ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE

A MEMOIR-MANIFESTO

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FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
New York

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Cassie Gonzales
First edition, 2020
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
fiercereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Johnson, George M. (George Matthew), 1985-
Title: All boys aren't blue : a memoir-manifesto / George M. Johnson.
Description: First edition. | New York : Farrar Straus Giroux, 2020.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019018174 | ISBN 9780374312718 (hardcover : alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Johnson, George M. (George Matthew), 1985- | African American gay men—Biography. | Gays—Identity.
Classification: LCC HQ76.27.A37 J644 2020 | DDC 306.76/6208996073—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019018174

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

In writing this book, I wanted to be as authentic and truthful about my experience as possible. I wanted my story to be told in totality: the good, the bad, and the things I was always too afraid to talk about publicly. This meant going to places and discussing some subjects that are often kept away from teens for fear of them being "too heavy."

But the truth of the matter is, these things happened to me when I was a child, teenager, and young adult. So as heavy as these subjects may be, it is necessary that they are not only told, but also read by

teens who may have to navigate many of these same experiences in their own lives.

This book will touch on sexual assault (including molestation), loss of virginity, homophobia, racism, and anti-Blackness. These discussions at times may be a bit graphic, but nonetheless they are experiences that many reading this book will encounter or have already encountered. And I want those readers to be seen and heard in these pages.

Within these pages, the word *nigger* or *nigga* appears, sometimes in full and sometimes abbreviated as n****. The same is true for *fag* and *faggot*, and their abbreviations. I included these slurs in the text in specific ways for specific emotional and intellectual effect. Please use the same thoughtfulness when talking about this book. If you don't identify as Black, African American, or queer, don't use these slurs in full, which can be harmful to others. You can use common abbreviations, like *n-word* or *f-word* instead.

Please know that this book was crafted with care and love, but most importantly to give a voice to so many from marginalized communities whose experiences have not yet been captured between the pages of a book.

I hope this book will make you laugh at moments. I hope this book will make you cry at moments. I hope this book will open you up to understanding the people you may have never spoken to because of their differences from you. We are not as different as you think, and all our stories matter and deserve to be celebrated and told.

With love,

George M. Johnson

ALL BOYS AREN'T BLUE

Baby George with Great-Grandmother Lula Mae

INTRODUCTION

BLACK. QUEER. HERE.

The story of how I entered the world was a foreshadowing.

When my aunt first saw my head full of beautiful, jet-black, curly hair crown from my mother's womb, she ran into the hospital's hallway where my family waited.

"It's a girl! It's a girl!" she yelled, to my grandmother's excitement and to my father's *slight* disappointment. But by the time my aunt got back to the

delivery room, and I had been fully born, she realized her quick assumption would soon need correcting.

She ran back out to the family and said, "Uhhh, actually, it's a boy."

The "It's a girl! No, it's a boy!" mix-up is funny on paper, but not quite so hilarious in real life, especially when the star of that story struggles with their identity. Gender is one of the biggest projections placed onto children at birth, despite families having no idea how the baby will truly turn out. In our society, a person's sex is based on their genitalia. That decision is then used to assume a person's gender as boy or girl, rather than a spectrum of identities that the child should be determining for themselves.

Nowadays, we are assigning gender even before birth. We have become socially conditioned to participate in the gendering of children at the earliest possible moment—whenever a sonogram can identify its genitalia. Gender-reveal parties have become a trendy way to celebrate the child's fate, steering them down a life of masculine or feminine ideals before ever meeting them. It's as if the more visible LGBTQIAP+ people become, the harder the heterosexual community attempts to apply new norms. I think the majority fear

becoming the minority, and so they will do anything and everything to protect their power.

I often wonder what this world would look like if people were simply told, *You are having a baby with a penis or a vagina or other genitalia*. Look up *intersex* if you're confused about "other." What if parents were also given instructions to nurture their baby by paying attention to what the child naturally gravitates toward and to simply feed those interests? What if parents let their child explore their own gender instead of pushing them down one of the only two roads society tells us exist?

When our gender is assigned at birth, we are also assigned responsibilities to grow and maneuver through life based on the simple checking off of those boxes. Male. Female. Black. White. Straight. Gay. Kids who don't fit the perfect boxes are often left asking themselves what the truth is:

Am I a girl?

