

Hurt People

A full-length play

Written by
LaDarrion Williams

Current Draft
(July 2024)

"Promises get broken. Toys and mirrors and clocks get broken. Bread get broken. Not people. People get hurt. And then they get healed." — Mx Elijah (David Makes Man Season Two).

Amy Wagner
Stewart Talent Literary Division
1430 Broadway Suite 601,
New York, NY 10018
Office: 212.315.5505 Ext 153

Artist Contact:
LaDarrion Williams
Ladarrionwilliams@msn.com
818.238.7788

Cast of Characters

Marcel Bennett - A Black man that's approaching the big 30. A deep thinker. He is a best-selling author who has come home to write his next book. But, of course, he struggles with it. Because he struggles with the past. And now it's bleeding into his present and future.

Brandon McCarter - Black man. 30. Country boy. The one who stayed behind in a small town. He moves through life with a sadness. But he presses on. Him and Marcel have been friends since they were in middle school. Yes, this Black man is masculine. Not toxic. But he operates in the masculine realm.

Keisha Jackson - Black woman. A good woman, too. Supportive. Loyal. She loves Marcel with everything that she has.

Black Woman - Black woman podcaster/ Divine Spirit of femininity. She brings a sudden change, wanted or not.

Black Man - A Black Man podcaster who created Sip Talkin'/ Divine Spirit of Masculinity. Fiery passion. Overtly masculine.

BLACK MAN #2 - A Black man podcaster/ Divine Spirit of Duality. Softer, yes. But still grounded in both masculinity and femininity. He may be Queer. Or Queer adjacent. Let's just say, he's open to some things.

****These three characters operate as their own world. It's literally a podcast on stage. However, there is something otherworldly about them. Grounded, of course. But there is something that's a bit heightened to their very being. Also, it's something that's there should be a rhythm to their speech. They gon' talk over each other; they gon' get heated and talk shit, but it's all love. It's all passion. ****They are to be played by BLACK ACTORS*****

(...) Indicates the words beyond the silence. A silent battle. Marcel, Keisha, and Brandon revel in it. It's their true thoughts. Whatever that may be. But please take into account this. It should not be rushed. It should be precious as gold. And they all should EARN it.

Setting

The stage should be split. With Sip Talkin', there's recording mics, sofas, bottles of alcohol. Whatever you can to really create that world. On the other side, is Marcel's airbnb.

Be free to create this space.

Note from Playwright

Dear Black man you have a space to be soft. To be/feel hard. Just explore that. Please.

Dear Black woman, you have a space to be angry. To feel unprotected. And you can call that shit out. If you want to be angry, it's justified.

Development History

This play was developed in the Texas State University's Black & Latino Playwrights Celebration (Eugene Lee, Fall 2023)

Eugene O'Neill National Playwrights Conference (Summer, 2024)



The Way by Dr. Fahamu Pecou

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE

(God's holy light shines upon three Black bodies. Two Black men and one Black woman. All three wear a vibrant-colored Egúngún mask, white joggers, and a fresh pair of tennis shoes. These are Divine Spirits of Femininity and Masculinity and the one in between-- The Spirit of Duality.)

(The ethereal but cursive singing SZA "Saturn" rises on the track. They all move around the stage as if they are dancing on air. One of them bends down, drawing something on the floor with chalk. The other two, they follow. Then they all move around as if they are creating three boxes.)

(As they draw their boxes, three more bodies appear and stand in them. One of them is revealed to be Marcel Bennett. A Black man who stands idly, staring at us. After a moment, he holds up a black ring box.)

(Lights shift to the next two: Brandon on his right and Keisha on his left.)

(Whispers fill the stage.)

(A silent prayer rests on Marcel's lips.)

(Marcel looks down at the ring, then to Keisha, and then to Brandon, conflicted.)

(Blackout.)

SCENE ONE

(On the left, the shifting lights subtly reveal a long couch and a chair with three podcast mics in front of them.)

(In silhouette, the same three bodies enter. They stand behind the microphones. On the wall, *Sip Talkin'* sparks up in neon lights.)

(We hear a burst of laughter come through. Black Man #2 grabs his mic, talking shit with Black Man and Black Woman. And yes, they've been draaaaankin'. They've been drankin'.)

BLACK MAN #2

Aight. Aight! Y'all niggas need therapy, for real!

BLACK MAN

I'mma keep it a buck, though. Both had points on both sides. I also took into account of what my brotha, and truthfully, some of y'all in the comments had to say. 'Cause I saw all of 'em. But say what you got to say man.

BLACK MAN #2

At the end of the day, I think everybody else be trying to define what masculinity is. Because let's be real, Black masculinity and white masculinity are two different things. And in my opinion, they try to redefine to their standards. And this is no shade to the sistas, but y'all try to redefine it too.

BLACK WOMAN

(Nene Leakes-esque.)

Now why we in it? You see how Black women get thrown into stuff we ain't even did nothing.

(Comments appear on the screen behind them. Folks are going in!)

BLACK MAN

Woah. Woah. We ain't trynna blame y'all or make y'all look bad. It's just, you know, acknowledging the pattern. And then calling y'all into accountability.

BLACK WOMAN

Account--(you know) Black people...!

BLACK MAN

Nah. Nah. A lot of the sistas be lacking in that. Then y'all, okay, lemme fix my speech. Some females talk to men with a sense of superiority. Sistas assume that they get good jobs and make more money than a lot of the men in their relationships; they think all of that moves the needle for them. In that, women have a sense of entitlement. Some of that entitlement is that I am this caliber of woman. So, I am entitled to a good man. I have this type of position or education. I am entitled to a good man. But y'all don't think that's a character flaw because y'all are leading with that. But by asking, "How don't I have a good man?" Without considering that with all that mentality and sense of entitlement, you're terrible to be around. That makes us slightly defensive because now, y'all are operating in the space of masculinity.

BLACK WOMAN

Well men don't know how to bask in their feminine energy. But lemme say this on the topic of "space of masculinity." Black woman, we have to operate in that. Think about it: most of us are raised in a single-parent household, and if you're the eldest sibling, you most likely have to raise and take care of your younger siblings. We don't know how to not operate in what is supposed to be masculine. So, to sit here and blame us--

BLACK MAN #2

Again, I don't think we're blaming. We're simply saying that a lot of times, Black women do try to redefine what Black masculinity is. Because if I'mma be real on here. I'mma be real; lemme me hit y'all with a sermon.

(A chorus of heavenly instigating from these MF's.)

BLACK WOMAN

Go head, 'Passa!

BLACK MAN #2

Y'all want the brothas to operate in this so-called masculinity, but when y'all, aka Black women, be going out and getting you a Brad, y'all don't make them operate in that same societal box. Check this out, I was watching an episode of The Bachelorette, and there was one contestant on there who was the typical white jock, of course, but he came in with dangling earrings, a Mary Tyler Moore scarf, and a whole man bun. Now, I firmly believe had a brotha came up in there like that...It would've been a wrap for that nigga. And y'all know it.

BLACK MAN

(Sips tea.)

Facts!

BLACK MAN #2

Black women go to these white men and allow them the space to be themselves, but they want us to operate in the stereotypical format of what it means to be a Black man and be masculine.

BLACK MAN

But as soon as we apply it, oh, we're "misogynistic". With us, we are measured by the material things. We gotta have a big dick, a good job, money, and the freshest car, or a lot of times females don't even be looking our way.

BLACK WOMAN

I can't really speak to those sistas that do that, so I'mma mind my Black woman business on that one. But I will say that when I was briefly dating a white man...

(Black Man and Black Man #2 throw a look of shade to the camera.)

BLACK WOMAN

It was like I was able to operate in my femininity with him. I didn't have to operate in the masculine realm, and I think it all boils down to Black women just wanting to be in the femininity realm because it's not our job to do so. And let's be honest; white men do treat Black women like the queens they are, and entitlement.

BLACK MAN

Hold on--

BLACK MAN #2

Naw, lemme get this one. I can see where you're coming from when you say that white men treat Black women better. In my opinion, it can give off a fetish with them. Just my opinion on that one. But, I do feel that because white men can operate in any space given to them without question. That's where the privilege lies. Most Black women turn their "Brad" into a Tyrone. Dress him. Give him that swag. Get his haircut a certain way. Or...or...y'all go for the basic ones that don't have to have this overt masculine way. For example, y'all remember that episode of Insecure where our girl Molly--(Rolls eyes jokingly.) She ran through several Black dudes. Good brotha's, too, and when she settled down with "Asian Bae," he was allowed to humble her. He didn't fit the mold of this "overt masculine trait" that a lot of Black women...not saying all, but a lot of Black women put on us brothas.

BLACK WOMAN

Y'all do that with white and non-Black women too.

BLACK MAN

What?

BLACK WOMAN

Don't sit there acting dumb. Y'all definitely do that shit too. Y'all always say that Black women be having attitudes, we too this or too that. But y'all want all the Black woman attributes on a non-Black woman. You shit on us, but have a white girl or let's be honest, a Latina girl or Asian do that, oh, y'all think that shit is sexy. Look at these niggas becoming "passport" bros and shit. Looking for women in other cultures. Because what? Running from accountability.

BLACK MAN #2

(Acknowledges the Black Woman.)

I can see that.

BLACK MAN

Ehhhh. I don't know 'bout that.

BLACK MAN #2

Nah fam. Niggas do be doing that. They do.

(They high-five each other.)

BLACK WOMAN

Thank you. Y'all niggas basically beg us to be masculine.

BLACK MAN

Men aren't begging women to become "masculine". That shit is a consequence of men's failings. But we didn't ask y'all to become masculine.

BLACK WOMAN

True. True. However, I can confidently say that all Black women want them a Black man. We do. I just think we've gotten to a point where we are not settling for less. (Shift.) So, can you two answer one question that was briefly brought up earlier?

BLACK MAN

What?

BLACK WOMAN

What is Black masculinity?

(In the same fashion of us pressin' that skip button on YouTube, we suddenly shift to...)

(...A brown wooden Chalet cabin mounted in the heart of Birmingham, Alabama on a Thursday afternoon. Something tells us this is a high-end Airbnb. Inside, the decor is extraordinarily tasteful. Not pretentious. A great room opens, revealing a Bear Creek sofa couch in the middle. It is vibrant in color and rustic in theme. A faux leather chair sits on the side of it on the left.)

(Somewhere in the back, a bay window casting a misty blue of endless greenery backdrop sits beside a fireplace. A grand chandelier hangs low from the ceiling. The great room flows effortlessly into a full kitchen with a unique Copper dining table and breakfast bar with three stools in the granite counter-topped kitchen.)

