

IF MAGAZINE

EDITION ONE - THE BEGINNING



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FROM THE SISTERS

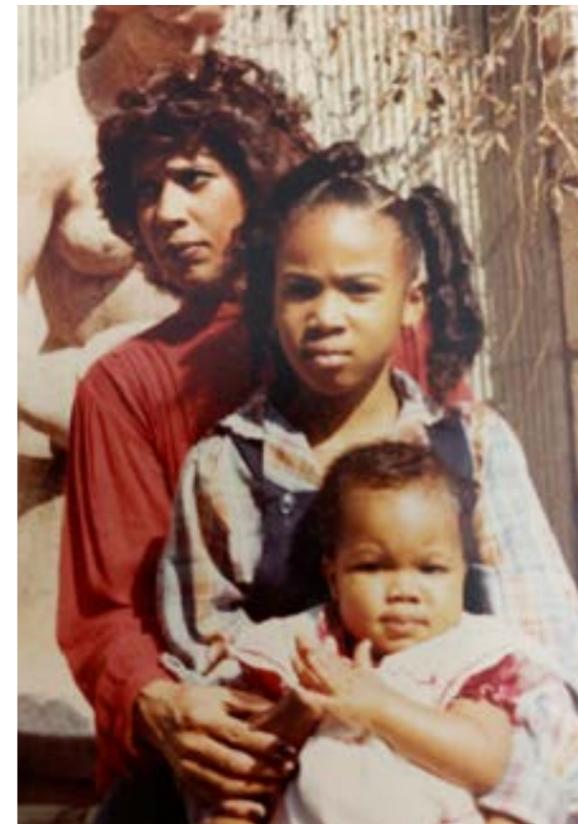
The house we grew up in was on a beautiful tree-lined street, in a historic neighborhood in Kansas City, MO. When our mother and grandparents moved to 28th street, they were only the third black family on the block. African-Americans were only recently permitted to move to the area. Our mother attended the same grade school as Walt Disney. However, when the area was integrated, D.A. Holmes officials had the swimming pool filled with cement. This and countless other illogical racist experiences created a mother determined to give her daughters a sense of freedom she'd never experience. If white people had it, she made sure we had access to it.

We moved to the burbs, attended good schools... We took swimming, gymnastics, tennis lessons at the Y. We had unbelievable Christmases, dinner from scratch, and visited our great-grandmother after church every Sunday. Our elders taught us that you get what your work for, to treat the janitor the same as you would the CEO, to make smart choices, and if you have abundance - share it. From the moment we could pronounce college, we knew we were going. We were going to get a good job and save for our normal; average middle-class life...



But then we decided to fight
for our dreams instead.





“Wherever you are as a result of your truth is where you’re supposed to be”

- Billy Porter

FEATURE

MELANNA GRAY

I WANTED A GOLD LETTER. I WAS ALL VARSITY IN TRACK AND BASKETBALL SO I HAD PLENTY OF PURPLE AND WHITE LETTERS AND A TREASURE CHEST FULL OF MEDALS BUT I DIDN'T HAVE A GOLD LETTER. GOLD LETTERS WERE FOR PERFORMANCE ARTS...





Oklahoma was NOT the place to be as far as I was concerned. I didn't think I liked theatre. I sing so I went out for the Harmonaires but I was not about to wear that shiny royal purple house-on-the-prairie-mid-calf-length dress and no ma'am, I definitely wasn't rocking that sequence belt. So I tried speech and debate and had a couple of amazing teachers, Debbie Twyman and Vickie Campbell, who encouraged me to take storytelling seriously. But I just wanted the gold letter... until I saw that Whoopi Goldberg Broadway special. Around the world in

eighty muhfuqin days.... She made me laugh, cry, and learn all in the same moment. I played it over and over until the tape snapped. I was all in. I made it all the way to State in the dramatic interpretation category.

