

*Fashion
And*
FEELINGS



By Renée Birchwood

Fashion and Feelings

Prologue:

I wrote the book “Fashion and Feelings” to highlight the high points and low point in my life. To give you a quick heads up the book does not end on a “high note” but more on a realistic one. It’s filled with earliest memories of my childhood to my current memories as well. I was able to look at my old photo album and pin point my favorite/ memorable memories just based on clothing. By sketching this I could see my transitioning from childhood to adulthood.

My parents were a big part of my childhood growing up so they were mentioned almost throughout the majority of my book. One key component to keep an eye out for is the shift in my clothing choices due to unfortunate circumstances. I was able to acknowledge that whatever I was going through mentally at the time was reflected in my clothing. In this book I go through a whole rollercoaster of emotions. So get ready to be intrigued and maybe a little bit emotional for “Fashion and Feelings!”

Foreword: Yasmine Matire

Mid way through summer break, a next-door neighbor arrived; this was the day I got to know Renee Birchwood. She was a very outspoken person right off the bat. It didn't matter who you were or was whether that may be a friend or a foe. Renee didn't let anyone talk bad or down on her. She respected her friends and would stand up for me or anyone, for that matter. A very creative person I might add as in she always came up with new ways to keep me entertained, we often found ourselves bored so she came up with the idea of building a fort with a Hula-hoop, blankets and couch cushions. You were never truly bored around Renee; her imagination would run wild with endless ideas.

Renee is my most supportive friend in-fact growing up she had a way of making everyone around her laugh and smile. Every time her baby sister would cry, she came up with the idea of crying with her. It was a happy moment. Knowing that I knew she never wanted her friends or family to be sad instead she found ways to live in the moment and be joyful doing so. She has always been a very confident person. She expresses it through her fashions and she carry herself well. If I had to describe her in one word it would be ambitious, as kids and even as an adult Renee always looks onwards and goes after what she wants. It was never a dull moment having her as my childhood friend.

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Chapter 1:Denim Fantasy

My full name is Renée Zelda Birchwood, but if you ask me my full name in person I'd rather say "Renée Zelda Birchwood the 1st" because it sounds better, and I don't believe there's a second one in the world at the moment. I was born on August 12 2001 (i'm a Leo sign) I'm the oldest sibling of my family. My mother told me, I was named Renée after a famous singer she liked, but when I questioned her on what her favorite song was from the singer, she cannot name one. But most importantly, I was named Renée due to the meaning behind my name. It's French for "reborn", I do believe in reincarnation and astrology so I believe in my past life or when I pass in my current one I will become a lion. I was born in Queens but spent ages 2-5 growing up in Brooklyn.

In terms of body modifications, there was a transformation with my nails, my mother would always trim them short once every 2-3 weeks to prevent me from scratching myself. For attachments to my body I had earrings inserted into my pierced ear holes. Usually it was gold plated or silver studs because I had sensitive ears. There was a transformation in my skeletal system from me being an infant to now being a toddler with developed bones. Lastly, my hair was modified into braids even though it's underneath a hat.

The outfit that I am wearing is my all time favorite. It was completely denim, what is interesting is that the denim jacket I wore had two long patches of the color Magenta/Orchid in the front and pack. The collar was a bit oversized to create an exaggerated shape. For the pants it was also denim but the cut was baggy. For the accessories I wore Magenta colored sunglasses to match the patches. My hat was also denim and matched the exact same color of my outfit, I believe it was a Beret style hat. Lastly my sneakers were white plain lace ups.

Just by observing my pose in this outfit I can easily tell my emotions during that time. If I had to describe it in one word it would be: Confidence. That it's one of the reasons I chose this outfit is because I specifically remembered how I felt wearing it. As a child I wore dresses most of the time and yes I did feel pretty, but looking back at old photos I began to realize that when I wore pants I acted differently. I just felt more comfortable and happier wearing pants.



Chapter 2: Dress to Impress

Growing up as a child, I was unsure of the names and locations of areas I used to go to. My mom named Leslieann and dad named Raymond were present in my life. The story goes something like this: my mother was born and raised in Trinidad and moved to New York at the age of 25 and my father is born and raised in Tobago and moved at age 34 and met through mutual friends. From memory we always went outside as a family for walks that were within walking distance from our apartment. My mom did not like taking the train with me during that time because I would become restless and had the bladder of a straining pan.

For body modifications, my hair has been transformed into two buns. Usually my hair would be in two braided pigtails, and it still is but my mom would wrap/enclose them so it creates a “braided bun”. For hand held objects I was holding a Barney Doll in my hand which I used for the “accessory” of my outfit. Of course there was a transformation with my teeth, I brushed them twice a day daily. For body supplements under the pre-shaped category I would say that the sunglasses I wore on my face would fit that category.

As I said in my first chapter, I did wear dresses a lot as a child. In the drawing I wore a tunic style dress, the color was a Cerulean Blue. There weren't any prints or patterns on it, my mom would usually put me in simple everyday dresses that could be worn anywhere like the supermarket or the park. There is small embroidery on the right side of my chest, it was three sunflowers. My sneakers are the same white lace ups as the first chapter. These were commonly paired with most of my dresses because the color white is very versatile. For accessories I wore matching colored sunglasses that had small fragments of glitter on the lenses and frames. Lastly, I had my stuffed animal as my “go to accessory” which I will explain in the next chapter.

I recalled this outfit from looking through my old photo album. From my memories I do remember going to the park a lot and socializing with other kids. This drawing took place around 2004, and I was about three years old so I wasn't in school yet. I did not attend daycare because my mother would be paranoid about the possible mistreatment of children. So the only time I did get to interact with other kids was going to the park. I didn't have any siblings yet either so I couldn't interact with any children at home so my parents made sure to take me out at least three to four times a week to the park to help with my socializing skills.



