I came to, when my brain registered the Pastor’s closing remarks, off in a dream world playing out what’s going to happen next time I step on the court. I was about to take flight for a dunk after a sweet left handed in and out dribble keeping to my favorite side of the court. I gazed at the attentive faces of the sanctuary, all the ones I could see, since my family always sat in the front row. I didn’t mind but always wondered how disrespectful my brothers and I are being teetering in the seat blatantly nudging each other to stay awake. Usually, I do pretty good but last night's tangle kept me up and as that thought ran through my mind I discreetly smelled my upper lip and fingers wishing she was still there.

Trying not to linger too long, I refocus on the sermon as the Pastor confidently paced the elevated homemade wood stage. It was stained an off black color, almost like a dark grey, and there were matching speaker stands that sat on the ground on either side of the altar. He walked in a half moon to avoid the podium and the glassed in drum set that sat in the middle of two guitar stands and more speakers that stood a little over 6 feet tall at the back of the stage. The platform was greatly illuminated whereas the observers sat in a half lit area exuberating the greatness of the power behind the words bellowing throughout. Since we are told that it’s not the man himself, but God’s words flowing through him and adding a visual makes the words seem more real.

Kind of like how the media does.

I did as I was told and stood to my feet hearing pops and snaps of my knees and ankles as my joints woke up from their sitting position. The call for prayer and deliverance was up next as we all closed our eyes and looked at our shoes trying to sense who was making their way to the altar. I always wondered, if that waiting feeling the Pastor endures after asking if anybody wants to turn their life over to Christ, was like a school teacher asking for a volunteer or a homeless man begging for money.

Wanting someone to see the light or needing them to.

At least it’s not whips and chains, I thought, falling into a more pro-black mindset as of late. My mind was open to a couple historical events that redacted information for the systematic destruction of my people, and it almost seems like Christianity, the religion in itself, plays a major role in our life’s glass ceiling. Mulling over freshly read articles I opened my eyes as prayer ended and the congregation started its slow exit. Most patrons stop in the aisle and exchange pleasantries sliding side to side like a hockey player trying to let others by. We have a couple individuals that leave as quickly as they came. Being as personable as I am, I stick around maintaining relationships, smiling and giving my best self.

One thing college taught me is that networking is key so I try to connect wherever my feet fall. Making my way to the vestibule, which is where everybody eventually migrated to, I hook a left to head to the bathrooms. Weaving in and out the crowd with head nods I pass a busy sitting area on my right, an “Announcements” kiosk with a few stragglers on my left, and if I went straight, the newcomers room but I veered and chose the door on the right that read “Men.” The bathroom had marble sinks and walls that made the area less like a waste room, it was empty so I flushed in peace. Using a pump bottle I washed my hands and looked in the mirror once again flashing back to last night.

A sly grin started to reach across my face as the door flung open, you had to pull from the outside so I quickly about faced getting there in time to have to let him go first. Another head nod, pulling out my phone as I cleared the doorway checking what I didn’t see the times I peaked during service. Using my left thumb, starting from the top of the screen, I scroll the menu down as my pace slowed in hopes of averting quickly if need be. I didn’t make it but a couple steps before I had to stop because of the heavy foot traffic. I could see people’s feet out my peripheral.

The chatter and music coming from the sanctuary faded out as my attention turned to my phone, standing still, I scanned the notifications reading ESPN before swiping it off the screen. I looked at Facebook next, checking to see if it was someone’s birthday I cared enough to send a shout out to. I swiped the nuisance notifications off the screen then responded to a Tinder message, realizing I can browse again, I indulge only for a couple check marks saving the rest for when I can online date comfortably. I scrambled to turn the volume down as I opened a couple Snapchats, not even looking up to see who turned my way.

Using the swipe keyboard I began typing out a response with a smile on my face finishing in time to see a church buddy walking up to me. I pocket the phone exchanging a handshake and start to converse on our similarities, which fall under the umbrella of basketball. From ribbing on each other's college teams to staying abreast on recent National Basketball Association trades. After an exiting patron entered our conversation to say his goodbyes, we finished off with inquiring about each other’s families and he wanted to know how my daughter was. Always lighting up when she is mentioned, I go off on a half tangent about how much I love her and some of the things we did last time she was in town.

After my conclusion of the events on the road trip back to South Carolina, we departed, leaving me alone to scan the foyer noticing more people left. My last conversation took me to the front doors on the other side of the men’s bathroom. With my right shoulder leaning against the frame, facing the way I came from, there was another less active sitting area behind me with the women’s bathrooms against a wall that led to the hallway for children’s church. Some kids were with their parents while others roamed the halls in packs waiting for their turn to go home, surprisingly not causing a lot of trouble.

I remember back in the day my brothers and I as well as other children would get into a lot while waiting on our parents, we learned every inch of that church including hiding spots for a secret hide and go seek game. Running around slowing down when an adult of concern rounded the corner or called out a guilty name from behind.

