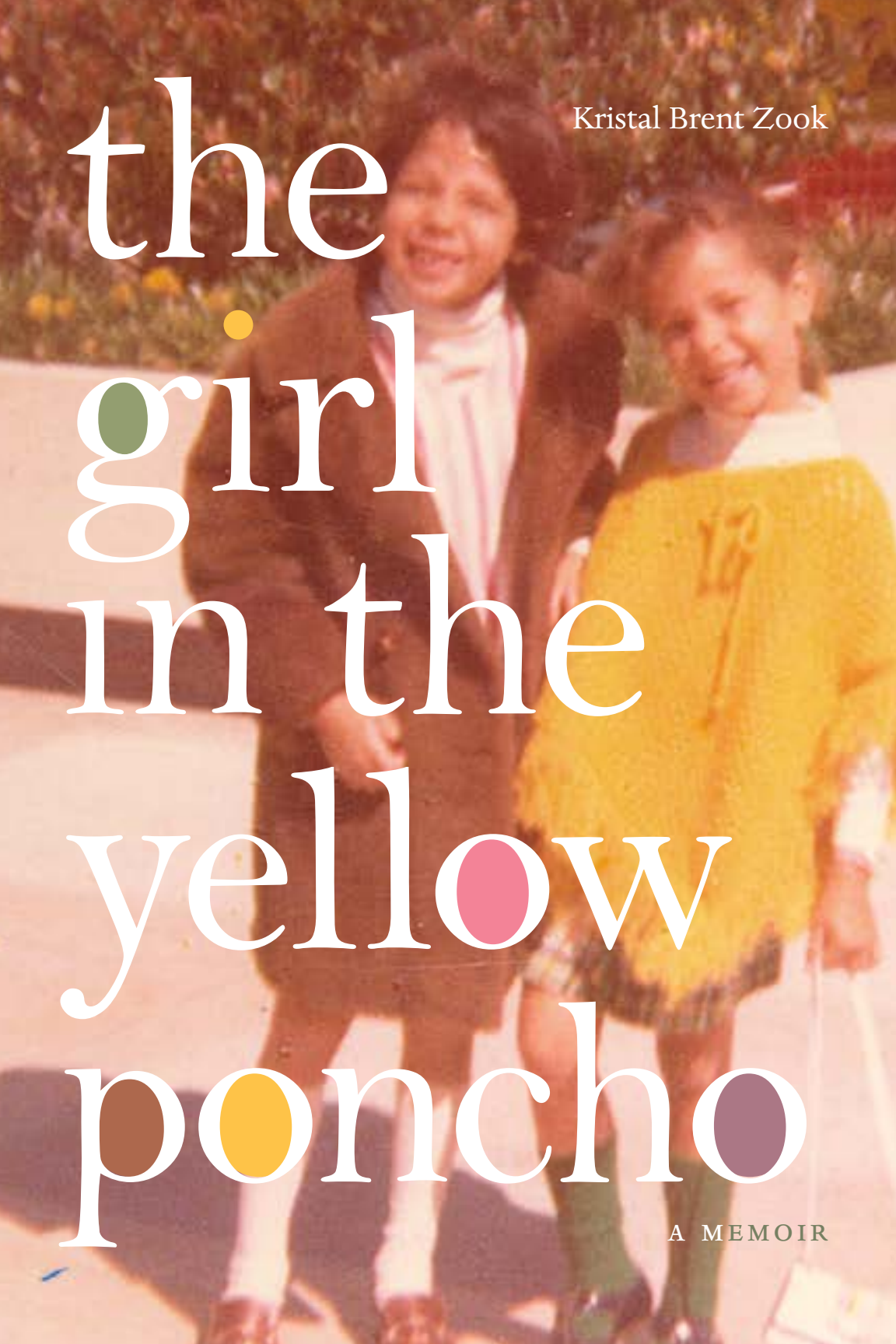

Kristal Brent Zook

the girl in the yellow poncho

A MEMOIR

More praise for *The Girl in the Yellow Poncho*

"Kristal's story touched me deeply. It will touch everyone who has struggled with feeling the in-betweenness that propels her riveting heroine's journey to define herself and create the family for which she yearned. The writing is as powerful as the message: love ultimately triumphs."—GLORIA FELDT, author of *Intentioning: Sex, Power, Pandemics, and How Women Will Take the Lead for (Everyone's) Good*

