



Here We Go Again

I was updating my vision board before my last year of high school started, sitting cross-legged on my bedroom floor. Scissors and glue were scattered around me, plus a few pink sticky notes, glitter pens that I bought offline, and some printed out pics that I had saved.

In the years before, I had pics of my fave cars wrapped in pink, sleek dance outfits, and cute hairstyles pasted with quotes from my favourite songs and plenty of dance poses. There were pics of condo interiors, the Toronto skyline, and I would create a collage and imagine myself living downtown, balancing university life with dance rehearsals and taking in the city's buzz.

I'd been dreaming of it since I was about ten and always had some version of a vision board pinned up next to my



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school schedules, dance schedules, and other notices held up with magnets on my whiteboard. The older I got, the less it was about the coordinated clothes and creating the perfect dancer-girl aesthetic ... now, it was more about having my independence and freedom. The dance part never changed, but the other things around me did.

I took a pic and sent it to my Auntie Sharon, my mom's sister, who was usually there to help me cut and paste the display of my yearly goals and dreams.

Amina: What do u think??

She responded with a quick pic of her luggage and her cute new mint green and white sneakers, with serious motion blur.

Auntie Sharon: I'm at Heathrow

Amina: Heathrow? Connecting flight? I thought you were in Malta?

Auntie Sharon: I was but then I remembered my friend Christine was in London so I took a little detour to hang out with her for a few days period I'm using voice-to-text so I hope this comes out OK period delete exclamation mark



Amina: Wow, you are travel goals. I need to put THIS pic on my vision board fr fr

Auntie Sharon: Don't worry I've got big plans for us after you graduate

Amina: Oh I know you do. You'll have me in Greece or something

Auntie Sharon: Of course I will exclamation mark exclamation mark!

Auntie Sharon: OK I need to go through security and put my phone down. If I don't talk to you before school starts have a great first week!! I know you've got your head on your shoulders and your heart in the right place and will breeze through this year like a pro.

Amina: I'll try, Auntie. Safe travels

Auntie Sharon: Thanks babe see you soon love you

Amina: Love you more!



TWO

So, I'm Leaving

When the rooster crowed that late August morning as the sun came up, I thought about how much I would miss living in Jamaica. There were months of ups and downs, hospital visits, doctors' appointments, and tough conversations, but now it had reached a point where things needed to change, and we had to put our plan in action.

My mother was going to move in with her sister's family to get more support, which was fine. We were a close family and didn't mind being around each other. I was eighteen years old and knew that change was coming, and that my mom would never hold me back by expecting me to stay and help her.

I was definitely helpful though, even as a young boy. I could cook and clean, wash and garden, and assist my uncles and older cousins with the farming during holidays, but there

was a type of care that Mama needed now that I couldn't provide. It would be too much for me to do on my own.

I loved living in Jamaica, but it was a normal thing for people to plan to move abroad — what we always referred to as *foreign* — to study, work, and build a family. It was a part of life and even though I didn't like the idea of leaving my mom, I knew it would bring her comfort to see me spread my wings.

For as long as I knew myself, it had been me and Mama. My dad left Jamaica when I was seven and now had an entire new family in Canada. Me and my dad talked often though, and there were no hard feelings. He was a quiet man, but always pleasant.

"*Wha gwan*, Derell, you good?" Pops would say, when the WhatsApp call came through. A hardworking mechanic, he'd usually call on Sundays, the one day when he was always home.

"Yes, Pops," I'd say.

"How's your mom?" he always asked, without fail. They rarely spoke, but they didn't have any bad blood between them. "You keeping up your grades?"

"Yeah, man!" I would then continue to brag about my latest tests or assignments, just like my dad wanted to hear. My parents were both so proud of my achievements at school.

"How's the farm?"

"The farm is okay," I'd let him know, and update him on any



new deals my uncles made in town or with the hotels. He wasn't from a farming family, but he liked to hear about the business.

Usually once a year, he'd visit Jamaica and check in with us in Christiana. Pops's side of the family lived near to Kingston and were heavy into cars. Car sales, running taxis, mechanics, and there was always a hustle and bustle amongst the men and their automotive adventures when I'd visit Portmore with him.

Sometimes he'd take me out to Hellshire Beach to eat or to Devon House for ice cream which was always a treat. Pops was cool. He never raised his voice at me or showed me bad face. He sent my mother money to help out with my school fees and other needs like clockwork.