Am I a boy?

Am I both?

Am I neither?

As a child, I struggled mightily with these questions. And that struggle continued to show up in

various ways throughout my life. Now, as an adult, I have a much better grasp of sexuality, gender, and the way society pressures us to conform to what has been the norm. I understand how this sense of normality doesn't hold a space for those of us who don't fit the aesthetic of what a boy or girl *should* be, or how a man or woman *should* perform.

Unfortunately, we are still struggling to move the conversation past an assumed identity at birth. And LGBTQIAP+ people are not just fighting for the right to self-identify and be accepted in a society that is predominantly composed of two genders—which would be the bare minimum of acceptance. We are also fighting to survive physical acts of violence. Many of us are not even surviving that. The spectrum of our traumas can be as broad as our identities.

I started writing this book with the intention that every chapter would end with solutions for all the uncomfortable or confusing life circumstances I experienced as a gay Black child in America. I quickly learned this book would be about so much more. About the overlap of my identities and the importance of sharing how those intersections create my privilege and my oppression.

Many of us carry burdens from the traumas of our past, and they manifest in our adulthood. We all go through stages of accepting or struggling with our various identities—gay, straight, or non-identifying. And race and various other factors play a role in how we navigate them. Many of us are always in a state of working through something—always in a state of "becoming" a more aware version of self.

This book is an exploration of two of my identities—Black and queer—and how I became aware of their intersections within myself and in society. How I've learned that neither of those identities can be contained within a simple box, and that I enter the room as both of them despite the spaces and environments I must navigate. In the white community, I am seen as a Black man first—but that doesn't negate the queer identity that will still face discrimination. In the Black community, where I more often find myself, it is not the Black male identity that gets questioned immediately. It is that intersection with queerness that is used to reduce my Blackness and the overall image of Black men.

Because this is a memoir, I'm sharing some of my personal memories with you. These memories are

specific to my experience as a kid, teen, and young adult. But they also underline some of the universal experiences of Black and/or queer people. My struggles are that of Black men and queer men and people who exist at the intersection of both identities. That's where the manifesto part comes in. I believe that the dominant society establishes an idea of what "normal" is simply to suppress differences, which means that any of us who fall outside of their "normal" will eventually be oppressed. In each chapter of this book, I'll tell you memories of my experiences growing up and what I think they mean in a larger context of living as a Black queer person.

I grew up hearing the word *nigga*, which was a term of endearment in my home. It's become a term of endearment in many Black families. By the time I was in middle school, I was using the word regularly with friends. It was the thing to do as a thirteen-year-old—that is, to curse and use the *n-word*. We were all doing it. It was how we greeted one another, how we clowned one another. We had different tones and inflections that could tell you the way the word was being used. But never with the "-er" at the end.

We knew saying that word with the hard "-er" meant something different.

By high school, I stopped using it. Surrounded by whiteness, I wasn't going to dare let my classmates get comfortable using that word with or around me. Anytime a white student even tried to utter it, I checked them. White kids love to test Black kids on things like that. Certain Black kids were fighting so hard to fit in, they would let white kids steal that part of our culture just so they could pretend they were accepted in white society.

By college, I was back in a predominantly Black school—back to using the n-word again with my new friends. It was just like middle school, except as an adult I knew I could use it, and no one could say anything to me about it. Truth be told, most professors hated that we used the word. They were of the opinion that the word had too much hatred in it for us to ever be able to take back full ownership, in any variation.

The n-word was the last word heard by many of my ancestors when they were being beaten and shackled—forced into enslavement in a new land. It was the last word heard by my people when they

were lynched as a spectacle for white people. "Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees," as the great Nina Simone would sing. So, for many of my professors who grew up during Jim Crow, experiencing legalized segregation, there was no reason to be proud of that word.

It was during those years in college and right after college that the NAACP and the National Action Network decided that it was time for the Black community to "bury the n-word." There was this belief that if we stopped using it, the word itself would lose its power.

This brought out arguments on both sides, people for and against this action to destroy a word that is so tied to the most painful parts of history in America. I began to shift to the side that thought it was best to bury it. At that time, I was learning how to be "a respectable negro"—with the good grades and a college degree, attempting to fit into white society, wherein I felt I deserved to be treated as an equal. It was important to me that I didn't use that word, because I felt it made us less than.