Another head nod, might as well be the girl from yesterday, head nodding the night away. Reaching back into my front pants pocket, I received my phone to finish checking notifications. Lighting up the screen I saw ESPN was back with more news about a football player I knew nothing about, swiping that and a podcast announcement off the screen the last pop up was a GroupMe message labeled “16.” GroupMe is a texting application that doesn't decipher between Iphone and Android users, the “16” represents the year I graduated and in the group is all my Alpha company classmates. Figuring the message to be comical or telling of a new position that one of them acquired, being at a military school only a couple pursued that career.

Clicking on the icon and seeing an article link from Heraldonline.com my mind instantly went to someone we knew messed up in some kind of way. Throughout the years periodically a cadet will fill the headlines highlighting the school first then proceeding to tell the story of mishaps which hit harder because we, as a corps, are supposed to be role models for the community. The prestige of our school calls for a big target on our backs lying in wait for one of us to step out of line. Being born an African American I’m used to those boundaries set by outsiders so adjusting to that part of school was a breeze.

The headline read “4 dead, including child and former Rock Hill High athlete, in York County crash.”

Rock Hill?

Being a school in South Carolina the city Rock Hill wasn’t uncommon but an unsettling feeling aroused as I perused my brain for the connection between my classmates and Rock Hill. A name came to mind but it just couldn’t be, I started to slowly read on. The article started off restating that four people died but emphasized that a 5-year old child passed away as well.

It went on to tell the story of the family of three identifying them with names and ages and loss of life was confirmed at the scene. Having to scroll past an ad about “Nobody knows Rock Hill like us” selling a ninety-nine cent subscription. I almost dropped my phone as the article uncovered the fourth death, the world stopped around me as I read the name I most feared. My eyes grew as big as knob year’s “high beams” and my legs felt as weak as locked knees during parade. My mouth parched as my brain raced trying to wrap my head around the words I was reading.

Continuing on, the article highlighted accomplishments such as a prolific wrestler and outstanding football player, commenting on his tenure at Rock Hill High, The Citadel and his professional career in Canada. I silently added my own accolades of Defensive Player of The Year in Southern Conference, 2x Conference Champion, and dedicated father of two. That hit like a gut blow, with a daughter of my own I couldn’t fathom the feelings going through his family’s head. At that moment I started to yearn for the family I tried so hard to have. Unsure of when my final day will be and not wanting my child not to know who I am.

I clicked out the article and started to read what my classmates were saying about it. They were posting old videos and quotes that made people laugh for four years. I chimed in reminding his knob year roommate how the deceased would invite me to the room to smoke Black n’ Mild’s, ashing in the window sill and blowing out the window with a fan by the door to hopefully mask the smell. We all liked a message reminding us of the time after Recreation Day, which is our graduation from plebe year, our classmate walked into the room of an upperclassmen with a taser as an atonement for the last 9 months. Another commented on when they were roommates he was always forced to leave for awhile due to our friend’s “happy time.”

My head slowly shook at the thread as my thumb sat paralyzed realizing I would never see him again, or hear his voice, like in the movies I started to replay times we had together. I went back to that first summer the basketball and football freshman got the chance to connect and I remember seeing him and thinking *That’s a big joker, he has to be a lineman.* Not knowing much about football I just figured the heavy strong ones belonged protecting or attacking the quarterback. I was sadly mistaken when the basketball team was forced to workout with the football players and he was as mobile as a running back, I was genuinely taken aback. Then we would go lift and he would put so much weight on the bar it would bend, after seeing that I didn’t want to lift with the football players anymore.

I recalled Hell Week, which I assume was supposed to mimic the red phase of basic training, and I remembered near the end when the football freshmen rushed in from training camp and I saw him toe the line awaiting instruction. I was elated, even though I couldn’t show it for fear of getting scolded, not only because it was a familiar face but another black kid to add to the two already there including me. I didn’t know much about South Carolina before I got there but what I did know was that there was a Confederate flag that hung in Chapel, and that was enough for me to know my position at that school regardless of class.

At the time we had an attractive African American TAC, Teach-Advise-Coach, Officer and thoughts of us sliding in slick suggestive hints when applicable, meaning no upperclassmen were around. We often joked about what we would do to her and whoever she was with wasn’t doing it right, pledging to do better if ever given the opportunity. That took me to the times we had to stand outside our rooms during taps, a musical tone symbolizing the lowering of the American flag for the night, and we would whisper or play around when the authority wasn’t looking. Sometimes, if we could, we would try to get the attention of a teammate or friend of a neighboring company.

Temporarily breaking free of my trance as second service patrons started to enter the building.

I had to tell someone.

Do I go to my parents first or do I go call close football players to learn more about the passing of a good friend. Indecisive, I step towards the door then back towards the sanctuary doing that a couple times as my mind was still piecing together what I read. I looked like a glitching 2K player but chose to make a beeline to my parents forgetting to dodge and head nod trying to reach my destination quickly.

Swiftly entering the sanctuary I find my father on the other side of the pew, exasperated, phone in hand, “Dad, my homie just died.”