"After thirty years of reporting, Kristal Brent Zook has turned inward to write a deeply personal, frank, and inspirational story about race and class."—ADA CALHOUN, author of *Why We Can't Sleep: Women's New Midlife Crisis*

"Kristal Brent Zook's coming-of-age memoir is a thought-provoking tale of triumph outdistancing pain, of never giving up on love and hope despite childhood traumas and a broken family. Kristal writes so beautifully and urgently. *The Girl in the Yellow Poncho* will absolutely absorb you."—KEVIN MERIDA, coauthor of *Obama: The Historic Campaign in Photographs*

the girl in the yellow poncho

DUKE
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Kristal Brent Zook

the girl in the yellow poncho

A MEMOIR

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2023

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Lisa Lawley
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Bell and Untitled by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Zook, Kristal Brent, author.
Title: The girl in the yellow poncho : a memoir / Kristal Brent Zook.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022044181 (print)
LCCN 2022044182 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478017196 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478024477 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Zook, Kristal Brent. | Racially mixed women—United States—Biography. | Racially mixed people—United States—Biography. | Single-parent families—United States. | African American extended families. | BISAC: BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Cultural, Ethnic & Regional / African American & Black | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Women's Studies | LCGFT: Autobiographies.
Classification: LCC E184.A1 z67 2023 (print) | LCC E184.A1 (ebook) | DDC 305.8/050092 [B]—dc23/eng/20221221
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022044181
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022044182

Cover art: Cousin Lisa and the author, wearing her favorite yellow poncho, circa 1973. Courtesy of the author.

An earlier version of chapter 13 appeared in the NewYorker.com as "How Black Lives Matter Came to the Academy" (January 30, 2021); chapter 17 appeared, in a different form, as "Love Down Under" in *Essence* (July 2002) and was reprinted in Taigi Smith, ed., *Sometimes Rhythm, Sometimes Blues: Young African Americans on Love, Relationships, Sex, and the Search for Mr. Right* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2003).

contents

preface

There were interviews. Always interviews. Pen and notebook in hand, I rushed here and there, to appointments with television and film directors, producers, actors, athletes, and musical artists. As an entertainment and cultural reporter, I wrote features about Magic Johnson, Jamie Foxx, Jada Pinkett Smith, Keenen Ivory Wayans, Jill Scott, and Lil' Kim, to name just a few. Later, as I expanded into social justice reporting, there were politicians, activists, entrepreneurs, and all manner of change makers. I sat close as they laid out their speeches and plans, hoping that my words would also somehow contribute to the task of lifting as we climbed.

I saw myself as a race woman, in the old-fashioned Ida B. Wells sense of the word; a journalist who dug deep to lay bare injustices and hold a mirror to our collective trauma and triumph. I was down for the cause, despite what some may have seen when they looked at me. I knew that my nearly white appearance put me at the periphery of this landscape, and yet I claimed it as my own. Raised by my African American mother and grandmother, where else was I going to go? I was light-skinned, but for me, there was no question of being anything but Black. Still, for many years, I held on to a secret shame and deep insecurities.

My white father had abandoned my mother before I was born, sending a message that locked itself into my psyche. I was unworthy of a man's love. Unworthy of white protection. Unworthy of the picturesque (and always white) family life I saw on television. To add to my humiliation, a father figure next door violated my innocence as a child, confirming that I did not belong to the tribe of girls who were to be cherished. I wrestled with these demons of sexual assault, trauma, abandonment, and racial shame for the first four decades of my life. And when I say wrestled, I mean literally, knock down to the ground, kicking and punching, wrestled. I journeyed across oceans. I prayed. I counseled. Time and again, I beat back the temptation to sink into a long history of generational drug and alcohol addiction that was entrenched on both the white and Black sides of my family tree. I would be whole, I decided, even if I had to grab the devil of my past by the throat and wrench the air from his lungs in a gladiatorial do-or-die fight to the death. I did that. I took him on.