Chapter 3: Purple Accessory

I believe at one point a child's favorite place to visit would be Toys R Us. In 2004 before Amazon, Target, and Walmart the only place to get toys would be in Toys R Us. But, it was sorta expensive especially if the toy was created where you had to buy different parts separately. If you wanted the knockoff version of a toy for example a Barbie doll you can just purchase a "Brenda doll" that's completely the same as Barbie from a little hole in the wall shop in Brooklyn. That is exactly what my mother did because she did not want to spend money on a doll that she can easily buy for five bucks and I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. She purchased it in a small retail store on 94th Albany Ave in Brooklyn.

Since this item is an accessory it does not have any body modifications. The only thing I can really focus on is the body supplements which would fit under the "hand held objects" category. This Barney doll was not a big doll. I would usually hold it with one hand everywhere I would go to the point where I would very well consider it to be "adhered" to my body. I recall wearing Barney with every single outfit I wore, because I didn't carry him around with the intention of making him match what I wore. But I do remember wearing sleeping pajamas and he was with me. I also wore a scooby-doo beanie and Lavender striped top with Velvet pink pants with him by my side.

I wouldn't completely consider the Barney doll to be a knockoff but it was more like a replica. It had the same colors and patterns as the original. The color was almost like a Russian Violet and for the stomach area he had a Pine Green oval shape. This Barney was supposed to be Christmas themed so he wore a striped Candy Apple Red and White scarf, I think he had a hat too but I "accidentally" (I was a destructive child) ripped it off. He also had Golden Yellow toes and a big black eye.

I would always carry Barney by my side whenever I would go outside to the park, to the supermarket, to visit a friend's house etc. I was emotionally attached to him, I wouldn't go anywhere or sleep without him. I remember one time I went to Toys r Us with my dad and sitting inside the cart and when we left I realized that I left Barney in the cart. By that point we were in the car driving home and the store was closing up so my dad told me in the morning he would call and ask if they could hold it for him so he can retrieve it the next day. It was the first night I slept without him and I felt like it was the longest night of my entire life. I did not sleep at all. The next day I went with my dad to pick it up and felt so relieved that he didn't get thrown away.



Chapter 4: Hair made of steel

Looking back at old photos of myself I would consider myself a “high maintenance child”. My mother mainly picked out what I wore on a daily basis without my father really having a hearsay. She’s a living embodiment of the term “mother knows best” but it only applied to her way of styling me. Jamaica Ave was her go to spot to buy good looking clothes without breaking the budget. But one thing that she would splurge on is hair ties and bow tie clips so I could have it match with what I wore.

The main body modification I had at the time was my *hair*. It was usually detangled first by using a brush or a wide tooth comb. She would use gel or grease to help *pre-shape* the parting spaces. Then she *braided* my hair in pigtails or in sections of 4-6. For attachments to my body she used *hair ties* to secure the root of my hair to prevent it from looking messy. At the ends of my hair she would *clip* plastic bow ties to the ends for aesthetics.

The beauty of this hairstyle was it was versatile with what I wore. Since my hair was in braids I could wear the style for at least a week without having to change it. I would wear this with a white collar button up shirt and navy blue pants for elementary school. For going out I would wear a taffy pink Gypsy style top with dark purple velvet bottoms. For a relaxed day at home I would wear the style with an oversized basil green graphic tee with a dragon in the center.

I hated getting my hair done as a child. My hair texture is 4c so my curl patterns are very tight and coily. I am also tender headed so the slightest tug to my head would make my eyes water. My mom always did my hair and she was too rough. Even though the simple hairstyle takes 30 mins to do, it felt like forever because of the pain I was in. One thing that I envied was people with a looser curl pattern because they don’t have to deal with harsh detangling.



