

## TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 26, 2019

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*In this poignant account, Rodriguez shares his experience facing the loss of a beloved family member while incarcerated. He details the pain of confronting lost time and experiences with his loved ones, and how his grief gave him a renewed sense of vigor to work toward his plans for the future.*

“Johnny Boy,” Kahri said urgently as he walked into the Bard Prison Initiative computer lab, “Deacon Buckner is looking for you. You know I don’t like when he comes around: He never brings good news.”

I sat before my computer screen, bewildered, my mind clashing with the paper I’ve been working on and the bad news I was about to receive.

“What? Where is he?” I asked.

“He’s outside the classroom door asking for you.”

I hit the save icon, got up, and tried turning off my computer monitor. But I couldn’t; I felt jittery. I began fumbling with the off button, looking at Leon, my fellow college buddy, with a distant stare that asked for help.

“Jonathan,” Leon pleaded, “I got you. Go handle your business.”

I took a deep breath, and whispered, “I hate moments like these!”

The silence that had filled the space in the room became deafening. I gathered my belongings and walked out of the computer lab, feeling the stares of my classmates penetrating my back. I entered the main classroom and saw the deacon waiting for me outside the classroom, just as Kahri said. Before exiting the room, I noticed Professor Andre Pletch’s curious stare.

“Professor, please excuse my leaving. I have to see what this is about.”

“Is everything alright?” he inquired.

“Someone in my family probably died,” I said offhandedly, the numbness I was beginning to feel superseded my thought-filtering ability.

In capturing so many words in three simple gestures, Professor Pletch stopped his one-on-one consultation with a student, got up, and shook my hand. I did everything in my power to embrace what was sure to hit me in the chest. I clenched my jaw after accepting Professor Pletch’s silent condolences and walked out of the classroom door.

“Man, I’ve been looking for you all day,” Deacon Buckner rapidly said. “I have to take you to the Chaplain’s office so I can get you on the phone with your family.”

“Deacon, what’s going on? Who died?”

“You don’t know what’s going on?”

“No.”

“When was the last time you’d spoken to your mother?” he shot out this question while we speed-walked through the two-tone hallway of Green Haven Correctional Facility’s school building, known as Building 12. We were on the second floor. Dread beat against my heart, each step I took feeling heavier.

“Last night,” I sighed.

He looked at me with sadness spilling out of his eyes, offering at last, “I was informed that your grandmother, Rosa Francesca Cruz, passed away this morning. We have to hurry up so I can get you on the phone and start filling out the paperwork so you can go to her wake.”

“Shit!” I blurted, slowing down my walk. Wrecked with emotions, I shook my head in disbelief, thinking, *If you could’ve held on for another five years—I had plans for us!*

“John, do you know if your grandmother was sick?” Deacon Buckner asked after noticing my emotional reaction to the bad news of my grandmother’s passing.

“She was diabetic and asthmatic,” I offered when we stopped briefly in the hallway. “I also know she lived in a very stressful environment. About two months ago, my aunt Jackie found her in her room, lying on her bed, blue and unresponsive.”

“I knew it! She must have suffered a heart attack,” he said with conviction. “Probably,” I replied, feeling out of it, defeated.

“Johnny?”

I looked over my left shoulder to the person calling my name. Kahri was running up to me and Deacon Buckner, saying, “Excuse me Deacon, let us have a minute alone.”

“Sure,” he replied, taking a few steps away, giving us some privacy.

I turned from Deacon Buckner and closed the distance between Kahri and me. He gave me a fist bump when I reached him, followed by a manly hug.

“Bro, I’m here for you,” he informed me when we released our embrace, his hands remaining on my shoulders.

“I know. Let everyone know that my grandmother passed away this morning. I got to go, Bro. I’ll speak to you tomorrow morning. We’ll go over the details of the theme for your final paper then.”

“Aiiight! Hold your head up.”