I felt that our using that word was a bad thing—because white people cringed when we said it. Because certain Black people cringed when we said it. To me,

it just didn't make sense to keep using it, especially because it remained controversial. I did what I always did with most things I didn't want to deal with—buried it.

I wasn't just trying to bury the n-word though. In burying the n-word, I was also burying my queerness. If I couldn't see parts of my own Blackness as respectable, there was no way I was ready to see my queerness as respectable either. But now I know that queerness is a part of Blackness, and that there is no Blackness without queer people.

Then, early in 2012, Trayvon Martin was killed by George Zimmerman—and my entire perspective shifted on being a Black person in this society. I saw that the new-age civil rights movement was being led by people who looked like me. People who were fighting for me and other Black children. It was during this time that my unlearning process really began.

My eyes were opened by seeing the shooting of Black people at the hands of police. Seeing the killing of Black children like Tamir Rice at the hands of police. Seeing that it didn't matter whether you were an affluent Black, a poor Black, a child, or an adult. In the eyes of society, I was still a n****. And my love for my Blackness meant that I had every right to fight

for my people and every right to take back ownership of that word.

So, I stopped using the n-word. I understand now that my Blackness is self-defined and that to use the n-word or not use the n-word is my choice. But it shouldn't be based on the comfort of those who constantly seek to invalidate me. I understand now that there is no such thing as "a respectable negro" in the eyes of society, nor was I ever made to be one.

BLACK.

My second identity—queer—is a journey that I will be on until the day I die, and I honestly believe that. Every day I learn something about myself. I get to sit and look back at all the times my queerness displayed itself, both in ways known to me and unknown to me.

As a child, I always knew I was different. I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I now know it was okay to be that different kid. That being different didn't mean something was wrong with me, but that something was wrong with my cultural environment, which forced me to live my life as something I wasn't. The fact that I couldn't see my full self in Black heroes or the history books was more about the

changing of history to spare white guilt than it ever was about me knowing the whole truth.

I learned that kids who saw me as different didn't have an issue until society taught them to see my differences as a threat. Those differences, like being effeminate and sassy, were constantly under attack my entire childhood from kids who didn't even know why I needed to be shamed for those differences. It wasn't them shaming me as much as it was those raising them who taught them to shame others with those qualities. Most kids aren't inherently mean. Their parents, however, can make them mean.

By the time I reached middle school and high school, suppression was my only option. I had become even more of a minority in the population, and I had to deal with the intersection of Blackness and queerness—and the double oppression that generates—for the first time ever. Fighting for Blackness in a white space came naturally to me, though, and I did it every chance I got. Fighting for my queerness, however, never seemed to be a viable or safe option.

I lived in that isolation for all those years in high school. I only saw snippets of queer representation in small television roles. They were rarely played by

people who looked like me. But it was never to the extent that I ever gained the confidence to be that person. Thankfully, college opened my eyes to true reflections of myself—in literature, in art, in class beside me—not early on, but right on time. I realized that the things I had always been running from had never left my side. That the things I had been chasing were all just a myth to turn me into something, some*one* I didn't want to be.

In college, I took a risk and did something that was so far away from being queer that it should've put me even deeper in the closet: I joined a fraternity. I was trying to preserve an image of masculinity for myself—something that Black fraternities have run on for years. However, in finding the frat, I found myself. I found brothers with a common experience chasing the same thing. And instead of the universe giving us what *we* thought we wanted, it gave us what we actually needed.

It gave us unconditional love and brotherhood from a shared queer experience. It gave me brothers who could see my humanity outside of my queerness. It gave me the confidence to define my Blackness and my queerness and my manhood and my masculinity, or lack thereof. I got to live in my totality and, for the

first time ever, exist as both Black and queer in the same space and be loved for it, not shamed.

QUEER.

I want the words of my life story to be immortalized. I want to immortalize this narrative of joy and pain, this narrative of triumph and tragedy, this narrative of the Black queer experience that has been erased from the history books. An existence that has been here forever.

I've never thought about immortality before. I always assumed that my mortality would be linked to my inability to survive as a Black queer person. I have the deaths of so many people who look like me in mind. From the HIV epidemic, to domestic violence, to suicide, I watch people like me who don't survive the oppression. They become today's news and yesterday's headlines.