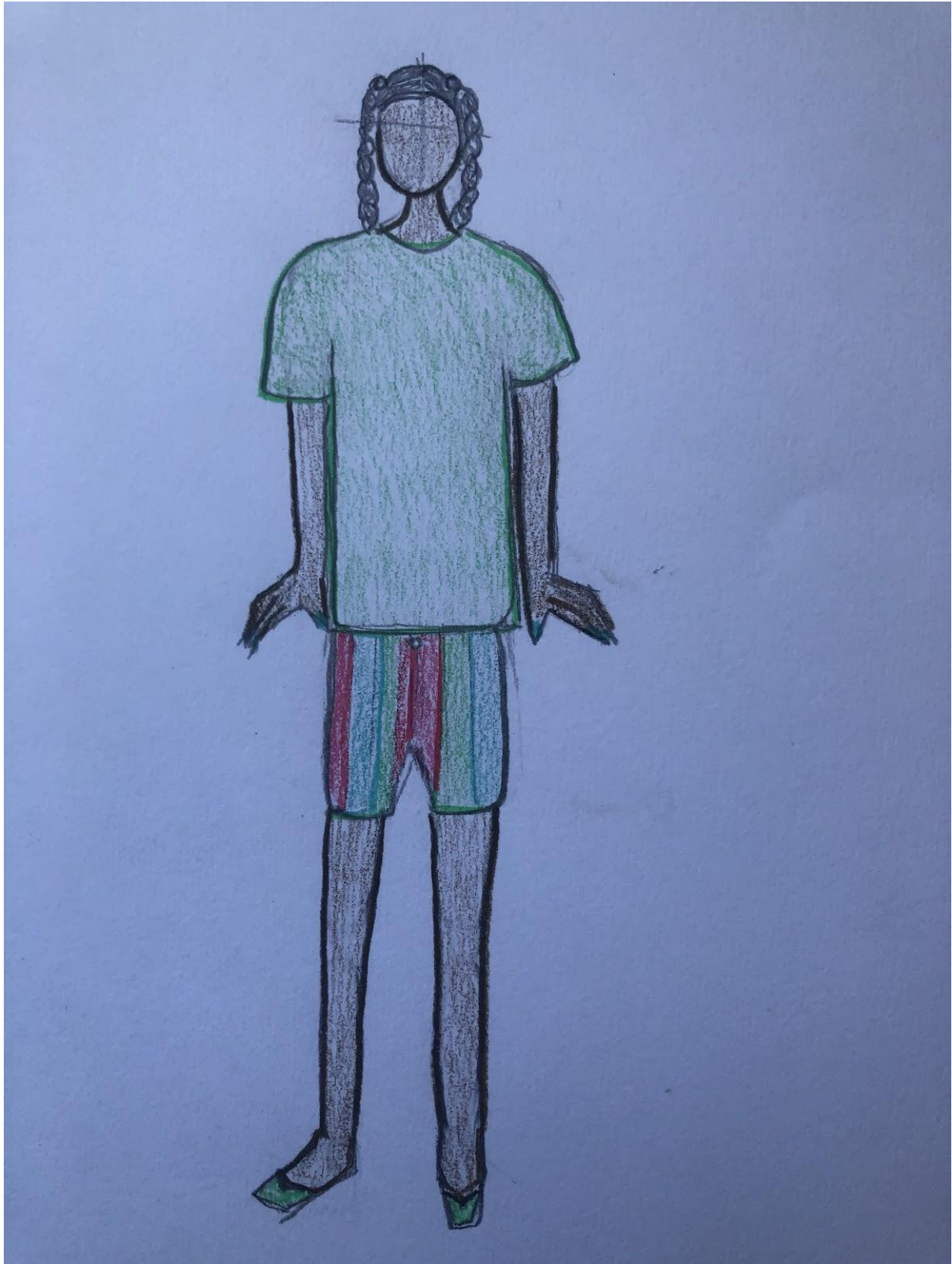
Chapter 5: Change of Scenery

My mother and father's goal as parents was to make sure their children had a backyard to play in and grow up in a house instead of a tiny apartment. By the time my little sister Kelise was born both of my parents agreed to move to a different state, Florida. In 2007 we moved to Ocala, instead of taking a flight we drove 14 hrs all the way from New York to Florida. We had transformed from living in a tiny 1 bed and 1 bathroom apartment to now living in a three bedroom and 2 bathroom house with a garage and wide backyard. The location was in 81st circle, Ocala so within the area was a small group of neighbors that were spread out throughout.

Second para: For body modifications there was a transformation of my *breath*. Since it was a 14 hour road trip we only got access to a restroom at certain rest stops. I brushed my teeth in the sinks therefore transforming my morning breath. For body supplements I had my Barney doll in the car with me and a *Etch-A-Sketch* pad for my hand held objects. Lastly, since we were in the car all day I had a *blanket* wrapped around my legs to keep me warm.

Third para: In Florida I wore an oversized but breathable cotton shirt. It was Emory's green color that was solid all over. I also started to wear Bemuda shorts that were multicolored. It had an arctic / Sky Blue hybrid color along with Amaranth Red and Lawn Green. I usually wore closed toe sandals indoors because the kitchen floor was made out of tile so it always felt cold.

In Florida my mother was not focused on making me look cute for aesthetic purposes, but she started to focus on my comfortability. Florida has a hot climate so my mother didn't want me to overheat so she started to buy clothing that was breathable. My clothing was almost always baggy/oversized and my pants/shorts would be semi fitted. It was also clothing that she didn't mind me getting dirty from time to time because since we had a backyard I was outdoors a lot. In Florida I became more active daily, I spent outdoors playing with my best friends.



Chapter 6: Introduction of Friendship, Fashion and Bratz

Across the street from my house I saw construction happening daily, I was unsure of what they were planning to build. My dad told me they were in the progress of building another house. I attended Sunrise Elementary School in Florida and just by fate my mom ran into a woman named Sandra. Her children, named Yasmine, Catiana, and Ashley also went to the same school and she and my mother would often discuss the amount of homework we got, grades, the weather etc. Coincidentally, Sandra had purchased the house that was currently being built across the street from us! When they officially moved in I grew closer to her daughters and ended up being friends with all of them.

For body modifications during that time I was 6 and had transformations with my *teeth*. I started to lose my baby teeth on my bottom row. My body supplements for that time focused on my nails. During this time I experimented with colorful nail stickers. The stickers came with glue and it *adhered* without needing to do additional preparations to the nail bed. The stickers were temporary so it would fall off within a week.

Yasmine, Catiana, and I would all do “fake fashion shows”. I would usually wear a cropped coral pink tank top with the same colored lace frills on the hem. For the “bottoms” I took my bedsheets and wrapped them around my legs for a “draping” effect. In the back I would tie it in a knot or hold it all together with a hair tie. For my “hair” I took a black hoodie and put it on my head to mimic long straight hair. Since our fashion shows were inside each other's houses we did not wear any footwear.

I owe it to my strong friendship to Yasmine, Cati, and Ashley for making me interested in fashion and Bratz dolls. One day while playing in their room, they brought out Bratz Dolls and they were surprised when I told them I've never heard of them before. At that time the only doll I was familiar with was Barbie because it was highly advertised on television. What I noticed about their Bratz dolls was that they had a variety of complexions, I liked that they had the same skin tone as me. We spent that entire day drawing Bratz dolls, figuring out which doll represents us best personality wise, and making a Bratz inspired fashion show.