“That’s going to happen a lot as you get older,” was his response. I stared him in the eye, stunned almost, but registering a great man of little words and wearing as many emotions on his face. A man born in the 50’s experiencing situations that social media is starting to capture. Also watching close friends and family fall to crack and the system, death wasn’t anything new. I often wonder exactly what he went through wanting to sit down and pedal stories of the old days, only getting excerpts here and there.

Without another word I take off back to the busier lobby area with more second service members entering catching early risers out the door. Locating my mother and telling her the news not expecting much of a response since she was already engaged in a conversation. I try to exit but confronted with a network marketing business acquaintance, keeping my best face we exchange pleasantries as I try not to stare too hard. He had something growing on his face and I wasn’t about to ask, just hoped his prayers were important enough to be answered on his time.

Pivoting, I pushed my way outside needing air and to call mutual brothers to either relay the news or confirm. The morning sun burned like it was midday, if there was a breeze I didn’t feel it. The sun seemed to be draining as a wave of emotion overtook me and all my appendages became heavy as if there was an overdose of lactic acid running through my body. My breathing was erratic as I tried to place one foot in front of the other thinking about the last time we spoke. Did I tell him I loved him? I’m sure he knew but who am I to say as I impetuously looked at the heavens anticipating an answer, hoping he at least made it up there. Not exactly sure of the formula to get my name written in that book, but maybe he will at least get a star.

I tried recollecting his voice and that signature greeting he used to always give me which included enthusiasm and a bear hug. Even if I wasn’t having a good day, his love and energy was contagious causing you to smile regardless. His two daughters flooded my mind again as my own child crawled across my memory as my vision blurred, blinking it away. I thought about our conversations on the topic complaining and giving personal experience advice hoping it’ll help with the pain caused by the mother’s. For the most part it was him giving me advice, on the little information I gave him, telling me to stay strong because success is around the corner. We worked too hard for it not to be.

Phone still in hand I try to look at the screen, always the one to set the brightness at the lowest, I squint and put my other hand on top to shield the sun. Pausing, figuring where I should start, I shoot a couple texts to my two former roommates and a couple of my teammates who would’ve known the champion and shared sympathy. Feeling the closest out of my basketball teammates I reach out to a football player that transferred to a Division II school in New York. He was one of many friends that matriculated with me but never got the chance to pridefully walk across the stage.

Finding his contact name I swipe right automatically dialing his number without having to press the call button. It didn’t ring twice before I heard his dry voice answer the phone.

“Yo.”

“Yo, you hear?” I had to ask even though I knew by the way he answered.

“Yeah, it’s crazy man. I just talked to him not too long ago.”

We both talked as if we didn’t want to discuss the subject but he began by informing me that our late brother was thinking about going back to Canada to continue his professional football career. I chime in by relaying that I just missed him about a month or two ago when he was in Durham, North Carolina for a football tryout. My younger brother was there. I wish now that I knew he was coming I would’ve gone with my brother to watch, but why didn’t I already do that? Rattling my brain trying to figure out where I was that day.

The voice on the phone assured me that there wasn’t any foul play involved and that the family swerved and collided head on killing everybody. I inquire of his daughters and comment on how the loss of life will affect them as they grow up, hopefully a father figure can step in and do a similar job. Or better. Making a verbal oath to keep tabs with his kids, not exactly knowing how, but that’s what was on our hearts.

After stating all he was told, memories are all we had left. We surfed the waves of emotion, or lack thereof, stifling anything that didn’t convey manhood. We laughed at the time downtown when two white boys tried to pick a fight with a couple of the football players and how our homie eventually ended up curb stomping one. Everytime I heard that story I wanted to be there throwing bows with my classmates. Remembering how we all bucked the system wearing soft shoes, tennis shoes, with our Duty uniform for months without having proper approval.

Our feet really did hurt though, working out early mornings then wearing dress shoes the rest of the day then changing back again for practice that afternoon. We also had to walk the long way around campus, seeing as only seniors and second semester juniors could walk across the big field that centered campus. It was called the parade deck simply because that’s where the parade was held. We mulled over how we missed out on a lot of those due to our schedules, in-season our respective sports were priority but before and after we were as confined as the rest of the corps.

Trying to be positive we share our gruntled excitement over seeing each other again, it had been too many months. Hanging up, I put the phone in my back left pocket and my hands in the front two as I inhaled taking in the scenery. Wishing my homie could feel the brightness of the sun again, the ground beneath our feet, the turf of the field, or the warmth of his children’s arms. I truly hoped he would get a chance to walk amongst the living visiting people he cared about, maybe, I will be on that list as I face the church reflecting on how that theory doesn’t flow with my preached beliefs.

I found myself next to the flagpole that stood tall in front of the church, the flag was lame this morning. My right shoulder leaned up against the pole and staring straight ahead I could see brick and if I looked left there were the doors I came from and the parking lot extended in that direction. I stood on a slight incline that showed more rocks and clay than grass, always trying to avoid stepping this way during rain showers. Behind me were the other stores that filled the complex, a Subway and Indian owned store with only customers of a similar culture. I’m sure others are welcome but one would have to know what they were looking for I would assume.