I remember being nervous about writing a book like this. I wasn't sure if this was my story to tell. In writing this, though, I realized that I wasn't just telling my story. I was telling the story of millions of queer people who never got a chance to tell theirs. This book became less about having the answers to everything,

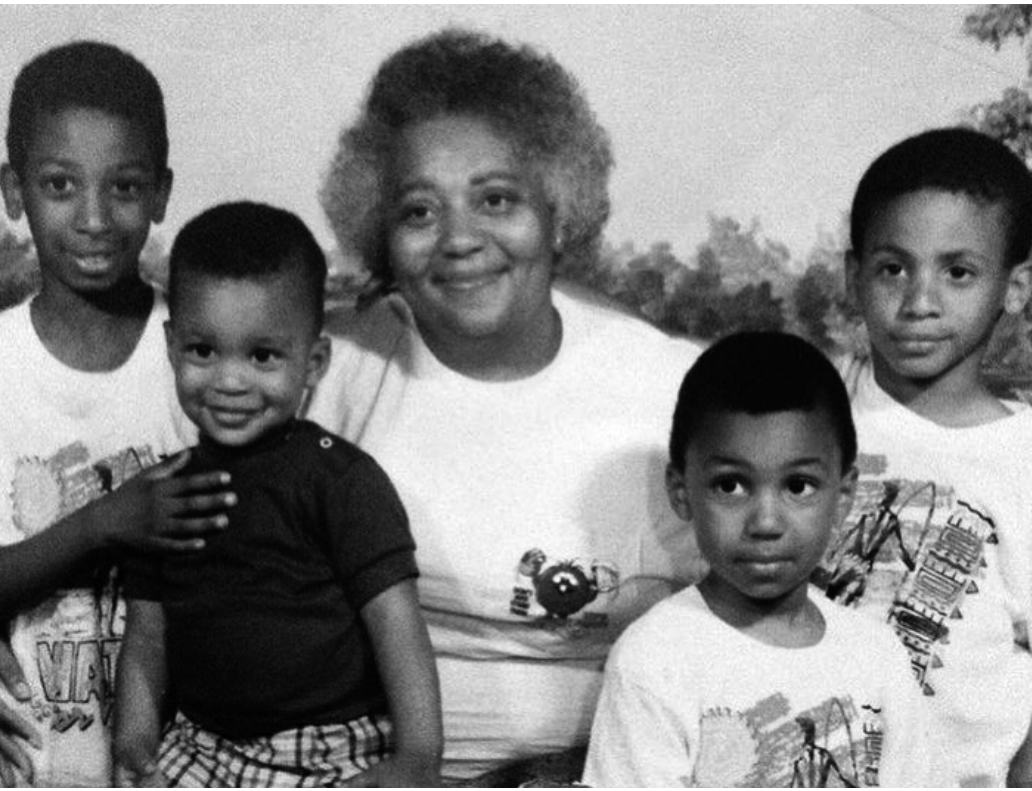
because I haven't been through everything. It became less about being a guide and more about being the gateway for more people to find their truth and find their power to live in that truth.

I often think about a statement Viola Davis made when she won her first Oscar. Something along the lines of encouraging people to go to the graveyard and dig up all the dead bodies in order to hear and tell the stories of those whose dreams were never realized. Those are the stories she's interested in telling. Although that is valid, I must challenge it. This book is proof positive that you don't need to go to the graveyard to find us.

Many of us are still here. Still living and waiting for our stories to be told—to tell them ourselves. We are the living that have always been here but have been erased. We are the sons and brothers, daughters and sisters, and others that never get a chance to see ourselves nor to raise our voices to ears that need to hear them.

Toni Morrison states in my favorite quote of all time, "If there's a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

This is the story of George Matthew Johnson. This is a story for us all.



Left to right: Rall, Garrett, Nanny (center), George, Rasul

ACT I

A DIFFERENT KID

CHAPTER 1

SMILE

I was five years old when my teeth got kicked out. It was my first trauma.

But before I get into that, introductions: My name is Matthew Johnson. Well, realistically, my name is George Matthew Johnson, but at five years old, I didn't know that yet. It all will matter in the end, though.

I'm from a small city located in New Jersey called Plainfield, about thirty miles from the bright lights of Manhattan. You could literally drive from one end of Plainfield to the other in less than ten minutes. It's a

compact city with so many interconnected stories. Triumph, tragedy, and trauma all exist within those few square miles. It is a place I once hated but grew to love as my true home. My only home.

