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PERMISSION
TO BE
BLACK

MY JOURNEY WITH
JAY-Z AND JESUS



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CHAPTER 1

THE MASQUERADE

Masquerading like he's got it figured out.

In my audiobook *Confessions of an Ex-Evangelical: Why I Left Christianity and Started Practicing Jesus*, I talk about my transition from Detroit to my time at Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD). After getting all of my stuff into my dorm room, my dad handed me a pair of socks with a pack of condoms inside and left. I was suddenly alone in a dorm room with no idea of what to do next at college in the South, let alone in life. God met me in college at age seventeen and through Brian Buck my life was changed. However, if you want the full context of my Detroit story, be sure to listen to that book because this next story picks up where that one left off.

There I was, spring of 1999, finishing up my intro classes for the semester. I walked into my last class session of Intro to Life Drawing. I was green-eyed with, as Martin Lawrence's Jerome character would say, "breath smelling

like Similac.” This class was supposed to be one hundred percent still objects and spheres. We already knew what our final grades would be, so I guess the professor decided to mix things up a bit. Instead of his usual process of setting up the wood objects, turning off the lights, and placing a spotlight on the subjects, he threw a curveball. I guess business as usual would be too boring—typical at an art college. Everything is art, right? Besides, he needed to prep us for drawing every inch, crack, and crevice of the human form, from twenty-eight- to eighty-year-olds. And boy did he!

I and the other students had our heads down as we casually settled in at our drawing tables, arranged in a circle around the subject to be drawn. We could hear the excitement in our professor’s voice as he announced, “I have a surprise for you all!”

I’m focused on my drawing materials. I take out my pencils and drawing pad and arrange them meticulously on the desk in front of me. As my professor says, “All right, let’s get started,” I finally look up to see our drawing subject. It’s our professor’s girlfriend, taking off her clothes.

On the outside, I have a stone face as I look around the room. On the inside, I’m thinking, *Yoooo! This woman is gorgeous. Her body is amazing! But, uh, is this the norm in this culture?* I look around for social cues, like someone fidgeting or looking for their keys. Seeing no one else outwardly expressing my internal feelings, I swallow my surprise. I

decide to internalize and view this women’s nakedness as sacred, while committing to draw her form for class as she agreed to freely give it away.

At this time I knew nothing about the Bible. And I was a typical college freshman who had no clue what a standard was. This situation impacted my body, mind, and soul, but I did what I thought any other person would probably do in the moment. I swallowed my feelings and emotions. As Lauryn Hill observes in “Adam Lives in Theory” (from the *Unplugged* album), I was “masquerading like he got it figured out.”

So I said nothing and masqueraded as if seeing her body, an exposed gift of sacredness, meant nothing. I acted as if it were not stimulating and used cliché phrases like, “How cool is it that our professor wanted to set us up for the stages in our artistic journey?” All the while, all I could think was, *Y’all we just saw a gorgeous woman nude!*

Let me pause to give you some context. I wasn’t a kid who accidentally found “porno mags” under my dad’s bed or was shown them by my friend Johnny (it’s always a Johnny. Sorry, Johnny!). I saw slides in high school when they wanted to scare us into not having sex, and I had one friend who had a random VHS tape in high school he showed us. We laughed him to shame, and he quickly turned it off. So, until my time at SCAD, my interaction with the naked female form was limited.

That day in art class, I realized that the art world is a different culture. In this culture, the feeling of sacredness

is somehow numbed. No one taught me to have reverence for the sanctity of the human body, but I sensed it on my own. For the next five years, through hundreds of nude drawing classes and experiences in the fashion world, the sacredness was indeed killed. Thank the Lord it did not send me into a spiral of porn addiction (no shame to those fighting to be free from that).

Still, it killed an innocence in me I didn't know I had. To this day I don't know which death had the most impact: losing my innocence and sacred view of the female body or losing my freedom to talk about things I tangibly felt in my body since they were contrary to the cultural and environmental norm. It became habit to internalize what I felt and thought—staying silent for the sake of remaining in the good graces of those who could make or break my professional success.

The human body itself is not sinful. We know this because God declared it good (Genesis 1:31). The problem is our interpretation of that body in different spaces and what God did after the fall in response to the coverings Adam and Eve made for themselves. In the moment God saw that Adam and Eve had covered themselves, he could have demanded they remove their clothes. He could have said they were never intended to wear clothing. However, God chose to remove their version of coverings and give them his version. Why? I believe he knew what we could never know: that after their eyes were opened, it would be

impossible for men or women to see the body in its sacred pre-fall form without a skewed animal-instinct or fleshly distortion to it.