As the rest of second service piled in they spoke and waved at a somewhat carcass of a man, only a silhouette as my mind was forced to process this unfamiliar feeling of death. In spite of the mother of my child making me feel like that’s the best way, with her trying to build a precipice between my daughter and my side of the family. Even through all the hurt, and the times the sun rose but wasn’t shining, the thought of a family soothed me. Knowing that my classmate would never be able to fulfill those shoes and already seeing the dream fade with mine, I felt it pertinent that I fall in line with the ideal family regardless of what it takes. If not for my daughter then at least for him, but it all seems so far away like I will be stuck in this spot, this situation, in this hurt, forever.

I’d do whatever for my daughter though, even if it means living unhappy for the rest of my life. I just need to be with her everyday, ask her about her day and tell her the real truths of this world. I have a child that I can mold to be pro-black, resilient, proud, goal driven, to learn to have a passion and make the most of it. That same fire will carry over to the public or private sector encouraging entrepreneurship and focusing on the development of our community. I just have to have her, as I start to plot how I’m going to fake my smile, as I’ve done the last few years, walking back into pain I’ve been unsuccessfully running from.

That got me silently ranting about this attraction I detest, the feeling of no matter what they do I’ll always give them another chance. The horrible feeling of waking up and going to sleep thinking about that person, stuck and blind to what’s in front of my eyes. Lost in some four letter word that apparently entails unhappiness and pain, I mean, even God says falling in love and following his footsteps will bring trial before triumph.

Why is that? Why is it that even when I gave her my heart and if I give God my soul why must I still endure pain?

Trying to shake off the fog, I turn right, mindlessly walking to my car in the parking lot opposite the direction I came kicking the earth barely picking up my feet. Still forcing one foot in front of the other I make a couple more calls to two more football players, a 4-year starter and 2x champion cornerback and redshirt 2x champion safety, both carrying such a presence on the field making offenses cower. I ask them what all they knew hoping to ascertain more than what I already learned, to no avail and not wanting to push further I hang up by the time I reach my car.

Missing the keyhole my hand shook throwing off my coordination, I tried to steady myself but my mind kept racing. It was almost as if my thoughts were interfering with the nervous system. I stood tall, closed my eyes and slowly inhaled, filling my lungs with steady air holding it only to exhale at the same pace. I repeated this process one more time hoping to calm the motor in my head, using this technique after a workout, this should work. I was able to slide the key in and open the door feeling the stored heat spill out.

Closing the door, I partake in my post-church ritual, if you will. Grabbing the cigar pack with my left hand out the side compartment that folded out towards me. I rip the sealing open and slide a cigar out resealing the pack and, with my two thumbs, start to split the cigar down the middle. Almost a straight line every time, with an immeasurable amount of practice I take pleasure in the process. Using my right hand to blindly find the Powerade bottle hiding under the passenger seat. Twisting the top off the smell of earthly medication filled my nose and added to the residual smoke that seemingly couldn’t escape.

Smoking and driving has never been ideal, but considering the fact it’s probably the safest with my current living situation. At least that’s what I tell myself as I overturn the bottle letting my grinder and a smaller container I got from a dispensary in Las Vegas fall into my lap. Splitting the cigar was symbolic of the wound that was just opened, then I unscrew my Las Vegas container extracting enough to refill the cigar. Opening the grinder I stuff the medication and smash the top back on creating tiny granules that represent the pain, fears, and inadequacy of not just death but all that weighs on my mind.

After a couple aggressive twists I open the middle section that catches what falls through the grater and pour it in the cigar spreading it evenly. I start the process of tucking these feelings away and rolling them to the back of my mind using the lighter to crisp over all that is hidden, hardening the outside to burn what’s inside from memory.

At least for a couple hours.

I start the car noticing I failed to check my surroundings, doing that, I pull off and head to the stop sign that all of us use to exit the premises. Making a right I waited until I hit the highway before sparking, riding to a portable speaker that I could barely hear keeping the windows cracked to let the smoke out. By the time I drove a mile or so, death escaped my mind and I was filled with lyrics to the song that played. A coping mechanism that only lasts a few hours but those pain free hours are critical to my sanity fearing if I didn’t, I may never come back.

I smoked about three quarters before making it home changing into my gym gear for the routine Sunday training sessions. Grabbing a water bottle and fruit I head out the door to fake the intensity I pride myself on bringing to each lesson. Correcting the most minute detail in order to become a better player overall, all while using basketball as a foundation for developing men. Impacting a child’s life is the reason behind my training and newly found love for coaching, I used to think I wouldn’t enjoy it as much as I do.

Those few hours in the gym and that next week seemed to be a blur, working Retail everyday to keep my mind occupied. The “16” group chat popped back on my screen a couple days later, this time with the funeral address and time. It was at the deceased old high school in Rock HIll, a 2 hour drive from me not having to think twice whether I’m going or not. Still not sure how I’m going to react once I get to the funeral, will I be able to hide my emotions as well as I do at work? Will my emotions move me to tears? Surely not, manly in every essence, doing as always by pushing those feelings to the back of my mind.

