd ever worked, or any office I'd ever visited. The door was smashed between two other buildings. The friendly team was functioning in an open workspace, likely by necessity because of space much before it was it was a trend. They talked a lot and were high energy while I quietly I transcribed postings. It was typical intern work and I was grateful. On beer Fridays **I unpopularity refused to believe that work was a place to be casual, probably because** I was not yet where I wanted to be. Maybe because the Midwestern idea of professional never included beer. I could not relax. I kept looking.

I loved the energy of the city. The smells, which would make most people nauseous, were like sweet exotic aromas to me. I loved hearing accents from all over the world, even trying to use the elementary French I knew to decipher words that the women who braided my hair spoke. I was in the tourist phase for several months: pausing to listen to subway musicians and performers; gawking at how much dirt one homeless person could cake onto one jacket. Train rail rats and street roaches, I got used to; it was nothing like Ohio.

It felt like everyone there had this drive to press harder, do better; we all wanted more. Even though it hadn't all been figured out I was enjoying it. I was getting the chance to define life for myself instead of letting it just happen to me.

You would have thought I hit the jackpot when I landed an internship at *Shape* magazine. While it was the jackpot for my resume, it was unpaid and the opposite for my wallet. Furthermore, it was a fashion internship with absolutely no writing involved. If I'm honest, my job was to clean and organize the fashion closet. I did have a few long days of gathering product from showrooms for shoots—which was awesome—but most of my other daily tasks were pretty elementary. It didn't matter. Striding through the city, taking the train to Bryant Park and walking into the office every

day, under the sign for a huge media entity didn't seem real. I had an overwhelming feeling like I was taking steps toward my goal and my plan meant the world to me.

Working with fashion editors surprisingly didn't hurt my self-esteem but did create a new desire to polish my look. When I wasn't working, I was shopping and eventually, the funds from college dwindled from supporting the NY lifestyle. I decided it might be time to get a paying job.

The cobblestone streets in the Village looked and felt so familiar. On an off-day I took those brick roads right up to SoHo where the NYU college crowd blended with the rich hipsters, and the stores were larger than life. I trained myself to pronounce Houston, *How-Ston* so I wouldn't reek of Ohio.

I applied for a job at Express, where my job interview felt more like an acting or modeling audition. When I looked around at the tall beautiful well-dressed employees, I started to feel like I wouldn't fit in. *I don't need this job anyway*, I thought to myself. Scholarship money would get me through at least two more months and I could live without all the extras. But New York was all about the extras. Eating out was the norm. While walking home with grocery bags from the store an older man yelled from across the street in the loving ways New Yorkers do, "Where's the party?" and I later realized that no one cooks in New York. Finding the cutest shoes that could get as many city miles was a monthly necessity. And, trying out new outfits that my Ohio friends would have laughed off was one of my favorite new activities. Part of me wanted a job for money, but the other part of me wanted a job just to socialize. My retail experience from JCPenney to Macy's must have paid off because I was going to work at Express in SoHo, which was like getting dressed to go out.

III.

In his favorite corner of the couch from behind a thin veil of smoke, my dad asked me what I was going to do after I'd graduated high school. I told him, "I'm going to write and inspire people and change the world!" I had it all figured out. In my heart I really believed that. Then he said, "No, what are you going to do to make money so you can eat and take care of yourself?" I said, "Oh, I hadn't really thought about that..." It was clear that I wasn't coming back to his house. However, the only thing I ever wanted to do was write. I would have loved to simply study and refine my craft, major in English or literature or creative writing and spend hours in the libraries and archives. But there was no generational data to support that that was a worthwhile idea. I could dream in the margins, but using the thing I was passionate about to support me was a new concept.

Getting a job turned out to be a good idea. If I wasn't interning or making money, I was spending it. I also had an opportunity to meet people my age. How else would I get to spend time with aspiring stylists, Broadway dancers, teachers with side jobs or other transplants like me. Express SOHO encompassed two floors of clothes for men and women. My job was to style and help women who wanted to try on clothes, so I stayed upstairs. I don't believe I ever touched a cash register in that place for the entire time I was there. There were just so many clothes to be folded, hung and put away that it felt like ten people could do what I did and the work wouldn't let up.

It was my second day when someone said, "Raymond, meet Ashley..." his eyes drew me in and I didn't hear anything else. He was 6'2", the height of a man I'd written about in a poem when describing the person I thought I'd end up with. His skin was a deep-warm brown and he had a proper hairline with low-cut waves. He was dressed nice, and smiled big when I first met him. I felt like I knew him, which meant a lot, because home and that familiar feeling were so far away. He was handsome, charming, had gorgeous teeth and stared at me intently like he knew me too. Though there was an instant attraction, I played it off like I was unfazed and continued on with my shift. He worked downstairs in the men's department.

