

BOUNDLESS

Cassandra sat at the end of the sofa closest to the window in the dark living room. The curtains were parted, and she looked up to the cloudless, starry night sky, a small smile on her face.

Her young son peered out from behind his bedroom door, looking at her for a long time. She'd been doing this a few times a week for the last month. Exactly a month, he slowly realized.

He finally pushed the door open and stepped into the short hallway. If she heard the light slap of his small bare feet on the parquet floor of the apartment, she didn't show it. He stood half-hidden at the wide doorway to the living room, watching her.

"Mama?" He finally asked.

She turned to look at him, slight surprise crossing her face.

"Jason, honey... what are you doin out of bed?"

He looked down for a moment, bending one foot around the other, toes splaying on the floor, and gave a shrug. "Couldn't sleep."

"Mmm," she said mildly, turning back to the stars. "Me neither."

He watched her for short time again.

"Whacha doin?" He finally asked.

She turned back to him.

"Just... thinkin."

"About Jerome?"

She gave a sad smile. "About a lot of things," she nodded slightly. "But yeah... mostly about Jerome." The tears in her eyes were staved off by her warm smile.

"C'mere, baby," she said, opening her arms to him. He went to her quickly, enveloped in her powerful but loving weight.

She eased up on her hug and turned to him.

"You wanna look at the stars with me?" She asked. Pressed against her, he smiled and nodded.

She shifted up the couch slightly, patting the place she'd just occupied. He hopped up and rolled onto his back, her thigh a makeshift cushion for him. They gazed skyward in silence for several long minutes before she began to hum quietly, a warm, heartfelt but sorrowful tune that Jason could recall since before any other memories. It was a song passed down from her mother, Cassandra had told him. And her mother before her.

He knew the words to better than anything else he could think of, going over them in his head even before she sang them, whispering, but with heart and power to her voice.

*Mama done tol me,
Said Baby, doan you cry,
We'll leave here together,
To be home by an by.
She wipe my tears an hol me,
I never be alone.
We'll leave here together,
And baby, we'll be home.*

There was silence for long moments, save for Cassandra's relaxed breathing. It caught for a beat when, under the trees out in the courtyard, she spotted some dark figures moving. More hints of shadowed shapes than anything else.

Pushers. Gang members. Maybe even the very ones who killed her older son. Not that it mattered any more. Around here—the worst area of the city, and infamous country-wide, but all she could afford on her meager salary—no one would talk about the bad things that happened. A dozen people could witness a young man get killed one evening on his way back from closing the restaurant where he worked, caught in a crossfire between rival pushers, and no one would say a thing. The police, when they were around, would only say they hadn't found anyone yet. Not even any suspects, they'd always say. And a month after she held her boy's head in her lap, crying out for someone to help her and finally, *finally* hearing the sirens in the distance as Jerome's life bled out of him, the people responsible still walked around freely.

A tear ran down her cheek. She wiped it away quickly, and stroked Jason's head. He hadn't picked up on anything of her sudden discomfort, still looking at the stars.

"You always did love them," she said, making herself look to the positive of this beautiful child that was still in her life. Jason nodded. Before he started school, when he had a father, he went camping once with his daycare. Way out of the city to where there were only trees and rocks, and hardly any roads, just a few dirt ones. And he could see more stars than he ever thought possible. He'd never forgotten the awe he felt.

He was a bit disappointed when he looked at the stars back home, in the city, because you couldn't see nearly as many. But he'd always loved them.

"Can I visit them one day? When I grow up?" He asked.

She smiled and looked down at him: His whole life ahead of him, eyes and heart wide open to whatever the future held, despite what his reality was right now.

"Honey, you can do anything you set your mind to."

He breathed a few times.

"Will I ever forget him?"

Cassandra held her breath to hold back from crying openly, the question cutting her to the quick with its innocence and earnestness.

"No, baby," she said, stroking his head and looking down at him, her tears coming freely now, running down her broad cheeks and soaking into her thin summer nightgown. "Not if you don't want to."

And he knew what she said was true; that as far as he may go some day—even to the stars—as far away as he could be from his mother's hugs, and from the place where his big brother had lived and taught him things and meant so much to him, he would always and forever remember, and be loved.

*She wipe my tears an hol me,
I never be alone.
We'll leave here together,
And baby, we'll be home.*