(The front door bursts open, and Marcel and his best friend Brandon fumble in with gut-bucking laughter. Marcel moves with a lot of pain. That type of pain you feel after not working out in months.)

MARCEL

(Out of breath.)

See, that's why I don't like to fool with you! You literally been trying to kill me ever since I got here a week ago. A whole weight lifting session *and* a hike up the mountain?!

BRANDON

Man, what's that meme I shared with you? That meme with Debo. (In Debo's voice.) Quit bein' a bitch and c'mon!

(Marcel crosses over to plop down on the couch.)

MARCEL

Don't start.

BRANDON

Hey, no pain and no gain. You the one who said you wanted to get in shape.

MARCEL

(Stretching.)

Yeah, it feels like it's more painin' and less gainin'. Damn, and how many sessions you do a week?

BRANDON

I try to go about four or five times. Two a days when I really wanna get in shape. But you were really pumpin' that iron though.

MARCEL

I appreciate you whipping me back into shape. It's been a while since I went that hard in the gym. (Struggling like hell.) Damn, we are not seventeen any more that's for sure.

BRANDON

Gettin' old, bruh. Ya bones crackling and shit.

MARCEL

Fuck you. I'm in my prime.

BRANDON

Okay, prime yo ass over to that stretchin'.

(Brandon goes to the fridge, pulls out two cold bottles of water. Tosses one to Marcel, who has managed to grab his phone. Scrolls. Stares. Scrolls even more.)

BRANDON

You obsessed.

MARCEL

I know.

BRANDON

You're still on the best selling list. Stop checking.

MARCEL

I'm just checking emails. That's all.

BRANDON

Why are you lyin'?

MARCEL

I'm not. I promise I'm just checking just a few emails...(Clocking Brandon shaking his head.) What? Okay. Fine. (Puts his phone down.) See? No work this weekend.

But if Keisha calls, then I definitely have to answer. You don't answer her phone call it'll be World War Three.

BRANDON

Oh, how she doin'? I know she ready for you to come back to LA.

MARCEL

She's doing well. Real good. It actually worked out because she flew in to Atlanta to visit her mother. She'll drive up this weekend for your birthday get together.

BRANDON

Oh, that's wassup. (Pause. Then...) Hold up. You still...

MARCEL

What?

BRANDON

You already know. We was about to talk about you proposing, but you had to go. That's been about a few months ago.

MARCEL

Oh, yeah. That. Man, okay. So, I definitely messed up.

BRANDON

Damn, what you do?

MARCEL

I think she kinda had this impression that I was going to propose to her at one point. Don't get me wrong, I plan on proposing. But the way I set it up I can see how she thought that.

BRANDON

What you do?

MARCEL

Nice candle light dinner in downtown LA. Bottle of champagne. The finest. And--

BRANDON

Ah.

MARCEL

I know. I know. But we were there to celebrate a milestone in a brotha's career. Let's just say it was awkward as hell.

BRANDON

Oh, so it was one of those TV moments when you think the character is gonna propose, and they don't? (Beat.) So, what are you waiting on?

MARCEL

(...)

I just wanted to give it to her during the right time. I'm real particular about stuff, you know. It has to be right. No mess ups. And plus, I really wanted make sure that my career was in the place that I wanted.

BRANDON

It's going to be good. (Extends his hand out.) Congratulations on that.

(Marcel grabs his hand in a manly shake.)

MARCEL

I appreciate it.

(Brandon mosey's over to the kitchen counter. Takes out several pots and pans. Prepping some after work out lunch. Marcel goes behind the counter. Leans against the counter, watching Brandon perform that alchemy with the seasonings and cooking oil. It's a rhythm with these two.)

MARCEL

So. You turning the big Three-O.

BRANDON

Yeah, man. I still can't believe it. Feels like yesterday when we were graduating. Man, I would kill to go back to bein' sixteen or seventeen. I would start the fuck over.

MARCEL

Start over?

BRANDON

Yeah, I just wanna do some 'thangs different, ya know?

MARCEL

Like what, exactly?

BRANDON

(...)

Shidddd, I definitely would've done better in school. Ya know, go to college, or paid attention a little bit more in Mr. Saunders class.

MARCEL

Oh, your ass always fell asleep in his class. His face would be red as blood, mad cause you didn't do the workbook assignments.

BRANDON

I'm sorry, that shit was boring, and it was hard tryna stay up after fourth period lunch. That *itis* was hittin' hard. Cheese sticks and chicken sandwiches.

MARCEL

And chocolate milk?

(Both are grossed out. Brandon crosses back to his cooking.)

BRANDON/MARCEL

Nigga...

BRANDON

We was really in high school, drinkin' chocolate milk? After school, we'd sneak into the teacher's lounge vending machines to get them honey buns. Man, you was honey bun eating-ass. Take me back to a time where we'd get off the bus, go home, fix ourselves somethin' to eat--

MARCEL

A big ass bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch...

BRANDON

Or scrambled eggs and rice. 'Cause you know a nigga couldn't cook back then. Had to wait on our mama's to come home from they shift from Golden Corral to bring us that good good food.

MARCEL

But look at you now. Cooking.

BRANDON

Oh, man. I took a lil' cookin' class at UAB. Changed everything. I really love it now.

MARCEL

Well, I'm sure it's better than that nasty ass rice and eggs you used to cook after school. Then we'd watch 106 & Park, watching the video countdown.

BRANDON

Oh, we takin' it back, back. Hold up.

(Brandon goes on over to a speaker. He presses on it. Pretty Ricky "On the Hotline" warbles all around the room. Both Brandon and Marcel vibin' while cooking.)

MARCEL

Not Pretty Ricky!

BRANDON

I told you I was taking it back. Man, we used to be at the school dances just grinding on hella girls. (Sings:)

Its five in the morning

And I'm up havin' phone sex wit you you

And now I'm on the hotline over here lustin' for you you...

We had those girls like...

(Brandon starts to grind. Moving his hips that'll make Shango jealous.)

BOTH

Let's talk about sex baby

Let's talk about you and me

Let's talk about bubbles in the tub

Let's talk about makin' love

Let's talk about you on top, or me goin' down

Let's have a lil' phone sex baby, on the hotline...

(Nothing but laughs and reminiscing.)

MARCEL

Ah, shit. We used to be cuttin' up, sittin' in the back of the bus. Wait, why were we sitting in the back of the bus?

BRANDON

Shit, I on even know.

MARCEL

Just undoing what our ancestors fought for, huh? Rosa Parks would be rolling around in her grave.

BRANDON

Hey, she fought for the right to choose. And our bad asses chose to sit in the back.

MARCEL

And on the weekends, go down to the Promenade, chill in the Walmart parking lot. Getting on those McDonald's workers nerves.

BRANDON

Ah shit, the dollar chicken snack-wraps. And yo ass would get --

MARCEL

A dollar sweet tea.

BRANDON

Class of 2011 was the best graduatin' class at Thompson High School. Man, take me back. Because those were some simple ass times.

MARCEL

I know that's right.

(They just laughhhhh. It's something soft about it. Something therapeutic.)

BRANDON

(...)

Like I said, I'd love to go back and be able to change some things. Now, I'm sitting here about to turn thirty and what I got to show for it?

MARCEL

(...)

BRANDON

(Crosses back over to the kitchen.)

But we here. And I'm glad you called. Been a long time, but soon as we started back, it was like where we left. Actin' a fool with each other.

(Brandon throws the meat in the skillet. It sizzles between the growing silence.)

MARCEL

I'm glad I did. (Beat, then...) And you don't have nothing to worry about because I'm gonna throw you something special. I already called a few folks from our old neighborhood and they're coming. Throw a little barbecue. Drink. Play Spades because I still don't know how and y'all asses never wanted to teach me. But that's neither here or there.

BRANDON

Ain't nobody got time to teach folks a game they should've been known how to play.

MARCEL

But for real, it'll be good to see everybody since I had to miss the reunion.

BRANDON

Yeah. It was a good one. You remember Ainsley Darnell? Well, she was the one that set it up. It was at the old football field where Jeremy got caught smoking weed by Mrs. Jackson.

MARCEL

Not the football field.

BRANDON

Hey, don't sleep on it. That shit look real different now. Man, Thompson High is a whole college campus now. City of Alabaster did so much remodeling down there, it looks like a whole new part of the city.

MARCEL

Ain't that some shit. Where was all this when we were there?

BRANDON

Right. These kids got it made now.

MARCEL

(...)

BRANDON

Maybe that's what you're new book should be about?

MARCEL

What? Our high school days? Pshhh. Man, I don't know about that.

BRANDON

I know you're supposed to be on your two week "sabbatical" or what not. But, I think it'd be good. Nobody is really writin' about that era, for real? And it'd be good to teach these youngin's where they got it from. Because the shit they have now...shit sucks. I was watching Disney Channel with my lil' niece the other night, man, all them shows are straight trash.

MARCEL

Oh, I know.

BRANDON

I was like, I know Marcel would be mad as hell to see what's on his channel. Because you was a Disney Channel watchin' ass nigga.

(Marcel's corny ass hums the "You're Watching Disney Channel" tune.)

MARCEL

That I was.

(Marcel pulls out his 'idea book'. Stares at it with a troubled mind.)

MARCEL

If I were to write about our childhood, how would I streamline it? Who would the characters that I want to be in it.

BRANDON

Oh, shit. You gonna be usin' nigga's government names, huh? 'Cause you love doin' that--

MARCEL

It's not even like that. It's something that I've been wanting. I want to try something different. (Throws a quick glance at him.) I guess, if you don't mind, can I ask you some questions for research?

BRANDON

I guess. Go ahead.

MARCEL

You know you said earlier that you wish you can go back and change things. I think that's the case for every adult. But, for this present moment, what is it that you want outta life in the now?

BRANDON

Tell you the truth, I really don't know what I want outta life.

MARCEL

There has to be something out there that you want. I mean, you can't really go through life not wanting anything. It's not possible.

BRANDON

Oh, is this is an episode of Iyanla: Fix My Life?

MARCEL

Come on, I'm being serious.

(Brandon thinks for a moment.)

BRANDON

I wouldn't say I don't want anythin', I just never had time to think about what *I* want. Let alone somebody askin' me what I want.

MARCEL

Isn't it about time you did?

BRANDON

Yeah. I guess.

(...)

Okay. My turn to ask. What is that *you* want to change from the past?

MARCEL

(...)

What is it that I would want to change from the past?

That's a question. I don't know.