The sentiment of wanting a family occupied my thoughts using this upcoming week to talk back with the mother of my child. Expressing how much I needed to have this family never knowing when my last day will be, I needed to be in my daughter’s life. It wasn’t enough to just video chat and see her once a month, hopefully. I wanted to be hands on like those first couple months she was born. Maybe if things didn’t go so badly during that time we would still be together, a happy family that I can be proud of and take care of.

I implored how I would even come pick them up, an extra 2 hours to my drive, just to have them by my side during this trying time. Always willing to go the extra mile even before we had a kid but like always, it was never reciprocated. Of course it wasn’t, I don’t know why I always run back to her especially when I’m in need of comfort. A lady who didn’t care to support or make me happy while I was trying to make something work out of nothing.

I’m left with the same gaping feeling I had when I was more or less forced out of South Carolina and out of my daughter’s everyday life. I often wonder what makes me want her so bad if anybody, even her, asks what I like about her. I get tongue tied but all I know is she’s who I’m fiending for each night. What a horrible feeling of being attached to someone I know I shouldn’t be with, an almost uncontrollable fascination, if this is what love is I never wanted to experience it again.

It couldn’t be love though, right? I was told love was this blissful marathon even though it always kind of seemed like a fairy tale to me. I know there are supposed to be ups and downs but what happens when only one of us is getting up, and it wasn’t me or my head. I do for you and you do for me, I think that’s love and if you’re not willing to do that then you can’t possibly love that person.

Simple.

Maybe that’s my problem, trying to look in the mirror to reflect on my own faults but if I’m constantly doing for you and can’t get the same in return I don’t see the problem in seeking it somewhere else. I’m confused, but I’ve always been told I was devoid of emotion, another day of pushing this hurt to the back of my mind.

My alarm woke me up Saturday morning still feeling a little cloudy after another night of running from myself. I wish now, that I didn’t light as much considering I didn’t have a lot left and needing the extra money for gas and food on the road trip. I methodically got ready almost hopping back in bed not wanting to face this pain, this will be the second funeral I have ever attended. The first was one of my bestfriends mom that passed which hurt but it couldn’t compare to the companionship that developed over the past 4 years. We had no choice cornered in small alcoves and hearing “nuts to butts,” a common stigma throughout the school. I didn’t have any female classmates so I wasn’t sure how that went for them but I can’t imagine it being too different.

Getting in the shower I let the hot water beat on my head for about fifteen minutes without moving, inviting the warmth of the water over this chilling feeling. I slap on lotion trying to smooth out the dryness of the day, ironing to press out the wrinkles of fears coursing through my body. In a lost headspace moving from activity to activity without much thought, like a soulless corpse.

Walking to the kitchen I prepare a simple egg cheese and turkey bacon breakfast sandwich losing the sense of creativity this morning. I toasted the bread and fried the eggs and bacon staring blankly into the pan, the sound of food cooking brought me back as I put the sandwich together.

After I finished eating I grabbed everything I needed for the road trip, double checked, then headed for the door. I called out from the foyer letting everybody home know that I was leaving, moments after, I heard footsteps and was hugged and prayed for. I started to walk out the door and my mom called out to me, “Are you going to be okay?” Seemed odd but that was the first time anyone of them asked if I was okay. Maybe it’s because I never stopped smiling, or the emotion I feel but can’t express, or it’s the fact that they know I handle commiseration internally. Like always, I give my best smile and tell her that I was going to be alright and turned to walk to my car.

Unlocking the door of my Toyota, I plop into the driver’s seat throwing my bookbag and overnight bag to the passenger’s side hearing the thud as they collided with the door. The only good thing about the trip is that I got a new Ipad, passed down from my brother, and it held all the new up to date music that’ll help me get through the ride. Surfing through albums I reach back to pull out my Powerade bottle preparing myself for the road trip. Before I could find an appropriate album I twisted the bottle open pulling out a nug that was an insult to the high I wanted to feel. Needed to feel. Unrolling the roach from last night and combining it to what I had left I was only able to roll less than half a blunt.

Pondering the next time I will be able to pick up I choose a J. Cole album, hopefully my favorite rapper will be able to cheer me up. Putting the car in gear and lighting the clip I rolled I start for my uncharted destination, not just Rock Hill but the sentiment that will linger in the air once I’m there. I shuddered as the clip turned back into a roach expiring before my thoughts could slip away, like running from a demon that carries the pain that keeps my mind turning. I know it’s not the best coping mechanism but it’s surely not the worst, at least I still have control over myself.

I wish I had more control over my thoughts but the lack of levitation caused a battlefield in my mind, the potential ascendency of evil over good. I strongly believe the favor passed down from my father’s spiritual awareness and dedication is what keeps me from tipping over the edge. Merging onto the Interstate, my mind switched lanes like the car as I flicked the blinker down looking in my side mirror. The steering wheel wavered as I corrected the car and wiped at my eyes, the memories standing as tall as the trees casting a dark shadow over the Toyota.

