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Own Way Girl

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

OWN WAY GIRL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Melissa Aldana

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Melissa Aldana, and entitled Own Way Girl, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Ricardo Blanco

Donna Weir-Soley

Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 14, 2022

The thesis of Melissa Aldana is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

DEDICATION

For my mother, an alchemist who turned water into blood. I am my mother's daughter: nothing in this world is beyond my abilities.

Also, for Margaret without whom I cannot write.

We are, for a spell, of the path where shape forms, where flux assembles, briefly a center.

And there are so many centers. -Lia Purpura

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

OWN WAY GIRL

by

Melissa Aldana

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Julie Marie Wade, Major Professor

OWN WAY GIRL is a memoir about growing up in a Caribbean family of women. The memoir covers the narrator's tentative beginnings as she was adopted by a single woman in Barbados at three months old until she turns sixteen and learns the secret that has weighed heavily on both her birth and adopted mother. This memoir explores the narrator's layered relationship with her adopted mother, her complicated relationship with her birth mother, as well family dynamics with her adopted grandmother and adopted sisters. It interrogates the nature of kin and blood ties and probes the ultimate question of what makes a family. This memoir also touches on the themes of culture, class, cultural capital, domestic violence, death, and a young girl's quest for agency.

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VENTNOR GARDENS

Naming

St. Augustine home for unwed mothers, Trinidad Tobago March, 1971

From her hospital bed, Elena watched the nurse in her crisp white uniform walk steadily down the row of beds. The sweaty head of a newborn was nuzzled against her wide green belt. A pink stripe on the blanket meant that the baby was a girl. The nurse strode past each bed. In each lay a young woman who, like her, had just given birth. Elena wondered which lucky girl would get a few minutes with her baby. Hers was gone, disappeared, swept away after birth to be adopted by unseen people.

The nurse stopped at Elena's bed and transferred the warm infant into her arms.

The nurse said, "Here's your baby, Miss."

Elena looked down at her daughter, who was sleeping, her mouth moving slightly.

"No, no," Elena said, "She's to be adopted. I don't get her."

"I doan see that paperwork, Miss." The nurse swung Elena's eating tray over her lap. "You going to have to finish her paperwork and name dis child. So her birth can be registered. I doan know how dey do things in Barbados where you come from but here in Trinidad we doan miss deadlines."

The nurse stepped away and returned with a single sheet of paper and a blue ink pen. "Be careful, and doan make any mistakes. We can't submit official paperwork with scratch-outs."

Elena sat up and maneuvered the baby to rest against her chest so she could fill out the form. She paused over "First Name." She hadn't thought about a name at all. She

wrote *Aldana* carefully in block letters in the space for “Last Name.” She hovered the pen over “Middle Name” and then wrote “Elenalita,” little Elena in Spanish.

Elena returned her attention to the space “First Name.” What should she put? She didn’t know what had happened to the adoption paperwork. Elena remembered the American parents wanted to call this baby Melissa. Under first name she wrote out M-e-l-i-s-s-a. This was all probably a useless exercise. Surely, the paper work would be found. At least the child’s first name wouldn’t change. Melissa sounded so American to Elena. It was a good name even if the only Melissa she had met was a girl she didn’t like.

She looked at what she had written.

First Name: Melissa

Middle Name: Elenalita

Last Name: Aldana

It was a good name, she thought. She said it aloud, Melissa Elenalita Aldana.

“I will always be with you little one, no matter what happens with us,” she told her sleeping daughter, whose eyes fluttered in seeming response.

1.

My three-month-old self lay swaddled and snugly, nestled on the passenger side floor of a white Austin Mini. My caseworker Helen was taking me to meet her mother. She put me on the floor for safety. This was so I wouldn’t fly off the seat and smack into the dashboard if she stopped suddenly. It was June 1971, so the car did not have seat belts. Seatbelts wouldn’t be mandatory for another fifteen years.

Helen claims that I stared at her with unblinking eyes for the whole drive. I argued that I must have blinked. Also, wasn't she watching the road? How could she have possibly kept her eyes on me the whole time?