And I won.

Today, my lost father is found, and amazingly present. So, too, is my mother, an unexpected piece of my happy-ending puzzle. Somehow, against all odds, I've managed to create the family of my dreams, with a husband I adore, a lovely stepdaughter, and my sunshine, our six-year-old daughter. I could not have done that without faith, an open heart, and a determination to heal.

My husband and stepdaughter are from Spain, while my daughter is biracial, of African American and Southeast Asian heritage. Our household is undeniably multiracial, part of the rapidly expanding population that has only recently begun to explode into our collective national awareness.

So where does that leave me, the journalist who has written about blackness and race all her life? Who am I now, if not the reporter documenting the suffering and strength of Black women? My answer is this book. In it, I take a journey back to a time when I recognized the power of others to move mountains but couldn't quite see the brightness of my own star. This story is my testament to the power of forgiveness and settling into one's own authentic identity. In short, it's my rediscovery of a little girl who once stood tall and joyful in her favorite yellow poncho.

acknowledgments

For a long time, I thought this was going to be a book about finding and making peace with my father. Even before reading these pages, he supported the idea of this book without question. For his openness and willingness to be put on display, I am deeply grateful. In the end, however, this was also a story that belonged to my mother. At its core, it is a journey about intergenerational healing among the daughters, mothers, and grandmothers in our family. For helping me to find my way through this morass, I thank my mother for her grace and generosity throughout the often difficult process. Thank you to my grandmother, who has watched over the entire process, I'm sure, in spirit. My cousin Lisa is truly one of the most selfless people I know, always unflinchingly embracing my own goals and dreams as her own. When she was moved to tears by something in the book, I knew that my words were correct. Like all the women in our family, she is a true survivor.

My daughter, Olivia, has been my inspiration from the inception of this book. The brightness of her spirit guides my path in every way. I hope that she may one day take comfort from the love of family expressed in these pages and the love that envelops and surrounds her at all times.

Last, but certainly not least, I thank my husband, Alfonso, who perpetually reminds me that it is both my right and my duty to fly. He has expanded my soul in ways that I cannot fully express. Not only has he generously supported this telling of our family story, but he also deserves much of the credit for making our family possible.

It is one thing for an author to mine the depths of the soul to write a memoir. It is quite another to help a loved one do so. I thank my entire family for allowing me this honor. Just as these words have contributed to my own healing, may they also contribute to theirs.

the girl in the yellow poncho

1

kansas avenue

"California law requires rentals to be free of rodent and pest infestations," Mom said through a clenched jaw and festering indignation. "We put all that in the letter." After our landlord refused to exterminate our apartment, which was crawling with roaches, Mom had consulted with Legal Aid and discovered that she could pay for a fumigation service herself, deducting the cost from that month's rent. She was resourceful in that way. Smart. But now, her anger draped itself into the corners of our little secondhand Toyota Corolla, which she had scrimped and saved to buy. What a relief to ride in a car, I thought, staring out the window. No more trudging back and forth on the stinky bus.

Mom took a drag of her Virginia Slims cigarette, filling the car with smoke. From the passenger seat, my grandmother's face was steely. She sucked her teeth, considering the situation, and finally replied, "That man ain't shit." Dra, as we liked to call her, was only four foot eleven, but for me, and I suspect for my cousin Lisa, too, who rode beside me in the back seat, Dra was the most powerful force in our world. Anybody who risked her wrath, well, that was risking quite a lot.

Mom and Dra often had conversations like this one: bitter exchanges about no-good, two-bit male landlords or bosses. While most of what they said went over my head, the gist of their worldview was as clear as Mom's Helen Reddy soundtrack. We were Black. We were women. We worked hard. We struggled. Fighting back and being angry was the story of our lives, it seemed to me. Men, when they managed to stick around, only increased our heartaches. We might have enjoyed watching *Shaft* and *Super Fly* on-screen—cool cats who exploded into movie theaters in the early 1970s. But such men didn't exist in real life. Not in our world.