BRANDON

Stop playin'. Yes, you do.

MARCEL

(Deflecting.)

I really don't. I mean, you can't change things from the past. Because what's done is done.

BRANDON

Fine. Let me ask you this. What do you want in the now?

MARCEL

To be a great writer.

BRANDON

That's real *obvious*.

MARCEL

From the time I can remember, that's always been what I want. Be a successful author, which I've accomplished.

(With a whisper of "hmp," Brandon makes his way back to the kitchen to finish cooking.)

MARCEL

What?

BRANDON

Nothin'.

MARCEL

It's not nothing. You just "hmp".

BRANDON

Bruh. It's nothing.

MARCEL

Brandon, please. What is it?

BRANDON

(...)

I feel like if you really want to propose to Keisha, you should just do it. No waiting. Just don't make it or her an afterthought.

MARCEL

(Tight.)

I'm not.

BRANDON

Sorry. I didn't mean to say "afterthought".

(...)

I say you want somethin' else. Somethin' different.

(Brandon stirs something in a bowl.)

MARCEL

Oh, so you know what I want now? (Trying to pass off as jokingly.) You know me now?

BRANDON

(...)

Well, I *want* my life to mean somethin'. You know, I wake up, go to a job that I fuckin' hate. Work for some assholes who barely wanna pay a brotha what he's worth. Then I come home and maybe go to the bowling alley, drink a few beers with some friends. Go to the club in Five Points, here and there and that's about it. And that ain't no life to live in my opinion.

MARCEL

What about marriage? Or being someone's life partner?

BRANDON

(...)

MARCEL

Or in your case, do you have any "side pieces" as you so call in that equation?

BRANDON

Ah, here you go.

MARCEL

Hey, I'm just asking. You never had that problem in high school.

BRANDON

(...)

Marcel, can I ask you something?

MARCEL

What is it?

BRANDON

Why did you come back home?

MARCEL

(...)

Your birthday, duh.

BRANDON

That, yes. I get that. But it gotta be somethin' else. Is it somethin' that you came home to fix?

MARCEL

Why are you asking all these questions?

BRANDON

You ask personal ass questions but I can't?

(Both of them laugh. But it is clear Marcel practices the art of deflection. And hell, he's good at it, too.)

MARCEL

All right. I'm gonna do it.

BRANDON

Do what?

MARCEL

What you said to do. Write about our childhood.

(A moment between them. Brandon crosses back over to the kitchen. Fixes them both a plate.)

BRANDON

Well, I'm glad to be your muse.

MARCEL

Can I be honest? I already had something written down. Jotted it down last night before I went to bed.

BRANDON

I knew yo ass been writin'.

(...)

Well, read me sumthin', then. Actually, let me choose for you. Because you be playin'.

(Brandon takes the notebook and randomly flips to a page. Marcel gives him a nervous smile as he watches Brandon flip through the pages.)

MARCEL

Don't laugh, man. Please.

BRANDON

I would never laugh at you.

(Lights shift to a crystallizing an accented white with purple hue. The Divine Spirit of Duality comes in like a might storm. The spirit slow dances around Brandon who is now caught in the blue light. More whispers fill the stage.)

MARCEL

“Chapter One: Tenderness. A place often where Black men are not allowed or given a chance to go. I wouldn't say “allowed” as more not given the freedom to explore such a thing. Softness and tenderness are where Black men have to be in the wilderness for forty years. Lost. It could be a place of refuge, but fear and ignorance are set in the restless minds like the sunset off the Alabama Gulf. Deep in their skin, battle scars are what they instead carry than laughter in their rumbling chest. If only they took the time to stop, breathe, and laugh. Laugh like music, laugh in harmony where their chests rise up and down, and their heartbeat syncopated. It's free. Laughter and happiness is the only thing free in this world. Well, next to pain and heartache. But too bad they live in a place where people believe Black boys don't cry or aren't supposed to laugh in sheer delight.

(...)

It's a strenuous burden they put themselves under. But, in these Black men's place of refuge, the two who shy away from this stand there, tall, arms reaching up to the Alabama sky. Skin black and wrapped in richness.

(Brandon and the Divine Spirit of Duality encircle each other. Their barely distinguishable whispers echo the poetry Marcel shares. As he speaks, the whispers swell.)

MARCEL

Mouths quiver with anticipation, and smiles crest on the corners of their lips like the morning light. Little Black boys lost. They are lost in each other. Lost in each other's music, the wind dance around them...”

(He closes the book in a manner of retreat. The Spirit of Duality disappears off stage. And the whispers fade to stillness.)

And...that's all I got right now.

(Lights shift back. Brandon claps.)

BRANDON

And the Oscar goes to--

MARCEL

Uh. It's a book, not a movie.

BRANDON

Ah, man, that shit was just gettin' good.
The way you weave words in.
Man, you're a dope-ass writer, for real.

MARCEL

Thanks, I appreciate it.

BRANDON

But you got something right there. It's a good enough start.

MARCEL

I don't know. Maybe I should follow everybody else and what they're writing.

BRANDON

Nah. Don't follow the trends. Write what you wanna write about. (They start to eat.)
Keisha is gonna love this. Watch.

MARCEL

I don't show folks my early version. So, consider yourself really special.

(A look between the two.)

(It's long, and needed.)

(Pushing itself over a boundary none of them
want to cross right now.)

BRANDON

(...)
Why did you really come home?

MARCEL

You've already asked me that.

BRANDON

Yeah, you told me that it was for my birthday.

MARCEL

Yes.
And I'm sticking with it.

(...)

(Both of them breathe...)

(It's like the air dances between them.)

BRANDON

I guess we're both on our truth today—

(And with that, we shift to...)

BLACK MAN

...Today, we got a question in the comments. This is directed to you. (He points to Black Woman.) “Hey, gurl. I've been dating this guy for about a few weeks, and we got on the subject of marriage and kids and you know he had a lot to say about the art of “submission”. He says that he wants his girl to be submissive and whatnot. And I'm like...niggah what? Idk. What you think?”

BLACK WOMAN

(Looks at the camera.)

Here's what I think: A lot of times Black women are not against submission. Me, personally, I am tired of the “Independent Black Woman” trope, and I don't mind the submission if the BLACK man is willing to take the lead and the charge. I am tired, you hear me! I, as a Black woman, don't want to be led into a dead end. (Mic drop silence.) Lemme say that again. If you want me to be this submissive woman, you need to be the type of man to be willing to lead the house hold.

BLACK MAN

A lot of times Black women...well, I'mma be real. A lot of times Black women wants men to be put in this societal box and then they don't wanna do the traditional wifely duties, either.

BLACK WOMAN

That's definitely not true.

BLACK MAN

It is. Y'all want us to be the breadwinner, the provider, the leader, but then what are y'all bringing to the table?

BLACK WOMAN

Why is it always the question when it comes to us? Do y'all ask Latina women what they bring to the table? Other than the sassy attitude and the body that y'all want from us. Or do y'all ask white and Asian women what they bring? Why is it always the Black woman being asked what we bring to the table? Kevin Samuels got y'all bumped when it comes to that. I mean, it really got ya'll minds WARPED. Black women are penalized if we do bring something to the table, and we are penalized if we don't. And here's a thing we don't really talk about: As Black women, we are taught to be independent from a very young age. We are not taught to be submissive.

We're constantly anxious about being abandoned, used, and thrown away because we speak our minds. And many times, Black men are not taught to be leaders.

BLACK MAN

And I oop!

(Black Woman looks to the camera.)

BLACK WOMAN

So, girl, if he's asking you to be submissive, ask him how he's leading. Because a lot of times, we only hype niggas up because we want a man. And let's face it, a lot of niggas don't know how to fuck, don't have no money, and...I'm about to go to church on y'all—

BLACK MAN

(Very churchy. Southern-Gospel Baptist like.)

Well, I'mma say is, I ain't got no problem when it comes to the bedroom.

(Black Man and Black Man #2 goes to church on they assess. Singing. Stomping. Clapping. Acting a plum-ass fool.)

BLACK WOMAN

(Dead pan look.)

That's fine. But y'all gotta stop leading with ya dicks and lead with your mind.

(Suddenly, they all freeze as if some one pressed the pause button. The lights shift back to Marcel. It's Saturday morning. The day before Brandon's birthday, and he's sitting, typing at his computer. His thoughts are flowing over the keys.)

(Tap.)

(Tap.)

(He begins to write and his pain.)

(Brandon appears in a ring of fused red and white light. He sneakily grabs Marcel's notebook and starts to read it while Marcel is off, writing.)

(As Brandon reads...)

(A spot appears the two Divine Spirits of Masculinity and Duality are acting as they are the young Marcel and Brandon who just got off the bus. They trade cracking jokes to each other. Throwing up a basketball in the air. Sling off their book bags and sit on a couch, pantomiming as they though they are watching TV.)

BRANDON

Chapter Two: “I felt something today. Something that I haven’t felt in a very long time. It’s like a storm raging over me. A storm that just won’t pass over. In moments like these, I try to ask myself, “who am I?” But I don’t know. I just don’t know.” Childhood was a little rough. Small three bedroom house. It was pink. I always thought that was weird. A pink house? Right in front of a church. Mt. Pleasant. I used to call it a house of horrors.

(The Divine Spirit of Femininity appears. She is slapped by the Divine Spirit of Masculinity.)

BRANDON

(...)
But they found refuge in each other. They love—

Lights shift. Marcel’s phone rings.)

MARCEL

(Answers the phone.)

Hey, youuuuuu.

(Lights fully rise on the right, revealing his girlfriend Keisha. She’s in a bathrobe and in a small kitchen area. She has a cup of coffee in her hand. Stressed. Both of them are doing their ‘mornin’ routines as they talk on the phone. Their phones can be placed anywhere on stage. And we got AirPods. So, be creative.)

KEISHA

Hey, I’m surprised you’re up this early. How are you?

MARCEL

I’m good. (Looks at his watch.) Wait, aren’t you supposed to be on the road by now?

KEISHA

I know. Atlanta is only two hours away. I’m leaving here as soon as I can get in the car.

MARCEL

No rush. Seriously.

KEISHA

Look, I'm trying to get away. I am. But I am glad to meet your friends. Especially Brandon. You talk so much about him, and I'm so glad you're spending time with him for his birthday this weekend.

MARCEL

Yeah, it's been great.

He wasn't in a good place this year, turning thirty and all. I'm glad we get to hang out this time.

(...)

Also, I'm just planting seeds for my next project.

KEISHA

Marcel...

MARCEL

I know I'm supposed to take a break.