My family has been a part of the fabric of this city for more than fifty years. My parents both held down city jobs for nearly three decades and still live there to this day. My brother and I grew up middle class, or at least what Black folk were supposed to think was middle class. With Christmases full of gifts under the tree, my little brother and I never wanted for a thing. We were blessed to have parents who understood what it was like to have the bare minimum, and who ensured that their kids never experienced that same plight. We are a rarity amongst most Black folks, who don't get to have intergenerational wealth like our white neighbors just one block over.

Family came first for us. I grew up with my little brother, Garrett, in the house. Our older brother, Gregory Jr., and sister, Tonya, from my dad's first marriage had moved out by that time. There were also cousins, aunts, and uncles living in Plainfield. Holidays were always a big family affair. For reference, I think the movie *Soul Food* stands as the closest semblance

to my upbringing, minus the fighting. Well, maybe a little bit of fighting.

My parents both worked "9–5, 5–9" as we called it. My father was a police officer who worked very long shifts. My mother was the head of the secretaries at the police department and owned a hair salon in town, where she would go in the evenings after her day job.

Some of my cousins used to live in the projects in Jersey City, an environment my mom's mother, Nanny, felt wasn't very conducive to the safe upbringing of small Black boys. Their parents were like oil and water. I can recall one time when their mom and dad visited Nanny's house. Aunt Cynthia and "Uncle" got into an argument over laundry that I learned much later was really over drugs. It then escalated into a full-on fistfight in the upstairs hallway. That would be the last time I saw their mother for years. Nanny knew she didn't want her grandkids growing up in all that. As she put it, "Y'all can run the streets all you want, my grandkids will not." And from that moment, she took them in and put them into school in Plainfield.

Nanny became the caregiver, cook, nurse, and disciplinarian for us all. Nanny was brown-skinned and

had a head full of gray hair. She was a bit heavyset, with one arm a little bigger than the other due to her lymphedema. She was from Spartanburg, South Carolina, and despite having lived in Jersey more than thirty-five years, she still had a very Southern accent.

My family provided the kind of upbringing and support system anyone would hope their children would have. The type of care, wealth, and love that should prevent a child from ever having to experience trauma or the same struggles that affected previous generations. Unfortunately, my life story is proof that no amount of money, love, or support can protect you from a society intent on killing you for your Blackness. Any community that has been taught that anyone not "straight" is dangerous, is in itself a danger to LGBTQIAKP people.

The elementary school allowed me to start kindergarten at age four because of a loophole in the system and my birthday being a month after school started. I remember having to "test in" to kindergarten because of it. So I was five when this event took place (in the spring of that next year).

By that age I already knew I was different, even though I didn't have the language to explain it or

maturity to understand fully what "different" meant. I wasn't gravitating toward typical boy things, like sports, trucks, and so on. I liked baby dolls and doing hair. I could sense that the feelings I had inside of me weren't "right" by society's standards either. I remember that on Valentine's Day, the boys were supposed to give their "crush" a card. Not wanting to give mine to a boy, I gave it to a girl who was clearly a tomboy even at that age. I was always attracted to the company of boys.

I used to daydream a lot as a little boy. But in my daydreams, I was always a girl. I would daydream about having long hair and wearing dresses. And looking back, it wasn't because I thought I was in the wrong body, but because of how I acted more girly. I thought a girl was the only thing I could be.

I struggled with being unable to express myself in my fullest identity. One that would encompass all the things that I liked while still existing in the body of a boy. However, I was old enough to know that I would find safety only in the arms of suppression—hiding my true self—because let's face it, kids can be cruel. I integrated well, though, or so I believed at the time. I became a world-class actor by the age of five, able

to blend in with the boys and girls without a person ever questioning my effeminate nature. Then again, we were so little—maybe all the children were just as naïve as I was about the kids who surrounded them.

I was five years old when my teeth were kicked out. It was my introduction to trauma, and now, I'm ready to start there.

