**Headphones**

A good pair of noise cancelling headphones could cost around $250, or $350+ if the *Beats* logo on the ear was too precious to forgo. Of course, those were the ones Jayla wanted. Not because she had an affinity for logos, but because it brought familiarity, the kind that didn't make her want to scream into her pillow and pound away on her keyboard at 3 a.m.

When her mother asked her why on earth she needed noise cancelling headphones so badly, it took everything within her not to snap.

"You just need to lash out," her friend told her one day after Jayla aired out her quarantine frustrations. "They're never going to get how their actions affect you until they see it first hand."

But she was white, and didn't understand that Jayla would be asking for a death wish if she even dared to speak her mind to her curly-headed melanin mother.

Instead, she kept her mouth shut about all the reasons why she felt the need to drown out the world around her, and listened to her mother offer a zillion reasons as to why it was a waste of money (as if she would be the one paying for them).

"You won't hear me when I'm calling you!"

Jayla attended college two states away for nine months out of the year. She didn't think that would be a problem.

"You won't be able to sense danger!"

Jayla had a general rule about wearing headphones in public: to not to. She was short and curvy, old enough to wear clothes that showcased that, and smart enough to know that made her an undeserving target.

After a few more unremarkable excuses, her mother huffed and pursed her lips. "I just don't get why you need them."

*To drown out your marriage.*

It wasn't until she left for college and came back home that she realized she'd gone nose blind to the toxicity. The arguing and screaming had been a constant part of her childhood, a state of normalcy she grew up with. Coming back to it all of a sudden felt wrong, like no matter how hard she tried she just couldn't adjust to it. In an ideal world, she wouldn't have to.

Jayla wasn't sure what was worse though, the arguing or the love.

The yelling served as Jayla's alarm clock, waking her up at around 8 a.m. every morning. The arguments were usually just displays of toxic masculinity, blatant insecurity, and unnerving paranoia. Her dad seemed to believe that love was about submission, and Jayla didn't know what her mother believed, because she changed her mind about it every other day.

The last thing Jayla wanted to do was listen, but she felt the need to, just in case. Because one time she woke up to her mother crying on the ground and her dad telling her not to call the cops, and she felt guilty for not being there sooner. She never knew when she would need to step in.

But when she was sure the argument was just one of the usual ones, another cheating accusation with no evidence or truth to it, Jayla would slap on her outdated, beat up headphones and blast lying love songs until everything faded away.

Some days their affection made her more disgusted than their arguing did. Jayla would get a lump in her throat when she walked past the kitchen to see her father hugging her mother, even though it was something she yearned for as a child. Sometimes they'd watch TV and act like a couple. Her mother would put on her playful voice and start giggling about nothing, agreeing with all the things he said. They liked to pretend their problems didn't exist, or maybe that was everyone and, even now, Jayla just wasn't old enough to understand.

Either way, Jayla tried to drown that out as well. She'd pound on the volume button of her headphones and listen to lo-fi hip hop instead of R&B. Words were meaningless, and she was tired of being lied to. Besides, the instrumentals drowned out the laughter better.

The worst part had to be the sex, though. Her parents seemed to think that the walls were sound proof, or maybe they just forgot how to act after a year of being empty nesters. Jayla couldn't wrap her head around it. How strong did you have to be to let hands that once meant you harm, try to bring you pleasure? Was it worth it, being used for five minutes of ecstasy in the hopes of lasting happiness? She didn't get how two people could undergo such intimacy, just to sleep in separate beds and argue again in the morning.

But maybe that's what love was, and Jayla was too clouded by all the fan fiction and teen romance novels to realize it.

Drowning all of that out was much harder. She'd snap her headphones into place as loud as she could, wishing she was bold enough to let them know that she was awake. R&B or lo-fi hip hop couldn't make it all go away. All of the 90s hits were filled with lies and the calming instrumentals were too happy for the suffocating feeling in her chest. Sometimes alternative music worked to get rid of the thumping and the squeaking, but it never did anything to stop the tears from rolling down her cheeks.

What was the point to succumbing to love if it was just petty fights and fake smiles, being used and being quelled?

It all made her want to scream, to place her issues on her parents who didn't even know about the damage they caused. It was their fault for corrupting her, for being the reason why she turned down dates and couldn't bring herself to text back that one guy she met at the park when she didn't have her headphones on. They were too wrapped up in their own drama to care. They were too busy pretending that pretending was worth it.

What Jayla really wanted was silence. She wanted relief without a song, white noise that cleared her head and transported her away from her childhood home. She wanted to be numb without angry bass and pitiful piano.

She wanted a love that wasn't like the one she knew.

But instead of saying all of that, knowing she never would, Jayla just shrugged. "I might have another noisy roommate again. It'll be a smart investment in the long run."