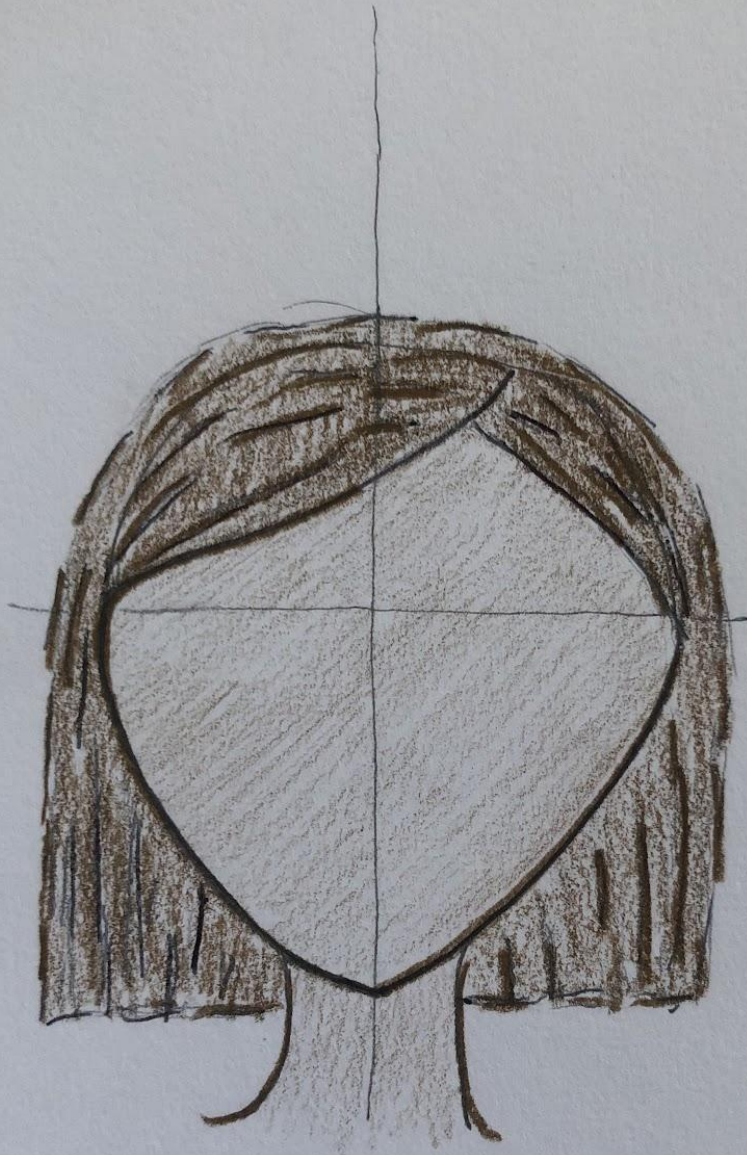
Chapter 7: Long Locs

Back in chapter (4) I referred to myself as being a “high maintenance child”. I realize as I grew older that idea began to change based on my environment. In New York I was a child that dressed up with matching accessories to go to the laundromat or park. In Florida I would never match my clothing, and began to pair certain pieces of clothing simply based on comfortability. Now at the age 7 I began to have a say on what I actually wanted to wear instead of my mother putting together my outfits. I chose to wear baggy and loose clothing because it was easy to change in and out of.

The main modification during that period was my hair. It transformed from tight coils to bone straight with the use of a relaxer. My mom would apply the cream to my roots and then to my tips. She would then use her hands to *stretch* out my hair to pre shape my hair to now be straight. After she rinsed out the relaxer and blow dried my hair, she would enclose my hair by *wrapping* it and inserting *bobby pins* to keep it in place.

The outfits I would wear would mainly be oversized cotton shirts, sometimes a graphic tee but mainly a solid colored shirt. For bottoms I would still wear shorts but more of a cargo style. It had pockets on the front, back, and down near the sides of my knee close to the hem. Instead of sandals and flats I started to wear sneakers again, usually the brand Eckos the colors range from purple with white and green with white. I wore an anklet that came with the sneakers on my right foot.

Transitioning from curly coils to straight hair was a big change on how I felt emotionally. At the time I believed straight hair was “better” than my natural hair. For me it was because of the way it flowed in the wind with grace. Or seeing celebrities and shows on Disney Channel with the main characters having hair that’s straight etc. Seeing my friends like Yasmine with relaxed hair made me feel left out.



Chapter 8: First for Everything

My mother liked Florida because it was quiet and the space was open. But eventually, she grew tired of not having the chaos and having to drive everywhere to pick up small necessities. The fact was Florida was too boring for us average New Yorkers, it was like moving from hot to cold. My family was used to being able to walk to the park or the delis around the corner, your neighbors being right next door, most importantly the loud sirens you'd hear throughout the day and night. Ocala lacked personality, so in 2010 my family and I moved back to New York in Richmond Hill, Queens.

Once moving back to New York my mother took me to the dentist due to the fact that my old dentist in Florida believed I had a Cavity and would also require braces. The dentist in New York examined me and saw no cavities but wanted to do cleaning. He *inserted* tools into my mouth and *adhered* a mouth mold filled with a pink paste into my mouth. After the cleaning, he examined my teeth and did not want to give me braces because he believed my teeth would transform straight by themselves.

On the first day of fourth grade I wore a zipper down hoodie. It had prints of Butterflies with the shades of Azure Blue and Kelly Green. For bottoms I mainly wore skinny cut jeans that were dark washed. As I aged I became taller, so instead of wearing baggy pants my mother wanted me to wear something fitted to my legs. For shoes I wore sketchers, I would alternate between my all black and white pairs.

The day before my first day of class I got my period. My body was now developing at a fast rate, one of the reasons I wore zip down hoodies was to hide my chest. When I began to develop breasts one was bigger than the other. Looking at my other female peers they were all still flat chested and I was too scared to ask them if they had gotten their periods too. I felt very self conscious at the time and decided to pick clothing that wasn't so close to my chest.



Chapter 9: Bullying

One thing that I noticed about the transition from moving from Florida to New York is the people. Sunrise Elementary School in Florida was mainly filled with white and black kids. In PS 161 in New York the demographic changed to West Indian and Hispanic kids. There were barely any African American kids and when joining my class for the first time I noticed I was the only black person in my class. One thing that stuck with me is a girl named Cassidy finding my look exotic and believing my braids resemble a palm tree.

The main modifications I had during this time was the *transformation* of my hairstyle. I still relaxed my hair at least once a month but I started to get split ends. To combat this, my mother would try to cornrow my hair as a protective style. Or my mom would style it in my hair into two braided ponytails, one on the top of my head and the other directly below. In result I would use less heat in my hair causing me to retain length.