Why do I say this? Because I had to internally process my stance on and experience with this issue for most of my life. This type of internalization would be considered mild but, sadly, it's par for the course. It affects our bodies, and we need to talk about that on the road to freedom.

BLACKNESS REDEFINED

Just as in Lauryn Hill's song, I believe we all "live in theory, trying to turn stones into bread" and masquerade "like we got it figured out." There are many situations big and small we would love to process, but fear of being shamed stops us. Life without a guide is theory. Most of us are living in theory just as previous generations did, going all the way back to the Door of No Return in places like El Mina and Cape Coast Castle in Ghana and Goree Island off the coast of Senegal.

**Life without a
guide is theory.**

The people who stepped through those doors had no idea what was to come. They didn't know the impact of slave ships, the Middle Passage, or the "new world" that would separate them from their language, land, family, and identity. They didn't know they would be burdened with the task of proving themselves, turning stones into bread.

They didn't know the terror they would face, as Sowande' M. Mustakeem's book *Slavery at Sea* describes:

With young girls and adult women this invasive procedure meant strangers' frantic groping about their breasts, hips, buttocks, and vaginal areas. Male captives underwent similar public molestation to make certain "they have no Mark in the Groins, or Ficus's about the *Anus*, or Marks of Scabs having been about the *Scrotum*" or other orifices. Foreign trades surveyed slave men according to the strength their muscles conveyed, often reinforcing stereotypical assumptions of black male sexual prowess. Knowing the vital assets both groups represented in the sexual economy of slavery, interested buyers scrutinized the lucrative potential that their captives' bodies could generate for future reproductive and breeding purposes.

My ancestors, going back to the slave trade, have known nothing but internalizing terror heaped upon them and the inability to process their humanity.

That day at SCAD, I learned that putting on the mask was perceivably better than acknowledging internal feelings for which I didn't have words. I needed to prove myself to the culture and turn stones into bread. And I had to do it in silence to justify my presence. If I'd spoken up, I would have been shamed with accusations like, "You just don't get it," or "You don't understand art."

CHEAT CODE NO. 1

Stop internalizing your pain. Drop the mask. Speak up. I believe our culture has prided itself on turning stones into bread to prove ourselves so we can belong. When it comes to Blackness, we've created standards that drive people underground into silence. They swallow their feelings and are robbed of their innate sacredness—all because of a “Black card” upholding the mantra, “There are things you just don't talk about.”

Trauma backs us into a human corner where external realities lay bare our humanity. Expressing pain, feeling feelings, blushing, being uneasy—these are all signs of weakness and warrant being labeled weak, not Black. However, we are people made up of body, mind, soul, and spirit. I need to be able to say “I need you” and not get chastised as weak or—dare I say—white.

In the movie *Juice*, Tupac Shakur's character, Bishop, says during a conflict with a so-called friend, Q, “I am the one you need to be worried about . . . *pawtna!*” What if instead he'd said, “I'm tripping with this gun, I shot Steel, and I don't know what to do. Help ya boy, Q”?

Yeah, right! Instead we take the gun, we man up, and we kill anyone who challenges us, because “we got the juice and need it.”

If a woman steps out of line, we check her—through verbal or physical abuse—instead of civilly saying, “Your actions hurt me.”

If I am not praised enough, I knock down as many people as possible.

If I am not loved by Mom or Dad, I seek that affection from someone else instead of acknowledging the hurt.

I use anything—drugs, acclaim, degrees—to find worth and self-medicate in order to cope with the things trauma stole from me in my formative years.

Those five years at SCAD (from seventeen to twenty-two years old) served as a breeding ground for “Lucy,” as Kendrick calls him. It was a time when I masqueraded like I had it figured out, and negative patterns set in.

Satan is a coward and does not care whether you have the tools. He wants to inflict pain and will use whatever he can in your environment to do so. He uses shame and internalization to keep us silent, but God did not create us to be slaves to fear, shame, or the temptation to prove ourselves and our Blackness by turning stones into bread.

For centuries we as Black folks didn’t have the freedom to say we were tired. Historically there have been laws and cultural mores that fostered a sense of terror that laid the foundation for internalization. If you were exhausted during these times, you kept going. You picked cotton or the whip, castration, and sexual abuse came. There was no freedom to call out inhumane treatment. If you spoke up you were lynched. We didn’t even have the freedom to eat where we wanted because our identity as humans was limited by legislation.