The temperature dropped to that of a morgue, my heart palpitating remembering sitting in his house in West Ashley playing Call of Duty talking trash. Days like those seemed never ending but those same days, I thought, would bring serenity in our ladder years of life. There isn’t anybody who could’ve guessed there would be a day that we wake up to a fallen companion in a brotherhood that was naturally created through survival. At least that’s what it seemed like, trying our best to stand tall clinging to each other’s words of encouragement and spiteful curses for entertainment because laughing it off was a healthy way to get through it.

I used my left hand to bring the blinker up looking into the blind side mirror and switching into the slow lane pulling out a Black N’ Mild craving an altered mindset. Any kind of stimulating buzz, but even before I lit it, I knew the nicotine wouldn’t suffice. Setting the cruise control I pull my first drag inhaling and holding in the smoke letting it dissipate into the bloodstream that rushed to my head. Letting it out I repeat the process, brushing off the damage my lungs were receiving, my mind telling me that my current situation is more important than worrying about life-long effects.

As the smoke raced out the window, with help of the air conditioning, I watched as cars of various models zoom by even a couple eighteen wheelers. In my life, at this point in time, that’s how I felt everybody passing me by while I’m ostensibly stuck on cruise control. Watching people switch lanes and advancing while I’m trudging by, smoking away the pain of inadequacy. Exhausting each opportunity and avenue trying to get a sniff of a higher income helping me better support my daughter.

Maybe then, I will be able to have the family that I always wanted.

It was as if I was driving on autopilot, not really paying attention to the road but still driving properly. It’s almost the same feeling as reading out loud and thinking at the same time, amazing how the brain works. The rest of the ride was a roller coaster of emotions, ping ponging from one thought to the next, some a long volley and others an ace to the heart. Some were uphill but most were a decline, the pressure forcing my body rigid sticking to the headrest. I always loved roller coasters, just not the ones that run between my ears.

Throughout the week my classmates GroupMe message thread was busier than usual, with planning a restaurant to meet and grab breakfast as well as gathering attendance. Most classmates could make it. We even had a classmate go AWOL from his post in Florida, justifiable for the man in the casket. We all agreed on a Cracker Barrel, an exit away from the High School, I knew because I wasn’t listening and the GPS rerouted me. I take in my surroundings as I drive the new terrain wondering how many times my friend drove these same streets. Who he was with what was going on in life at the time, even what decisions were made that could’ve prevented our paths from ever crossing.

Pulling in the parking lot finding a suitable spot to back in I elegantly turn the wheel to fit perfectly in between the lines. Checking the rearview mirror I couldn’t see my eyes due to shades but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to. Apparently, my first look judging by the placement of my tie. Wanting to realign my outfit subconsciously worrying about gigs, the South Carolina air brought resurfacing thoughts of inspections and uniforms. Gigs were points taken off for abnormalities in a cadet's uniform or room and if received enough there leave, ability to escape the gates, would be stripped away.

I opened the door catching a whiff of the tobacco smell that still lingered, stepping out with my left leg first followed by the right then the rest of my body accompanied by a grunt. As I straightened up, my joints started communicating a snap followed by a pop until they finished waking each other up. I started to run my hands down my chest and legs dusting off crumbs and picking at neverending lent, flicking it to the wind. I stopped to watch the white spiders float effortlessly, careless in direction or next destination. Freely existing amidst the nuances of life. Being inanimate was a lot more appealing than dealing with the situation of today, unfortunately, I didn’t have a choice.

Looking in my reflection I continue checking my wardrobe wanting to carry over what I learned from school to the real world, at least for today. Maybe to pay tribute to a fallen comrade or maybe because I didn’t want to let my classmates down since they were a big reason I got through the military aspect of the school. Whether it was helping shining brass or shoes, inspection, or keeping the uniform presentable they were always willing to help. A lot of them also supported the basketball team coming out to most home games cheering and representing the company with a horizontal “A” on the collar, the tip pointing towards the neck.

Striding to the front door I recognize classmates cars and see another pulling up as I enter the restaurant. Showered with hugs and handshakes it felt good to be reunited, this was our first encounter since graduation we just wished the circumstances were different. Like the wedding we all were attending for our highest ranking classmate, by senior year he became 1st Battalion Commander in which he governed our company and the three surrounding. In any institution there will be politics, we were glad that the Commander was one of ours.

The wait was expected to be 30 minutes which allowed the rest to trickle in giving everyone a chance to catch up before we sat. It was as if we all were determined not to talk about the task at hand as conversations flowed from work to family to the women we were dating. We waited in the lobby and scanned the array of options Cracker Barrel had to offer, pointing out items to throw jabs at one another. Felt like the old days.

A group of nicely dressed gentlemen brandishing the band of gold in Rock Hill was enough to draw attention as we headed for our table. It was almost as if forks lay lame and mouths stopped moving as eyes focused on our presence, and as soon as we sat a couple questions were asked in our direction by another table. We got settled and quickly ordered since the funeral was to start in the next hour.