I wore a purple cotton long sleeve shirt with a solid Sangria Purple color as the base and layered on top of that was prints of splattered paint. The colors would range from Eggplant Purple, Cyan Blue, Lime Green etc. For bottoms I would wear my dark or light wash straight cut jeans. If I got my hair done at the hair salon and depending on the season, I would pair my shirt with opened toed sandals. I would not wear a jacket during this time due to it being warm in the beginning of September.

The paint splatter shirt was my favorite shirt, I wouldn't really explain why but I think I loved the variety of colors. The popular girl clique at my school noticed how often I would wear it and one girl in particular said the comment " You must be poor since you wear the same clothes over and over again". Afterwards she laughed at me, being new to the school and not having any friends I laughed with her. I was unaware she was laughing at me, after school I told my mother what she said assuming it was a joke. My mother became furious and in result found out where the little girl lived and spoke to her mother about the comment.



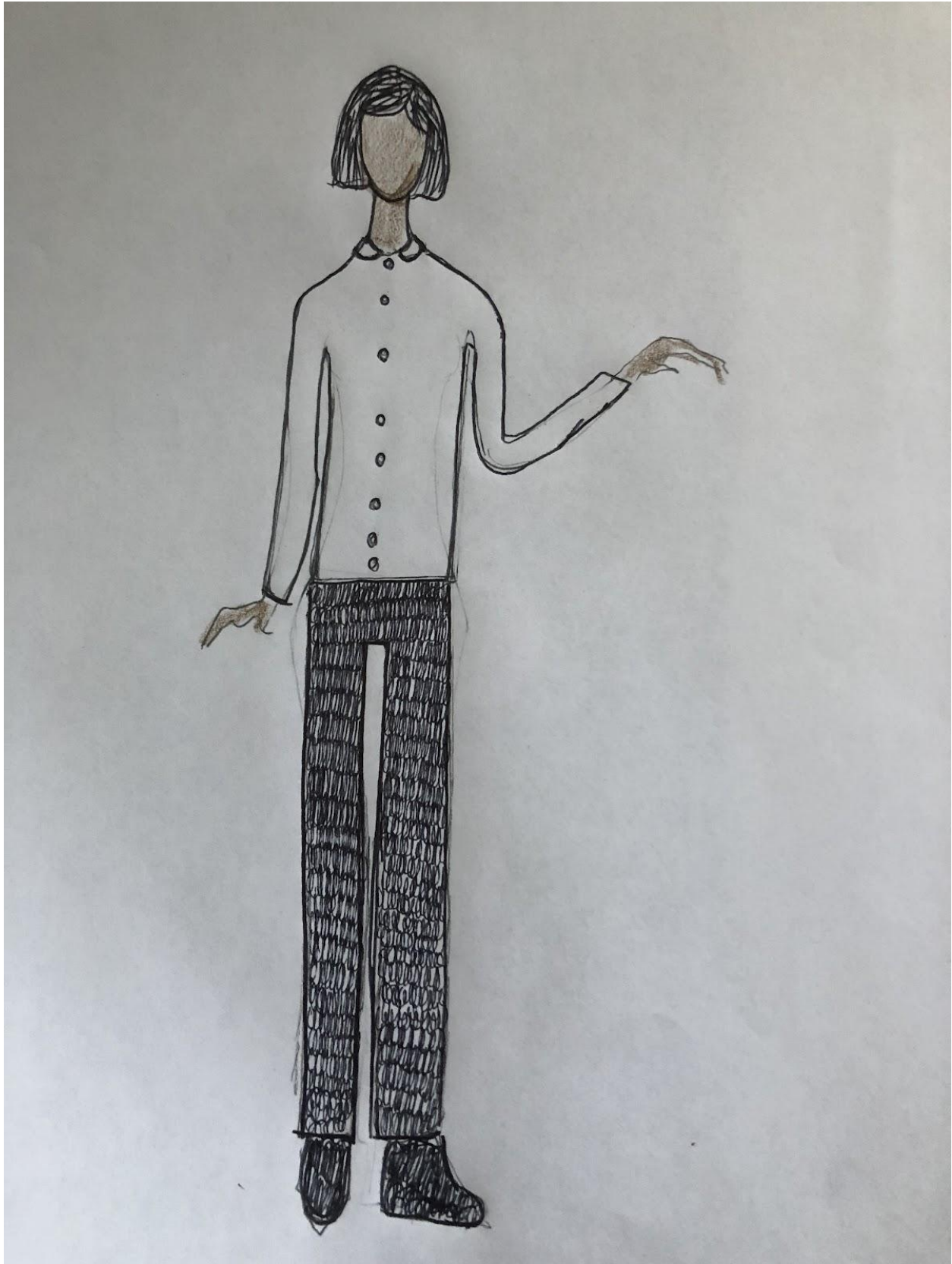
Chapter 10: Last Year of Freedom

I would say that one major benefit of moving back to New York is the fact that everything is walking distance from each other. Once I graduated from PS161 in 2012 I attended MS137 which was only a 15-20 minute walk from my house. I lived near the A train so I was able to take it to school which saved me time. Transitioning into middle school I started to notice the diversity between students. There were African Americans, Hispanics, West Indian, White etc . It made me feel comfortable and I was able to befriend people rather quickly.

By the time I was in middle school I began to wear acrylic nails. It starts off by the nail technician *adhering* the nails to my hand and then *clipping* the nails to the desired length. The technician would then use her brush and *insert* it into a monomer, then into the powder, and finally onto my nails. I also got a transformation of my ears, I got my second lobe piercing done at a mall stand. It happened pretty quickly, the guy marked the spots on my ear and then pierced my lobe with a piercing gun and the studs were *inserted* into my new piercing.

MS 137 was a pretty strict school, therefore we had uniforms. I always wore a white collar button up shirt paired with black straight cut pants. As soon as school was dismissed for the day I would unbutton the white collar shirt and reveal what was underneath. I had on a fitted tank top underneath usually the colors Violet Purple or Pecan Brown. For sneakers I would wear Nike, I don't remember the colors to be exact but it was most likely black or white so it can fit with my uniform.