I may not appreciate the musical but when I got to Los Angeles, I learned just how country I really am. No one prepared me for how Los Angeles would snatch me from my Mayberry ways. Not only did I become immediately self-conscious of my slang and twang but more importantly, I no longer had an anchor. Un-



til college, all of my accomplishments and hard work were driven by my desire to make my family proud. I didn't even go out for the track team because I wanted to run. I went to an all-white school and I wanted to meet black boys. Then lo and behold I found out I inherited my father's athletic ability and was offered scholarships from at least twenty universities. After a trip to the ocean and Disneyland, I accepted the offer from USC. I always say I found out I was fast by being fast.

I pretty much started flailing immediately. I talked to my father about taking the reins of my track career now that we were in the same state but that was a no go. When changes and issues occurred within our coaching staff, my teammates had their parents and/or local leadership. I felt alone and isolated myself even further. I wasn't prepared to go it alone. I had a lot to learn and I needed a wing to get under. I eventually enlisted a fellow teammate to train me. But then he broke into my apartment and wiggled under my bed while I was sleeping.

I didn't feel safe. I had no desire to run. I needed to fit in somewhere and started searching for where I really belonged. I became a busy body, knew everybody, was involved in everything. It was crazy because even when I left the team, I was still running. I just didn't know it.

Upon graduation, I had a theatre degree with no idea how to use it. I didn't know how to get an audition, join unions, read contracts, negotiate, market myself, nothing beyond find an agent and get some good headshots. I kept asking, "Yeah but how do you DO it?"

Even though I had not one iota of business acumen, due to my relationships, I booked a few gigs with now legend filmmakers. At the time they were small gigs with little to no pay. This is the business of relationships and someone is always lurking, waiting to cross the line. Defending my honor became tedious. Innocent meetings became ultimatums. Further, I had good storytelling skills but no real voice yet. Like so many young actors, I was still searching for my Self. In this vulnerable state of being, anything could've happened... which is why there are so many hashtags today. Avoiding potential #MeToo moments meant avoiding major opportunities. I wasn't sure what to do with any of it.



On top of it all, my mother and sister moved to Los Angeles my senior year without a job or a plan. Every apartment I moved to, somehow, they ended up joining me. This, the frustration about the industry, a broken marriage engagement, and desire to compete again made me decide to pack up my Nissan Sentra and move back home to Kansas City to train. I figured I'd have plenty of time to work out my acting career but the time to run was dwindling. It wasn't that it was a bad decision. It's just that I had absolutely no idea of the situation in which I was leaving my sister.

I made the Nike squad and started competing. During an off season, I took a chance and auditioned for a theatre MFA program and somehow got in. (I don't know why. My audition was horrendous). But by the end of the program I began to understand acting and my auditions were good enough to earn the attention of several New York agents.

I chose one and began my New York theatre career. I literally fell in love with New York, the people, and the stage. I even booked a couple of national commercials in my first year.

My first professional gig was in Florida. In January. I got to spend the entire winter on stage. This. Was. The. Life! While in St. Petersburg, a director from the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center asked if I would audition for the role of Zora Neale Hurston.

I've been studying Zora ever since.



After 9/11, things died down significantly. It took a while to get an audition let alone a book a gig. I eventually got the opportunity to audition for one of my very favorite playwrights, Theresa Rebeck. I booked it and originated her new play, *Omnium Gatherum* in Louisville, KY at the Humana Festival. The play made it to a historical off-Broadway house around Union Square. I was terrified – but in a great way. *New York Theatre Baby!* I was even in a *New Yorker* caricature!

Then Pow! I learned my grandmother was terminal. She died the week we opened. The day after we closed, I was back in Kansas City to become the caretaker of my grandfather. Everything came to a screeching halt.



I thought I was going to be home a few months, get Papa settled and get back to New York. But while the show was running, my grandfather's brother had changed his will, bank accounts, title, deed, and benefits to include himself. It was a teetotal mess. I had to quickly sell our family home for peanuts and get Papa under a safe guardianship situation. That took two years. Obviously by the time I got back to New York, I'd lost all momentum and would have to start over. Again.