I received a call, from the football transfer, telling me that a lot of the guys were meeting at the deceased mother’s house. By the time my food got here and I ate I would be too late so I told him I would catch him at the high school. The food came swiftly. I ordered an egg and bacon sandwich that came runny when I specifically asked them not too. I didn’t make a fuss since we were already limited on time, our friend I coined “Preacher” from an opposing company walked in compelling shouts of greetings from all of us at the table.

We ate and chatted then were soon on our way to the high school that embraced our classmate just as much as the men driving single file. Reminiscing on the gutters, I smile trying to recall some memories to rectify what was already dead unable to revisit with a fallen soldier. One time I was a couple cadets behind him jogging, chins tucked eyes open wide arms glued in a 90 degree angle, single file in the barracks headed for the stairs. I saw an upperclassmen run up only to get flattened by the defensive lineman’s shoulder stifling a laugh hoping to avoid push ups. Hopefully, I thought, the transgressions that we shared together won’t fade like the avowedly astute cadets that failed at bucking the system.

As we turned into the parking lot, the facade of an infallible stout dwindled as if I hit a force field stripping away my determination to make it through the day. A disquieting emotion filled my soul wanting to run away, like I do so often when it pertains to situations requiring me to face the problem at hand. Whether women or death I use vices such as weed, writing, reading, and working to stimulate my mind keeping unhinged thoughts at bay. Unwarranted, to say the least, coping mechanisms paired with invading notions of despair.

Losing hope of success and family I back into my parking spot swinging the door open forcing myself to take the initial step feeling heavier after tapping into mental baggage. We all parked in the same vicinity and waited for each other before walking in as a unit, a habit. The autumn South Carolina sun blazed in the early afternoon creating blinding glares on the cars that I walked past, thankful I remembered to bring my sunglasses and wear contacts. My gait wavered as much as my persona as the front doors finally came into view.

Well, as much as I could see due to the fact that the front entrance was crowded as mourners piled in to pay their last respects. I had to remind myself that I was headed to a funeral and not a sporting event. This scene is how I imagined the crowd from the deceased playing days, people from various cities walking over each other to see the superstar perform. The solemn expression of pain brought me back to reality as we approached the back of the line.

Seeing a couple of familiar football faces we acknowledge, embrace, and began talking in hushed tones as if we were trying not to wake the dead. Or a church service, we shared with each other how we couldn’t believe this was the inducement for our first grand gathering post graduation. Unfathomable, like the sun that was beating on our heads feeling my pores open under an all black outfit of dress shirt, dress pants, tie, and crocodile designed dress shoes. Regretting wearing all black, I tried to inch my way closer to the doors which was under an overhang that provided a sliver of shade.

Reaching out to help keep the door open as we all tried to squeeze in feeling the rush of cool air as we approached the entrance. Immediately, I found myself in the gym foyer, an open space with tile floor that usually exhibits sports accolades. Unfortunately, today was different. Although the trophies and plaques stood tall in the vestibule they were overshadowed by the acknowledgments of the former high school standout.

To the right were the trophy cases as well as bathrooms on either side of the closed concession stand. In front of that were three long rectangle tables that contained pictures and various memorabilia from middle school to the most recent. Seeing older football players that helped set the tone for the championships won, and the mindset that followed, I stepped out of line to shake hands expressing both gratitude and sorrow.

An unequivocal feeling of remorse swept over my body as the reunion brought about an array of emotions weakening my extremities. The struggle of wanting to smile in the presence of faces that excavate positive memories but knowing we wouldn’t have them without the connections made by our man in an eternal slumber. Shaking hands with half a dozen class of ‘15 champions I walk to the gymnasium stopping at a, waist up, portrait weirdly relishing the dress grey uniform. The gold buttons sparkling like his well known smile.

Continuing on through the gym doors I was forced to an abrupt stop trying not to step on the heels of the person in front of me. There was a tarp that covered the court and had chairs set up resembling a church service or graduation day. The line I was in started at the door and wrapped around all the chairs leading to the casket at the front pew as if communion commenced. I was in awe of how many people were in attendance. The bleachers and chairs on the floor were filling fast and there were plenty others behind me.

As I inched forward, under the far basket, I had to wonder if my funeral will have as great a showing. Will I have touched enough lives that my passing will be the catalyst for congregating the past and the future? Various time periods assembling to paint the picture of an honorable man and father on a 2 hour canvas. I used to think I wouldn’t have to worry about these kinds of thoughts, I used to think I had all the time in the world but the casket I was approaching proved that life isn’t guaranteed.

The closer I got the clearer the view of the silhouette that was once lively in every essence, I felt as if I was supposed to be waking him up for formation. Maybe to help him get ready for Senior picture day, which was less than a year ago, or make plans for the weekend coming up. Even just a simple conversation, a whisper, a word, anything to prove that this is all a dream and he will jump up to scare everyone brightening the room as he always did.