At that age, I wasn't allowed to walk home from school by myself. So, I walked home with my older cousins, Little Rall and Rasul. During that time, my cousins lived with our grandmother, who also happened to be our primary caregiver—since our parents worked long hours. Walking to Nanny's house after school was our routine. I usually walked holding hands with Little Rall while Rasul went ahead. We would take the back way every day, which meant walking behind the school, through the football and baseball fields, to the street one block over from Nanny's house. On a normal day, that walk took less than ten minutes. Living so close to the school, I'm sure Nanny never imagined that within those ten minutes, her grandchild's life would be forever scarred.

The memory is vivid. I can still smell the air from that day, sunny and mild springlike weather. That

walk to my grandmother's started just like any other, with me holding hands with Rall, while Rasul sped ahead of us. We were at the corner of Lansdowne and Marshall on the lawn of the corner house when we ran into a group of kids from the neighborhood that I didn't recognize.

They had to be about my cousins' ages—around nine or ten years old. The main kid was white. To this day when we talk about it, we use his full name, but I won't say it here. The other kids were Black and white if memory serves me correctly. My cousins knew who they were, I guessed, because they immediately began arguing. When I sit with this memory, there is no sound in the moment. I can see it. When I write about it now, my body can feel it. But as I close my eyes to think about it, the situation was instant chaos. I got extremely nervous. I just held on to Rall's hand even tighter.

There were three of us and six of them, which was really two on six because what did a five-year-old know about fighting? The arguing kept getting more intense with my fear growing as the boys got closer, in each other's faces. It's strange how near to home and safety one can be when some of the most traumatic

things in life occur. I used to wonder what would've happened if we had walked a different route that day, or left the school five minutes earlier? Would my life have turned out any different?

Before I knew it, the argument broke into a fight, and I, the invisible boy, somehow became the biggest target. As my cousins squared up with three of the boys, two others grabbed me by my arms and held me on the ground. I screamed for help, as it was all I could do. The third kid swung his leg and kicked me in the face. Then he pulled his leg back again and kicked even harder.

My teeth shattered like glass hitting the concrete. In that moment, I felt nothing. It was as if it were all a dream. Then I felt the pain. I also felt an emotion I had never experienced before: rage. I didn't fully understand the feeling at the time—had not yet had the pleasure of introducing myself to it. The tears that streamed down my face were no longer about pain. I was now crying tears of anger. Tears of rage.

That rage was enough to stop the boy from ever bringing a third kick to my mouth. I somehow broke free, lunged forward, and bit his leg with the teeth I had remaining. He screamed so loud as I bit through

his jeans. By this time, my cousins had handled the other three boys and saw what had happened to me. They ran toward us together, which made all my assaulters retreat. They grabbed my book bag, and said, "Run to the house, Matt."

So, I did. Ironically, this moment marked the beginning of my track career, which I would pursue from elementary to high school. Sound is now back on in the memory at this point. I can hear my crying as I ran home. I got to my grandmother's house, and I continued to cry—bloody mouth, busted lip, and baby teeth knocked out.

"What happened?" yelled Nanny.

"We got jumped," my cousins explained. Nanny went and got ice and wrapped it in a paper towel, and she told me to hold it to my face.

It all gets a little hazy after that, as I remember bits and pieces of what occurred. My mother left work immediately to get to Nanny's. She sent an officer ahead to meet us at the house to take down the report. When my mother got there, she came and checked on me immediately. She sat in one of the dining room chairs and had me sit in her lap with her arms around me.

I finally calmed down once my mother held me. At

some point, my uncles showed up and were sitting with us all. My cousins were still visibly upset. I sat there in silence, feeling the rise and fall of my mother's chest with each breath she took. The officer began asking my cousins what happened, and they told their story. The officer asked me to open my mouth so he could note the damage in his report. I recall not speaking for hours after this happened.

When I close my eyes now, I see it all happening as if it were some out-of-body experience. I think back on that day a lot. I wish I knew what motivated the attack. Could it have been because I was effeminate? Could it have been a race thing, since the main assaulter was a white boy from a different part of the neighborhood? Could it have simply been the toxic behaviors we teach boys about fighting and earning manhood? I know that impact and intent always play a role, so even if their intent wasn't those things, the impact would forever change me anyway.

There were no counselors or therapy sessions to help me work through what had happened. Therapy is still very much a taboo subject in the Black community. Those who are seen as having issues with their

mental health face a lot of stigma and discrimination because mental health is often conflated with mental illness. So rather than having their child labeled as something hurtful, my parents did the best they could with what they knew.