Apparently, I needed to learn more than how to say “How-ston” to shake the helpless Ohio belle thing. Two guys had overheard when I told a coworker I’d be taking the train from SoHo to the Village because I didn’t want to walk (which was a little excessive) and they both offered to walk me home. I suppose I chose Raymond, or perhaps he chose me.

Spring in New York was never as beautiful as it was on this day. Usually, the smell of at least five different ethnic cuisines and hot garbage outside of their restaurants would invade my nose but, on this day, I smelled spring flowers. The sun shined through all of the buildings onto me. The Village was lively with culture and music -per usual- and it served as the perfect backdrop for the beginning of a love story. This was the walk home from the romantic comedies that every girl imagines: I played girly shy, he played gentleman—trading me places so that he could walk on the sidewalk closer to the cars. We strolled slowly and talked about where we were from, our families. **He told me he wanted to be a police officer, and that he went to school at a city college. I told him I was in the city from Ohio to pursue my magazine dreams.** He walked me home from work that day but I got lost in his Brooklyn-boy charm. And, at the end he gave me a piece of receipt paper he’d pre-written his number on.

I said, “I’ll call you.”

He said, “I know.”

I waited until the third day to call. After that, I believe it’s fair to say there wasn’t a day that we didn’t talk for the next five years.

IV.

My apartment was down by the Christopher Street stop on the 1 train. Barrow street has a beautiful balance of trees, shade, stoops, flowers and people at any given moment. It was where you’d want

your child to move if they were moving to New York. Our landlord and roommate Brian lived there with another girl, maybe her name was Vanessa. Though she lived there I only saw her once in the three months I subleased. My corner room had a futon, a window and a tiny closet. My roommate and I shared it all. For at least an hour in the morning I could lie on the futon writing and documenting my journey, until I felt too cooped up and then I'd move to the common area if no one else was at home. When others were there, I felt every inch was a violation of someone else's personal space. Outside, however, in the courtyard behind our building, beautiful flowers and well-kept plants greeted each passerby. Open air was free here. In other parts of the city, grass was roped off, fenced in and charged for by the hour. This was a rare green space in a city full of concrete. The gracious architects allowed just enough sunshine to pass through buildings to keep the green stuff alive and to keep us all hopeful. In all the scurrying and rushing about I barely noticed the courtyard. There was a rumor that we were not far from one of New York's most famous speakeasy bars for writers. I probably walked past it several times without noticing. I suppose that's the point. It was difficult for me to enjoy the city because I was working so hard to remain in it. Even still, it seeped through my pores and I basked in the vapors of it: forward thinking, fast pace, the blunt nature of the locals, fashion risks, the accents of fusing cultures, and the stark differences from home.

This wasn't home and that is probably why I loved it so. I had to get used to not smiling kindly at strangers like my mother taught me to growing up. I had to get used to not seeing familiar faces who knew me since childhood. Although it wasn't home, it felt like exactly where I was supposed to be. People say that the best way to learn a language is to immerse oneself in conversations. I dove in headfirst. I learned the language of the city quickly. I bounced from the Village to Hell's Kitchen to Columbus Circle and back to Broadway carrying a tiny subway map I had ripped out of a pocket city guide so I didn't have the one that opened like a bed sheet and made me look like a tourist. I walked expeditiously; I took the long strides of a city dweller. I dressed the

part in complementing colors with ideas I stole from street style columns. You couldn't tell me I wasn't supposed to be here. Before I knew it, I had also gone from one job to three. I went to Shape on Tuesdays and Fridays, and I worked at Express evenings and weekends. Then along the way I'd picked up a part-time internship at *NYSE* magazine at Time Inc.

Despite my mission, Raymond and I talked all the time. I'd report on where I'd been, what I'd eaten, who I met and what I saw. Some days if he wasn't busy, he'd come from Brooklyn to pick me up from work, not in a car, just to walk me home if it was dark. We treasured the time we could spend together.

The career growth, however, was moving at a snail's pace compared to what I thought it should. I wrote about three lines in *NYSE* magazine, and had more fun wandering in the Time Inc. building than I did in the internship position. There were legendary titles everywhere! Just upstairs was *Essence*. I remember the day I met a beauty assistant in the cafeteria and she let me hang out in the *Essence* office. I became a barnacle there when I could. *Essence* was on a table in about every black home I'd ever visited. Being so close to this publication that had so much meaning to black women felt surreal. *Essence* gave us the vision of the women we didn't even know we could be. It had traffic-stopping outfits and trailblazing newsmakers; unnecessary hair that would only last an hour in real life and scenes from countries we hadn't heard of in day-to-day conversations. I could barely see down that road: me in the job I'd dreamed of, wearing something stylish, writing and inspiring; but I was going to keep walking. I even attended an event where famed *Essence* editor Susan Taylor spoke. She was my Michael Jordan – the best to ever do what I wanted to do. She had achieved the goal of pouring into the culture and making a living while doing it. She did it with poise, excellence and grace. Such a thing felt like a fairy tale, to get paid to do what you love and serve the community you are a part of. Back home, as graduation neared, it was looking more and more of us would have to