I walked away from Kahri and continued the long journey to the Chaplain’s office with my own private escort, Deacon Buckner. While walking through the prison’s dingy hallways, he schooled me in what to expect. He planned to put me on the telephone with a family member, most likely my mother. Disregarding institutional rules, he informed me that my grandmother’s wake was to be held on Saturday, November 30, a few days from today. After my phone call was completed, he would then escort me to my housing block. I understood the procedure all too well. Just last year I went through the same process when my 10-month-old niece Nayahlise passed away in my sister Amy’s arms.

At the rate of speed we were walking, we arrived at the Chaplain’s office in record time: Just under two minutes!

“It took me forever to find Jonathan, but I found him in the Bard College room,” Deacon Buckner explained to Pastor Gebamoni as we walked into the Protestant office. “Get his family on the phone!”

Pastor Gebamoni wasted no time in picking up the telephone and dialing my emergency contact number, which belonged to my mother. No one picked up. He tried again and got the same result.

“Here, call my mother’s cell phone number,” I said after pulling out my brown address book and writing her number on a piece of paper. Pastor Gebamoni took the

paper and dialed the new number. Louie, my mother's boyfriend, picked up after a few rings.

"Hello. Can I speak to Margarita Rodriguez?" the Pastor asked, his thick Indian accent weighing heavily on each word. "Yes, I'm the head Chaplain at Green Haven Correctional Facility. I have Jonathan sitting in front of me."

He paused, a confused look crossing his face. I immediately understood what was happening. Since Louie doesn't speak English, a language barrier existed.

*I can't believe this is happening, again,* I thought, anger rising to the surface. I understood death to be an essential part of life, but understanding this fact still didn't make the experience of losing someone dear any easier. Granted, my reckless actions and some terrible decisions over a decade and a half ago have placed me on the path to receiving a twenty-year prison sentence. But my predicament didn't stop me from dreaming of a better life upon my eventual release. In fact, my current situation exasperates it. It has become the driving force that fuels my desire to succeed in life, to be a success story.

I'm still a human being, damn it! Fulfilling my bucket list means the world to me. The tragic event of this day has now forced me to draw a line through everything I'd planned to do with my grandmother. There will be no more dinners with or birthday parties for grandma. And my future child won't ever get to meet the superwoman in our family. My grandmother's memory will forever be etched in the distant past.

"Here, speak," Pastor Gebamoni said to me, tearing me out of my reveries by making this announcement and offering me the phone.

I grabbed the receiver and said, "Hola! ¿Como está, Louie? ¿Donde mi Mama?"

"Llama esta number. Ella es tus casa de la abuela," he answered, reading off a phone number to me, repeating it a second time just to make sure I got it. I wrote it down on a piece of paper. I passed the phone to the Pastor, and asked, "Can you call this number for me?"

He briefly looked at me with sympathy seeping out of his eyes. He took the piece of paper and dialed the number. The phone on the other end of the line was answered immediately.

"Hello, yes, can I speak to Margarita Rodriguez?" Pastor Gebamoni asked. When the person on the other end of the phone line answered, his eyes lit up and darted toward me. I knew then that it was my mother who'd answered the phone.

"Yes, I have your son here. Hold on," he replied, passing the receiver to me.

"Hey, Ma," I spoke softly into the phone, trying to gauge my mother's mood with these feeler words.

"JONATHAN, MY MOMMY'S GONE!" she broke down in tears, her heart wrenching tone piercing through me.

"I know. I heard," I responded in the softest and most comforting tone I could muster at the moment, tears trickling down my face. "I know what I'm about to say is easier said than done, but you have to always remember that grandma left us something valuable: Family. We have to lean on each other for support during this time."

"I know, son. I know," mom said, more to herself than to me.

“Now, I know I can’t physically be there for you like I’d like because of my predicament, but you best to believe I *will* do everything in my power to call you every day. I will check on you during this tough period in your life. Do you hear me?” I said firmly, clenching my jaw muscles.