From the Greenwood Massacre of 1921 to Freedom Rides and Bloody Sunday, these painful facts rang true. We couldn't worship at the white man's church because we weren't welcomed or allowed. But we couldn't pray in our own churches without fear of disruption from bombs or snipers. The 2015 massacre of the Charleston Nine reminds us that this is still true today. We couldn't live in our neighborhoods without the fear of death from the hand of the white man then or the hands of our own kind now. What is normal and embedded in the Black identity is the existence of holistic terrorizing trauma.

The sacredness of life has been taken from us, and we have internalized it for too long. This has led pop-culture icon Charlemagne to speak about mental health in his book *Shook One: Anxiety Playing Tricks on Me*. Our people have not been able to process our existence as whole persons. Research confirms that unprocessed trauma impacts our brains and bodies on a cellular level. Science now shows us how trauma is passed down genetically. (For additional reading, I recommend *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel van der Kolk, *The Soul of Shame* by Curt Thompson, and *The Souls of Black Folk* by W. E. B. Du Bois as starting places.)

The Black man and woman have not known a time in the Americas when they were free from the possibility of imminent danger. In 2021, Black parents still have to have “the talk” with their children. Not the sex talk but instructions on the “proper” conduct to display if pulled over by

the police as Maria Taylor calls it “comply or die.” This is a life-or-death conversation. I have had it with my eleven-year-old daughter and eight-year-old son. There are protocols we must abide by because our lives depend on it. Other communities do not have this burden or concern.

So with a history of inability to objectively process critical levels of shock—spiritually, emotionally, physically, socially, or psychologically—how do you get a group of people to begin to open up? You start with leaders being honest about the pain and the need to mourn and heal. You start with acknowledging the times are changing. Laws have changed or are being enforced, allowing a greater ability to live into the freedoms we have as US citizens. We are able to celebrate some aspects of our humanity that our former generations—even our parents—couldn’t have. Without the lenses to see this clearly, we will continue the cycles we are desperately trying to break. Meanwhile, our real enemy remains coy, as if he has nothing to do with it.

The adversary has no compassion for you personally or for us as a people (1 Peter 5:8). The way we have been groomed and reared to fight this troubled existence is to internalize our personhood. Though we are free to vocalize our pain, Satan succeeds in his attempts to convince us otherwise. He often wins, but we still must confront our pain, admit it, and live holistically. I will explain how to do this later in chapter twelve.

What was your breeding ground for silence and internalized shame? In talking with Don Furious, I realized mine started when I was twelve. I didn't vocalize my feelings of rejection from constantly being compared to my two older siblings. I was the child who was not planned or "didn't get parented," so I got leftovers. I had an absentee dad during the crucial window of twelve and beyond and a mother who was recovering from a horrific shooting (and two years later was further overwhelmed when my sister had a baby while still in high school). I absorbed and internalized a ton.

On top of that, there was a layer of alertness one had to have to navigate Detroit—and later the South—without a guide. It was a legacy all the generations before me had lived. So by the time I got to SCAD at seventeen, I had perfected the practice of internalizing and remaining silent. This is why Don Furious said to me, at thirty-seven, "I am surprised you are still alive."

**Performing to
turn stones into
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We can rediscover Blackness through transparency. What was taken from you and devoured by trauma? The ideal is gone. Eden does not exist when we come out of the womb, though we have an innocent Edenic mentality. Once we identify our breeding ground and realize through

trial, error, and distress that our environment is unsafe and far from Eden, we feel the need to develop survival mechanisms such as internalization and covering up. One key to understanding the enemy's scheme is being able to understand your habitat and recognize the patterns of internalizing and shame in your own life.

No longer can we call it healthy to masquerade like we have it all figured out. Performing to turn stones into bread only gets you achievements that can be snatched away from you. The good news is that our Eden, true joy, can be birthed out of the darkness. Don Furious gave me a colossal cheat code and tool: to do the work and vocalize the pain is better than internalizing it and pretending as if it doesn't exist. You have the permission not to pretend anymore.

New Horizon (A Spoken Word)

Bread given to *breed*

Because we were bred to *breed*

Shamed to *speak*

Whips, chains, auctions, violation of the body
 and *conscience*

They sold off more than our *bodies*

Looted, suited, and *booted*

To be present with Sambo's *smile*

Meanwhile

Meanwhile

THE MASQUERADE
.....

Haughty

The spirit of our *oppressor*
Our lineage only knows *stressors*
The enemy disciplined us into
Being the *aggressor*
Freedom, not of this origin's *soil*
But this ain't our *soil*
No more vain *toil*
From the door of no return
With no ability to *speak*
The wind of God kept us
Despite the plan to bury us *deep*
The charade to be *over*
We get *closure*
Mourn for *then*
Mourn for *now*
Now *bow*
Bow!!!
It.will.bow.

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