I booked a Bank of America industrial and a couple of plays. But things were slow and like Zora says, "I was jumping up and down in my own footsteps." I made a call to The Who I Know and asked if I made my way back to Los Angeles, would they help me get acclimated, find an agent, or even hire me for "under-fives". I got "yesses," "Just get here," even a, "I'll get you on my show..." But once I moved back, no one did much of anything they said they would. It was like, "I said what? For real? Did I say that? I dunno..." "Mann... It's so hard to get something going here." Mind blown. My Los Angeles business acumen had not changed much since my first stint. I had no reel. Didn't know I needed a reel. No agent. No referrals. No money nor desire to consistently pay for casting director workshops on top of student loans. Then I met Bill Duke who changed my life.

Every decade or so, Bill has an actor's bootcamp. I didn't have the fee, but I was going to get it and I wanted my place saved. I was so persistent that his partner, Carl Gilliard, offered me a job in lieu of my tuition. Bill's first lesson was, the days of auditioning and being discovered were over and that we should write and produce our own content. I did everything he said. So much so, I took these and other lessons, forged INDIEFEMME with my sister, Gianni-Amber North.



Sissah and I pitched a short to him, showing we'd grown exponentially thanks to his teaching. And he actually said yes. For \$3500, Bill Duke, Aaron D. Spears, and Amir Arison; along with a fabulous producer, Cheryl Bedford, we made our first film, ENGAGEMENT.

We were no longer on the defense. Sure, we had a lot more to learn and several more obstacles to face but we were finally taking control. We found our voice. We have something worth listening to; something to give to the world. Now we just had to fight to be heard.

It was no longer just about being skilled and prosperous. This is our life's journey. We knew that our decisions and content were more than "just business." These are tests of the soul.

FEATURE

GIANNI- AMBER



Despite my grandparents' best efforts, our mother grew up an only child. She has always talked about how alone she felt not having a sibling. It made her determined that she would have at least two kids, so when the world got crazy, if nothing else, we would have each other. And all our lives, we've been each other's greatest gift.

Our mother raised us as a single woman and a schoolteacher who was constantly trying to figure out how to chase her dreams and teach us to chase ours. Trying to find the balance meant we spent a lot of time at our grandparents' house, which was home more than any other place we ever lived. Our house on 28th street was the second house from the corner on a beautiful tree-lined street, with multi-generational households, who much like our grandparents had started their history on the block shortly after "white flight." We played kickball, hide-and-go-seek, double-dutch, and had snowball fights in the winter. We went to church on Sundays and from the moment we could pronounce college, we knew we were going. Our elders taught us that you get what your work for, to treat the janitor the same as you would the CEO, to make smart choices, and if you have abundance - share it. We lived to make them proud, which made it hard for us to make the break and move to California. They didn't understand why we had to go to California to chase our dreams. But they supported us. They believed in us

so much that even in the moments where we doubted ourselves, we remembered their steadfast love. It has always fueled us.

You cannot fail if you refuse to give up.

We have had at least two dozen jobs and side hustles between us; but no matter what we have had to do to keep a roof over our heads or how many rejections we got, we never stopped writing, pitching, applying, trying to find a way to get our break. Yes, there have been moments when we've asked ourselves, how much longer are we going to have to do these horrible jobs? How many more no's do we have to hear, before we get a yes? We didn't know. We only knew we could not give up.

Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey* teaches that you're only a hero if you answer the call. No matter how hard things have gotten, we've never regretted saying yes to the journey. No matter what we just continued to move forward.







On her daytime show, Queen Oprah constantly reminded us that our lives were always talking to us. I have absolutely found that to be true. I've always had a fascination with books, even before I really loved to read.

I found magic when I discovered "The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes" in a Walden's bookstore when I was 8. I then got a class assignment to write a book. They gave us a stack of plain white paper to write a story about anything we wanted and draw picture for it too. Then we got to pick out fabric for the book cover, which our teachers ironed on to cardboard and bound our stories inside. I remember the feeling of rubbing my hand across the smooth blue, yellow and white fabric and being proud of the story that came from my imagination. I think it had something to do with a cat.

I remember seeing Do the Right Thing and that being the first time I saw myself reflected in a movie. I saw people that were just like people who were part of my everyday life. And they were beautiful.

