

"Memories of You"

By: Arnecia McGlory

It was about a quarter to nine in the morning on Monday, July 2, 2012 in Houston, Texas. I sat zombie-like in the passenger seat of Shadow, my roommate/coworker's (JoJo's) Nissan Altima, waiting for her to come out of the school. The interior of Shadow boasted an increasingly roasting temperature. I was too fixated with my thoughts to even think to start the car, turn on the a/c, or even crack a window. I fiddled with the keys and allowed tears to flow freely. The vacant driver's seat. Embarking on an unknown journey without a seasoned navigator, without someone to quell my insecurities. I closed my eyes and dropped my head into my hands.

My mind had assembled a replaying series of preparative statements from my grandmother. Each one a slightly different variation of the same thing: "Yah know Ahm not gone be 'round heah fa eva... One day Ahmma be wit' tha Lawd... Yah betta enjoy me while Ahm heah." Even though it was something she tried to prepare all of the family for, nothing would soften the blow. Granted she was 102 years old, at that point I really didn't think she was going to go. In a sense she seemed to be able to fight through anything and emerge a victor. My eyes were a leaky faucet as the call from my mother played as the second track on the listing of my sad memories.

I had just finished giving instructions to my summer senior English students for their group assignments. They were writing plays and rehearsing them to perform for each other. It was the perfect assignment to keep them busy and give me a chance to catch up on grades. As soon as I settled into the chair at my desk, my cell phone rang which was a first because no one called during school hours. The display read "Sweet" which is what I have my parents' listed as, a play on home sweet home. My mom was the person that always called. Dad would be over her shoulder.

"Hey Ma. I'm in the middle of class what's up?" I held the phone close to my ear and lowered the volume.

"I...I...You need to get over here. Granny..." she sobbed, "she isn't doing well." Her voice trembled throughout each statement, cracking, shifting from low to almost inaudible tones. I walked away from desk and near the door. My heartbeat accelerated, and the world around me began spinning like a merry-go-round on warp speed.

"I don't know how much longer she has. Please don't be mad at me for not calling you sooner. I didn't want to wake you up. But you need to come see her. I'm sorry. I'm scared." By the completion of her speech, I was in the hallway in a position I could not completely comprehend.

"What happened?" my hand trembled as I pressed the phone against the side of my face.

"I think she had a stroke late last night and has not been responding. We heard her holler 'OHHH!' and she hasn't said anything since. I'm sorry Necia. I can't talk right now."

"Okay. I'm on my way." I ended the call and walked next door to JoJo's class. My face was covered in tears as I pushed the slate toned door open. She was writing on the dry erase board and giving directions but stopped mid-sentence when she saw my grief stricken face. She came out into the hallway. I explained the phone call from my mom. She gave me a hug, ran into the classroom, grabbed her keys, handed them to me and told me to go wait in the car. She would take care of everything.

One of my students came out into the hall to check on me just as JoJo had walked around the corner to go to the front office. Cecelia asked me, "Are you okay Miss?" I shook my head. "I'm leaving," was all I could say.

"You want me to grab your purse and stuff?"

"Yes, please. Thank you." I remember a sense of abandonment overtaking me. The world just seemed like a void, emptiness gnawing at the pit of my stomach.

She walked in the classroom and returned a moment later. She gave me a hug and handed me a box of tissue. My legs managed to guide me from the door outside of my classroom, down the

salmon hued hallway, past the expansive rows of steely lockers, in front of the library, around the corner, out of the double glass doors to the teacher's parking lot at the back of Cesar Chavez High School.

A few moments later, JoJo got in the driver's side. Her almond eyes widened. "It's hot in here," she said and removed the black cardigan from her thin arms and started the car. "How do I get to your parents' house?"

"Take 45 North to 59 South," I said, my voice raspy. The drive from Southeast Houston to Sugar Land, a suburb of Southwest Houston, usually took about thirty to forty minutes depending on traffic.

We pulled out of the parking lot and began heading toward the house. I rocked back and forth in my seat like my grandmother would do whenever I told her I had a bad dream or a tummy ache or even when she just wanted to hold me. I remembered how much I valued her hugs. When I was small, we pretended they were the armor of God and could shield me away from the cold, harshness of the world. And given the state my mother described a hug would be one of the many moments we'd no longer share. The seed of emptiness planted by this news took root and began to grow, revealing a host of insecurities and absences that I'd fought out of my mind forever and a day. No one wants to consider losing a closely loved relative.

My stomach bubbled a guilty sorrow. *I should have gone to see her more. I should have spent more time with her.* I called her more, but the visits had become less frequent. It froze my soul and yanked away at my heartbeat to witness my hero wither away as a result of her third bout with cancer. It progressed quickly to me, but slowly in a medical aspect. It had metastasized from her right breast, eating away at her organs, devouring her energy, consuming her body until she was only a fraction of herself. I initially felt guilty for two reasons: 1. I could not bear to watch this relentless thief steal her away, piece by piece, a person so near and dear to my heart. It hurt to see her suffering. 2. Knowing there was nothing I could to fix it. It was a situation beyond my control. The hardest thing to make peace with is being unable to help a suffering person, especially when it's someone you love unconditionally.

JoJo interrupted my thoughts. "Is there anything I can do or that you need me to do?" she asked, breaking eye contact with the road. Her small hands securely held the steering wheel. Her face flushed, highlighting the small freckles around her button nose. It would be years later that I reflected on her actions in that moment, her ability to come through in a tight situation. I'd start calling her Clutch as this would be the first time of many when I'd be around her and receive my share of traumatizing news.

