

## **BOOK PROPOSAL**

### *THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY*

Submitted by:

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## Overview + Vision

**Author:** Ashley Ferguson

**Title:** *The Most Beautiful Alley*

**Word count:** 45440 words

**Genre:** Memoir. Creative Non-Fiction.

**Logline:** In a tug of war between ambition and single motherhood, what wins?

**Logline:** *The Devil Wears Prada* with Stephanie Land from *Maid* as the main character.

### Overview:

Like most ambitious twenty-year-old millennials in the early 2000's, my life plan was set: I'd become a magazine intern, then a staff writer and eventually an editor. I'd followed the formula, too. I worked hard, avoided distractions and did everything expected of me. However, when I finally got the chance to move from Ohio to New York, the magazine hosting my internship folded and the path I'd planned became something else entirely.

Avoiding the advice of my college advisor, I went anyway, secured multiple internship positions at major publications, and fell for a charming Brooklyn native. But, after only a short stint of walking in the rosy colored cloud of my dream life, I got passed over for the staff position I was promised. Soon after that I learn I am pregnant and must return home for help to restart.

I stumbled down the alley of single motherhood, but found a new path to my true purpose, redefining my identity along the way.

**Reasons why people will care about THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ALLEY:**

- It details the rough underbelly of single motherhood that often goes untold, because single moms are busy.
- 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 trauma 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 memoir about relentless ambition coexisting with single motherhood.

At 21, Ashley had it all figured out. She 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 and is then surprised when the father of her child later joins her. The two attempt to build a family; but the initial abandonment rots the foundation of their relationship.

When she finds herself in the alley of single motherhood, she accepts a position that pays the bills and buries 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 finding shards of light when she embraces motherhood.

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 no amount of accomplishment can shield her from disappointment, or heartbreak; contrary to what she grew up believing. The complete text reminds readers 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 Kiese Laymon's HEAVY and 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 working full-time, she promotes her three children's picture books titled, *Girl, You Are Magic!*; *Boy, You Are Brilliant!*; and *I Am Not Afraid of Spiders*. She is also a sought-after guest for local and regional events, including the African-American Read-In, promoted by the Cincinnati Library; the Great American Read-In, promoted by Cincinnati Public Schools; and the Books By The Banks book fair. 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 landed her in the Hurston Wright Writer's Weekend cohort under the instruction of the incomparable Imani Perry; Penguin Random House's Women and Words program, Ohio State University's Newberry Award Symposium and the 2025 Martha's Vineyard Creative Writing Institute. She has also attended recent workshops with celebrated writers including Crystal Wilkinson, Maggie Smith and Hanif Abdurraqib.

As an active community servant, she 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. 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, but loves to wander.

## Social Media

IG: ashleyayaferguson | Facebook: Ashley Aya Ferguson

## **Inclusions & Affiliations**

- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, Member
- Women Writing for (a) Change – Cincinnati; Facilitator, Former 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**

- Martha's Vineyard Institute of Creative Writing Poet + Author Fellow [2025]
- Kennedy Heights Arts Center Teaching Artist, Ohio [2023]
- Buckeye Book Fair – Presenting Author & Panel Speaker, Ohio [2023]
- Cincinnati Books By The Banks – Writing Workshop Facilitator, Ohio [2023]
- Alvin Adams Symposium Panel Speaker, Ohio University [2019]
- Hurston Wright Writer's Weekend Fellow [2021]

## **Comparable Titles**

*You Could Make This Place Beautiful* by Maggie Smith

*Heavy* by Kiese Laymon

*Stay True* by Hua Hsu

Maggie Smith 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.

Hua Hsu flips through scenes from memory and uses the reflection of other characters to tell his own coming of age story in *Stay True*.

In *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon lays it all down, tenderly, in letter form to his mother. This intimacy creates a clear window into the emotion behind the words.

## **Marketing + Promotion Ideas**

The marketing plan for this book will consist of a combination of paid and organic efforts.

### Organic

- A new roundup article on books about single mothers for SEO, which will land those searching on my promotional page.
- Book club and tour appeal letters for Delta Sigma Theta, women's writing groups
- Podcast visits on topics related to setting a vision, single motherhood and the mother-daughter bond.
- A series of videos with poetry voiceovers for social media about the relationship between mother and daughter. One of these is already created.
- A blurb from Maggie Smith, Jacqueline Woodson, Kiese Laymon, Hanif Abdurraqib or Glory Edim

### Paid

- Paid social sponsored content ads targeting the millennial mother with video
- Booktok and Book Influencer sponsorships



## Chapter Summary

### Chapter 1

I'm on the way to my second job when I see my child's father who is always crying broke in a brand-new suit. I'm beyond pissed. He is my daughter's hero, but I would like to punch him in the face. (You'll notice I'm addressing my daughter very subtly) When I get to work, still mad, a song that plays triggers my memory about how I got to this place. I flashback to life as a college student interviewing for the internship position that will choose me, but the magazine folds before I get there. I go to New York anyway.

