

**W**E MET ON the dating app Hinge after she sent me a rose. "Who even sends roses?" had been the topic of my three-person group chat multiple times. In this instance, I had to double-check that Reina had been the one to send it to me. Why? Because I was looking at maybe the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen.

The only issue was that I was leaving Southern California for the next 10 months to attend the language program of my dreams in Japan.

The following day was my friendiversary with my bestie, Jose. We were on our way home from a couple's massage, dinner and a walk around Downtown Disney. (Romantic love isn't the only love that's important.) As I drove us home, I had him open my phone and look at Reina's Hinge profile. "Oh, she's pretty," he said.

I nodded, but felt a twinge of insecurity.

"I'm not too bad myself, though," I said shortly afterward. He nodded halfheartedly. After a pause, he said, "Yeah, but she's pretty-pretty."

We held stilted conversation the rest of the drive back to L.A. I was pissed at what I perceived as being called butt-ugly by my bestie, but I had to admit that he was right. Reina was pretty-pretty.

I matched with her, but hadn't thought of the right message to open the conversation. By the next day, I still hadn't come up with anything, but she put me out of my misery. One of my prompts on the app detailed my phobia of snails in detail. She'd responded with a snail emoji and the word "Boo!" From there, I was hooked.

We had a bit of a cute conversation over text, but I wasted no time in asking her out. Reina said yes, and we had a date to go thrifting for clothes the following Friday.

I thought about her all week and tried to imagine what arti-



ELEANOR DAVIS For The Times

L.A. AFFAIRS

## Would we ever get a chance to reconnect?

WE HIT IT OFF ON HINGE, BUT I LEFT L.A. FOR 10 MONTHS

BY ISOKE ATIBA

cle of clothing I'd find that would convince her of my overwhelming good taste. However, the day before our date, she messaged me. She had COVID-19.

I was devastated. We tried to reschedule, but I had a scheduling conflict: I was busy packing and had a flight out of the country in five days.

Reina and I tried to hold a conversation, but the urgency quickly petered out. The gaps between the replies were getting longer. Messages were becoming info dumps rather than conversations. I landed in Japan and decided to go for one final Hail Mary.

"I'm going to delete Hinge to focus on studying," I wrote. But

I wanted to drop my Instagram if she wanted to follow me. If the stars aligned, I'd ask Reina out for coffee on the other side.

"I'll add you now! We'll see what the future holds," she responded.

One year, one week, one torrid international affair (me) and one long relationship (her) later, I messaged her: "A little anticlimactic, but I'm back. How've you been?"

Five days later, we were on our first date, a picnic by Lake Evans in Riverside. She was two hours late, but it was a California summer, and the weather was perfect. I didn't mind the wait. When she arrived, I tripped over my words. She gushed, and we agreed that we

wanted to see each other again. And again. And again.

After our third date, I confessed that I wasn't sure whether I was ready to date. I liked her, but I was unintentionally holding back, the echoes of my last relationship being blown to smithereens in my head. I asked if we could go on one more date to test the waters. We decided on the lavender nights at 123 Farm, a farm and event venue in Cherry Valley.

I went to pick her up. As soon as she walked out of her house, I was gone. The stammering from the first date became full-blown speechlessness. At 123 Farm, we got flights of lavender cocktails and talked about our teenage years, but all I could think about

was her hand on my knee and how I was going to ask to kiss her.

I'd rented a s'mores pit for our date, but we decided to drop some things off at the car before dessert. On the walk over, we finished our last cocktails and were arguing about who got to eat the maraschino cherries. I ended up getting both, but she asked for the stems. "Can you tie a knot?" she asked.

I seized the moment, knowing that a cherry-stem-tying contest between us could easily become heated instead of hot. "I'm not sure whether I can or not," I answered. "But we could just kiss instead?"

We did, and it blew away any questions of chemistry.

We also made s'mores. Then I bought her a dried bundle of lavender, and we made the long drive home in high spirits. That night, I texted her saying that if she was down, I'd love to keep seeing her.

Today she listens to me rant about my slimy mollusk phobia, and I push back against her competitive streak with my own. We listen to her favorite musicals on the long drives on the 5 Freeway, the 10 Freeway and the 110 Freeway. She watches me play video games, and I lose game after game of bowling.

She's a romantic, and I'm cautiously hopeful. We've been seeing each other for four months now. I don't know if we're forever yet, but I do know what we have was worth the wait.

The author is a PhD student and writer. They live near USC and are on Instagram at @isokethebooksoup and Substack at eesokay.substack.com.

> L.A. Affairs chronicles the search for romantic love in all its glorious expressions in the L.A. area, and we want to hear your true story. We pay \$400 for a published essay. Email LAAffairs@latimes.com. You can find past columns at latimes.com/laaffairs.

## A Life Examined From the Inside Out

Identity, purpose, and the quiet battles that shape who we

by Cornelius Wright



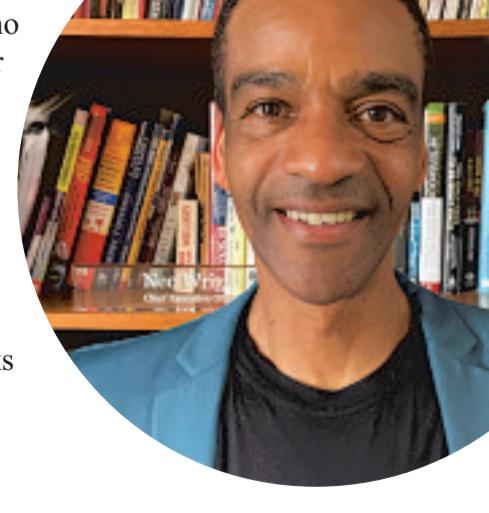
*Black Boy from the Barrio* is a deeply reflective account of one man's journey through identity, struggle, and self-discovery—told with candor, humility, and quiet strength.

Set against the agricultural landscape of California's Central Valley, the book follows the life of a Black American boy born in the 1960s, shaped early by hard labor and limited expectations. Yet the heart of this story lies beyond geography or circumstance. The author turns the lens inward, confronting the internal conflicts that surface over a lifetime—fear and hope, anger and joy, certainty and doubt.

Throughout the book, readers are invited to pause and consider two enduring questions: Who are you, and what is your purpose? The narrative suggests that while we may travel great distances in our lives, the most difficult and meaningful journey is the one that takes place within the mind. With each chapter, the author challenges readers to examine their own thoughts, choices, and assumptions in ways that feel both personal and universal.

Written with honesty and emotional restraint, *Black Boy from the Barrio* speaks to anyone who has wrestled with their past or questioned the direction of their future. It does not offer formulas or promises. Instead, it offers reflection—and the space to think differently.

Authored by Cornelius Wright, this book lingers because it asks readers to look inward.



Scan the QR code to learn more and explore the book.

amazon



## Los Angeles Times FOOD



### These are the 101 best restaurants in Los Angeles

For some restaurants this year, culinary creativity felt like an act of resistance. It helped us, and no doubt other diners, feel hopeful.

In that spirit, we've included 31 fresh entrants on the list, plus a newcomer to the No. 1 ranking that synthesizes community values and notions of deliciousness so vital right now.

SEE THE LIST



latimes.com/101