"Clifton is a responsible man," my mother always reminded me. She wasn't the type to bad talk him, because he took care of his responsibilities in Jamaica and in Canada and ran a stable business with his repair shop.

My parents were prepared for this move. My dad had already filed for me, and the passport in my hand made it official.

"I'm gonna miss Christiana, still," I let my mom know, as we sorted through my clothes and personal belongings.

"Christiana is going to miss you!" she responded, watching as I packed. "Derell, you have a good heart, and God will

continue to bless you,” she said, noticing how sad I was. “The opportunity is good for you, and your dad and Gigi have space for you to be comfortable and focus on your studies without distraction.”

“I know, Mama. I just hate to leave you.”

“*So it go*, Derell. You won’t be the first young man to leave his mother to go a foreign, and you definitely won’t be the last,” she said.

Mama and I lived in the small farming town of Christiana, in Manchester parish. As I got older, I could tell that she wanted more for me. She wanted me to go to college, especially since I did so well at my Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) exams.

“Can you pack me some of the tamarind juice, Mama?” I teased her, once my bags were ready for the airport. Mama’s juices were always a hit. Sorrel or tamarind — the carrot juices were nice, rich with ginger and condensed milk. Her orange and beetroot juices, or lime and soursop juices were also popular. She had a long list of clients from our community and even some folks from Clarendon who would place orders. “And are you *sure* you don’t want me to stay with you?”

“It’s okay for you to go out and explore,” she said confidently. “Plus, you are Clifton’s one son! He will be so happy to have you around him full time.”



“What about Jessica and Jason? I don’t want them to hate me,” I said. I didn’t really have a relationship with my stepbrother Jason, Gigi’s son from a previous relationship, or with my dad’s daughter with Gigi, Jessica.

“They will adjust. Just mind your business, and always be kind,” she said. “This will be good for you.”

“Yes, Mama.”

Mama was having issues with her kidney. She was often tired, her feet and legs would swell, and now her blood pressure was also going up. She struggled with basic daily chores and was most likely going to need dialysis.

“What about Veronica?” I asked Mama. She paused and held onto my hand.

“Veronica is young and still has to prepare for Sixth Form. This way she can focus without you distracting her,” she teased me.

My girlfriend — well, ex-girlfriend now — was mad at me for keeping a secret like this from her for so long. I didn’t tell her I was leaving until the last minute. Veronica was my complexion, a rich mahogany brown with the puffiest, thick black hair that was usually held back with a headband. She had a cute smile, bright eyes, and did really well in school. We had been dating for almost two years, since we were sixteen, when Veronica and her family moved into our community from Mo Bay.

When I went to officially tell her the news, I could overhear her talking to her mom.

“Why are you crying?” Miss Margaret asked her daughter.

“Derell says he needs to talk. I think he’s breaking up with me.” She knew.

When I appeared at their open side door, they both turned around in shock.

“I think this is what’s best for me,” I said to Veronica, when we were alone out in the back of her home, and I’d let her know the plan was in motion. Her cat rubbed up against my leg when I sat down. I patted Dusty’s grey head.

“I knew it was possible and that your dad really wanted you to move to Canada, but ... I didn’t want it to actually happen.”

I wasn’t used to seeing Veronica cry. Most of our time spent together we’d be laughing, watching videos, or retelling stories about our classmates and what happened to and from school.

“I wish there was a way we could make it work, but I know how these things go,” Veronica said, defeated. We both knew because we’d seen it happen time and time again. I had to remind myself that we would both eventually move on and hopefully still be friends.



Limited Access

Surrounded by my half-dozen fuzzy pink and purple pillows, I scrolled through my phone and sipped on the maple mocha that Tim Hortons had just released for fall. The unfamiliar yet tasty new vibe warmed my soul as it spiralled into my system.

It was the little things for me lately. A nice coffee. Good music. Fresh breeze. I was learning to appreciate the simple things in life and vowed to be more present during the school year. I was usually caught up in too many activities, attending too many events, and trying too hard to have original styles to rock. I knew a lot of other girls (and a few guys) watched my feeds specifically to see what was hip and acceptable, and had been doing too much to keep my status as “that chick” at Central Vaughan Collegiate.

The Italian princesses, Russian superstars, and Chinese

dolls all had their cliques to govern. When it came to the Black and Brown baddies at CVC, I was considered top tier. Our school had groups like most schools. Jewish kids and Indian kids, everyone had their own standards of beauty, although we all seemed to have the same sense of fashion. We were all the children and grandkids of immigrants but did our best to keep our cultural identity.

