

THE EXTENT OF FATHERLESSNESS - ALL PERSONS, ALL TENSES

KENDRA ALLEN

Our men our daddies and the man we cannot keep are all the same
person

Our daddies ran away at birth—
to the outside world we look like immaculate conception. As if we just
appear in mass numbers to become the world's most hated rappers or
your favorite ball players

... as if we do not have an origin story

We are magnificent in ways that we don't have fathers yet almost always,
we look exactly like our disappearing daddies.

They went away on crack binges / to Houston / some were stolen from us
/ they do not marry our mothers / some just go, we do not know where to
/ to jail / to hell, possibly. Some just didn't care enough to get away; they
are in the same cities as us—my mama's daddy lived forty-five minutes away
from her, her two sisters, and their brother until the day that he died.

We all, the aftermath / the children, connect with our runaways
innately. There are attitudes and noses and eyes and everything else that
our mamas used to love about them in our faces, in our bodies. We just
forgot that mama don't love these things no more and no amount of soap
can wash their imprints off of us. We can't scrub off the lies and make our
mamas feel better. We do not know what our real faces look like. We do
not know the actuality of anything.

My daddy apologized to me once during Ludacris' episode of *Behind The Music*. Ludacris was describing the feeling he felt when his daughter was born. He was explaining a necessity he had to always be in her life.

The lights in the room dimmed some.

He was explaining manhood.

The lights in the room dimmed some more.

He was verbalizing love.

The lights in the room dimmed some more.

He was explaining how he loved his child more than he loved being right.

Then the room we were in became dark.

My daddy said: I'm sorry that I wasn't there like I probably shoulda been

He probably was right

I probably shoulda said: I forgive you

There isn't one way to go about parenting black kids. A lot of us were raised under the voice of a woman of some sort, a grandmother / a mama / an aunt, it really does take a village / women who, just like us, did not have black men in their lives, so they tried to fill those empty spaces with cornbread and cabbage.

They did not know what else to feed us.

The unsaid rule is: we can laugh and play around about our missing parent, but no one else can. There are reoccurring jokes about our nonexistent relationships with our daddies and how they leave / when they leave / why they never fully return

Like: him going to the store and never coming back

Like: playing catch in the yard with an invisible man

Like: imagining conversations

Like: never attending a daddy and daughter dance

Like: him saying he will pick you up for the weekend and you are overflowing out of your socks with joy that you wait for him all night until you finally fall asleep on the couch

Funny, only when they are coming out of the mouth of someone who can relate, because these happenings are, more times than not, too true. The kind of truth that makes you laugh with a pang of misplaced comfort. It is too real. It is too real for black children to not have any communication with their fathers. It is too real to be afraid to talk to your mama about him. It is too real for some of us to not even know what he looks like.

For some little black girls and boys, we meet our daddies for the first time deep inside of our adult lives. In these cases, maybe a child of our own, or a series of unanswered questions about why we behave in the manner that we do, will trigger us to reach out. We think we are missing something important. We need to know why we were left with a bunch of women who could not teach us balanced love.

This one thing is certain for all absentee black fathers (I have not witnessed one to prove me wrong and I heart achingly wish for one to do so), when you finally talk face to face, you will go through a process of disbelief, a wave of rock bottom sadness and an ultimate high of disgust.

Your daddy, whom you haven't laid eyes on in over a decade. Your daddy, who you see once a year and finally summoned up the courage to question. Your daddy, who you are just meeting for the first time will say to you

- a. it was your mother who kept him away (not in a literal sense but in ways that attacked his ego)
- b. he could not financially provide for you (he thinks that is his sole purpose for your life)
- c. the past is in the past (meaning he is afraid of you and what you will say to him so he just wants you to forget it. he is saying do not hold him accountable for something that has already happened but he is not saying that things will change.)
- d. (the worst one) he isn't completely at fault, he cannot and will not take the full blame, that you, the child, could have reached out too.

To him, who knows nothing about you except that you carry his last name, will always believe that the phone works both ways

I guess he wants you to be his father too

There is an episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* that I hate to love called "Papa's Got a Brand New Excuse." In this episode Will's distant daddy decides to show up, sell his son dreams of a father/son connection and Will is happy. We, the audience / the kids who are just like Will, are happy that he got his father back too.

At the end of the episode when Will's daddy inevitably lets him down for what feels like the last time and Will is yelling that he doesn't need him because he learned how to drive / how to shave / how to fight without him and yelling about how he endured fourteen birthdays without him and never even received as much as a birthday card, he cries out TO HELL WITH HIM!!!! and we, the audience / the kids who are just like Will, recite this scene verbatim, and bawl every time that it airs
We all share a silent group hug every time we see Will ask,
"how come he don't want me man?"

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I try to internalize whether or not there are distinct differences between fatherless black boys and fatherless black girls, whether one is affected more severely. And all I can come up with is what we have in common we both know of a man who strikingly resembles all of our flaws.
we both buy our mothers gifts on father's day.

we only acknowledge our fathers when we want to feel sorry for ourselves, when we need someone to blame.

The similarity between fatherless black girls and boys is that we are both affected to our disadvantage. We don't have the privilege of seeing stable black men in our vicinities. Faithful black men. Godly black men. We don't get to see black men taking care of black women, loving black women, protecting black women, raising black families. Loving their daughters, molding their sons on a day to day basis.

We are already black, we cannot afford to be bastards too.