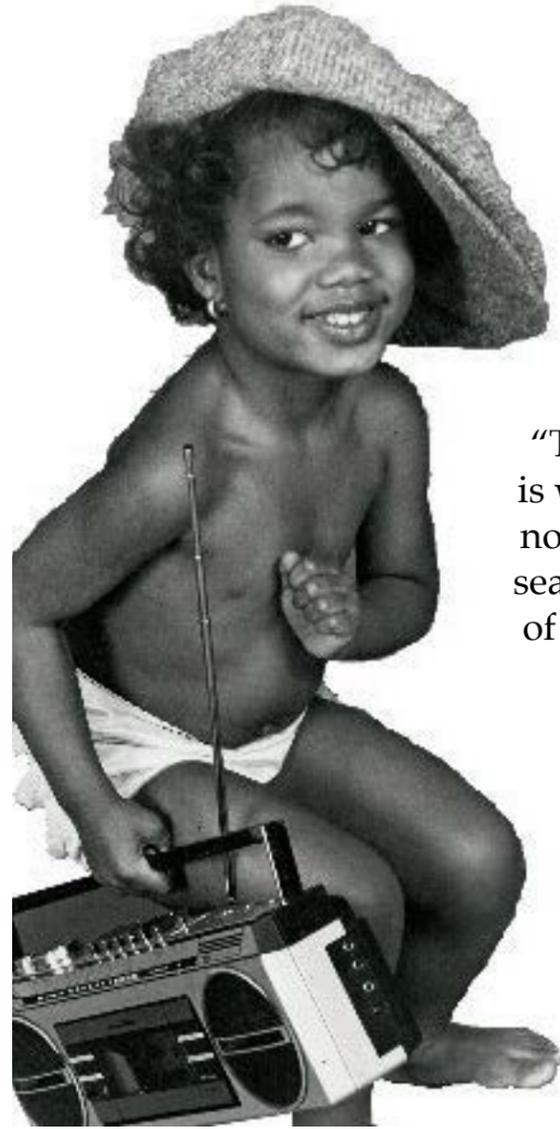
I read "Phenomenal Woman" by Maya Angelou when I was 12, which inspired me to write poetry. I didn't think I could write anything that dope. But I was damn sure going to try.

Then, I read James Baldwin's "If Beale Street Could Talk" when I was 13. Up until then, getting me to read more than a poem was like pulling teeth because in school, I was constantly forced to read books with white protagonists who didn't reflect who I was. When my teacher Mrs. Sams, a beautiful chocolate woman gave me 'Beale Street' I realized that Fonny and Tish were like people I knew. They made me want to read their story because I saw myself in it.

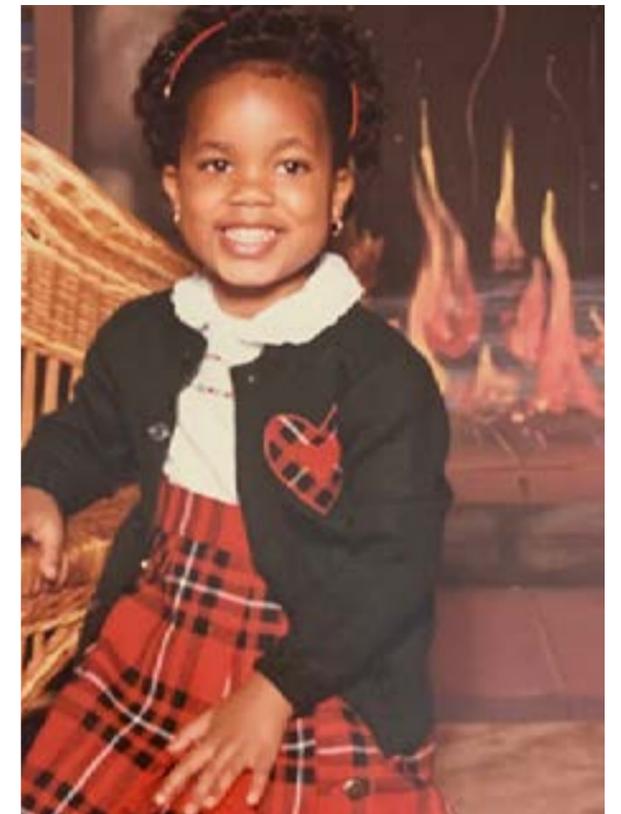
These works of art and the times in my life that they found their way to me were my life talking to me - especially because I spent a large part of my childhood in predominately white schools and in country clubs playing tennis where I was constantly told that my blackness was a handicap, not an asset. These works became my refuge. They inspired me to do as Toni Morrison instructed... 'to write the books I wanted to read,' and in this case also make the films and shows I want to see.