“Okay. Jon—I miss you so much.”

“I miss you, too. Always and forever,” I confidently related, smiling. “Let me wrap up this phone call so I can get back to my housing block. If I can make it back before count time, I should be able to call you again, and this time we’d have more time to talk.”

“Okay, call me, please.”

“Okay, I will. Love you, Ma.”

“I love you, too, my Sun Shine.”

When the phone line went dead on the other end, I handed the receiver to Pastor Gebamoni, saying kindly, “Thanks for everything.”

He shook his head and we shared a moment. For me, I was grateful for what he just did. For the Pastor, even though it’s his duty to relate the death of loved ones to incarcerated individuals and process the necessary paper so said person, if eligible, could attend the loved one’s wake, this job in helping prisoners process their grief is never easy.

“Let’s get you back to your housing block,” Deacon Buckner interjected.

The walk to my housing block wasn’t long. On the way, Deacon Buckner and I engaged in small talk about how short life is. If I only understood this when I was younger, my life would’ve been filled with less heartache and pain. But I’d long ago accepted the idea that the reason why I’m usually hard on myself is because I know I have the potential to do better in life.

It is unfortunate that I had to come to prison in order to learn and value this lesson. This lesson is predicated on another realistic one: I took a life and, with the same brutality, I had to watch close family members and friends leave, grow old, or die from a prison cell, my pain repressed for the sake of not succumbing to the perils that come with living a prisoner’s life.

When I arrived at my housing block, I was allowed to use the phone because of my loss which isn’t always the case. But I gladly accepted the gesture with kindness and gratitude from the steady officer. I went to the phone booth and realized that I won’t be able to call the phone number Louie gave me because it wasn’t on my offender phone list.

*You gotta be kidding me!* I thought, annoyed at my plight.

I stood in the phone booth. I tried to control the rising stress I began feeling from having to deal with my grandmother’s death and this unexpected obstacle. Resigned, I dialed my best friend Daniel’s cell phone number.

He picked up immediately, “Yeeerr, what’s up, Bro-di?”

“Yo.”

“So the Pastor spoke to you?” he inquired after gauging my emotional response to his question.

“Yeah,” I replied, grateful at the fact that I was able to connect with my friend in my time of need.

“Sorry about you losing your grandmother, bro. I called Green Haven once your mother reached out to me. She’s devastated, you know.”

“I know, listen...” I was cut off.

“Don’t worry, I got momdukes. Do me a favor and focus on school. I don’t need you fucking up now; you came a long way with your education. Remember, we have big plans for the future. So keep focus on what matters, and don’t forget to grieve. Reach out to me any time of the day. I don’t care if I’m working, reach to me.”

“Okay. Thanks, bro.”

“Do you need anything at the moment? Would you like for me to three-way anybody for you?” He asked with sincerity.

“Nah, you’re at work right now, right?”

“Yeah, so what? This is a family emergency.”

“Nah, I’m good for now. My family is making the funeral arrangements for my grandmother and I don’t want to get in the way with my phone calls. Maybe tonight, though. Plus, I know my family. Most of them are going to smoke weed and drink liquor in my grandmother’s memory.”

“I don’t blame them. Your mom sounded out of it when we spoke earlier.”

“Yeah, I noticed when I spoke to her earlier, too. Listen, bro, let me call you back later.”

“Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m good. I just need time to myself. I need to breathe and think. I’ll speak to you later.”

“Call me! Love you, Bro-di.”

“Love you, too, Bro-di.”

I hung up the phone, took a deep breath, and exited the phone booth. I soon found myself back in my cell. After settling down, I pulled out the big manila envelope with all my pictures from the bottom of my locker and started looking through them. There were so many. So many pictures were sent to me over the past 16 years. I can honestly say that I’d watched many family members grow up through snap shots of their lives. I felt joy and pain as I began reliving their special moments forever encapsulated in photographs. The only person missing from all of them was me.