We did what we always did as a family—we loved on each other even harder. In that moment, my mother just held me, and we sat there together for a long while. Eventually, she took me home. But the next day became just that. The next day. What happened the day before was to be forgotten, or better yet, buried.

Unfortunately, part of what I forgot was how to smile. I immediately became self-conscious about smiling. It's something I've struggled to remedy even as an adult. Because my baby teeth had been kicked out, my adult teeth—almost "buck teeth"—grew in extremely early. Adult-size teeth on a seven-year-old are very odd-looking, and it brought me a whole new type of attention I wasn't looking for. My lips became protection for the smile that was stolen. Picture after picture after picture, I refused to smile. There are photos of me at seven, nine, thirteen, twenty-two, and twenty-nine years old where I refuse to smile.

Every now and again, my mom will find a picture of me with my teeth showing. There aren't many of them, though. And when I look at them, sometimes I cringe. Other times, I've actually teared up, wondering if I was truly happy in that picture or if I simply felt the need to smile because someone said, "Smile, Matt" and I obliged. The fact that I don't feel happy when I look at those images lets me know there wasn't any happiness when I took them.

What did I look like to others—a child who rarely smiled? Did they ever take it as a sign that I was actually dealing with a trauma I couldn't get past? Or did they pass it off as a "boys will be boys" thing that I would eventually grow out of? To go years without smiling in pictures, rarely being questioned why, leaves me to wonder how many signs of trauma we miss or ignore in Black children.

Black boys are required to be rough and tough. To suck up the pain, and not shed a tear. *If you get into a fight, you better win the fight or I'm a beat your ass when you get home* is a phrase I've heard too many times from friends and family throughout my life. Being Black and queer brings on layers of issues.

There can be both a fear of your own community and a fear of dealing with bullying from other children who don't respect your identity. When that kind of pressure builds within a young queer kid, the fear becomes constricting and can wrap you up in layers, each more difficult to peel away as you grow up.

As an adult, I have gone through the unlearning to understand that my community's treatment of Black queer children is in fact a by-product of a system of assimilation to whiteness and respectability that forces Black people to fit one mold in society, one where being a man means you must be straight and masculine. I didn't have the ability to separate my Blackness from my queerness. The loss of my smile was as much a denial of my Black joy as it was my queer joy. When I did smile, it was a coping mechanism. My smile was a mask that hid the pain of suppressing who I was.

Masking is a common coping mechanism for a Black queer boy. We bury the things that have happened to us, hoping that they don't present themselves later in our adult life. Some of us never realize that subconsciously, these buried bones are what dictate our every navigation and interaction throughout life.

Oddly enough, many of us connect with each other through trauma and pain: broken people finding other broken people in the hopes of fixing one another.

I used to think that I had gotten over it if I took a good picture where I was smiling. But it only required one bad smiling pic to remind me of how trauma has a funny way of showing up in our lives during the moments when we least expect it. It can be an action that we write off as something else, when really it is the manifestation of a pain we had refused to deal with. A trauma that no one helped us fully process or that they didn't have the skills to even know we needed help for. *Boys aren't supposed to cry, so hold that shit in*. Sometimes to the grave.

There have been times when I brushed my teeth too hard and got a taste of blood and was immediately taken back to that day. An adult, crying in a bathroom mirror, pretending I didn't know why.

Trauma appears all throughout pop culture, often sung by the masses as a hot lyric, penned by the performer as a release of that pain. The trauma is shared by the community, too. Songs become our battle cries; trauma becomes the thing that bonds us together. So much so, that I've heard people actually say, "I need

sad Mary J. Blige to come back because her music is better." Our community struggles to connect with joy in the way that we have with pain.

When I hear Cardi B say, she "gotta bag and fixed [her] teeth," it's more than a cute line in a dope song. And yes, "Bodak Yellow" was a bop! But she is responding to years of hate and flack she received for having crooked teeth. She is talking about the trauma she dealt with, and what she was able to do to gain back agency over those moments, and then use it in a way to make folks proud. Every time she speaks about her teeth, she is allowing herself to work through the process of healing rather than be burdened by the weight of holding the trauma in.