I didn't know it then, but Mom and Dra were laying a serious foundation for us girls, outlining the contours of a belief system I would take to heart so completely for the first few decades of my life that it never occurred to me how fundamental it was to my being. Or how detrimental. They taught us, both in words and actions, one all-encompassing lesson: Black women survive. Push past the fear, the sadness, the regret, and don't count on anyone but yourself. Just keep stepping. Most importantly, never take the time to acknowledge old hurts and vulnerabilities. Leave those where they are, raw and unhealed beneath seemingly impenetrable surfaces.

We were on our way home from Dolores's church, as they called it, near Pico and Vermont in downtown Los Angeles. Dolores was a Latina family friend who may or may not have been an actual member of the clergy but who shared the same spiritual beliefs as Mom and Dra. Her "church" was more of a storefront shop with a podium and several rows of folding chairs for services. Dra liked to stock up on her talismans there, purchasing green candles for money, white ones for protection, and black to ward off evil. They were thick and came in glass jars, allowing them to burn for days on end. Dra kept long rows of them alight across the entire length of her bathtub. This seemed perfectly normal to me as a child. Didn't everyone fill their tubs with burning candles?

We called it Dolores's church, even though she had a husband somewhere in the background. Maybe we discounted him because he was up to no good. "He don't want the mestiza no more," Dolores later confided to Mom when her husband left her for a whiter Latina. Of course, we all sympathized. In that much, Latina culture was the same as our own. We all understood perfectly well the power of light skin.

The demons were aggressive at Dolores's church. Sometimes they had to be physically chased from bodies. Once, when a demon burst forth from an adult man, the entire congregation leaped to its feet. "Get the kids out! Don't let him get inside the children!"

On other Sundays, we attended church services at the home of Madame Eula, an ordained minister whose congregation met in her South Los Angeles living room. Or maybe that was Reverend Richards. In any case, there were several Black women preachers we trusted. It seemed perfectly normal to us that they might pepper their biblical proclamations with prophecy. Why wouldn't they? No one in our family doubted the power of divination. Mom and Dra depended on psychics such as Madame Eula to guide our family's comings and goings and to help prepare us for future events.

A more traditional option was Calvary Baptist Church on Twentieth Street, where parishioners fell out into the floor with the Holy Ghost. On those Sundays, Dra loaded us girls onto the bus for a full morning of Bible classes, sermons, and socializing with the tall-hatted women who gathered there. But no matter where we went, the best part about Sundays was coming home. I longed for the moment when I could finally kick off my patent leather shoes and watch the *Flintstones* while Dra boiled hot dogs for our lunch.

I glanced at Lisa in the seat next to me. She was more like a sister than a cousin, really, since we'd lived together our whole lives. She happened to be biracial too: her mother was white and her father (Mom's brother, my uncle Mervin) was Black. Unlike me, however, Lisa had smooth black ringlets and olive-colored skin. I was more yellow-toned, with a frizzy, blondish-brown mane. Despite our different features, people assumed we were sisters. Some even asked if we were twins, perhaps because of our matching green eyes. Talk about color-blind. Our color apparently made them blind to everything else.

It's hard to imagine now, but in the mid-1960s, children of more than one race were still seen as strange. Until 1967, interracial marriage was still illegal in sixteen states. Our very existence warranted curious stares and rude pointing on a daily basis. Once, Lisa's father—a brown-skinned Black man—took her for a haircut at the Santa Monica mall. A couple of police officers pulled him aside, detaining him for questioning. *What*

was a Black man doing with this little white baby? they wanted to know. Those were the times we lived in.

Mom was never quite sure how to describe us to strangers who often asked what we "were." She and Dra told them we were "half-white" or "mixed," if they really needed to know. And they really seemed to need to know.

