



BLACK LOVE LETTERS

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EDITED BY
COLE
BROWN
AND
NATALIE
JOHNSON

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FOREWORD BY JOHN LEGEND

DEAR DAD

BY DOUG JONES

feel robbed.

We only started our friendship back when I moved into the downstairs apartment for graduate school. Do you remember what you said to me after you said I could live there? "If ever the traffic through the apartment gets uncomfortable for me and your mother, we will ask you to leave." Took my breath away. At twenty-eight, I wondered who you thought I'd become. I was the person you had raised. I was every bit of who you had declared, demanded, pleaded, begged, prayed, forced, cajoled, coerced, and strong-armed me into becoming. And in one breathtaking moment, all of that had been reduced to "traffic," such being your euphemistic way of saying you didn't want to see, hear, or encounter any aspect of my gay "lifestyle." I did everything I could to not move back into that brownstone with you and Ma. But Columbia was unyielding about not extending housing to students who had family living within a fifty-mile radius of NYC. And even back in 1996, NYC rent wasn't cheap—especially coupled with grad school tuition. That Bed-Stuy garden apartment in the house where I grew up was a gift and a curse. We were



father and son, and there was love, but we had never really *liked* each other, Dad, did we? Not like you and Duane. Not like me and Ma. Well. God would show us, wouldn't He? And He certainly did.

Even with living in the ground-floor garden apartment, those first few months, things were so tentative. For my part, I tried not to breathe too loudly. Music low, TV quiet, careful about visitors. Weekend meals every so often with you and Ma helped locate neutral territory. You wanted to hear about school, especially when I took that class with Michael Eric Dyson. I would tell you that Columbia was different from Morehouse in every way imaginable. I couldn't have attended undergraduate school at Columbia; emotionally, psychologically, I wouldn't have survived. Racist overtones and intonations haunted everything. The presence of non-white bodies there was a necessary accommodation only to be tolerated until someone thought of something better. Remember our long conversation about Black writing and the dominance of Morrison, Walker, and McMillan on the bestseller lists at that time? I wanted to know where our modern equivalent was. Where was our current-day Baldwin, Wright, and Hughes? "He's at the tip of your pen." Here we are decades later, and your response still lights my insides.

Slowly, surely, and with the certainty of the Divine, God transformed us right before our eyes. I finished Columbia in two years. Shortly after graduation and before I moved out to my apartment, Ma told me, "Your father is having such a *fantastic*

time with you!" Dad, we had become *friends*. We talked about everything, most especially work stuff related to me navigating the New York political world of economic development but also about the changing landscape of Bed-Stuy; the rising cost of real estate (when was I going to buy a house?!); my frustrating trials with the New York publishing world; my relationship with my brother and his relationship with our future daughter/sister-in-law; and, every once in a very, very, very blue moon, the open secret of my romantic life. My relationship with Chadra was not what you and Ma hoped for, but I'm still thrilled she's become a very treasured part of our family. I think we all are. I was humbled when you invited my closest friends over for a night of drinks and hors d'oeuvres, even while saying you didn't want to know anything of "the affair" you correctly guessed I was having with one of them. You had become my guide and confidant, my usher and my touchstone. I consulted with you about everything, from what career moves I should make to seeking your advice about the brownstone I'd eventually buy. You reminded me to give myself grace in the development of my writing: "Something like that takes years of experience. Look at Morrison." And you always kept it real—ever attentive to my tales of frustration with my very demanding boss at Hunter College, you typically agreed with her—a *compassionate Republican*, of all things!

None of us—not Ma, Duane, me, any of your brothers nor your sister, none of your nieces or nephews, not one of your friends, no

one—were prepared v
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of a television is mac
are—the patriarch of
you are; the grandfa
the houses you purc
me, for my brother)
you provided for me
and community you
Unnecessarily so. To
drive again. To never
That you will always
tance. To not be able
the news that final
being published wil
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many romantic twist
but that affair you re
som into something
fear, shame, guilt, an
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diagnosis has been a

Dad, I opened this
ease has progressed

one—were prepared when you were diagnosed with Parkinson's. It has been five years now, and the sight of your six-foot-three, three-hundred-plus-pound frame reduced to a shrinking mass of clothes and blankets sitting stationary in a wheelchair in front of a television is maddening. When I think about the man you are—the patriarch of our family; the husband you are; the father you are; the grandfather you are; the children you have raised; the houses you purchased and renovated (for our family, for me, for my brother); the debt-free undergraduate education you provided for me and my brother; your charity; the friends and community you support, it just seems so cruel. Unduly so. Unnecessarily so. To never walk with you again. To never see you drive again. To never again hear you speak a coherent sentence. That you will always require round-the-clock home-care assistance. To not be able to see your eyes mirror my excitement at the news that finally—*finally!*—my long-anticipated dream of being published will come true when Simon & Schuster publishes my novel in 2024. To not be able to let you know that after many romantic twists and turns, I'm doing okay—it's still early, but that affair you referenced two decades ago might just blossom into something incredible. Parkinson's has muted me in fear, shame, guilt, and anger. Parkinson's has been a specter hovering over my therapy sessions. Remarkably, your Parkinson's diagnosis has been a cauldron of emotions helping me evolve.

Dad, I opened this letter saying that I felt robbed. As the disease has progressed, I thought limiting our interaction would

reduce the hurt—out of sight, out of mind. It has only made the memory of you ache that much more. And the true cruelty is to continue to allow this disease to rob us of these moments. This heist, this piracy of our relationship necessitates a clarity of perception in order to repossess who we are to one another. I understand you to be a complex man of highly evolved morals, ethics, and way of being, all of which you imparted to me as your son. Some of those values have conformed to my understanding of myself. Others have had to be recalibrated to fit my definition of myself as a Black gay man. Parkinson's attempted theft has replaced the solid foundation afforded by certain confirmation with the loving flexibility afforded by the fluid divinity of grace. I know you are as proud of me, as the son you made me to be, as I am of you, the patriarch and father who made me.

I love you.

*Your Son,
Doug*

TO ERIKA

BY MAHOGANY BR

DEAR ERIKA,

I don't come to you with a
outreached. But I have
that you can find your way
structure, with a desire to r

Over a decade ago, in c
believe we both didn't sh
imagine what Grandma C
words, purses, and hands
tered relationship remaine
us. She never liked us to a
too. But like all things we
the thing that curdles our
time together as destructi
we played dominoes and
clothes (the same clothes I
forget them on the floor of
made up our dialect of love