I didn't know it then, but my Mom's decision to move to Los Angeles when I was 12 was creating the path for a dream I didn't even have yet.





“Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second’s encounter with God and with eternity.”
- The Alchemist





I remember being in the Fairfax District and passing by my first film set. I was fascinated by all the lights and trailers, everything people had talked about but I had never seen in person.

L.A. had something else that Kansas City didn't have, a massive gang problem. Post '92 Riots Los Angeles was a tough place to grow up, especially for a kid from the Midwest who didn't know anyone or anything about how L.A. worked. My junior high school was near Westwood, where one would assume I would have been safe. But the school district had implemented a bus program where kids from all over the city were bussed into my school. This meant members of rival gangs walking the halls together. This meant chaos and a lot of violence. I was not prepared.

Thankfully, a group of kids recognized I was as clueless and country as the overalls and curly afro I sported to school on my first day. They protected me and taught me how to survive in LA, even though many of them didn't.

Staying in my books and on the tennis court kept me focused on the goal of graduating high school and going to college. It also helped keep me sane when my mom and I were homeless, when yet another friend got shot, or when I got homesick for the safety and stability of my grandparents' house.

As challenging as it was, I still know moving to L.A. was the right thing. Being in L.A. forced me out of my comfort zone to a place where my dreams and I could grow. And when I look back, I realize the young woman who survived all of that grew into a battle-tested woman with no limits.

FINDING PURPOSE, CHASING THE DREAM

When I graduated high school, I knew I wanted to be a writer. The plan was to play tennis all through college, write some dope screenplays and keep pitching them until I convinced someone to make them. A conversation with one of my writing professors changed that. My naiveté led me to believe that a director had to follow the screenplay they were given. My professor informed me that nothing could be further from the truth. That's when I started thinking about being a director. I had no idea what that entailed and not a lot of resources to find out. My small liberal arts school didn't have a film program or even cameras, so I started trying to find an internship.

The ancestors must have been listening to that request because a chance meeting of two impressive-looking black women on my flight home from Kansas City led me to the start of my career in entertainment.

While I was waiting on my bags, we got into a conversation about my interest in film.