Mom steered the Corolla onto Cloverfield Avenue, a few blocks from our apartment. Dra, who never had a driver's license, was a classic back-seat driver, comically slamming her foot into the floor mat whenever she suspected Mom should slow down.

At a red light, the car stalled.

"Shit." Mom turned the key in the ignition.

"Not again," Lisa mumbled.

"What's wrong with it?" Dra asked.

"The same thing that's always wrong with it." Mom said this as though the car breaking down was somehow Dra's fault. In reality, it was a piece of junk that had never worked. My poor mom had been sold a lemon with a hopelessly corroded engine. No matter how many paychecks she poured into repairs, it never stopped breaking down.

A couple of guys offered to push us to the side of the road. From there, we didn't have far to walk. Gathering purses, groceries, and, of course, bags of heavy candles, we trudged the rest of the way on foot.

When I think about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which my mother and grandmother passed on lessons of strength and fortitude, I'm reminded of three memories in particular: boxing, bleeding, and pooping.

Professional wrestling and boxing matches were our Friday night ritual. Lisa and I curled up in the back bedroom, munching snacks. Dra was propped up a few feet away, in her own twin bed, popping open a Coors. Between us was a small black-and-white television on a rolling cart.

"Get 'em, Thunderbird! Knock his head off!" we yelled at the television. Mom stayed in her room during these bouts, never quite acquiring a taste for knockouts.

"Hit 'em harder, you dummy! Break his arm!"

And on we went into the night. Our ritual served as more than entertainment. It was also a teaching moment.

So was the Saturday morning that Dra yelled at me for nursing a bleeding finger. Squeamish to a fault, I was the kind of child who fainted at the mere sight of blood, passed out cold on the floor of my pediatrician's office. But Dra wasn't having it. There was laundry to do, and I was supposed to be helping her and Lisa sort clothes. "Ain't nobody got time to worry about that finger!" she barked. I had expected sympathy, but her expression was one I'd never seen before and wasn't quite sure I recognized. Dra was actually . . . disgusted? By what, I'm still not sure, but I suspect it was a kind of frailty, or weakness, that made her most uncomfortable.

Then there was the problem of my poop. I was often constipated as a child, spending long stretches on the toilet. During these episodes, I would moan or cry out in pain and frustration. Mom and Dra mostly carried on with whatever they were doing: vacuuming, folding clothes, making dinner. No one coddled me or kept me company. They felt sorry for me, of course. Who wanted to see their little girl suffer? But I guess they figured that other than giving me generous servings of castor oil, there wasn't much else to be done. When I had hernia surgery at age five, I took the hit like one of those wrestlers we watched on television and moved on.

The women in my family were warriors, without ever seeing themselves that way. Just as our ancestors and forebears had survived centuries of oppression and brutality by shoring up their defenses to the thousandth degree, so too did Mom and Dra behave exactly as they were expected to: without sentimentality or the slightest hint of fragility. They meant us no harm. In fact, cultivating our strength was their way of equipping us for battle, just as their forebears had done for them.

For years, I did my best to absorb the lessons they conveyed. Even today, I do a pretty good imitation of a strong Black woman when the situation calls for it. In fact, part of me *is* that woman. But there's a bigger part, I think, that never quite embraced that narrative. Barely hidden beneath my thick skin, an unspoken desire flickered on. The odds weren't in my favor, I knew that. But my heart was resolute. If I listened to it closely, it would prove to be my most powerful resource. I might have

to reject everything Mom and Dra taught me about being a strong Black woman in order to heal the broken parts of myself. But that was OK. I decided I was willing to pay that price.

I imagined that I might one day have the kind of dream family I saw on television, with mothers and fathers who sweet-talked and played with their children. I know now that families are *not* perfect, of course. Black families like my own are often laden with generational trauma. But back then, I was convinced that if I wished for it hard enough, my father would come back. And if he came back, maybe my mother would smile and tickle and kiss me too, just like those happy moms and dads on television. I would have the family of my dreams, I vowed in some quiet corner of my being: a family that felt whole, with no one missing. I *would* have my happily ever after.