

My Chains Too Shook with a Familiar Sound

By: Kendal Deaunta Edwards

I was seven years old when I was first introduced to my chains. Though they did not claim me until much later in life, they made themselves known to me in the late summer of 1997. It was not a day that I can remember, and there was no fire and brimstone, no series of hard punches from my father—only laughter: cruel, unconvicted, and certainly, condescending laughter. There was, of course, the unspoken declaration of war. I became familiar with the definition of “faggot” at a young age, though the term was not used against me, but against one of my older brothers. He was the feminine one of the first four foster kids my adoptive mother took in, and it was known from the start that he was a sissy. My brother had a knack for petty theft and his bounty of choice were dolls; Black Barbie dolls were his favorite. Once his stash was uncovered, we rarely heard his given name called from the lips of the few men that did occupy the family tree, my father included. From then on, he was simply called “Brandy” behind my mother’s knowing back and his ridicule never ceased. True, my brother was a vile creature who’d steal anything he could lift, but he was my blood still and I could not, without feeling bad, call him Brandy, though I did on occasions when we argued like sisters do. I was the resident baby at the time, therefore my own growing femininity was shielded from all mockery. I was a precious thing to all, my mother’s untainted child who spent no time in the bosom of the ghetto as my brothers had. I had been christened—chosen by white America, having gone straight from the Hamilton County hospital into the waspy arms of a white Floridan family before fate decided that such a charmed life was much too good for a Black boy born of a young jezebel. Thus began my war with my Black skin and the stereotypes that come with it. At the age of three, I was excited about literature. I could form cognitive sentences and hold proper conversation with adults, and nothing delighted me more than Gene Kelly! “Different” was the term they used in marvel when describing me, “better” is what they meant. This all I knew, and secretly, I found the clay for my sense of self in the adoration.

I was raised by a woman, herself titled “different” in her youth. My mother experienced the power and glory of God at a young age, and she clung to HIM, not only for eternal salvation, but also for deliverance from the patriarchal hell of 1950’s America. She too had been given the insatiable thirst for more, side-slapped by the improper gender to lead and the flippant courage to raise hell about it—never mind her midnight tint. She raised my brothers and me under the strict eye of the Bible and the old ways of her own oppressive father, but still there was love. Unable to overcome the laws of the Black community, she shied away from discussions of my brother’s overt femininity with embarrassment and a slew of “I’m sorry” as she returned his stolen goods with puzzled anger. Though she was a better woman, she still was human, and therefore vulnerable to the itch of gossip. This law of the Black



Photo of the author, courtesy of Kendal Deaunta Edwards.

community, “gay is either sin or confusion—nothing more,” thrives on two things: female silence and male intimidation. Both can be found in the Black church. This fact being relevant because my mother sought to raise us within its walls. She wished to drown us in holy blood, that we may truly be born again without the many reasons our existence should find us wretched. I watched my mother, my sister, my aunts and female cousins, all attempt to ignore and pray my brother’s homosexuality away. All men he encountered attempted to beat, scare, or verbally abuse it away—all in the name of Jesus. I never heard of my mother speaking to my brother about his molding, nor did she ever attempt to educate us on the growing population of homosexuals in the media, we just knew it was bad. It wasn’t a compliment to be called “sweet,” “RuPaul,” or most deadly, “funny.” As I began to resist such notions, I felt her eyes heavy on my back, her hands tighten around me when my brother asked me to play, and I felt her overwhelming presence even as I began to think about the possibilities of wearing pink.

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It came as no surprise to me that she’d be devastated when my seven-year-old mouth formed the sentence, “I think I’m gay,” but her dismissal of my revelation as a childish attempt to ease the pressure off my brother left me betwixt anger and sheer delight. Years later, my outward expression, and the violent inaction of hatred towards me by my family, would create a jealous wedge between me and my brother that would only deepen in green as the years passed. My father’s laughter evolved into uncontrollable cackling as my mother’s teeth clenched, brows furrowed, and nose flared. I could do nothing but relay between their faces, unaware of the declaration I had just ushered in. My mother reached for me and my small body – ignorant of the pain Black hands could administer – stood firm and received her touch. To what should have been my surprise – and to the disgusted disbelief of my older queer brother, who’d been eavesdropping the entire time – she did not strike me. Her teeth eased away and formed a smile, and her words were clear, sweet, and vicious, “No you aren’t. Don’t say that again.” Weeks later, I was signed up for football camp. It was war.