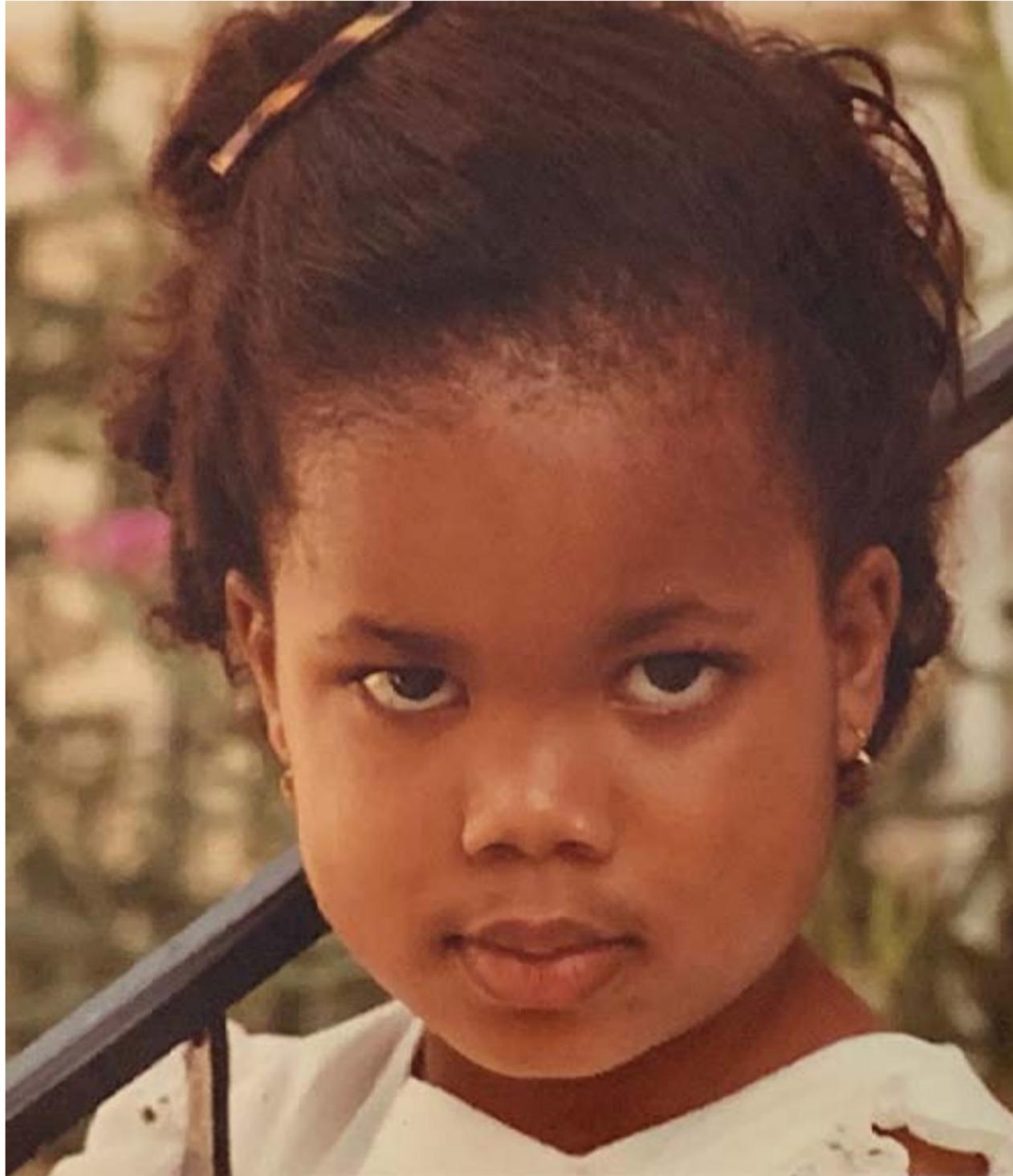
They said they had a friend who worked at Universal. With it being the beginning of the year, they would probably be looking for summer interns soon. We exchanged information. A few days later, they emailed me the contact information for a man named Matt Jackson. After playing phone tag with Matt's assistant for months, I finally met with him and he got me an internship at Edmonds Entertainment.

The first time I walked on an actual set was with my boss Carol-Ann Shine. She was producing a short for an incredible director named Yvonne Welbon. Almost every person behind the camera was black, including Yvonne. I saw cranes, cameras, people buzzing around creating the magic of a film set. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I knew what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.

If there were any remaining doubts about how far I could go as a black woman filmmaker, they were quashed when I saw the trailer for *Love and Basketball*. When I learned that brilliant film was made by the incredible Gina Prince-Bythewood, any limitations I had left were gone.



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TO LIVE OR DIE IN LA

AFTER YEARS OF MELANNA BEING ON THE ROAD DOING THEATRE AND WORKING TWO OR THREE JOBS TO SURVIVE AND ME BEING IN LA, MAKING A BUNCH OF SHORTS AND WORK TWO OR THREE JOBS JUST TO SURVIVE, I CALLED HER AND ASKED HER TO MOVE BACK TO LA. IT TOOK A FEW WEEKS AND CALLS TO A BUNCH OF FAMILY AND FRIENDS TO CONVINCHE HER BUT I FINALLY GOT MY WAY. AND SO BEGAN THIS JOURNEY OF US TAKING ON THIS CRAZY INDUSTRY TOGETHER.

If one is lucky,
a solitary fantasy
can totally transform one million realities.

- Maya Angelou