Middle school for me was a period where I can look back on my life and say senior year of elementary school was my "last year of freedom" so to speak. In middle school I felt restricted from self expression through my clothing. In middle school I began to realize what responsibilities are. I caught myself stressing out and spent most of my time trying to raise my grades. On some days I would stay after school for tutoring, in a way I am glad I began to take responsibilities in my own hands at an early stage. This is a quality I was a pro in transitioning into high school.



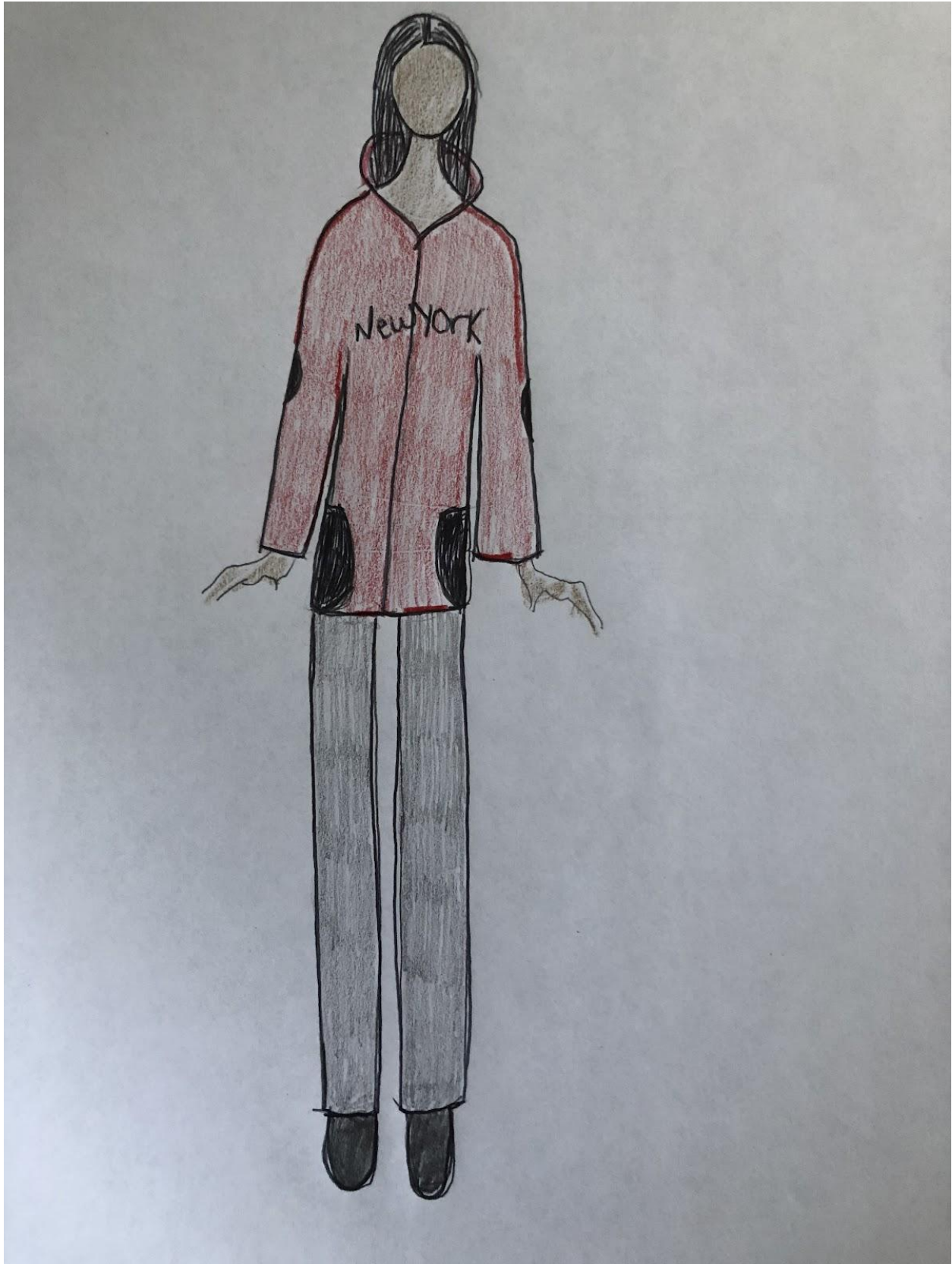
Chapter 11: High School Blues

When I became a senior in middle school I applied to The High School of Fashion Industries. I was mainly attracted to the school due to the name, it automatically caught my eye. Part of the application process was to physically come to the school to do an “audition”. For me it was nerve wracking, I had to travel to Chelsea in Manhattan and bring illustrations of my designs. Entering inside, I was seated in the auditorium with other people auditioning and given a paper so I could fill out all my personal information. Then we were asked to write an essay and draw an illustration and after we were finished we would turn it in with our portfolio and leave. A month later every senior student in MS137 came into the auditorium and was handed an envelope with our official high school pick. I took it home with me and when I opened the envelope I was officially an H.S.F.I freshman.

In high school I decided I should grow out my natural hair and trim off the relaxed ends. As a transformation I started to wear lace front wigs and it would be *adhered* to my forehead by applying Got 2 B gel. I also got my nose pierced sophomore year of high school, instead of using a piercing gun the piercer used a needle and afterwards *inserted* an “L” shaped stud into my nose. During this time I had a mole tag on the back of my neck. It got in the way of my wigs by the strands *hooking/wrapping* around the mole. The dermatologist *injected* the area to numb it and then used scissors to *clip* it off.

