CHAPTER 1

Before I Had Language for It

When I think about childhood, I don't think about one house. I think about places.

Addresses.

Rooms.

Neighborhoods.

Different versions of Maryland. My house was wherever we were living. But for a long time, I had not had a home. There is a difference. A house tells you where you sleep. Home tells your body it can stop preparing for what might happen next. I didn't have language for that as a child. I only knew where I felt comfortable. My room was one of those places. Outside was another.

Nature was available in a way people sometimes weren't. I could go outside and look beneath things.

Turn over rocks.

Find insects.

Look for isopods.

Salamanders.

Whatever small living thing might be hiding somewhere I hadn't looked yet. I didn't need a reason. I was curious. I wanted to know what was there. That curiosity was already part of me in many aspects including curiosity with my family.

There were periods when our family had more stability than others. When we were living in Baltimore County, I remember every Sunday rising. My two older brothers, my older sister, and I would clean the house while my mother made a big breakfast. The house would be moving with all of us in it, everybody doing their part while food was being made. There were good memories with my mother.

A lot of them.

She was goofy.

Funny.

Creative.

She would make silly voices just to make me laugh.

She could cook.

She could bake. Every birthday, she made me a strawberry cheesecake because she knew it was my favorite dessert. When she made cakes or brownies, she would let me lick the batter off the spatula or out of the bowl.

When she could afford to, she took us out to eat. We even took family trips to the beach. Those memories matter to me because my childhood with my mother was never only one thing. There were difficult parts. There were things that hurt. There were things I didn't understand.

But there was love there too. Both are true. Home had structure. My mother was stern. She didn't have much of a nurturing side. When she said something, you knew she meant it. There wasn't much room for questioning an instruction or routine. In many ways, our house was a fear-driven household. We were probably more afraid of my mother than anything else. Sundays had their rhythm. We cleaned. Coming home from school had a rhythm too.

If there was homework, homework needed to be done. School clothes or uniforms came off. Play clothes went on. Then I could go outside.

There was one rule every child in the neighborhood understood:

Be home before the streetlights come on. One evening, my friends and I were so busy playing hide-and-seek in the neighborhood that nobody noticed the street lights had come on. What we did eventually notice were our parents outside looking for us. The reasonable thing would have been to come out of hiding. We did not do that. Somehow, watching our parents search for us made the game even more fun.

We were hiding and trying desperately not to laugh while quietly making our way toward our houses one by one. Somehow, I managed

to get home before my mother made it back. When she walked in, she looked at me.

“Where were you?” “What do you mean?”

I knew exactly what she meant. Eventually I admitted that we’d been playing hide-and-seek—and that, yes, I had seen her looking for me.

She just stared at me with an obvious level of irritation, and she yelled:

“Don’t do that anymore. You know you’re supposed to be home before the streetlights come on!”

At the time, my friends and I thought the entire thing was hilarious. I’m sure our parents did not. There was a maple tree beside one of my friend’s houses that we used to climb. While everybody else stayed somewhere around the middle, I would keep climbing toward the top. We’d sit in that tree and talk. We’d make up songs. We’d sing. We were just kids in a tree with an entire world beneath us.

There was still school in that world though. My mother would help me with my homework when I needed it. She was intelligent. Patience was the problem. Sometimes she couldn’t understand why I didn’t understand something, and her frustration would come through. Eventually, I stopped asking to avoid being yelled at. I would try to figure it out myself. If I got it, great. If I didn’t, I didn’t.

But I would try. For much of my childhood, within my household I was quiet. Not because quiet was my personality. It was how I observed. In a household where people frequently argued, I learned a lot by watching. I watched how people responded when they were angry. I watched how disagreements were handled. I watched what happened when someone felt hurt, disrespected, frustrated, or unheard. I wasn’t consciously studying any of it.

I was a child absorbing my environment. Like children often do, I learned from what was modeled around me. I didn’t know then that some of what I was watching would eventually become part of the way I responded to conflict myself. At the time, I was simply observing. You had to be pretty damn loud in my household.