

AUNT CHLOE

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Gaslight

My parents taught me I was difficult to love and their love was difficult to stomach, full of buildup from sores festering inside them. What is now called trauma was, then, just the tax of growing up.

I took pride in my name like it was the first and only thing I'd ever have. I mean, it was all I had, because sure, no one said I was ugly, but no one told me I was beautiful, either. I was tall and bony, as my family would say. Rightfully convinced of my bonyness, and of my inevitable inability to overcome it, that when Beyoncé's "Crazy in Love" video debuted when I was 15, I vowed I would eat myself into her kind of curves. I didn't know how I'd acquire them otherwise. My kind of thin and my height weren't the kinds the boys liked, at least not the ones I so desperately wanted to like me back. So, some adjacently popular guys showed interest in me, and over the years I shared a few libidinous makeout sessions. I certainly wasn't a prude, but I was taught that being a too-fast Black girl too soon would ruin my life. I was also a romantic. Sexuality is cool, but have you heard about love?

Once the guys moved on from the satisfaction of swapping spit and into the very serious business that involved fingers and vaginas and sometimes mouths and penises, I had nothing to offer. Even the adjacently popular boys needed more than kisses. And I—alone, it seemed—needed something more like love. So really, all I could keep was the deep pride I took in my name and all I discerned and was told it meant. I was a Marshall, something said with a tone of reverence and honor. I was an intellectual, with big feelings and grand passions. Fervor. In short, swag. I gobbled it up like the homemade Kool-Aid and sugar candy we'd shake up in a bag and pour out into our inexperienced, searching, adolescent hands.

II.

"Girl, you got that Marshall temper," my father said.

My skin was flushed like I'd just finished a run. My eyes threatened to drop the tears they held. Our small kitchen was always the stage for these Sunday morning dramas. I hadn't yet heard you don't have to attend every argument you're invited to, and so over grits I wouldn't eat and pancakes with perfectly

golden, crisp edges my father would bait me, and I'd impale myself on the hook every time. I'd say anything, and he'd challenge me, forcing me onto the defensive. Which in turn would cause me to prattle on, explaining my position. It was imperative I get my point across, that I was understood. I didn't yet know that my being understood was never the point of these cyclical spectacles, and so I would continue on, until he took my explanations and picked out a word or phrase and lectured me about how I couldn't say or feel this or shouldn't say or feel that. I could have said the sky was blue, and he would have replied, and how do you know that?

"I just like to make you mad," he said with a chuckle. "I like how you talk when you get mad."

III.

Even when mothers aren't the safe spaces we imaginewantneed them to be, we run to them instinctively when we seek comfort because they are the first homes we ever have; their cellular territory is technically more familiar than anything else in the world. There's a passing on of energy at the site of their body, with the genesis of our individual lives, which would explain why I constantly tried to create out of my mother a soft space to land even though every trip down the runway left me flayed and bleeding, as though landing on jagged rocks under what appeared to be solid ground.

"That's just how your father is," my mother said, anytime my father did anything egregious enough to spur my complaints to her. "When we got married, your grandfather pulled me aside and said, 'He can be difficult.'"

IV.

"It's going to take a special man to deal with you," my father would say, often after I expressed myself and my viewpoints in what felt like brilliant fashion, the way all of the ideas of your truly naïve youth feel fresh and unique. This supposed difficulty, always addressed this way to me by my father, seemed as much a birthright as the Marshall temper my family always joked about.

See: Marshall temper (n.): an affliction referenced by its possessors as having very high boundaries, being quick to anger; prone to indignant rage and/or action. Side effects include: elevated volume, profanity, physical violence, lack of reasoning. See also: anger issues, unresolved trauma, insecurities, fear of vulnerability masquerading as boundaries.

The admonition felt like belonging to something bigger than me. The belonging incited pride. And the pride felt esoteric, and heady. But as I got older, and the boys I wrote bad poetry about and impassioned love notes to, trying to intellectually explain how much I needed them to heal something in me with their companionship, as those boys passed me by for girls who didn't need special boys who would grow into special men, girls who weren't intellectuals but were liked and loved and valued in a way I was not, I understood the phrase for what it was: prophecy hanging over my head, rooted in me from my inception, blooming in my marrow, spreading through me like a cancer. It was: good luck, girl. You'll be lucky to find someone to put up with your ass.

V.

From my journal, December 2007: “Men and I have had curious relationships for a long time. Since I was a child, I’ve always wanted to be found by my Prince Charming; always wanted to have a steady bf or something of the like. Due to various other factors, I have become a desperate female, giving men way too much credit and way too much authority over my life.”

VI.

I was willing to be whomever I needed to be in order to be loved. I was willing to do whatever was expected of me if it meant someone would choose me. If there were a dearth of special men to deal with my special ass, then maybe I needed to be less special. I would never be chosen as myself. So I erased difficult words like no from my vocabulary. I let that man with sour breath shove his leaden tongue in my mouth. I didn’t stop him when he shoved his dirty fingers inside me after pushing me up against his car in the midday parking lot. I didn’t stop the man who pushed his dry dick inside my body without foreplay or condom; didn’t make a peep as his dryness and size felt like desperation inside of me.

When men fucked me violently, pushing my body so hard it flew onto floors and into lamps; when they slammed their bodies into mine so forcefully it was as if they were trying to beat something out of themselves and into me, I moaned along because that’s what I thought I was supposed to do. When one man grabbed my head and pulled my twists like they were the reins of a runaway horse, I did not ask if he could simply loosen his grip. I said nothing when one of my extensions dropped to the floor; I did not even offer to myself that I was frightened that he could separate something from me just by force and his two hands, that I had always been alone with men who had that power, had they chosen to exercise it. I told myself I liked it, that grown women who liked to fuck liked that sort of thing. That I was a grown woman, and I should be grateful. I should be grateful. I couldn’t say no. I knew what I’d gotten myself into, and I’d asked for it. You couldn’t just kiss a man and then deny him dominion over your body. I didn’t want to be difficult.

VII.

One day, I met a man. By the time I met him, I’d settled into the fact that maybe I would remain too special to be chosen. I had tried not to be difficult, but something about my DNA was, and I couldn’t outrun my construction. I had started to project my presumed problematic nature outward before he, or any other man, could tell me I was too much to deal with. To my chagrin, he didn’t find me difficult at all. He was not scared of big, bold me who wore dark sunglasses and scowls. Whereas others moved lightly around me in a show of deference, he was resolute. He challenged my beliefs, and engaged me in

conversation, and asked me for my opinion. Even then, before my heart had anything to do with it, he was a kind of special man, the kind with light inside him, light that shone onto the cracked parts of me and did not dim in my presence. Even almost a decade later, having received that healing for so long, I still need his reminder that I am safe in the present and that I am not difficult to love. (I am worthy of love.) I am not difficult to love. (I am worthy of love.) Even when I am difficult, I am not difficult to love. (I am worthy of love.)

Epilogue

“Taught me a lesson I should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget.”

—Toni Morrison, “God Help the Child”

Malorie Reid’s work has been published in various outlets, including NPR, Watermelanin magazine, and Scalawag magazine. She earned a B.A. in English from the University of Florida and a M.A. in Journalism from the Craig Newmark School of Journalism at the City University of New York. She writes poetry-infused nonfiction at www.maloriereid.com.