### Chapter 2

A short memory explains why the stakes are so high for success. I didn't want to be restricted by others' beliefs about my abilities, like my mother was. This chapter details my arrival to NYC spring quarter of my senior year, the setting in the West Village and the quest to find work in magazines. I land an *editorially adjacent* job, while learning the language of the city, then finally I get an internship.

### Chapter 3

A short memory about my father explains why pursuing a career in a field that I am passionate about is risky and unconventional. The scene cuts to me talking about my new part-time job to ensure I can finance the rest of my stay. It is at this job where I meet the man who will change my life forever.

### Chapter 4

Take in the scene of the beautiful West Village. I am moving through now, soaking up all the city has to offer, well as much as I can on a college student's budget. The relationship between myself and the Brooklyn native is growing like a weed. When I get an additional internship, you start to believe that I'm actually going to get to my dream career in magazines.

### Chapter 5

You will start to feel the tension and intensity of landing a job now that graduation approaches. I talk using magical genie faith to pray about the job I want. I'm good, right? I should have what I want. (This is a running theme early on) Here we learn about the history of my relationship with God. It worked a little, because I land a paid internship at Martha Stewart Living and find a slightly scary apartment in the barrio.

### Chapter 6

My job as a fact-checker begins, and you get to see inside the magical world of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia 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. I learn more about magazine duties and how decisions are made and also of an open editorial position that I have practically been waiting to walk into all of my life. I am asked complete tasks and audition for the role.

## Chapter 7

When I don't get the job, I'm crushed. I detail how this feels like the end of the world for me and fall into the loving arms of my Brooklyn native. He has what it takes to help me heal from the disappointment, considering he's been through so much. You get to learn more about his character, why he is resilient, how I admire him and find safety and protection in him.

## Chapter 8

I start to get back on the horse, not ready to give up, and score another internship but it feels like working for free is a bad idea now that bills are a real thing. I'm completely undone when asked to write what I deem a celebrity worship story. Now that I've graduated and we are shacking up, the increase in expenses causes stress and urgency to accept an offer on a very random trademark research job. It is at the end of this chapter that readers find out I am pregnant, also spiraling.

## Chapter 9

I'm coming to the realization that life must soon change. My dream career is no longer within reach and add to that the shame and embarrassment of becoming pregnant unexpectedly and we get a toxic combo. I am not even prepared for safe sex, let alone a baby. I am juxtaposing the life I wanted to live ending and the life inside of me beginning, complete with the violence of morning sickness on the subway and trying to hide the inevitable from her coworkers. Here you will 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, I write a letter in preparation for the holiday season. The awkward delivery of the message reflects my mixed feelings and unsettled nature. I visit home with my boyfriend and deal with it as best I can. At Christmas, I visit with his family because I cannot afford to get home, but I am miserable as I continue to ponder my reality and how I have bonded my life to his so quickly. I understand now how others see me, as just another girl who got knocked up, no longer special or on a journey of her own.

## Chapter 11

As winter comes around, the weather isn't the only thing changing. My hips are widening and I decide to stop relaxing my hair and going completely natural. I see the changes in myself and I see the change in my partner. When he doesn't get the police job he applied for, he soon thereafter decides he is not interested in living the family life at all. He vows to always be there for his daughter but is not ready to live together and be part of a family. The breakup makes the winter even colder, which makes a pregnant hormonal me strongly consider what I will do next.

## Chapter 12

More than anything, I want to stay in New York. I want to prove that I can make it. But, as soon as the break up is real, my mother works on getting me out of New York. She arrives in the early spring with a van and my older brother to pack my stuff and leave the city. After the apartment is cleared out and I

share a sad goodbye with the Brooklyn native, I find myself in a cocoon of love and safety in the home she grew up in with my parents.

#### Chapter 13

As I settle into being at home, during a visit with my brother and his family nearby I am hit with the surprise of my life. My daughter's father, who previously talked with my parents, has decided to move to Ohio to live. This confuses me as all I can remember is him distinctly breaking my heart and telling me he did not want to be in a family, or to be together at all anymore. Regardless, I have no choice but to embrace him as my heart strings are still attached.

#### Chapter 14

The due date approaches. And, with my child's father by my side I am experiencing a range of emotions from shame related to personal judgement; to joy, confusion, sadness and happiness. I'll tell you the birth story; and am careful to share also my fear and feelings on being unprepared to become a mother. Although I love and respect the experience, inadequacy and ambition haunt me.

#### Chapter 15

After giving birth, I've got something to prove. The itch to return to work and to return to New York began to irritate Raymond until he eventually moves out of my parent's house. I stupidly follow behind him after agreeing that we will work, save money and try to get an apartment there. He rented a room, a single room in Brooklyn and we left our four-month-old daughter with the hopes of eventually bringing her back to the city, too. It didn't work. The plan was doomed from the start considering that we would have to work and not spend money in one of the most expensive cities. An scary episode also made me realize that he wasn't responsible enough to manage a household, a dream or even a small goal. By November, we were back to Ohio.