During this time I wore a lot of hoodies/ pullovers due to me not planning my outfits ahead of time. Traveling from Queens to Manhattan took me usually 45 minutes to an hour if there were no delays on the train. I picked my outfits last minute and based on how comfortable it would be for me to wear all day. My hoodie should be Blood Red and Black with the big words “New York” on the frontside. Since I wore hoodies often I automatically picked Earl Gray sweatpants to pair. Occasionally if I did not feel like adhering my wig to my forehead I would wear a Black and White Nike Feather Light Cap. For sneakers I wore Coin Gray Puma sneakers that did not have any laces.

High school was a nightmare for me, mentally I found it draining. I often found myself staying in school until 6:30pm even though classes ended for me at 3:37pm, sometimes I would even come to school on weekends. During senior year of high school I had to make a garment for our annual senior year fashion show, deal with college applications, record, edit and make a short film for the fashion show, take AP psychology and more. I felt like I barely had time to myself and was always worrying about school, therefore I wore what was comfortable for me and not necessarily caring on my appearance. Along the way in high school I met my close friend Saniyya, she helped me a lot with managing my time and work throughout high school.



Chapter 12: Successful at failure

Being a senior in high school one of the most devastating things that could possibly happen is not getting into your dream college. Mines was a couple of blocks down from my high school on 28th street and 8th Ave. Fashion Institute of Technology or F.I.T was everyone's first pick of college choices including mines. I did not even prepare backup college choices because I was so confident I would get into F.I.T. Being a senior during that time I was spending most of my hours making a garment or making my portfolio to submit to F.I.T. In the middle of classes I got an email from the college saying they made their decision. I got rejected, and I felt like the world was going to end.

The main modification I had during this time was my *transformation* of my nails from using acrylic to hybrid gels. In 2017 nail technicians raised their prices from 50 to now 85 and up depending on designs and length. I took it upon myself to learn how to do my own nails using poly gel instead of acrylic. I'd take my brush and *insert* the tip into 70% alcohol then squeeze out the poly gel onto my nail and begin to make a coffin *shape*. The entire process took four hours and although it was time consuming the end result was pretty.

Senior year of high school I still wore sweatpants and sweatshirts/hoodies due to me feeling depressed and still for comfortability. A pullover hoodie I wore often was a thick polyester that was oversized. It was our senior sweatshirt, it was inspired by the popular show at the time "Stranger things." In the front it said "Senior things" in Scarlet Red and in the back it said our class year. For bottoms I'd still wear the Earl Gray sweatpants or Charcoal Gray Aeropostale sweats with the same spelt out on the side of the leg.

Even though I felt like I was at a low point in my life I still had responsibilities I needed to fulfill. One of them being my senior fashion show garment. The theme was gender neutrality which was a concept I was not completely familiar with at the time. I decided to make a lace bodysuit with crystal appliqués attached, layered on top would be a black sheer cropped jacket with a sliver mandarin collar and cuffs. I stopped dwelling on my rejection from F.I.T and focused on completing what I needed to get done.