KEISHA

Yes. You need it. You've been going hard for the past year and a half with edits and finishing out your obligation for your series. You really need a break.

MARCEL

I know, Keisha. Just being home has...(Looks around.) inspired me a little.

KEISHA

I understand.

(Shift.)

So, this barbecue. How is it gonna go? Any of your old friends are gonna try and show out for the birthday boy?

MARCEL

No, it's gonna be chill. You know, folks reliving the glory days.

(Even at a distance, they are doing the same thing down to the T.)

KEISHA

Well, I can't wait to meet your friend Brandon, that's for sure.

(...)

How are you, really?

You know what Dr. Barnett said--

MARCEL

I know--

KEISHA

You've been doing really good, Marcel.

MARCEL

I know, babe. I know.

KEISHA

And dealing with family, it can be--

MARCEL

Oh, you don't have to tell me twice about that. I promise, I'm good.

KEISHA

And--

MARCEL

Babe.

KEISHA

(...)

I'm sorry, I'm doing it again, aren't I?

I don't mean to nag you.

MARCEL

You're not *nagging* me. I appreciate you worrying about me.

KEISHA

(...)

I love you.

MARCEL

I love you, too.

(...)

But enough about me. I wanna make sure you're good. How's your mom?

KEISHA

She is doing well. I'm going to leave here in a few hours. And I swear she is working my nerves. Soon as I sit down to rest or just relax, she's calling me. (Stops to lean forward.) Wanting to go here and there. I'm trying to be calm. But she's getting on my damn nerves.

MARCEL

I'm sure it's not that bad.

KEISHA

It's my mother we're talking about. You know, if they gave out awards for parenting your parents, I'd be a Nobel Peace Prize winner because chiiile. That's one thing they don't teach you when you graduate high school and have to navigate your twenties and now thirties, parenting your damn parents.

(Beat. They both laugh. Still mirroring the same movements of each other.)

MARCEL

Yeah, you're right. She's just glad to see you.

KEISHA

Yeah, every since dad died, I know it's been hard on her.

MARCEL

How is she doing with that?

KEISHA

She's...fine. As much as a fresh widow would be. I'm going to take her to her favorite nail shop. It'll be good for her. And to get out of this house.

(Marcel is fixated on the computer.)

MARCEL

Right.

And are you doing okay?

KEISHA

I'm fine. Everything is fine. Grief is a funny thing. It sneaks up on you when you least expect it. But it sometimes don't make it no better because mama tried to strike up an argument, and I almost fell into that trap. Marcel, that woman triggers me--

(She stops herself. The air between them changes.)

MARCEL

Hey. Check your phone.

KEISHA

What?

MARCEL

Check your phone.

KEISHA

(Looks at her phone.)

You made me another playlist?

MARCEL

I did.

KEISHA

Nobody can make a playlist like you.

(She goes to her laptop. Presses play. Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" plays.)

KEISHA

You know..You know I loooooove me some Sam Cooke.

MARCEL

You and your dad used to dance to his songs, right?

KEISHA

(Emotional.)

We did. Thank you, Marcel. You made my morning.

MARCEL

Hey, what do you tell me all the time?

KEISHA

"Through it all".

I know.

(...)

I am so ready to come to you.

(The song cuts out. Hears a voice in the other room.)

Babe, my mom is up. But I'll see you this weekend.

MARCEL

Okay. I love you.

(Keisha hangs up, leaving Marcel alone with his thoughts. He cracks open his computer. Taps the keyboard. Lights up on the Black Man behind the podcast mic. Continuing from previous convo.)

BLACK MAN

Niggas cannot be bisexual. You out yo goddamn mind!

BLACK MAN #2

Why can't they be?

BLACK MAN

Because you either like dick or pussy. No in between. A nigga claiming that he's bisexual, then he's just being confused like hell.

BLACK WOMAN

I mean...

BLACK MAN

Look, she agrees with me. For once.

BLACK MAN #2

I don't even know how we got on dude's sexuality in the first place. But this convo is giving ignorant because I just think that we as a people should be past this. Because this shit is exhausting. Black men have to carry themselves in a certain manner just to avoid their sexuality being questioned.

BLACK MAN

I can agree witchu on that one. We do.

BLACK MAN #2

We can't flick our wrist a certain way, or we have to walk in a certain manner. We as Black men can't just fucking be. The patriarchy be fawkin' us up.

BLACK WOMAN

Well, y'all create it, so that's your problem.

BLACK MAN #2

We didn't create anything.

BLACK WOMAN

Okay, you didn't create it, but y'all definitely perpetuate it.

BLACK MAN

And y'all don't?

BLACK WOMAN

No, we don't.

BLACK MAN

Hold up, hold up, you don't think Black women be perpetuatn' patriarchy?

(Hella silence. And it's telling, too.)

(They all laugh...)

BLACK MAN

Oop. She got hella quiet!

BLACK MAN #2

Well, we all know the answer to that one.

BLACK WOMAN

How?

(Petty as all get out, Black Man #2 raises his hand. A video from *Love is Blind Season 1*. *Carlton and Diamond* edition.)

(Black Man #2 snaps. A picture of Michael B. Jordan and Ryan Coogler and Michael is holding his head.)

(Hella tweets pop up. “These niggas gay.” “Oooh, are they fucking”. “If my man held another man like that, I’d dump his ass so quick.”)

(A still from P-Valley of Lil’ Murda and Uncle Clifford kissing. Comments pop up. Homophobic ass comments.)

(But a picture of a Zendaya with two white boys from *Challengers*. Hella tweets in support.)

BLACK WOMAN

But--

BLACK MAN #2

Oh, I ain’t done.

(Like magic, a Tik Tok is cued up.)

BLACK WOMAN TIK TOKER

The real reason is the moment I find out you’ve been with another man, I immediately get turned off.

BLACK MAN

Ahhhhhhh shit! He got you on that one!

BLACK MAN #2

Ask any Black woman if she’ll date a brotha that’s been with men. That’s how y’all uphold the patriarchy. Obviously, we perpetuate a lot of the misogyny that we see. We uphold it. Based on the conversations we had before, I think that’s true. “Toxic Masculinity” if you will.

BLACK MAN

But I feel like when the conversations surrounding “Toxic Masculinity” it’s always seen when it comes to Black men. So, white men can’t be toxic? Asian men...Latinos?

BLACK MAN #2

Most definitely they all can. I think in the LatinX community is called machismo. I mean, I can’t really speak on it, though.

BLACK MAN

So, it's interesting that we're the mental picture of "toxic masculinity." I also feel like the conversations regarding patriarchy and all of this we've been discussing, many times, women benefit from it. And with us, right, a lot of the way we act and operate in the space it's because from a very young age, we, as Black boys going into Black men, have been gaslit.

BLACK MAN #2

Yeah, especially growing up in a single mother household or--

BLACK WOMAN

Okay. That's a whole other subject.

BLACK MAN #2

Alright. Lemme ask you this: Would you date a dude who's been with another dude?

(A moment. She thinks. It's one of those Red Table Talk type of thinking.)

BLACK WOMAN

Okay, personally, *I* would NOT date a dude that's been with another man. That's just *my* opinion.

BLACK MAN

Why not?

BLACK WOMAN

Because...

BLACK MAN #2

Because, why?

BLACK WOMAN

Because nigga, I just don't wanna be with a man that's been with a man. I'm sorry, I just don't. It's no hate for the LGBTQIA community. No hate. But I personally wouldn't want to date a man that's been with a dude. I ain't trying to hear about my man giving sloppy toppy to his nigga. (Oprah meme type shrug.) Sorry.

BLACK MAN

Okay, that's respect. I gotchu.

BLACK MAN #2

I don't. What, you think he's gonna cheat on you with a nigga?

BLACK WOMAN

Possibly, yeah?

BLACK MAN

(Looks at the audience as if they are the camera.)

Uh oh.

(He presses a button. That Janet Jackson “Oh, so you doing the bending” scene from Tyler Perry’s *For Colored Girls* plays.)

BLACK MAN #2

You see, that’s where I get stuck when a lot of Black women. Y’all think just because a man’s been with another man, or comes out to you as a bisexual BLACK man, then he would cheat on you with a dude.

BLACK WOMAN

That’s right. I mean, if my boyfriend is bi, and he cheats on me with another man, then what’s the point? I, as a woman, can not compete with another man.

BLACK MAN #2

But you can compete with a woman?

BLACK WOMAN

If my nigga cheats on me with a bitch, I mean, I can kinda compete with that and I can somewhat understand it. And plus, I am not trynna get no HIV or aids.

(A deep, heavy, Negro spiritual sigh. Black Man # 2 collects himself. Then he unleashes his righteous rage.)

BLACK MAN #2

First point: You can’t compete because he’s obviously found something better in that other person. No matter the gender. Two: What you just said has been stigmatized against Black men since forever. Black women always wanna say they don’t wanna date a man who’s been with another man because they’re afraid they’ll get an STD, HIV, or whatever- but be jumping on the same dirty ass heterosexual community dick. All in the name of being straight. Make it make sense.

(Mic drop moment.)

BLACK WOMAN

Well, I said my peace on it, so...I ain’t dating a nigga that’s fucked another nigga.

BLACK MAN #2

And that’s why we are the way we are.

(Lights shift back. Clippers spark to life. Brandon works that layin’ on of hands on Marcel’s crown.)

BRANDON

I'm tellin' you, that nigga got a wholllleeee gut!
His mama said all he do is eat and sit around on the couch, bein' lazy.
You ain't finna catch me like that.

MARCEL

I can't believe it. That's crazy.
We all believed that he was gonna go the NFL.
Play in the Super Bowl.

(Brandon bends, carefully working on Marcel's chin. There is a ritual with this. It's done with style. With care. With tenderness.)

BRANDON

Shit, we thought that, too.
Had all the coaches praising him.
Having your knee blow out the first year after high school...
Sssss.

MARCEL

Yeah...

BRANDON

Nah. I ain't trynna be like that.
I gained some weight. But damn.
(More laughter. More cutting.)

MARCEL

Man, I can't believe some of the people back in town. How they on their third kid? You know, I saw that Aaron Tillman is on his fourth one.

BRANDON

Damn. I know. Saw that muhfucka in the grocery 'sto. Him and his baby mama was arguin' and cussin' each other out in the Produce aisle.

MARCEL

It's just crazy to think about it all.

BRANDON

Facts. Folks stay havin' babies.

MARCEL

I'm surprised you don't have any.

BRANDON

What's that supposed to mean?

MARCEL

I'm just saying, you stayed *hunching* on girls back in the day.