Sun Tzu theorized that the supreme art of war is in the ability to subdue your enemy without fighting. My mother must have digested this on the rare occasion when she wasn’t feasting on the Bible. It occurred to me, as I watched her cheerfully wave me off to practice each day, that she meant to exorcise me with a sinister kindness. This morbid kindness tag-teamed me with the original tool for Black deliverance from the ghetto and the ole stomping grounds of homophobia: sports. My older siblings’ glee contrasted my gloom to such a degree that I knew this had to be a tactic for my undoing; my father knew this as well. He asked me flat out if I was excited about it, to which I flatly declared no. My head did not droop, my words were sharp, and my eyes did not waver. I was my mother’s child—after her own heart, some have said. This truth meant that I was smart, very convincing, opinionated, set in my ways, pleasantly aggressive, and irritatingly polite. Had I only had to deal with my father, I’m sure, even to this day, that I would’ve bended him to my will and been just as happy to endure my brothers’ games from the sidelines choking on the exhalations of his cigarettes. But my mother was, and is, a different story. You see, my keen ability to manipulate the

masses is a gift given and taught to me by her, and the master is not easily bested by the pupil. She recognized her own script and countered me with new lines she’d rehearsed to perfection. She explained that she believed I was very talented and that she only wished to see how far my talent level extended. My father and brothers were spellbound by her flattery, straight men can rarely decipher the mystical ways of women (or want to attempt the feat), but my funny brother and I were well familiar in the nice-nasty of woman talk and our eyebrows cocked in annoyance almost simultaneously. I will tell you now that I love a good praise song, but no amount of sycophancy can sway me to smile at the thought of gearing up for a brute’s idea of fun. I fell only at the mercy of the distinct twinkle in her eye that happens when she smiles.

Before I continue, I want to explain the mindset of a child who is 1: Gay; 2: A foster child; and 3: A superb people pleaser. The mixture creates the perfect cocktail of an obedient child, because we are nourished and bloom under the waters of adoration. The key ingredient here is the unwavering fear of rejection. This my mother knew, and I believe that this knowledge put her at a gentle ease at the reality of raising the descendants of a mad woman. After three racketeers, I cannot fathom any other reaction from a rational human being, much less from a woman who is self-described as a conformer. My coming must have been like rain to the Saharan desert. My entire existence was about pleasing her. I do not know if this wild loyalty springs from warped gratitude or my own selfish need for approval. Perhaps both. I have often thought that my desperate need for perfection formed its genesis in my desire to be seen the way I initially was in her eyes before I uttered those four innocent words. I have still not seen that mesmerizing twinkle in authenticity, and as beyond it as I believe myself to be, I still unconsciously search for it. For that I am not perfect, so judge me now if you like. There is not one man in all of time who has not lusted for motherly love, so, suffer. Though I do not need it, I certainly want it. Football, baseball, basketball, my overextended role at church, my failed attempt at all “A’s every time,” and that horrid, diabolical saxophone all collected like steel and formed the links that would bound me over the course of the next eleven years, but it was her approval, held high above my reach, that were the cuffs.

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The Black community finds security in its men. Historically, a race of people is only as strong as their males. Our African ancestry boasts tales of kings, warriors, and bravery, thus making anything less an enemy of our people by modern standards. The African narrative of being proud and unconquerable lifts our Black faces to the sun as we allow this historical high to get us through life in a white world. Understand that the African narrative and the “Black” narrative are not the same, however, we are greatly influenced by the former. The captives, and its descendants, of the Brookes and ships like her birthed a new law of “Blackdom” based on the oppressions of slavery. How can one love to smile when their oppressors smiled disgustingly as they raped our sisters and sodomized our brothers, moreover, experiencing such forms of wicked torture, how can a Black man accept another brother who delights and lusts for this kind of touch? A fear of femininity was birthed on these ships; men getting sexually abused the same way as women, creating a narrative that they,

themselves, were less or unable to protect them—undoubtedly a small hint of misogyny steers this fear. If nothing else, the belief that men and women are not equal finds its resting place there. This is my only explanation for homophobia within our community: genetically-passed fear of femininity grounded in bitter hatred and ancient wounds. Nothing else makes sense. I refuse to believe that my own people possess the affinity for raw hatred. But what of the purple people who do not know of the darkness that lurked in those seaside chambers? Again, they are simply repeating what has been taught. I mourn for them because they have drunk the Kool-Aid of ignorance, anchoring themselves to the enemy's greatest tactic: communal segregation.

As a young gay intellectual, I experienced this segregation first hand. Whether for my scholastic smarts or my low tolerance for sweating, I was alienated from my peers. There are multiple accounts where I sat alone at lunch humming show tunes to myself, or reading Nancy Drew. My seventh-grade social studies teacher, Mr. Taylor, took it upon himself to alert me of my “feminine ways.” He meant for this message to find my spirit broken, but instead I laughed in his stout face and called him a fool. I was never ashamed of myself, and this bred hostility from those who made it their business to shame me. Though I didn't like being alone, I greatly preferred it to parlaying with my peers that I had nothing in common with. As I searched for reasons why I was different from my fellow classmates, the voices of every adult figure I'd encountered thus far returned to me with the same haunting phrase, “You're better than them.” Directly following the phrase, was my mother's pride-filled smile, and I was convinced that they didn't like me, not because they could smell the gay on me, but because they were simply jealous of me, jealous because white people didn't look at me and scorn or cross the street or clutch their purse when I got close. They were jealous because I owned those metaphorical blue eyes Toni Morrison denied Pecola in her creation. And so, I ran from everything Black.