*Grandma*, I thought. I caressed a picture of her and a fond memory popped into my head.

*I was perhaps five-years-old, and I did something terrible. I disrespected my mother by giving her some lip. Sensing danger, I ran from in front of my grandparents’ apartment building, my mother and young Aunt Jacky in tow. My fear of getting caught provided fuel for my short legs, and my mother being pregnant with Amy slowed her down. I kept running. I ran between parked cars in front of a garage, jumped on top of sturdy boxes, and skipped over oil puddles. And I kept running. I ran around my grandmother’s block, feeling relieved when I looked over my shoulder and saw no one in sight.*

*I eventually found myself in a truck lot. I aimlessly wandered through parked trucks, my mind grasping the reality that I’d just dug myself into deeper trouble. After climbing a short wall at the end of the block and wading through two parked trucks, I felt arms close around me and lift me up.*

*“Maggie, I got him,” Aunt Jackie yelled at the top of her lungs. She was about four years older than me, and her skinny arms had a vice grip on me. Fear filled me. I kicked and screamed my little heart out, crying bloody murder. Aunt Jackie was relentless. She kept lifting me off my feet, hoping to tire me out. Upon her final lift, I pulled up my right knee to my chest and when she allowed my other leg to touch the ground, I struck with vengeance. My right foot slammed into her kneecap. And boy did she let out a wail, releasing me in the process.*

*I took the opportunity presented by my Aunt’s injury to hightail it out of there. I ran as fast as I could, hoping to run into my grandmother. And I did. I ran right to her waiting arms, but my safe haven didn’t stop my mother from entering it. While crying for help in grandma’s arms, my pregnant mother flew over her shoulder and smacked the shit out of me.*

*“Don’t you ever run from me like that!”*

*“Hay, Maggie, leave him alone,” my grandmother tried to reason with my mother.*

*“No! He’s going to learn the hard way. He could’ve been killed with his recklessness, mom.”*

My grandmother meant the world to me. “Grandma,” I whispered, choking out her name. She was my savior whenever I got into trouble with my parents.

The days leading up to my grandmother’s wake went by in a blur. My sleep pattern had changed dramatically as I sunk my teeth into my studies. Numbed, I was no longer fazed by the late night and early morning routine. My waking hours became something I looked forward to.

Saturday morning soon arrived, the sky clear and blue, the cool air somewhat soothing my anxiety. I still felt empty inside as I waited for correctional officers to pick me up and drive me from Stormville, NY to the Bronx, NY. Time slowed down to a snail’s pace as I waited in my cell. I paced back and forth and listened to music on my JP5 tablet as a way to not fold under the pressure of losing someone dear. I did wrestle with the thought of what to expect at the wake. Would I have the courage to walk up to my grandmother’s casket, bend down, shackles tearing into my flesh, and kiss her one last time? Considering my family members’ love for drama, will they show up to support each other, or would they be at one another’s throat? Deep down inside I knew that only time would answer these questions.

Twelve noon brought in the all too familiar sound of my cell door opening, a correction officer shouting down the company, “Cell 214, Rodriguez, let’s go. Your escort’s waiting for you on the flats.”

Taking a deep breath, I exited my cell, went to the flats, and met my escort.

“What’s your name and DIN?” the officer asked while looking at a piece of paper with my picture and identifying information on it.

“Jonathan Rodriguez, DIN: 05A3198.”

“Okay, that’s you. Let’s go.”

We left my housing block in no particular hurry, eventually arriving at reception. I was stripped searched by another officer and then shackled. A pair of handcuffs was used to secure my wrists, followed by a waist chain attached to it with a padlock. An ankle chain was the final touch to this funeral home trip. Once chained, I was shuffled to an awaiting van and taken to the rear gate where I was processed. I was

asked, again, to verify my identity, while the two escorting officers retrieved their weapons.