BRANDON

Ah, man. I ain't out here like that no more.

MARCEL

(...)

So, you really haven't found anybody?

BRANDON

Nobody worth my time or effort. It takes a whole lot of energy to be that right person for somebody. And the one's I've been fuckin' on or just casually dating here and there just wasn't worth it.

MARCEL

But it gotta be lonely, right?

BRANDON

Being alone don't mean you lonely.
Besides, I embrace the lonely.
Folks ain't all in your space or business.
I can come and go as I please with out letting anybody know.
And...

MARCEL

And what?

BRANDON

You ain't gotta worry about nobody hurting you.

MARCEL

(...)

(Brandon cradles Marcel's head, applying that layin on of hands even more. Something about this is very intimate. It's done with tenderness.)

MARCEL

Well, who was the last girl you dated?

BRANDON

Tell you the truth, the last girl I had, I fucked it up.

MARCEL

Really?

BRANDON

Well, lets just say it was on both ends.

MARCEL

What was her name?

BRANDON

You gon' laugh.

MARCEL

Why the hell am I gonna laugh?

BRANDON

Man, she's...

MARCEL

She's what?

BRANDON

A'ight. Nigga, it was Allison.

MARCEL

Allison. Wait? Allison Stone from--

BRANDON

Yup. That's her. Exactly her.

MARCEL

A white girl?

BRANDON

Ayye...

MARCEL

Wow...Okay, how the hell did that happen?

BRANDON

We ran into some problems. A lot of problems.

MARCEL

What kind of problems?

(Brandon starts to brush off the extra hair.)

BRANDON

Some cultural shit.

MARCEL

Hmph. That'll do it.

BRANDON

Yeah, man. She put me in a real bad spot. Her family didn't approve of her dating choice, and we tried to brush past it. But it kept coming up. Then I realized, man, this ain't gon' work because I'm thinking about the future. Especially if we were to have kids. As a Black man, I wouldn't want to put innocent little lives through that. It's irresponsible. These kids nowadays have it hard enough. Don't get me wrong, she was attentive and knew what I needed. Definitely on that "let's talk it out" shit. But 'alla that, she just didn't get it.

MARCEL

You sure that's all?

(A moment between them. Brandon brushes off the clippers.)

BRANDON

Ayye, would I lie to ya?
I'm telling you, that was all.
(...)
Aight. Take a look.

(Marcel studies himself in the mirror. He's come back to life with this new haircut. For the mirror, Marcel should look to the audience. A lingering of a gaze.)

MARCEL

This is doooooope!
It looks so good.
(A beat. Brandon chuckles to himself.)
What I say funny?

BRANDON

Nothin'.

MARCEL

No, what is it?

BRANDON

Nothin', man.
(...)
You just real funny.

MARCEL

Okay...

BRANDON

I have something to show you. Hold on.

(Brandon disappears offstage for a moment, leaving Marcel alone. Marcel continues to look at the mirror. Brandon re-appears. He places a cup in Marcel's hand.)

MARCEL

What is this?

BRANDON

Fool...just open it.
(Laughs.)
Askin' so many questions.

(Marcel proceeds to tear the lid off. Pulls out a styrofoam cup with frozen blue ice.)

MARCEL

No way!

BRANDON

Yup. Yup.

MARCEL

Be-Bops!
Man, I haven't had this in so long.
We used to get these at the candy lady house.

BRANDON

I know. I was like lemme take this dude *all* the way back.

(Brandon pulls out *one* spoon.)

MARCEL

Oh, you ain't playin', I see.

(He starts to dig into the frozen-flavored Be-Bop.)

BRANDON

It's the small things, right?
I figured this would inspire you.
Maybe write it as a chapter or somethin'.

(Suddenly, BRANDON leans in and kisses MARCEL on the lips. A kiss...A spark...it's lit. And it is about to explode until...

(To be Continued...)

FAUX INTERMISSION NOTE:

(We interrupt this program to let you know that audiences will stand up as the lights go down and come up for the intermission. Stretch. Walk out to go relieve themselves in the bathroom. Grab those quiet snacks. Talk. Catch up with friends. Yes. All of that. However, in the last five minutes of said intermission, our podcasters should come back on stage and stare directly at the audience. Acknowledge them. Break that damn fourth wall.)

(Of course, be mindful of AEA rules. Cause actors gon' need a break after this shit.)

(The question of "What is Masculinity?" is asked to the actual audience from Black Man #2 because they are the viewers. Same as YouTube or if we are on Live on TikTok or Instagram.)

(Answers will be thrown out, and our podcasters will cycle through all of this through improvisation to spark an important dialogue on masculinity, submission, relationships, the art of giving 'grace' and the chasm between men and women.)

(Let's be for real. This conversation is in-house. It is cultural. Others may chime in. But the conversation is/should be between Black men, Black women AND Queer Black folks.)

(Whiteness should not be centered here. Sorry. Not Sorry. Because a lot of this shit is passed down through trauma in result of white supremacy since 1619. But we know how the American Theaters are, so if the audiences are predominately white, ask the question of "How can we show grace in relationships" instead.

(As the answers whine down and audiences are back comfortable in their seats, our Podcasters will usher them back into our where we...)

ACT II**SCENE ONE**

(...see the two Black men already in mid-conversation. No cameras. No comments. Nothing. Just them. In communion.)

BLACK MAN #2

I think we gotta learn how to vocalize it.

BLACK MAN

But don't we?

BLACK MAN

I gotta say we really don't. Look, when she asked me how can Black women show Black men grace, I couldn't really answer, but may be you can. I think another interesting point to see it from is that men and women are not equal in position but in value. And the thing I think we're not getting to the root of all these issues. Females--

BLACK MAN #2

Women.

BLACK MAN

What?

BLACK MAN #2

Women. I think we as Black men gotta stop saying, "females". Because that shit comes with a different connotation. It's disrespectful and dismissive.

BLACK MAN

Aight. My bad. *Women*. Especially our sistas don't realize or acknowledge the part they played in us becoming all of this. What we are. How we operate. That's it.

BLACK MAN #2

Right. On the topic of vulnerability and operating outside the box, in my personal life, I've dated women and men, right? So that can be considered bi-sexual or whatever. Growing up and having these feelings towards men and women, I had difficulty dating, especially with Black women. And it'd be this energy, at least for me where I'm always pushed to the friend zone or the comfort friend when it comes to my women friends. I wasn't confident enough to put myself out there or to allow myself to feel one-hundred percent comfortable around girls. Know what I'm sayin'?

BLACK MAN

Right. Right.

BLACK MAN #2

Because when we're on our first date, we have the conversation surrounding who we date or who we've been serious with. But when I specify that one person is a man, there's this abrupt change of atmosphere with the woman. No cap. It's like I am one of the most disgusting things in the world. Because I've had sexual relationships with women and men.

(A soft moment between the two.)

BLACK MAN

Can I ask?

BLACK MAN #2

Ask what?

BLACK MAN

I mean, it's a real personal question, so--

BLACK MAN #2

Nigga, just ask.

BLACK MAN

Are you on the top or bottom?

BLACK MAN #2

Why does that matter?

BLACK MAN

Because not to play devil's advocate because I'm understanding where you're coming from. I...hmmm. When it comes to Black women and the whole dating, I think if a dude that has had previous sexual relationships with men probably feels like if you're on the receiving end, they probably think that your masculinity has been emasculated.

BLACK MAN #2

Which is ignorant to think that.

BLACK MAN

It is. But from her perspective, if she's with a dude, and you know, y'all kickin' it, gettin' serious...she finds out that you let a dude bend you over, in her eyes, that's not masculine. And I guess the question is, do you even tell her?

BLACK MAN #2

That I've been with dudes?

BLACK MAN

Yeah, like are women even entitled to that information.

BLACK MAN #2

I guess I have to operate in the spirit of feeling obligated to tell her. Honestly, I go into the date, knowing that it won't happen because that part of me is always in the back of my mind and it may manifest in a way where I may feel awkward when I'm touched by a woman, or when she's showing interest.

BLACK MAN

Lemme ask you this, do you wanna marry a man or a woman?

BLACK MAN #2

If you had asked me in my twenties, I would've said woman one hundred percent. Now, I'm at a point where I don't know. I simply don't know. Because everybody wants to be loved. Everybody needs to be loved. And working through my trauma, I've been kinda battling with the idea that the "happily ever after," the wife with the three kids, a dog, and the white picket fence, is not for me. Or I don't deserve it.

BLACK MAN

Wow. Man...

BLACK MAN #2

Yeah, it's some shit that I'm working through. Because for me, I'm still learning different facets of myself. I'm learning not to harbor that shame, because there is NO shame in wanting to feel loved. There is no shame in not wanting to be alone.

BLACK MAN

You sound like you're speaking from experience.

BLACK MAN #2

Because I am. I am walking through this world lonely. You know, there was this one time I saw this teen couple, man, and um, they were posted up at this city fair. Riding rides, playing the carnival games, and eating funnel cake. And I thought to myself, "I am straight-up jealous of these two." (Laughs.) But then I got sad. In the middle of this damn carnival. A place for joy, and I'm here, jaded. Because it was like the universe was making it abundantly clear that finding love, finding a partner, whoever that may be, was not in the cards for me. And I may have to deal with that. (Surprised at the raw realization lil' bit.) Wow. I never admitted that out loud before. I'm sorry, I don't know where that came from.

BLACK MAN

Man, don't apologize. That's ya truth.

BLACK MAN #2

Yeah. My truth.

BLACK MAN

I appreciate you for sharing that with me, man. Because that's something we not talking about. And you being vulnerable in sharing that you're grappling with loneliness...that's-- man, thank you for sharing. Seriously.

(A moment between the Black men. They sigh. They breathe. They silently commune with one another.)

(Suddenly, as the lights shift, they put their masks back on, becoming the Divine Spirits.)

(Lights shift. Marcel and Brandon are back in the scene moments after the kiss.)

MARCEL

You kissed me--

BRANDON

I know.

MARCEL

You fuckin' kissed me--

BRANDON

I know!

MARCEL

Wait, what is happening, right now?

(He backs away, tumbling over one of the coffee tables.)

BRANDON

Marcel, listen.

MARCEL

No! Just stay back for a second. Just for a second.

(Marcel paces. Brandon waits. Nervous as fuuuuck. After a split second, Marcel looks at his phone. A text dings. Awkward moment. Marcel freezes like a block of ice.)

MARCEL

Umm, shit!

BRANDON

What?

MARCEL

Shit. Shit!

BRANDON

Nigga, what?!