It was exhausting, but it was what I knew. I was watching my classmates on TikTok and Instagram too, to see how everyone else spent their holidays and how they were preparing for back to school.

There weren't any common visits to the CN Tower or Wonderland on my feed of classmates and peers. I saw tons of people visiting extended family in the Caribbean. I saw them attending concerts and tennis matches and sometimes mixing and mingling with athletes and other "celebrities" because their parents knew someone who knew someone.

Sometimes, their parents were that someone — the plug.

That's just how my school was. Not everyone came from that type of background, but there were definitely a lot of us in one location that had people looking at our lives and assuming we had it all figured out. Little did they know that the travelling and special events were nice ... but it didn't mean that inside we were all confident and secure all the time.



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Nice fits and great Insta pics weren't everything. I was getting older, almost eighteen, and the empty feeling in my spirit and my lonely heart reminded me that designer purses weren't everything. Driving in nice cars wasn't everything ... although I still needed the new whip my dad promised me to get to and from university soon.

I kinda needed more, and I didn't have anyone around me that understood that what I had still wasn't enough. My parents did their best to give me any and everything I needed growing up. They worked their butts off, and kept connections with friends and family around the world to make sure we always had access to the very best. So, complaining to them wouldn't make sense, because they'd given me a super comfortable life.

My besties grew up in situations like me. Amy and Alisha and I had been friends since junior kindergarten. Our parents were a small but powerful group of Caribbean-Canadian businessfolks and entrepreneurs, and we were an even smaller group of their children attending CVC. It was a group effort to stay close and work together.

The excitement of a new school year at CVC electrified the air at home, and I could hear my parents' voices — mainly Mom singing Deborah Cox's "How Did You Get Here". She loved the Canadian singer, played her albums constantly, and

had even travelled to see her performances on Broadway a few times. Sometimes I couldn't help but wish Mom would appreciate the reggae version of the R&B hit too, but Mom was like that. She liked the classics.

Deborah Cox was someone we always agreed on.

Downstairs, I could hear Dad and his assistant Rachel on speakerphone mapping the big events in my calendar for the school year ... a reminder of how little say I had in the social decisions I made or the events I wanted to attend. An upcoming charity gala from one of his clients was underway, from what I could make out.

Thinking about the annual dinner and dance, I cringed. It was the time of year where I was pressured into slow dancing with arrogant sons and conceited creeps who would whisper cocky things and attempt to take photos and pose with me to keep the illusion strong. I'd see Dad's approving nods and smiles as he looked at the future of our social circle, while he'd be busy schmoozing and boozing with friends, holding on to Mom's waist.

Insert eye roll. Sometimes it was just too much, but they rarely noticed (or understood) my discomfort or disgust with the scene. But this year I was determined to make room to do things that made my soul feel inspired.

After looking at the last week of summer vacation pics and



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videos (and closing my door to drown out Rachel and Dad's planning), I went into my contact list and double-checked my blocked numbers to ensure each and every wasteman had been included on it. Anyone who called me out of my name, anyone who posted my pics without permission, and anyone who didn't take the time to get to know me — the real me, not the me presented and paraded around with my parents — were an instant block.

That left a very small handful of friends and people who had access to me. Aside from the girls I danced with, family members, and a few chill male classmates, I was going to keep my circle super small going into my final year of high school.

Ready to start with a bang, I was planning my outfit for the first day. Some things were automatic — I still wanted to look good! Of course, I did feel a flutter of anxiety about how the year would unfold, especially with the pre-university pressure from my parents, and the possibility that my dad would continue to push the uber-arrogant Malik on me.

Of all the young men in the GTA, Dad chose Malik as the most acceptable partner for me to date. Malik St. Pierre. Extremely attractive, athletic, but very, very annoying. Malik got the nod of approval from my dad at one of his parents' functions during the summer after our grade nine year, and he hadn't let up since.



We went on a few harmless lunch dates and attended pool parties with friends, which was fun and reasonable when I was fourteen ... but not now. It wasn't enough. Malik swore he was going to be the next Drake and that I was going to be the girl on his arm as he rose to fame. He didn't care about my plans to attend school and study dance, or about my other hobbies and interests. Most of his comments were based on my looks, and how we "made sense" together.

Nothing about him made sense to me, because he was a straight-up fool.