Woefully, it was real and any doubt was dismissed as it was my turn to approach the casket. Standing over the body I felt emotionless and empty; he looked recognizable but altered. He had lost some pigment and his skin looked shiny and fake and bloated as if they added air to “liven” him up. Instead, to me, it made him look sickly. Ghostly, for lack of a better word. It did look peaceful though. A certain calmness I was yearning for dealing with a dissipating basketball future, job application rejections, and barely being able to care for my child whose life I was being forced out of.

I spoke so that only he and I could hear, “Get up and stop playing man, this can’t be real, I wish I would’ve hit you up again or I wish you hit me up letting me know you were around my way. Going to miss you bro, we’ll look out for your kids. Much love.”

I stifled the emotions rising from my stomach to throat, pivoting to the right proceeding to the section of bleachers that presumably was set aside for his college associates. As I approached I was welcomed by stale smiles of recognition and acknowledgement of support from a non football player. Giving out handshakes and hugs to the group of players that I graduated with brought me back to Hell Week when athletes get one meal with their coaches. Just like now, I went to everybody in Mess Hall, cafeteria, it was almost the same fragment of joy seeing familiar faces in a trying time.

We settled as the rest of the congregation trickled in following the line to view the body waiting for the commencement of praise, the start of a new life rather than the end of an old one. At least that’s how the other black funeral I attended was constructed, it’s a going home party, going home to that place that eases our mind believing that’s where our loved ones reside. If it’s real, who is truly worth that type of paradise? If it is heaven, wouldn’t my experience be different from the next person since our interests aren’t the same?

Inexplicable questions hoping the eulogist, Reverend, could offer some answers as his voice boomed over the microphone. I sat next to former classmate and Division II transfer and behind the other two champions that I called the day I found out we would all be congregating again. The Reverend added levity forcing mixed emotions but the laughs and past stories my friend never got around to telling me made this situation more bearable.

What hurt just as much was watching his first daughter wearing an all white dress dancing and twirling around in front the front row to the left of the casket. Unable to comprehend that her father wouldn’t be able to hold her again, see her graduate or send her off to college. She will miss a very important figure in her life and I would miss one of my best friends but the thought of it had me yearning for my own daughter who I feared would miss that same touch. The thought moved me knowing that I desperately wanted her at this moment, her mother too, maybe for the presence or the facade of having a family justifying having a child at this age.

My buddy linking arms with me brought me back to reality, our friend Preacher took the stage. He wasn’t a stranger to the spotlight, preaching several Monday’s at Fellowship for Christian Athletes or FCA, and his presence filled the gymnasium demanding the eyes and ears of everyone. Listening to Preacher’s recollections of the deceased took me back to our 4-year tenure, it was hard to picture these stories knowing a prominent character was missing. Like in the movies where the person pixelates fading off screen, at least I could still hear his voice. I thought, as the speaker handed the microphone back to the Eulogist.

The rest of the funeral seemed like background noise zoning out to a world of my own troubles, the struggle of finding a salary job and of trying to get back overseas to play basketball. I started replaying the relationship that distracted me from my dreams, the anger, pain, disgust, the disappointment in myself churned my stomach. Breathing in my nose and out my mouth to calm the retching feeling that I experienced every morning after returning to Raleigh from Charleston this past Christmas. Dry heaving as soon as I wake up my mind wrestling to grasp ahold of what I turned my life into watching all of my hard work slip through my fingers like sand. The hardest part is trying to pick myself up, get back to where I once was but mentally it’s like picking up one granulate at a time. This strenuous task caused thoughts of dusting my hands off and walking away leaving basketball, my daughter, and life behind choosing the easier path.

Quitting.

Unfortunately, that isn’t in my DNA even though the peace and calmness radiating from the casket was enticing like in the cartoons where the character floats to the smell of a fresh pie. The funeral ended and the congregation tried to spill out of two doors, in the wait I got the chance to have conversations with Class of ‘16 football players catching up and relaying what’s new. We all stopped in a big group outside in the blazing sun trying to figure out what the plans were post funeral, most went to the burial site but that wasn’t something I was trying to see. Seeing a close friend in a casket is bad but witnessing him being put in the ground was a different hurdle and I wasn’t sure if I was ready for that.

I hope he can forgive me.

Everybody else went in their own direction returning back home for another week of work, one common conversation was how much the real world entailed. I was going to go with a Romeo Company classmate to his home in Charlotte but that would take me out of my way since my next destination was Charleston to see my daughter. Finalizing my decision in the car sending a text recanting my earlier statement. Using the same breathing technique in my nose and out my mouth, I set the GPS mentally getting ready to deal with the fecal that comes with the mother of my child.

Pulling out the parking spot and throwing my arm out the window and stabbing the air with my forefinger pointed to heaven, or my late classmate, hopefully it’s the same vicinity. I saw the return salute of the index finger from my rearview mirror and could’ve swore I saw something in the clouds move.

Maybe I’ll get a closer look next time I ride a cloud on a herbal flight, flying over the reoccurring thought that brought all of us to our alma mater and this occasion. Regardless of the work put in, the reality of death and toxic relationships will remand dreams to the depths of imagination.