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Hail Mary

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

HAIL MARY

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

DeAndra Miller

2022

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

This thesis, written by DeAndra Miller, and entitled Hail Mary, 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.

Shawn Christian

John Dufresne

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 14, 2022

The thesis of DeAndra Miller 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

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

HAIL MARY

by

DeAndra Miller

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

HAIL MARY is a young-adult novel narrated by autistic, sixteen-year-old Aiden Wright. At a post-football game celebration, he is drawn into a fight, leading his brother, team star Brandon, to intervene, only to be accused of assaulting the police officer who shoots and seriously injures him.

After ambiguous videos leak online, Aiden uses his technological skills and ability to focus, seeking more evidence. Asking tougher questions and demanding more from those around him, Aiden grows, gaining allies and making others see him as a human, rather than viewing him through his disability and race.

Here, as in Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, high-school-aged characters work against a corrupt and racist system. Set in contemporary South Florida, HAIL MARY shows the lived experience of young people seeking to do more, across racial and social divides, with what they have and who they are.

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Chapter One

I can talk. I'm just quiet. I'm not quiet because I'm autistic. I'm quiet because people are stupid. Well, most people. Like Dalton, tapping away at the speech-to-text program on his tablet rattling off all the similarities between him and Stephen Hawking as his reasons for why he won't ever need to do a job interview. Never mind that I've had science classes with Dalton since middle school and the only lesson I've seen him pass with flying colors is when we made ice cream in Ziploc bags.

I picture Dalton in a boxing ring. Here in this corner, we have Stephen Hawking. In this corner, we have Dalton. Resident genius of West Gate High School, hailing from Palm Beach County, Florida: creator of crappy, half-melted, bagged ice cream. I chuckle.

Ms. Findley raises her caterpillar eyebrows at me. "Something funny, Aiden?" She's frowning.

Crap.

I shake my head, lean back in my chair, and tap the edge of my desk. One, two, double tap. One, two, double tap. Three more times. I don't look up at Ms. Findley. Her expressions make me itch. Instead, I stare at the silly motivational posters all over the classroom. *CHANGE* with a picture of a tree. Change, by definition, means to alter, replace with something else—newer, better. Trees don't really do that, I mean they grow but if you carve your name in there, it's always there. *COURAGE* with a picture of an army officer and a dog jumping out of a helicopter. Courage, by definition, means to do something that scares you, to have strength in the face of fear or grief. I mean, maybe she likes heights, and guns, and armies. *ACHIEVEMENT* with a picture of an astronaut on the

moon. Achievement, by definition, means a thing done successfully with effort or skill. Alright, I can't fault that picture, but it's still annoying.

There's a long pause, and I continue to tap. I assume Ms. Findley's still staring at me, waiting. Keep waiting, lady. That's what the poster behind you is all about, right? *PATIENCE* with a picture of chessboard. Patience, by definition, means to accept and tolerate delay, trouble or suffering without getting angry or upset. Accurate. I smirk.

Ms. Findley lets out a long, drawn-out breath. I focus on the dot over the letter I in the word disability written on the board behind her. This must be what she means when she tells my parents I'm disruptive during IEP meetings. I force down the laugh rising in my throat. Ms. Findley's already pissed. If I laugh, I'm done. I don't like to piss anyone off. Not on purpose.

I feel Ms. Findley's gaze boring into my skin before she continues to speak. "So, as I was saying, *everyone*."

Well, geez, make it more obvious that you're mad at me, why don't you?

"Job interviews are on the horizon for you all seven of you—even you Dalton. Most of you are finally 16 or approaching there and might be seeking out your first opportunities soon. I know it might seem intimidating but remember some of the tips we went over today."

Ms. Findley steps from behind her desk and motions for Tucker to stand up. He looks up at her, then back down at his camera that he's fiddling with and shakes his head like he wants his brain to fall out of his ears.

"Come on, Tucker," she says.

"It's Buck," he responds in a whisper. A few people in class laugh.