MARCEL

Keisha's here.

BRANDON

(...)

MARCEL

(...)

(Keisha enters, towing a suitcase.)

KEISHA

I finally made it. Whew. I know I said two hours, but it was a wreck right at the state line, so much traffic backed up?

(Marcel meets her by the door. He hugs her like the world is ending.)

MARCEL

Babe...Ummm--

KEISHA

And I would've been here earlier, but you know how Mama is.

(Clocks an awkward Brandon:)

Oh, hi, I'm Keisha.

MARCEL

Oh, sorry. Keisha, this is my best friend from middle school, Brandon. Brandon, this is Keisha.

BRANDON

Hey, it's real good to meet ya, Keisha.

I only heard good things about you.

(Keisha goes in for a tight hug.)

KEISHA

Sorry, I'm a hugger. It's soooooooo good to meet you. (Fixes herself.) I'm sorry, I am all over the place right now.

BRANDON

No, no, you're good. Marcel, you ain't say how beautiful she is, though.

KEISHA

Oh, you're too sweet. I look a hot mess.

BRANDON

No, no, not at all.

(...)

Ummm, I'mma a let y'all get settled in.

But Keisha, it's really nice to meet you.

And Marcel see you tomorrow at the barbecue?

KEISHA

Yeah, it was nice to meet you, too. And happy early birthday!

(Brandon goes off. Keisha looks around the room, taking stock of everything.)

KEISHA

Okay, this is absolutely gorgeous. I picked right. I knew it. Five staaars.

MARCEL

You did, babe. You did.

KEISHA

I'm just all over the place.

MARCEL

Babe, don't worry. Let me get those bags for you.

(He toggles her luggage into the backroom. It's heavy, but he manages.)

KEISHA

Awww, baby, thank you. Thank you so much for that.

(Goes for the kitchen, looking.)

How are you today?

MARCEL

I'm good. I'm good.

(Keisha clocks his demeanor. Clearly, he's not.)

KEISHA

Are you sure?

(Marcel grabs his notebook.)

MARCEL

Yeah, babe. I just got some good words flowing, and you know, it's been...

KEISHA

Hey, make sure you don't--

MARCEL

Babe, I'm good. I promise.

KEISHA

Okay. Well, I am so glad to see you.

(Kisses him.)

I couldn't get out of my mama's house fast enough.

MARCEL

Oh, you had *that* talk again?

KEISHA

Yes. She doesn't get it. But we're doing us, right?

No rushing into things. I get it, she getting older.

(...)

She wants grand-babies.

MARCEL

Right. On our own time.

KEISHA

(...)

Right.

(Marcel sits by her. Grabs her hand. She stops. He looks into her eyes with a deep yearning. He kisses her. Looooonng and passionately.)

KEISHA

(Swooned like hell.)

What was that for?

MARCEL

I'm just really glad you're here. I've missed you.

KEISHA

That's so sweet. I missed you too.

(They kiss again.)

MARCEL

I got some writing done.

KEISHA

You're supposed to be resting--

MARCEL

I know.

KEISHA

You're not on deadlines any more.

MARCEL

Being home has just been inspiring me. It's only a little thing. Here and there.

KEISHA

(...)

MARCEL

I think I wanna write about my childhood in depth. You know the good, the bad, and hell, the ugly, too.

KEISHA

(...)

MARCEL

Being home, really opened some things for me.

KEISHA

How so?

MARCEL

Just thinking about what would've happened if I stayed. It just got me thinking. And then, writing.

(Keisha stares at him. Deep. Long.)

KEISHA

Are you okay?

MARCEL

Yeah, I'm fine.

KEISHA

(...)

Are you sure--

MARCEL

Keisha...

KEISHA

I'm just asking.

MARCEL

I'm good. Why?

KEISHA

You just seem antsy.

MARCEL

(...)

KEISHA

(...)

Whew. Let me get in this shower.

(She starts to go. But Marcel swings her around. Feeling all up on her.)

MARCEL

Hm. I love me some you.

KEISHA

You won't love me if you're gonna smell all this road funk on me.

MARCEL

Hmmmmmmmm.

(Marcel starts to take off his shirt. Kissing her.)

KEISHA

Marcel, nooooo. I've been driving all morning running Mama around and then hopping on the interstate.

MARCEL

They got a huge bathtub.

(More kissing. More Grabbing. Pulling each other into one another. Keisha is swooned. And she pulls him into the back room.)

(Black Woman appear. She stares at a propped up phone behind a ring light. She goes to the radio and play "Destiny Child's "Through With Love." There is an abrupt change to her. A righteous rage. A heavy sadness. A broken need.)

BLACK WOMAN

Lemme sing you a Black girl's song real quick. I really don't think the burden of "giving men grace" should be placed on the Black woman's shoulders. The way this world is set up, we can't carry anymore. We already have to take the years of abuse, being placed on the side, pay inequity, and the straight-up bull shit the world has to offer. And I'm sorry, the silly thought of "giving grace" is not on my mind right now. (Beyonce goes into the second verse, giving Black Woman the strength to carry one.) Men want us to show them grace but have the nerve to take that grace and give it to someone else who, in a quick turn, won't return it to them. You penalize us if we don't want to date "down" because we should understand grace and see the potential in our men. Okay, look.

At the beginning of the relationship, we want y'all to prove us wrong so bad. We stay through with y'all cheating on us. We stay through y'all wanting to build yourselves up financially, but when you do, you go spend ya wealth on a white woman who even dare look your way if you didn't. But I'mma be real for y'all. Men don't want grace. You want leeway. I'mma say it again: men don't want grace; they want leeway. Thanks for coming to my Ted Talk. Oh, and sing that shit, Michelle.
(Black Woman cranks up the volume and Michelle sangin' ass slides into that bridge.)

SCENE TWO

(At rise: Sunday morning. Keisha is in the kitchen area, looking through the fridge. In one of the back rooms, we hear the shower running.)

KEISHA

Oh, he needs to go grocery shopping. Lord...

(Brandon enters through the front door.)

KEISHA

Hey, babe-- (Sees Brandon standing by the front door.) Oh, hey? Happy birthday!!!

(Yes, she goes in for that hug.)

BRANDON

Oh, wow. Thank you. So sorry for just barging in like this.

KEISHA

Boy, it's fine. Come on in. I was going to go the grocery store. This man has been in this Airbnb with no food?

BRANDON

No, we mostly go out.

KEISHA

Well, I'm here to the rescue.

BRANDON

(...)

KEISHA

I also want to say, thank you.

BRANDON

(...)

Thank me? For what?

KEISHA

For being there for him. I'm sure you know, that Marcel puts a lot of pressure on himself.

BRANDON

With his work? Yeah, I know.

KEISHA

Just things in general. So much so that he forgets to take care of the one person that should matter the most: Marcel.

BRANDON

You're preaching to the choir on that one. That's why I've been having him in the gym, boxing it out, and trying to clear his mind.

KEISHA

That's been helping. I can see that.

BRANDON

(...)

KEISHA

Also, I think just reuniting with you as well. Look, I don't want to overstep, but him coming back home and being here with you has been instrumental in a lot of his personal healing.

BRANDON

Well, that's what friends are for, right?

KEISHA

Definitely. Whew. Let me get to this store. I know he's been writing, and I want to get some of his favorite snacks when he writes. I know he's been working, hasn't he?

BRANDON

(Awkward laugh.)

Oh, you already know.

KEISHA

I knew it. He loves that real specific brand of hummus and those Pita chips. Hope they have it...

BRANDON

Y'all really love each other, huh?

(That stops Keisha. A moment between the two.)

BRANDON

Sorry, that came out of nowhere. It's just after all these years, I never seen Marcel--sorry, I'm talking to much--

KEISHA

No, no. Um. Hm. I don't know why I'm telling you this, but if you're seeing someone, allow her to really see you. You know, to see you. Even if it's the dark and ugly parts of it, they still see you. You hear on all these reality shows and social media videos about how women want a good man to be vulnerable and soft and tender or want them to only provide this or that. But what's really being unsaid is all a woman wants is to be kept. They don't like to say the real, but that's what it is. They want to feel safe, you know? And in that safety, I think many women feel like their purpose in a man won't be taken for granted. No lying. No hiding all the dark corners of themselves in fear one would stop loving them. Because Marcel knows me in and out, I'm exposed, just like my mother with my father. She opened herself for him to fill her with all the love, protection, and goodness he had to offer, even when the world tried to take it away from him.

(...)

So, to answer your question, yes. We love each other. Because Marcel and I crack each other open. I fill him. He fills me. I see him. And he sees me.

BRANDON

(Guiltily.)

(...)

Well, with what you just said, I believe you'll make a good wife one day, Keisha.

(Keisha beams, flicking away any of the self-doubt. The possibility of it all got her gushing like a little girl.)

KEISHA

Thank you again, Brandon. Tell him I'll be right back? I'm gonna go grab something for the fridge and stuff for the party.

BRANDON

For sure.

(Keisha grabs her things and exit out the front door. Marcel comes out in a bathrobe.)

MARCEL

Have you seen my--?

BRANDON

Hey.

MARCEL

What are you--? Brandon, what are you doing here?

BRANDON

She told me to tell you that she's going to the grocery store.

(Marcel stands there. Awkward as heyyyyeeel.)

MARCEL

(...)

BRANDON

I ain't tell her nothin'.

MARCEL

(...)

BRANDON

I promise.

(Marcel goes to back room. He comes back out with basketball shorts and a T-shirt on.)

BRANDON

You remember you asked me if I regret anything?

MARCEL

Brandon, don't. Just stop, okay.

BRANDON

Well, I lied, Marcel.

MARCEL

(...)

BRANDON

This whole weekend, man. It just got me thinking. It got me scared on a lot of things. Everybody we know either got kids or moved or just passin' through life.

MARCEL

(Still keeping his distance.)

Yeah...That's something to be feared for sure.

BRANDON

Hell yeah. Because I'm one of them.

MARCEL

One of who?

BRANDON

The people that's *passing* through life.

MARCEL

(...)

BRANDON

You know, I sorta had this daydream. And in that day dream, I was standing right here. But there was a waterfall in the back of me. Pretty blues falling off the edge of the water. It was moving like a montage in a movie. Peaceful. And I saw my younger self. Standin' there right in front of me. Just how I was when we graduated. Smilin'. Happy. Content. Big dreams inside that big ole head of mine. Dreams of what could of been.

(Through all of this, Brandon has moved close to Marcel. He leans down. Touches him tenderly, softly. Their lips are inches away from each other. Brandon leans in. Marcel is stuck.)