The ride to the South Bronx was pretty much quiet. Music played on the radio as I allowed my eyes to take in the scenery. The van's tainted windows and security gates, however, didn't protect me from experiencing the rise and fall of my anxiety level, each rolling hill building up my anticipation and worries. I began experiencing mental exhaustion within a matter of minutes, which placed me in a trance. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to escape the taunts of ghosts from my past. But I couldn't. This escape wasn't possible because the bumpy ride kept jostling me awake, robbing me from the oasis sleep is known for sometimes promising.

It took us about two hours to get to our destination: R. G. Funeral Home Inc., located on the corner of 149<sup>th</sup> Street and Southern Blvd. The change in scenery, from Stormville, NY to the South Bronx, caused my mind to well up with memories. The old bike trail that I once took to get to my grandparents' apartment made me smile as the van exited the Bronx Parkway underpass and turned onto a street I had once enjoyed riding in a past life. Newly constructed buildings occupied once empty lots, their presence filling me with wonder and anticipation. New York City was my home. Now I'm expecting to revisit familiar places that would surely make me feel like a stranger in my old stomping grounds in a matter of a few years.

I broke out of my reverie as the van began slowing down. We were creeping toward the Funeral Home, and there were a lot of people hanging outside of it. These people lingered at its entrance. Some were crying; others were smoking cigarettes; and still others were huddled in groups, talking. These people were my family, but they were much older now. Aunts and uncles sprouted grey hair. Cousins were either teenagers or young adults. And nieces and nephews, some becoming preteens, were now the curious lot staring at the van parked in the front of the Funeral Home. It just hit 2 pm.

Both officers were taking everything in, looking for potential threats. The driver said, "Do you recognize these people?"

"Yeah, they're family."

"Who's that guy by the car in front of us wearing a blue sweater and hat?"

I took a glance at the man he was speaking about, and said, "He's my stepfather, and those people over there are my cousins, nieces, nephews, and sisters."

I felt like a celebrity. The officer in the passenger's seat got out of the van and went inside to make preparations. He returned within a few minutes, declaring, "The inside is clear. The funeral director said for us to wait another ten minutes so he can finish up some last minute details. Rodriguez, we're going to stay close by you. You have to let your family know that they're not allowed to take pictures of you. Please let them know. Do you understand?"

"Yeah."

"Now, more than likely, your family members may want to stop and talk to you once we get out of the van. Please let them know that they could speak to you inside."

"Okay."

Looking over at the driver, he said, "It's time. Let's go. Rodriguez, please be mindful of your head as you're getting out of the van."

"Gotcha."

The officers got out of the van at the same time, one of them opening the sliding door. I slid across the seat, leaned forward so as to not hit my head on the door frame, and stepped out of the van. My family was on me like hawks.

“Yo, Johnny, what’s up?”

“Oh my god! Look at you.”

“Johnny, I needed to see you.”

“Guys, I know you want to talk to me,” I began my spiel, “but it’d have to be inside.”

I walked inside R. G. Funeral Home not knowing what to expect. All my steps were deliberate. I didn’t turn around to address my name being called because I needed to steel myself for what was to come. There was no escaping it: I must walk up to my grandmother’s casket and pay my last respect.

I entered the somber atmosphere in the funeral parlor. There were more family members sitting about, talking and crying. I walked up one of two aisles when my mother met up with me.

“Jon...” she choked on her greeting.

“I know,” I said, leaning over to give her a kiss on her forehead, as that was the only show of affection I could offer, thanks to my restraints. Other family members wanted to talk to me, but I’d stopped them so I could get the main purpose of my visit out of the way.

“Guys, please give me a minute,” I announced loudly. My wish was respected.

Clenching my jaw, I slowly walked to my grandmother’s casket, my shackles rattling to the rhythm of my pace. I was filled with emotions as I stared at my grandmother’s frozen features. She was very pale, her hands clasped over her midsection, her hair combed like she was going to a dinner party.