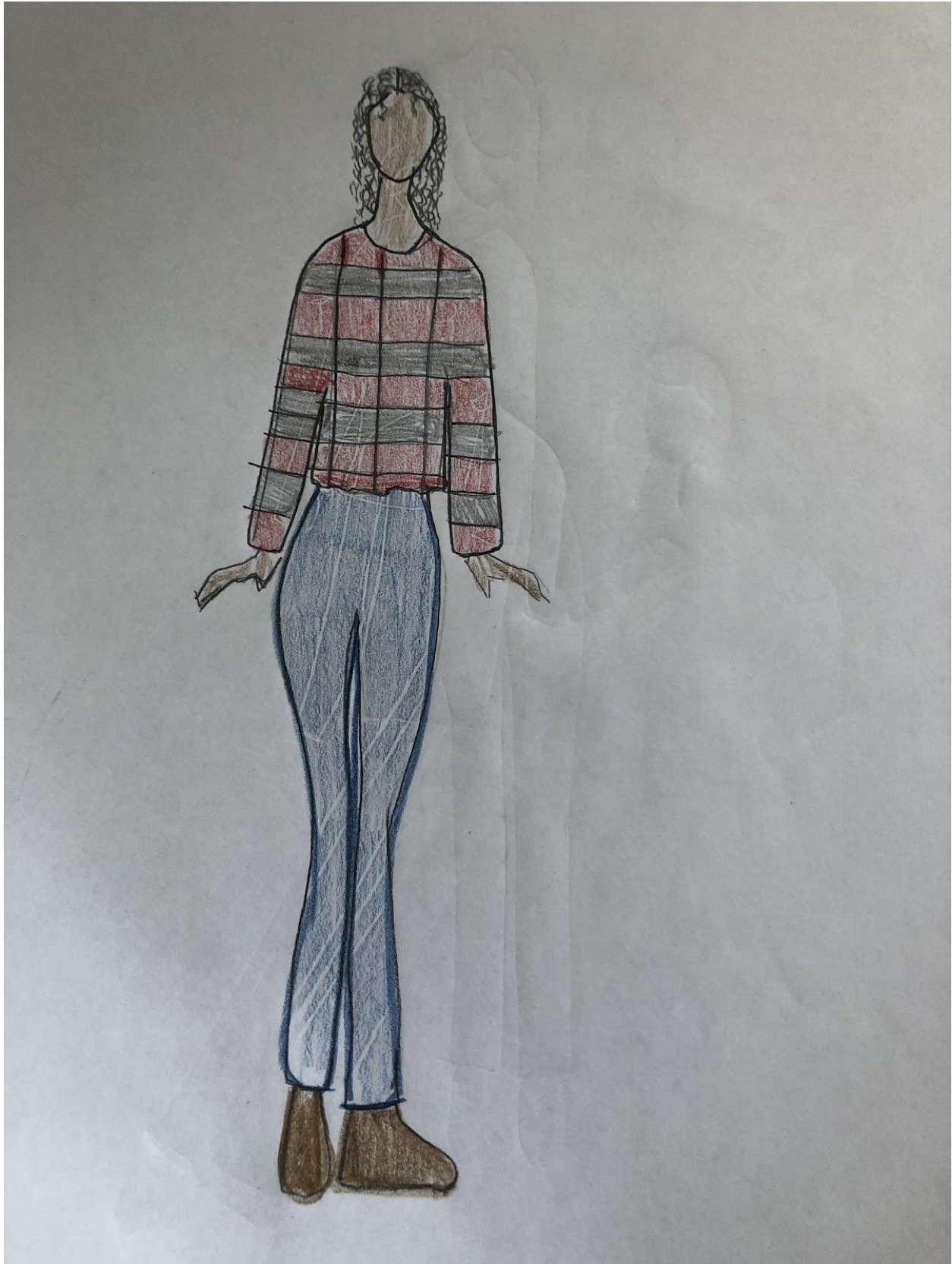
Chapter 13: Independence

One of my personal goals for 2019 was to get a job before graduation. I applied to different positions for multiple companies using websites like Indeed or Zip Recruiter but had no luck. I always had the conflict with going into a job interview and realizing that I do not have the experience for the position even though some applications state “no experience necessary.” The straw that broke the camel's back was when I got a job interview for a retail store on the east side of Manhattan last minute. I rushed to print out my resume in my high schools computer lab and took the A train to 59th street. I walked inside and told a lady behind a counter I was there for an interview and she just took my resume and said “thank you” and that was it. I felt like my time was completely wasted so I went to a Banana Republic next door and handed my resume to the manager and the rest was history.

The main modification I had was my first tattoo. It's located on my forearm, it's a dream catcher mixed with geometric shapes. The tattoo artist first photoshopped and sketched out my design and prepped my skin with an alcohol pad. He then *adhered* an outline onto my arm, and began tattooing by dipping the needle point of the tattooing machine into ink and started to follow the outline. When it was completed he *wrapped* the tattoo with cling wrap.

Once I officially got the position as a brand ambassador for Banana Republic I began to start dressing up for training. I wore a striped Wine Red and black button down linen top. For bottoms I began to wear high rise skinny jeans that were dark washed. During this time I started to experiment with other hairstyles besides wigs so instead I wore faux locs. For shoes I wore Hickory Brown pleather combat boots.

During this period of my life my personal style clashed with the dress code policies. For Banana Republic I would not wear shoes/sneakers with a visible logo, a short sleeve top without a layering piece, hair colors that were not considered “natural”, a nose ring and more. Having long nails was not a violation of the dress code but it was looked down upon by my manager. I felt like my personal sense of style clashed with these dress codes. Often I felt like I was stripped away of having my own self expression.



Chapter 14: Love and heartbreak

Throughout my senior year of high school and in freshman year of college I had a boyfriend named Julius. He lived all the way in Anaheim California while I was still living in Ozone Park Queens. We met using an old texting platform called Kik. He would fly to visit me often and we'd spend our days together stuffing our faces with food, playing beer pong, or just watching a simple movie together in the hotel. In 2017 we officially became a couple, he gave me a promise ring and I would wear it almost daily. It was meaningful to me.

One modification that was not painful at all was my tooth gem. I spent months contemplating if I should get it done and I finally gave the "green light" once I took a trip to California. The lady who did my gem had clients like Kendall Jenner and Adwoa Aboah, needless to say I was impressed and excited. She used a bonding gel similar to the adhesive for braces, and *adhered* a rose shaped gem on my canine tooth. The process took about 10 mins and once she was finished I was so happy.

For my trip to California I wore a white cropped ribbed short sleeve top. In the front it had a said "Angel Baby" in a Shimmy Silver color. For my bottoms I wore a semi fitted high rise Tawny Brown colored pant. Since I was traveling all day I decided to wear my Puma slip on sneakers. I needed something comfortable to be in my feet but be breathable at the same time.

Like all relationships that start off in high school, it didn't not end on a good note. I found out that he went on vacation with another female for the weekend and kept it a secret from me. At that point I felt like I couldn't trust him anymore so I mailed back the promise ring. Saniyya supported and comforted me during this time which was something I truly appreciated. She made recovering from a relationship very tolerable.



Chapter 15: Losing all at Once

2021 was the year I lost two people who were once close to me. The first person was Julius since he was dishonest with me, and the second person was Saniyya. In April of 2021 Saniyya went missing from her campus at Buffalo University. News outlets began to cover her disappearance in hopes of finding her. I was stressing out and worried because I also had finals the following week. I had to speak to district attorneys and a week later her disappearance was ruled as a suicide.

During this time I got another tooth gem from a different lady based in Brooklyn. The process was the same but took longer. She used a bonding agent and *adhered* it onto my canine and incisor tooth. I picked out a butterfly design that was created by using two teeth for spacing and 4 gems in total. This was totally painless. The only difference was my gem was Swarovski so the shape was a bit bulky in my mouth. In a couple of weeks I was able to get used to it.

During this time I wore a lot of black clothing. I wore a thick cotton black long sleeve shirt. On the side of the hem and on the arms were silver zippers. For bottoms I wore stretchy high rise black flared jeans. For shoes I usually wore white Converse and sometimes black combat boots. I started wearing all black due to the dress code change policy for my job and because mentally I couldn't not overthink or else I felt like I would have a breakdown so I picked something simple and basic.

Losing Saniyya was painful because she was almost part of my daily routine. I would text her almost everyday and we could call each other on the phone and talk about absolutely anything without getting bored. After her passing, I tried to distract myself with little things to keep me occupied but I still had to face the fact that she was gone forever. Acceptance was the hard part but eventually I had to move on. With Julius I did have the same mentality, I accepted what happened was unfortunate but I needed to move on. Currently I try to take everything step by step little by little to get back into a routine I am familiar with.





About the Author:

Hello my name is Renée Birchwood, to tell you a little about myself I was born in Queens NY and raised in Brooklyn. At one point I moved to Ocala Florida but then returned 3 years later to the big apple. Currently I attend New York College of Technology as a full time student and hopefully I'll graduate with my bachelors in 2023! I work part time as a Brand Ambassador for the brand Banana Republic.