settle for positions that extinguished the fires inside of us to serve our communities and break boundaries. I didn't like that idea, which was why I was here. After seeing her speak, I stood in that Columbus Circle building feeling out of place but inspired. I didn't really know what to do with myself in a crowd of people who seemed to already know each other. In what could only be luck or chance (or a pitiful-looking baby face), Susan Taylor herself invited me over into the conversation her circle was having, as naturally as if I were one of her friends. She asked me about me. When I mentioned that I was an intern, I heard someone mention under her breath, "Oh I don't remember interns being invited..." I shrugged it off because I remembered inviting myself when I saw a flyer in the building. In my mind, I was supposed to be there. It wasn't in New York to wait for invites. Especially since the original invite had gotten lost. I just showed up.

In my off-time, Raymond and I watched *Jeopardy!* I cooked foods from home that made me feel warm inside and shared with him. He showed me around, waiting while I looked at every interesting title at the real-life newsstands, which didn't exist in my hometown. He steered me away from touristy places like Canal Street and Times Square; and at the end of our dates for the first month, we only hugged. It was like he didn't want me to think he was taking advantage of me. And I didn't. One night when my roommates weren't home, we were alone and there were fireworks outside of my window over the Hudson. He said he wanted the first time we kissed to be special, and it was because there were fireworks. We held hands and we took pictures of our palms. I've never seen a palm reader but almost every crease in my hand and in his is similar. He made me feel safe in a place where no one really knew my name. He was home. I started to believe we were destined to be together. We shared so much with each other. He told me that he had been raised by a family who fostered, then adopted him. He had a strained relationship with his biological mother. His father died when he was 3. I told him about my family, being raised in Springfield, how I really felt about Magnolia cupcakes and my love for God. When he looked into my eyes, I felt like he

could see my soul. We were dealing with a spiritual connection. It wasn't long before he told me he always wanted to be with me and that he would never leave me. Inside, I felt feelings I'd never felt before. I abandoned everything I believed about love. Nothing could be realer than this; than these moments we spent together. I disregarded those outdated rules about sex I'd once been taught to follow. On one of the nights we spent together, we had the very same dream. We were connected and it felt like we were always going to be.

He loved when we did even simple things together. I would meet him at his college where he took classes and we'd walk to get food or run errands together. I would sometimes let him talk to whoever was on my phone at the time. Usually it was my mom, checking on me. He said she sounded country and she hilariously mocked his accent. While walking home together one night, he broke out in a salsa dance to draw my attention away from the roaches I saw in the dark. It worked; I laughed while I ran away.

Summer in New York is just as beautiful as spring when you are a tourist-turned-resident. Perhaps at least for the first year. The moment I personally claimed residency was a simple moment. I had invited Raymond over for salmon patties; the food I was most homesick for. I turned the television on to see the weather report. And that's when it hit me. I actually cared about the weather here because I lived here. Each day in the five-day forecast mattered to me because I would be here. Many of the important things I'd accumulated in 21 years were here in this tiny apartment. From the window, you could see the Hudson River hugging the sideline of the city next to the westside highway. The people, the piers. *What an honor to live here*, I thought. I was grateful to be somewhere other than Ohio where dreams went to die. It felt like so much was possible here.

I was in love.

Living the dream.

And finding my way in the greatest city in the world.

Additional Background

Children who grow up with single mothers often celebrate them; however, the mother's journey is rarely detailed. *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY* was written in the crumbs of time I found between working full-time (and sometimes part-time), raising an active daughter, chasing my own dreams, and breaking generational chains all while appearing to have it all together. As much as I'd like to fill this proposal with lines about my publishing history in this journal or that journal; my bustling platform of followers or awards won while pursuing my MFA, the reality is that I've spent the last 17 years focusing on building what I believe is the best life for my daughter. My dream of writing has taken a backseat to my presence in her life. Yes, it's fed, but on a strict diet. Showing up for her, truly showing up for her, means doing what I love as long as it doesn't take away from what I believe she deserves. This included exploring self-publishing options instead of querying (so that publishing could happen before I lost my nerve); it meant putting off things that stole too much time or attention; and taking way too much time on one book! However, with as little ego as possible, I am truly proud of the life I've built, the draft I'm proposing and the future ahead of the both of us because of the choices I've made.

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY is about what happens at the place where relentless ambition meets single motherhood.