They lean closer...)

(And closer...)

(And fucking closer...!)

MARCEL

What is happening? Why are we doing this?

BRANDON

We're just picking up where we left off. It's okay. Look, you coming home for my birthday, I realize something. Something that I've been carrying with me since the day you left. I realized that I couldn't stop thinking about us. What could've been. Where we can pick up where we left off.

(Appearing like rolling clouds in the sky, The Divine Spirit of Duality and Divine Spirit of Masculinity are young Marcel and young Brandon. There is touching on the arm. The chin. The head. The buzzing sound of clippers underscores this moment.)

BRANDON

You're that montage in a movie, Marcel that just won't end. You're like that song, Marcel. You're like the love song that is stuck on repeat and repeat and repeat and when you left, that song stopped. And I wished to God every day to hear that song on loop one more time. Because the song was familiar. It was needed. Marcel, I love you. I am in love with you. I am in love with you. I am in love.....with you.

(Heavy breathing. The Divine Spirits KISS!)

(However, in real life, Marcel, with a puzzled face washing over his face, pulls away away

from Brandon.)

MARCEL

Brandon, I don't love you. I don't love you.

(Brandon grabs Marcel's hand. Marcel snatches away, but Brandon grabs him again. Stares deep in his eyes...)

(Black out.)

SCENE THREE

(Marcel enters and find Keisha sitting on the couch, looking at her tablet.)

KEISHA

I have to tell you, you were sooo cute back in high school.

MARCEL

(...)

KEISHA

You were. Those girls missed out.

MARCEL

(...)

KEISHA

Marcel? What's wrong?

(Marcel goes over to a speaker. Turns it on. Tamia's "Still" blesses their ears.)

MARCEL

Will you please dance with me?

KEISHA

What is this?

MARCEL

Please. Just dance with me.

(He holds out his hand. She grabs it, and they begin to sway to Tamia's love song. He pulls her closer. And he hugs her something deep.)

KEISHA

Hmm. This is nice.

MARCEL

It is.

KEISHA

Every time you pull me into your arms, Marcel. I just feel so safe. Dancing with you feels like the first time we met. You know that?

MARCEL

At Whole Foods. I was picking up grocery deliveries, lost as hell. And you helped me find the...

KEISHA/MARCEL

...Vegan ranch.

MARCEL

You laughed. And I laughed. I knew then I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you.

KEISHA

Marcel...

(He twirls her around to find him holding out the black ring box. Keisha can't say a word.)

MARCEL

Keisha Renee Jackson. You've been the woman I've always dreamt about. You are so good to me; I don't always appreciate it. But I do. When you ask me if I'm doing okay", you don't know how much that gives me strength to keep going. I love that you wait for me to get home so we can watch our favorite TV show, even though I fall asleep before the end of the episode. But you never watch it without me. I love that we order our favorite cheesecakes on DoorDash every Saturday night and then feel guilty. I promise to start over at the gym on Monday. Keisha Renee Jackson, I love how you loved me when I wasn't the most confident man, but you spoke power into me. Keisha, you make me feel safe. You make me feel whole, and I want the white picket fence with you. I want the kids. I want it all. With you. So, Keisha Renee Jackson Bennett. Or however you want, it doesn't matter. Will you...marry me?

(A moment.)

KEISHA

Through it all, Marcel Bennett.

(Marcel excitedly puts the ring on her finger and they hug and kiss. Black out.)

SCENE FIVE

(Sunday afternoon. Marcel is sitting nervously on the couch. His knee bounces up and down, waiting. Finally, the door bell rings. Marcel quickly goes to the door to open it.

There, stands Brandon.)

MARCEL

I'm glad you came. Come on in.

BRANDON

Yeah, you called me over, remember?

MARCEL

Right. Ummm. I'm sorry we skipped the barbecue.

BRANDON

Look, if we can just--

MARCEL

Brandon, I finally asked Keisha to marry me.

(...)

BRANDON

Okay--

MARCEL

We're getting married soon. I'm not all for the semantics or traditions or the thousands of dollars spent. I want to marry her now.

BRANDON

And you trynna convince me of somethin'?

MARCEL

Keisha, Keisha said yes.

BRANDON

Okay. You want a congratulations?
You want a "I'm happy for you?"

MARCEL

What is your problem?

BRANDON

I ain't got a problem!

MARCEL

No, obviously something is on your mind. What is it?

BRANDON

You don't fuckin' get it. That's what. You asked Keisha to marry you... (Smacks his lips.)
There you go actin' out of fuckin' fear.

MARCEL

All right, stop pretending like you know me. Because you don't!

BRANDON

I...don't know you? You really gon' sit there, and look me in my face, and say, "I don't know you?" Ohhhhh. You must've forgot. That day after school?

(...)

(Marcel is stunned.)

BRANDON

I guess you really came home for the truth, huh?

MARCEL

Yeah, I did. It's in the soil. It's in everything.

BRANDON

Will you turn off the writer brain! This ain't no Jane Austen novel, nigga!

MARCEL

(...)

Look, back then, I didn't know what to do. Okay. I didn't know how to react.
But I gotta be honest, it fucked me up for a very long time.

BRANDON

But you kissed me back, too.

MARCEL

Yeah, out of--

BRANDON

Out of what?

(...)

You act like you're the only one affected by this.
I ain't some fuckin' villain in your story.

MARCEL

What are you talking about?

BRANDON

Your last book. Marcel, I read between the lines. You made me out to be the fuckin' villain. The best friend betraying the main character? Really? Damn, Marcel, you could've done a better job at hidin' that shit.

MARCEL

It's fiction.

BRANDON

No, it's real. (He grabs his hand tenderly.) *This* is real. C'mon, bruh, you knew what you was doin'.

MARCEL

Just like you knew what you were doing that day. After school, when we hopped off that bus, and I was in the kitchen, fixing us something to eat, and you came up and you kissed me? And then we...

BRANDON

What? Because my memory ain't so hazy. You kissed me back, too. You took me upstairs in your room, and we...it was just how I was feeling. But I didn't *mess* you up. We explored something spiritual, something that was beyond just two kids losing their virginity. We explored love--

MARCEL

This isn't love! This isn't what I want.

BRANDON

What about me, Marcel?

MARCEL

What about you?!

BRANDON

You left me! We used to be best friends, you and me.
 You were the only person in this entire world that I fuckin' trusted.
 Told you every dark corner about myself.
 Talkin' about I don't know you
 Nigga, please.
 I know you, Marcel.
 I know you like I know the back of my hand. So I know you are dealing with whatever lie you conjured up to make yourself feel better, but you cannot sit there and tell me what we had wasn't real.

MARCEL

Like you said, Brandon. We were kids. Kids who didn't know any better. Experimenting.

BRANDON

Whatever you tell yourself. And it wasn't *always* like that. And I ain't never loved nobody like I *love* you.

MARCEL

And how the hell is that my fault?

BRANDON

Man, why are you really here? With me?
You could've strolled into town, and not even hit me up.
And I would've been like, cool. Whatever. But *you* hit me up!
So, why are you here?!

(...)

BRANDON

You ain't got no fuckin' answer?!

MARCEL

What do you want from me?!

BRANDON

(Defeated.)

(...)

You said you came here to unlearn the things that shaped you, right? But you ain't. You ain't doing shit to unlearn the things that shaped you. That's just an excuse for you to reread the same ole chapter that ain't gon' change. Look at you. I still see that scared little boy that you tryna hide. No matter how many books you write, fancy talks you try to spit, or all that bullshit...you're still that scared little boy who loved another boy. Lemme ask you this: Have you showed Keisha every dark corner of yourself?

MARCEL

What kind of question is that?

BRANDON

A real simple one.

MARCEL

(...)

(The question seeps into Marcel, deep. Marcel brushes past him, and Brandon instinctively grabs Marcel's arm. They both stop... looks at one another.)

(Marcel has an apologetic look in his eyes. There is obviously an attraction here. An attraction that's been forever lost.)

BRANDON

Does she get lost in you. Because I get lost in you. I am lost in you. C'mon. Me and you got music between us. You feel it, and don't lie to me. Because it's something that's unspoken. I ain't a brotha that believe in fate, but you here, with me this past few weeks. Don't sit there and say you haven't felt nothing.

(Brandon leans in once more. Lips inches away from touching.)

MARCEL

(Under his breath.)

No...

BRANDON

Marcel--

MARCEL

We were seventeen!!!

We were seventeen!!!

(Marcel's rage turns into full-on panic attack.)

MARCEL

We were...seventeen...

(Marcel repeats while Brandon stands there. Legs cave. Heart sinking. Fists clenching. Years and years of pent up frustrations spill out on the stage. Things unsaid, and now unsayable admissions.)

(...)

(A silent battle. Both are fighting. Both are...losing. Brandon goes to wrap his arms around Marcel.)

MARCEL

(Jerks away.)

GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM ME!!!

Don't you touch me!

Don't you ever touch me again!

(Marcel storms off.)

(Keisha, at her laptop, is wining down. She's on her Olivia Pope vibes with a glass of wine right next to her. Her phone buzzes.)

KEISHA

(Laughing while looking at her iPad.)

Whew. She ain't never lied.

You two were really friends in high school?
 (Clocks the look on his face.)
 Babe, is everything okay?

MARCEL

(...)
 We're finally getting married, and you are the most important person in my life. I love you so much, and-- I don't want to enter this lightly because I believe marriage is forever, and I don't want to enter it based on lies.

KEISHA

(...)

MARCEL

You love me, right?

KEISHA

Marcel, of course, I love you.
 But what do you mean "based on *lies*?"

MARCEL

(...)
 I need to tell you something, Keisha.

(...)

KEISHA

(Jokingly.)

Marcel Bennett, did you cheat on me?

MARCEL

No, I would never do that.
 No other *woman* could never compare to you.
 It's about Brandon?

KEISHA

Brandon? What about him?
 (...)
 Babe, is everything okay? You're scaring me.

MARCEL

When I was in high school, I went through a lot.
 Especially with my daddy and mama, and everything.

KEISHA

Just tell me, Marcel. What is going on?

MARCEL

Me and Brandon...
 (...)
 We fooled around...

(Whewww. Keisha is too stunned to speak.)

MARCEL

Keisha, please, say something.

(...)

(She places the glass wine on the coffee table.)

KEISHA

It would've been better if you told me you cheated.

MARCEL

But that's the thing, I never cheated on you.
 This happened before we got together...*Years* before.
 (He tries to reach for her but she pulls back.)
 Before--

KEISHA

(Calmly.)