Ms. Findley glances around and clicks her tongue at us. She does that when she's upset. Like we're dogs that she's trying to train.

"Oh, that's just a mean nickname. You shouldn't use it as a name."

I smile. Bucktooth Tuck. Not our fault his braces made his teeth look even bigger once he got them off.

Tucker huffs and sits back further in his seat. His thumbs fumble over each other as he clicks buttons on his camera. Tucker takes his camera everywhere. It's always around his neck. Tucker pushes further back in the seat and refuses to look up. If he pushes any more, his chair is going to tip with him in it.

The new girl, Isabella, sits behind Tucker. I can tell she's stifling a laugh. Isabella catches my eye and her eyes water from holding in her laughter. I clear my throat, fighting the urge to burst out laughing myself. If Bucktooth Tuck falls over in class, he's never coming back from it. Isabella sits up and leans forward, letting her long, black faux locs create a curtain over her face. She's hiding her face to laugh. Smart. I'm going to have to use that to my advantage when my locs get longer.

"Tucker, come on." The pitch of Ms. Findley's voice increases.

Hmm, not following that *PATIENCE* poster, ma'am.

"Buck." His voice is stronger this time. "If I use their weapons then they can't hurt me with it." Tucker looks up at Ms. Findley. Right in the eyes.

Whoa. Very serious. I'm almost impressed.

Everyone laughs. Well, he tried.

Ms. Findley smiles despite the laughter.

We don't get the tongue click. Out of the woods.

“Okay, Buck. Well, I need you for this demonstration and it isn’t optional,” Ms. Findley says.

Bucktooth Tuck pushes his blond hair off his forehead, puts his camera on his desk, pushes out of his seat, and lumbers over to her.

“Alright, so remember everybody. Don’t force eye contact and make yourselves uncomfortable. Quick glances only.” She demonstrates with Tucker. “People take handshakes seriously, so practice regulating your grip with your parents at home. You don’t want to squeeze too hard by accident.” Ms. Findley grasps Tucker’s hand and shakes.

Tucker looks like he’d rather be in a hole than in front of class. I feel that.

“And don’t forget to always report your disability, if you have one,” Ms. Findley stops to nod at Isabella, “to the human resources...”

My brain doesn’t care. One, two, double tap. I think about the film I watched with Brandon last night of the last football game. If I was on the field for West Gate, I could have followed through on the running play. If our team could get a running back with a little more weight, he could have run that linebacker over in last week’s game. Actually, if the current running back had more speed on him, he could have made it to the hole before the linebackers even got there; actually, had the running back had better awareness and seen the hole faster he could have been there even with the trash 4.8 he runs now; actually—

“Mr. Wright,” Ms. Findley snaps.

I glance up. Shit.

She clicks her tongue. “The bell rang.”

Dog trainer noises. Yeah, yeah. I'm going.

I lean down, grab my backpack, and sling it over my shoulder. I start towards the door.

“Aiden, you really need to pay attention in this class. I'm trying to teach you important skills for managing your disability in everyday situations. You know, your parents had job readiness on your IEP as a goal. What could possibly be more important in your mind than—”

I don't turn to face her voice.

A football. The bumped-out ridges on the grip. The mottled surface in my palm. The quivering sensation that relaxes every nerve, spidering out from my fingers, through each synapse and pathway to my brain, when I run my tips along the football. A football field. The aerial view I have even with my feet planted on the ground. The arrows I draw in my mind of each player and route they'll take. The cushion of the turf underneath a spiked cleat. The place where clamor rushes like a soft wind in my ear. The place where I'm at home. The place where I have no place because other people think I'm too autistic to belong. That's what's more important on my mind.

“I'm only 16.” I walk out.

Out in the hallway, the new girl, Isabella is waiting right outside of the door and stops me as I stalk out of Ms. Findley's class.

“Hey, Aiden, right?”

I look at her and nod. Her faux locs are wavy and hang down to her waist. Pretty sure it's just extensions. Her hair was in a big curly afro last week.