We need to be engaged in the lives of black men –not Michael Kyle from *My Wife & Kids*, not Furious Styles from *Boyz N The Hood*, who are giving us ideas of black fatherhood, who cannot have a realistic impact on our

lives. We need to see black men in our families, in our homes, with loud personalities and a firm sense of self, we need to see them make mistakes and fix them.

We need to know that you are there.

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When I was younger I used to take satisfaction in saying that not having a serious father did not affect how I turned out. I took satisfaction in not needing him, minimalism was enough. I didn't even try to entertain the practicalities of it all.

Until I realized that I could not modify my father's awareness was when I began to forgive him. I knew that his guilt would always be stronger than his presence. I knew that his pride had always rubbed off on me.

Sometimes when we talk, there is a disconnect between him and his pain, between him and his responsibility. A disconnect between him and his truth. I hear about a similar pain in hip-hop / in poetry / in my daddy's throat when he is trying to hold in his cries.

It is to be said that a lot of black fathers are living in fear of recreating their own fatherless childhoods.

Jay-Z, for instance, wrote a song about the joys of new fatherhood when his daughter was first born. It even had her happy voice in the background as theme music.

And then soon after, Jay-Z wrote a song about his realities when fatherhood presented itself to him.

In "Jay-Z Blue" Jay interprets his own fatherless childhood and how it could so easily happen to his own flesh and blood without warning. He says things

Like: *Please don't judge me, only hugged the block, I thought my daddy didn't love me*

Like: *I don't wanna duplicate it. I seen my mom and pop drive each other mothafuckin crazy and I got that nigga blood in me. I got his ego and his temper, all I'm missing is the drugs in me*

Like: *Father never taught me how to be a father, treat a mother*

Like: *I don't wanna have to just repeat another, leave another baby with no daddy*

This sensation doesn't vary much. My daddy had a providing father in his presence every day but that does not mean he had a man to model after. In fewer words, he has communicated to me the same terrors of this song. So has my cousin who has a daughter. So has my uncle who has a son. They all consume the same hurts, yet how these men go about being fathers all clash with one another—all crash into their offspring—all crumble into us writing about it twenty years later.

For some odd reason after my daddy is mean to me, he asks me nicely am I mad. I can depend on him to be worried if I hate him or not. I always say no. He says he doesn't mean to be nasty. I repeat: I'm not mad I don't get angry anymore. I am quite familiar with what he's capable of giving...

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Growing up. This is what I comprehended about black men. They were beautiful too black and too strong, they were too majestic for this world. They walked to a rhythm. Their skin was bronze like trophies and their voices sounded like the bass in my trunk.

I knew I wanted one since I was a child.

The black man is like the mecca no matter how many bad encounters I've had with one. They are carved by the hands of God, they wear crowns around their temples for protection.

I just didn't have anything in my personal life to compare my vision to. There was no way I could have a black man for an extended period of time; they were not mine to keep, they do not like confinement / obligation / dependency. They are too hard and unwilling to break.

In Kiese Laymon's book *How to Slowly Kill Yourselves and Others in America*, he hints on black fatherhood and the idea that black kids need more than just black fathers in their lives in order to survive. He says, "black children need waves of present, multifaceted love, not simply present fathers." This is true and I agree, we need multiple forces of outside love, but I also believe that we need love in the home in order to know how to receive love secondarily. His notion of love being synonymous to survival, a

carnal need, is a technique that fatherless children cannot comprehend, for we cannot take love.

We fuck love up.

Black girls need fathers for this very reason. We need fathers to avoid looking for one in boys most importantly / so that we won't be afraid of men / so we can know how a man is supposed to treat us / so that we don't think we need a man in order to be a woman / so that we won't end up on shows like *Love and Hip Hop* / so we learn how to take direction / so we won't mature into adult girls with distrustful hearts.

Black boys need fathers so that they will not grow into adult boys who think women owe them something / so that they won't grow up to say that they only date white girls because black women are "crazy" / so that they won't grow up thinking that crying is an unmanly characteristic.

Black boys need black fathers so that they won't turn into another statistic. We need multifaceted love but we also need simple, unconditional love so that when we find someone to love on our own, it does not become hard to decipher whether or not we are sorting out our daddy issues or if it is the real thing.

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My daddy once said that the women in my family cannot keep a man / we run them off / we are too attached to the women in our family opposed to the men we entertain. He remembers my family as a bad experience. I do not know how to separate his experience with my family and his experience with me—me and my mama compared notes and they feel the same

In Laymon's book, he also said that he is not the only black boy who realized a long time ago that his mother and her mother and her mother's mother "needed loving, generous partners far more than [black boys] needed present fathers." —my mama does not understand this, she is too hard and unwilling to break. She is too strong to believe that she needed help.

Some of us girls suffer a strong anxiety of meeting someone like our distant

fathers—so much that we don't meet anyone at all. I can't even get past the second date without jumping to conclusions.

My mother never remarried after my daddy showed himself to be no different than her father.

My grandmother never remarried after marrying an older, father like figure.

My great-grandmother never remarried ... after the second time.

A genuine trust of the opposite sex is a distance.

Our peaks become a midpoint.

We leave first. We never speak to the boys we like or the men we could have loved again.

It is not that we cannot keep a man, it is that we never learned how to be kept, and I still don't know whether or not this is something that can be reversed.

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My daddy apologized to me once on a ride to Popeye's to go get some chicken. He dropped me off and said to not take his tone so literally.

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when they leave, what I think they are saying is

let me go

don't nothing grow here

Like: me

Like: me

Like: me

/ like you / like simple sentences / like roots that have not been watered