Tears began trickling down my face. With my hands grasping the long edge of the casket, I leaned forward and kissed her hand, whispering, “I will always love you, grandma. I will miss you. Rest in peace.”

Death is such an ugly thing to deal with. It robs those alive of what once was, of what could’ve been, and of what will never be. This was the only privacy I’d have with my grandmother. After kneeling down on the cushion in front of the casket, I silently made a promise to my grandmother: *I will never be humiliated like this again!*

After getting back to my feet, I turned around and noticed a line of people behind. I stopped in my tracks, not knowing what I was supposed to do next. Relief filled me when one by one family members walked up to me. My Aunt Jacky placed her hands on my shoulders, kissed me on the cheek, and buried her face in my chest as grief nearly brought her to her knees. My cousin Destiny was next, and she threw her arms around my neck, sobbing, “I miss my grandmother. I don’t know what to do without her!” All I could do was kiss her by the ear and whisper, “I know, let it out. We’re going to get through this ordeal together. I need you to believe in this, Des.”

The progression continued until finally everyone started making their way to my grandmother’s casket to pay their respects. I moved to the side so as to give them room, and that’s when I saw my friends Frances, Danny, Louis, and Hector next to my mother and Louie. From my vantage point, I could see everyone. That’s when



my stepfather and Aunt Rosa walked up to me. They wanted to make sure I was alright. My stepfather made me promise to work out with him when I came home. And Aunt Rosa filled my ears with compliments and assurances. She said, "You look so handsome, nephew. You're going to have a lot of girlfriends when you come home. And you're gonna make some cute babies with those green eyes of yours."

I smiled at her, saying, "Titi, I just want to get on my feet and enjoy life."

"Yeah, I could just imagine all your stupid-ass ex's coming round to holla at you," my cousin Michael injected himself into our conversation.

WTF! The sudden change in the conversation caught me off guard. But Michael's statement was true. I, nevertheless, took everything in stride. My family just wanted the best for me.

The two hours allotted to me for this funeral trip went by fast. Everyone wanted to speak to me, to touch me, to draw comfort from my missed presence. Then it was time to go. I got up and a line quickly formed, again. My friends came over to offer me their condolences before I was bombarded by relatives wanting to say goodbye. It felt really good seeing them, specifically because it has been years since we shared the same space in a room. I spoke to them in rushed words, trying to make every one count. They gave me a hug, one by one, and went to console my mother. Throughout this emotional moment, Frances lingered close by, waiting for her opportunity to talk to me. And she closed in on it when it presented itself.

Walking up to me, she smiled, commenting, "You look good. I want to kiss you so badly."

"Do it! Do it!" my mother chanted, appearing out of nowhere.

I shook my head "no," pleading, "Frances, not like this."

It was too late. She leaned in and kissed me on the lips.

*This chick is bugging! She has a boyfriend, and we're at a funeral,* I thought.

After giving everyone a show, Frances hugged me, placed her hands on my chest, and said, "Call me."

"Okay," I replied, stunned yet hopeful.

I started making my final rounds through the small space in the funeral parlor, saying my farewells to relatives and friends. Saying farewell became hard. I didn't want to do it. I didn't want to leave my family and friends and return to a prison cell. But I had to – for now.

I had a lot to think about on my way back to Green Haven. Seeing my family and friends and having them support me through this loss felt good. Now I felt more at ease as I knew the healing process was taking effect. As we got closer to the facility, I trained my thoughts on what needed to be done. I needed to get my Associate's Degree from Bard Prison Initiative, and then go for my Bachelor's. Without a doubt, I planned to do just that. Home would be the next step. Life took on a new meaning for me as I re-entered the prison walls of Green Haven.

My determination to get through this prison experience was renewed with vigor. I became tired of watching everyone close to me grow old and die from a prison cell. The buck had to stop with me! Staying or coming back to prison weren't options for me. A new desire to make it in life began burning in me.