#### Chapter 16

After the first Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday with baby, we move to Cincinnati. Eventually we get settled into our first apartment together. Raymond finds a job at a law firm and I find 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 I'm excited to work with words again; even if the topic is not inspiring or interesting to anyone outside of the industry. The job sparked my interest in writing, reading and researching again. However, because the magazine industry wasn't safe from the recession, and Raymond was recently fired, I made the decision to choose another path in a marketing career.

#### Chapter 17

Now that I am completely out of my desired field, I'm putting on a show, living a life I didn't really want but felt like she had to live. I work downtown in Cincinnati, which feels as empty as I do. I am depressed, going through the motions of work and motherhood, watching others in their 20s enjoy their lives.

#### Chapter 18

A quick memory about my mother helps readers understand the struggle I'm having with motherhood. My measure for being a good parent is incomparable and unfair. I decide to take advantage of a temporary contract position for work in Philadelphia to escape my current life and to determine if I can

make it as a single mother. I bring my daughter along and surprisingly, we get to know each other better during the adventure. Faced with a decision of whether to stay or to go at the end of the term, a quick weekend trip makes it clearer.

#### Chapter 19

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

#### Chapter 20

Upon returning from Philadelphia, I, who am afraid of being single, decide to focus on keeping the family together and ensuring my daughter gets the best education. However, this is when the life I thought I wanted actually falls apart. My daughter informs me that she'd rather be white and it's clear my child's father has begun to move on without me or us.

#### Chapter 21

When I do decide to move out, I am met with the reality that I may not have enough money to do it alone. I humor myself and go to see an apartment in the neighborhood I love, but is just outside of my price range. This is around the same time as my 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 I am preparing to move out. The birthday party goes on and although we are clearly over, a fight in the car ensues; making it very clear that I've 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 I recently moved into. I describe 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 my 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. Readers learn more about what it feels like for me to have a second job and miss out on time with my child. We also learn about how I'm struggling to afford a semi-decent life for my daughter.

#### Chapter 24

After some time, I've developed a routine I am proud of but also kind of despise. Readers also see the dynamic between mother and father and my reluctance to put him on child support, even though I really need the help. I replay the scene at the jobs and family services office. I also share my renewed confidence and how a former man friend has taken note. I am able to quit my job and start writing as a side hustle instead of working at The Container Store.

#### Chapter 25

Here I start to make the connection between the alley I've been walking through and the alley I have to walk through to get to work. I conclude that sometimes alleys are not so terrible. I share the details of

my first editing client I visit in Columbus, and how I learned a bit about forgiveness from her. In this chapter I also share a story about how my child's father terrorized me and my boyfriend, breaking the glass on the front door and cutting his tires; eventually ruining the relationship.

#### Chapter 26

It's a celebration! I have received my first payment from my work as a freelance editor. I have officially launched my side hustle into a business. While doing this, I juxtapose the importance of quality time with my daughter and the value of time someone will pay me to work. This also demonstrates how I am falling in love with motherhood, with of course the help from the village.

#### Chapter 27

When my daughter asks me to make pancakes I want to shrivel. This request triggers me as I am reminded that I am not my mother. This time, however, instead of feeling bad about it, I am moved to make something of my own (waffles), just as I make my own brand of motherhood something of my own.

#### Chapter 28

Seems simple, but in the elevator to work someone asks me how I'm doing but I pause when the truth eeks out. I am barely making it: financially, mentally and emotionally. Things are shifting. This chapter details my journey of seeking out a new place to live. I am intrigued when a coworker talks about home ownership but I know my finances aren't in the ideal place. I discover that my finances are jacked but my credit is actually in the exact right place and I could be eligible to receive a grant for first-time homebuyers. The chapter concludes with the amazing (and divine) synchronicities involved that helped my home purchase go smoothly.

#### Chapter 29

This chapter details the final walkthrough and closing of the purchase of my first home. My fears of being alone during the home purchase were completely eradicated when my village showed up (out of nowhere!). We all celebrate with a party together on the Saturday before my daughter's birthday. As I look back on where I've come from, I am overwhelmed with emotion, but grateful for the progress I've made and the life I'd built.

#### Chapter 30

Now that proper housing has fallen into place, it's much easier to notice how out of alignment my job is with the life I desires. Although I've tried, I am having trouble getting a job in a field I prefer. My depression is triggered by living a life I feel like I'm not in front of, choosing for myself. 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 mine; others are remaining pieces of the people who used to live there. Purging and organizing is an invitation for me to be more intentional. My continuation of a quest for a job working with words finally yields an interview. This chapter details the interview and feelings afterward; almost sure I've secured the position.

## Chapter 32

In this chapter, check me out at my new job. After all that, I am finally writing for a living and enjoying it. Now that I'm not miserable, I'm able to pay more attention to my daughter and notice when something is off. After an incident I am inspired to write a poem for her. I make the poem into a book and slowly discover that without my daughter, I would never have the meaningful life I live now live.

### 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.

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“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.*

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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.*

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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 journey 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 how relentless ambition and single motherhood can coexist.