Don't touch me, right now, Marcel. Just wait for a second.

MARCEL

Look, I really don't want to lie to you--

KEISHA

Marcel, you're saying a lot. You're saying a lot to me right now.
 All these years... I mean, Marcel--

MARCEL

I know...

KEISHA

You're literally sitting here telling me that you've...
 (...)
 Did something happen between y'all this weekend?

MARCEL

Keisha, we were kids. Nothing more.

KEISHA

That's not what I asked you, Marcel?! Did something happen this weekend between you and Brandon?! That's what I'm asking.

MARCEL

(...)

KEISHA

Answer, Marcel!

MARCEL

No.

KEISHA

And now I'm supposed to believe you?

(Heads for the room.)

You're unbelievable.

MARCEL

(...)

We kissed.

KEISHA

(...)

MARCEL

I mean, *he* kissed me.

And this is why I'm telling you this now, Keisha. I don't want to lie to you.

KEISHA

(...)

MARCEL

Keisha, I am so sorry.

KEISHA

So what, you're gay, or bisexual now?

MARCEL

No!

(...)

KEISHA

Did you two love each other?

(...)

MARCEL

There are things you just don't understand--

KEISHA

Are you fuck-- Okay. Fine. Help me understand.
Because I'm feeling really stupid right now.
Answer the question, Marcel. Do you love him?

MARCEL

(...)

KEISHA

Go to hell, Marcel.

(Keisha storms theeeee fuck out. Marcel's breath is knocked out of him. Black out.)

SCENE SIX

(Monday morning. Marcel sluggishly comes out of his room, carrying luggage. He checks his phone once more. No messages. Fuck. He continues to place the bags by the door. Taps on his phone.)

MARCEL

Keisha, please call me back. At least, let me know you're safe. Please, babe. I just wanna hear your voice. (Beat.) I'm sorry.

(Brandon comes in. Sees him. Awkward moment.)

BRANDON

I know you're leaving today, I just wanted to come by and talk.

(...)

MARCEL

(Closes his laptop.)

Yeah. Umm, my flight leaves in a couple of hours. I'm gonna head back to LA.

BRANDON

Where's Keisha?

MARCEL

She's...um.

Tell you the truth, I don't know.

BRANDON

(...)

MARCEL
She knows everything.

BRANDON
You told her?

MARCEL
Yeah, I did.
And she didn't take it well.

BRANDON
My bad. I didn't...

MARCEL
You didn't do anything.
You didn't...*I* should've been upfront with her about everything.

BRANDON
You were right.
(...)
We were seventeen, and young, and stupid. And bringing this all to you, expecting you to choose me, I know I messed this up. You know, when I kept asking you why did you come back, I just needed the answer to be spoken to me. The answer that I knew all along. And when you said you didn't love me back, I guess I finally got it.
But I learned something new.

MARCEL
What?

BRANDON
That I deserve love, too.

MARCEL
Of course, you do. You deserve everything.
(...)

(Brandon makes his way towards the door.)

MARCEL
You know when I said I came home to unlearn the things that shaped me?
Well, I did love you, Brandon. I did. I loved you. That's the truth.
And I'm sorry it took me this long to finally admit.

(A small smile of gratitude from Brandon. Keisha comes through the front door.)

MARCEL

Keisha...

KEISHA

I can come back.

BRANDON

No, no. I'll go. I was just sayin' bye before y'all left out.

(To Marcel)

Good luck with that next book, bruh. I'm sure it's gonna be good. I guess I'll see you around.

MARCEL

(Grabs Keisha's hand.)

(...)

Good-bye, Brandon.

(A moment of relief. Brandon nods to Keisha. And he's gone.)

MARCEL

I'm glad you're still here.

(He wraps his arms around her. Hugs her tight. However, she doesn't hug him back.)

KEISHA

Yes, I almost left. I was half way to Georgia, and I--

MARCEL

Can we just talk about this?

KEISHA

I don't even know what's there to talk about.

Listen, I'm not homophobic or anything, but--

MARCEL

Babe. It was a *long*, long time ago.

I was a kid and I made a mistake in not telling you.

(...)

KEISHA

Did you two have sex?

MARCEL

Keisha, no.

KEISHA

Maybe I should be more specific.
Did you two have sex *this weekend*?

MARCEL

We did not have sex.

KEISHA

But you're still in love with him?

MARCEL

I love you.

(...)

Keisha, what happened with Brandon is in the past, Keisha, and there is no future in that.

KEISHA

Have there been others?

MARCEL

No.

KEISHA

And you're...*struggling* with...

MARCEL

I'm not struggling with anything. I'm--

KEISHA

But you kissed him. Right? You kissed him. You laid the foundation, Marcel when you two were hanging out these past couple of weeks. You haven't finished writing the chapter, and you're trying to move on. And that's not how life works. You know what, I'm not even mad at the act of it all. No, I'm not that kinda of person I am. But what I am mad at is you making me look like a damn fool! (Calms.) I'm mad at that fact that you did not include me in the most important parts of yourself. You asked me to marry you, out of what, guilt? I'm sitting here, thinking to myself, is this the road of hurt that we're going to go down? And in the back of my mind, I'm thinking, "What else are you keeping from me?" And there's no possible way you ever love me enough if you don't trust me. What is it about me that don't make you feel safe? I build you. You were SUPPOSED to build me. I cover you in love, and we were supposed to crack open ourselves for each other and reveal every dark part of ourselves, and you still don't feel safe with me? What more can I do? I want to be your safe space, Marcel, and you won't let me. I'm in this space now that I have to carry this insecurity in my relationship. And that's not fair. I didn't do this, Marcel. I shared every dark part of myself with you, and you didn't trust yourself to tell me this. You sit there, and you projected the world's viewpoint onto me, but, that's what hurts the most. I will protect you from the world, baby. I will do that for you. But...how are *we* supposed to move on from this?

MARCEL

Keisha, please.

KEISHA

(...)
All I'm left with is if I'm gonna be enough. For you.

MARCEL

You are more than enough.
(Grabs her hand, kisses it tenderly.)
Babe, I'm sorry. I love you. I love you so much.

KEISHA

(...)

MARCEL

Look, I'm here. I've been right here. I wanna marry you.
I want to build a life with you.
Have a whole bunch of kids, watch them grow, and we grow old together.
I want that white picket fence, house.
I want it all.
And I want it with you.
Please, Keisha.
(Kneels on one knee.)
I want you to be my wife.
I want you to be my parter.
I want to spend the rest of my life with you.
Because I love you and you love me.
Remember: you'd love me through it all.
Well, babe, this is the "through it all".
Please.

KEISHA

(...)
I'm going to be hurting for a while. Marcel, this hurts.
I don't want to hold things over your head, but I'm going to do that.

MARCEL

(...)

KEISHA

I want to marry you, Marcel Bennett, I really do.
But not right now. Not right now.
That's my truth.

(They sit by each other. Stare out aimlessly. They're not sure. We're not sure.)

(Suddenly, the lights shift back into the podcast.)

BLACK WOMAN

I think my final thoughts are that I really do appreciate the different perspectives here. A lot of what was sad was tough, but that's what we do. We give tough love because it helps us understand each other better. I do think that a lot of our problems, the root of it, is that a lot of the shit we perpetuate on *each other* is generational. The shit was brought down from slavery. Also, gotta be honest too, a lot of our problems stems from the patriarchy that's been perpetuated by the church. I know I'mma ruffle my brothers and sisters in the Bible belt. But it must be said. It's from the Bible belt, y'all.

This whole bullshit when it comes to who sleep with who.

The act of 'homosexuality' s not what trips people up.

Nah.

It's the white supremacist shit that's behind it.

Breaking the buck.

And then the whole *DL* thing, that's why it is like it is.

It's a stigma.

A stigma we ourselves perpetuate sometimes.

I mean, we just gotta unlearn that shit.

Together.

(looks to the Black men)

We was on the boat, together. We was in the field, together.

And we gon' get through this bullshit, together.

BLACK MAN #2

What is masculinity? What is *Black* masculinity? Is it anger? Some people say that Black masculinity is influenced by a long history of slavery, racism, and oppression. Such a history has manifested racial attitudes towards Black masculinity in contemporary society. Is it? This question has been plaguing my mind for quite some time. It's a question that I've asked friends, colleagues, loved ones, and I can't seem to really get a straight answer. But for me and my journey, I don't think anybody can predetermine what my masculinity is. That's all. Oh, yeah, just show love to one another. Love and grace.

BLACK MAN

It was good to have you two here to spark a much-needed conversation. I think it's important to be comfortable enough to allow the women and men to converse with each other in love and healing. And allowing each other the space to be who we are. That doesn't mean you can be any kind of way to people, but again, allowing the space to tap into spaces that make you uncomfortable. And that's okay. Healing, especially when it comes to our racial trauma, it's not always comfortable. Shit definitely not gonna happen over night. Or maybe in our lifetime. We all want the same thing from the women's and men's perspectives. And I want to say that it's very powerful when a beautiful Black queen stands in her femininity. It's beautiful when a brotha stands firm in his masculinity and is soft, and tender with one another, and intimacy...intimacy is very important.

And someone who hasn't quite grasped the idea of intimacy, and that's something...that's something I'm gonna force myself to learn.

BLACK MAN #2

Facts. Love you brotha. (To the Black Woman:) And I love you.

BLACK MAN

I love y'all. (To the camera:) In next week's episode, we'll have a special guest who sparked much of the conversation you saw today. New York Times Best Selling author Marcel Bennett will discuss his new powerful memoir, "The Art of Letting Go," a social commentary on Black manhood and healing the inner teenager. He will also be speaking on personal topics you saw firsthand. So, you already know what to do. Like, share, and subscribe where we got a whole lot of shit talkin' to do. Peace.

(The Podcasters all stand up and step into the space of the Airbnb. They are now the Divine Spirits cleaning up. The Divine Spirit of Femininity finds the ring box. Stares at it. The Divine Spirit of Masculinity bends down, drawing three boxes. The Divine Spirit of Duality holds Marcel's notebook.)

(Marcel appears. Then Keisha is on his left. Then Brandon is on his right. They all step into the boxes as The Divine Spirit continues to draw, leaving an opening at the front of their feet.)

(Marcel suddenly steps out of the box as the whispers fill the stage. Then Brandon. They all look back at hesitant Keisha, waiting for her to step out of the box.)

(...)

(...)

(...)

(Sadly, she doesn't move.)

(From there, the swelling music of Jojo's "Small Things" leads us to a black out.)

END OF PLAY