But Helen wouldn't budge. "You didn't blink," she said.

Helen was taking me to see her own mother, Clara. She hoped that Clara would like the looks of me so that Clara would take care of me for a *while*. I was in desperate need of a savior. My seventeen-year-old mother, Elena, the other half of Helen's case, was not coping well with me and my infant demands. Elena, a minor herself, was unwanted by her family, with me a bastard in tow. She had been placed in an older woman's house—an older woman who expected her to help with the housework. A squawking baby was a distinct negative. And a dead tired girl as helper was a double negative.

Elena said that if she didn't get a break from me soon, she wasn't sure what she would do. A veiled threat Helen decided to take seriously. Elena begged Helen to find somewhere for me, anywhere. But Helen couldn't find someplace for a tiny baby who cried too much and couldn't pull her weight. The only person left was Helen's mother, who *liked* children. My future hung on that one word *like*.

Helen drove with the fingers on both of her hands crossed as she gripped the steering wheel. I needed some luck to get past her mother, and I hadn't had much in my short life. Helen's mother was *particular*, fussy, everything had to just so according to her arbitrary standards. Anything about me could rub Clara the wrong way. If she thought I was too bald, or had a strange smell, or looked cross-eyed. And most importantly, I shouldn't be too black. To Helen, I was a perfectly acceptable baby. She thought that I was

cute, a medium brown shade; I had a few sprigs of black curls on my head. Elena said I cried too much, but Helen didn't think I cried any more than was expected.

Helen turned left at the tamarind tree and into her driveway. She drove past the black wrought iron gates into her garage. She lifted me off the floor of the car, walked into the kitchen, and presented me to her mother, who sat with her arms crossed behind a white and chrome 50s-style Formica table. Clara unwrapped the thin white blanket swaddling me, then picked me up and turned me to and fro. She fingered the thin pastel animal print shirt and cloth diaper I was wearing.

With her singsong voice, she said, "Lord, I wonder how many little bodies have been in dis shirt. It's almost transparent." Clara expertly re-swaddled me. "She is a nice little baby. What you brought for dis child?"

Helen said, "She has a diaper bag in the car. I didn't know that you would take her so quickly."

"What did you think I would do with her den? Bring the bag. Let's see what we have."

With that, I was accepted into the house of women, and Helen became my sister.

"Her mother says she cries a lot," Helen reminded her mother.

Clara sucked her teeth. "How old dat girl?"

"She's seventeen," Helen said.

Clara sucked her teeth again. "She doan know nuttin' 'bout babies. She's too young."

Clara looked at her daughter. "Stop *getting* dat bag and get it, please. I asked you dat already."

Helen retrieved my bag from the car and spread the contents on the table. Six cloth diapers, four diaper pins, two glass baby bottles, and three well-worn baby shirts.

Clara surveyed the contents disapprovingly. “Well, dis will have to do until tomorrow de shops are closed. It’s plain milk for you tonight, Child. What is her name?”

“Melissa,” Helen said

“What kind of name is dat? Dat is an American name.”

“I think she was supposed to be adopted by Americans,” Helen said.

“Well, dat can’t be helped.” Clara scooped me up into her arms. “Come, child, let’s meet Granny.”

Clara took me down the hall to meet her mother. Helen went to her room and closed the door, her duty done.

My new caretaker was Clara Ince. She was a forty-six-year-old, financially independent woman. She called herself a housewife, but that wasn’t right as there was no husband. He went to England twenty-two years before and started a new life, apparently forgetting he had a family in Barbados. He was divorced and forgotten except for his name, which her daughters still carried.

Clara lived with her daughters, Helen, twenty, Masie, eighteen, and her sixty-nine-year-old mother, May. There should have been another son or daughter. But that life was lost along with Clara’s womb. This child would have been five now. Clara folded over this loss with silence. But their absence made her more susceptible to my upturned face, a motherless child, driven around on a car’s floorboards.