For years, I held that traumatic moment inside of me, and it was reflected in hundreds of pictures that captured my face absent a smile. I tried smiling with my mouth closed or making faces. As I got older, I would get hit on by guys and crack a smile. They would say, "You have a nice smile" and my instant reaction was to roll my eyes in disbelief. And I'd even have friends send me messages saying, "I noticed you don't ever smile." I would deflect the comments and give some reason that had nothing to do with what

I was actually feeling. I still had that five-year-old in me who was not ready to smile. This queer in me that couldn't fully be.

January 15, 2015, would signal a change in my smile-related trauma. My mother had two brain aneurysms that day. It was a dire situation, and my family was very unprepared. As a thirty-year-old, I knew I had to hold it all together. I was her eldest and I knew she would need me.

I remember the doctor saying, "It's time to take her back to the prep room. Two people can come to walk her in." My father and I decided that it would be us. They wheeled her into the prep room right before you go into the OR and told us, "You have one minute." My dad stood on one side of her bed, and I stood on the other. He leaned in and gave her a kiss, and she said, "I'm going to be fine."

I stood there. Nervous. *Terrified*. I finally gave her a kiss, too. As I pulled away, she could see that I was choking up. In that moment, I felt like that five-year-old boy sitting on his mother's lap just after losing his teeth. And she, in her moment of need, was my comfort. It was as if she always knew that I hadn't gotten

past that day. And before she went into that operating room, she needed to make sure that I did. As a tear rolled from each of my eyes, she looked up at me and said: "Smile, Matt. Just smile."

I gave her the biggest smile I ever had since the day I lost it.

My mom survived her surgery, and I learned a valuable lesson about holding on to trauma. It's necessary that we do the work to unpack our shit. It's time for the world to let queer Black boys unpack their shit.

Smile, Black boys.

PS: The day after my teeth were kicked out, my cousins went back up to our school with my uncle and beat up the main boy and his father while waiting for school to start. They got suspended for five days. Don't mess *with family.*

CHAPTER 2

IDENTITY

"Matthew . . . MATTHEW!!!" Nanny was yelling for me.

"What?"

"Don't you *what* me, boy."

I ran downstairs and stood in front of the big chair in the living room where Nanny sat and said, "Yes, Nanny?"

"Go upstairs and grab my purse from behind the door."

"Okay," I said, and again I went running. I was

always Nanny's go-for to retrieve something. You know, *go-for this* or *go-for that*. I actually enjoyed being her helper, though. She would often make you come from upstairs to where she was downstairs only to send you back upstairs to where you'd just left, to get what she needed, and come back to her. Nanny was old school. She liked to make sure she saw you before giving you instructions.

The towering yellow house on Lansdowne Terrace in Plainfield was my second home. We used to call it the "Big House," in comparison to my parents' home, which was much smaller. This was Nanny's house and our daily refuge after a long, rigorous day of elementary school. With my parents working, my brother and I would stay there after school every day from about 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. My mom would then come and pick us up after her time at the salon and bring us home.

The Big House was always fun because my cousins Rall and Rasul lived there, as well as my aunt Munch (when not in college). When I was a kid, Nanny's house also felt like "home." There were plenty of times Friday would come, and my mother would ask if we wanted to come home or stay the weekend. My younger brother and I *always* opted to stay for the

weekend—which I'm sure our mother appreciated since she also worked at her salon on Saturdays.

The Big House also meant family. There was a big dining room table there, and Nanny loved cooking on Sundays and having all the Elders—Mom and Nanny's side of the family—over for dinner to watch football on the big-screen TV in the living room.

I recall one particular Sunday evening though when me and my cousin Little Rall were teasing each other—playfully—like we always did. The jokes started off very mild.

"That's why you short," I remember saying to him.

"That's why you ugly," he said back.

Everyone was letting it happen because it seemed harmless enough at first; no one would get their feelings hurt. But that all changed very quickly when I made a joke about his grades. For reference, I was a straight-A student—considered a nerd by most standards. My cousins knew that I was smart, and they weren't as much jealous about it as they were irritated. See, I was always used as the gold standard for how everyone else's grades should have been. So I said it:

"That's why you get bad grades."

This pissed him all the way off. Luckily for me, Little Rall was always my protector so I didn't worry much about him ever retaliating violently. Had this been Rasul, the result would've been different for sure. But Little Rall, instead of hitting me physically, went below the belt and hit me in the worst way possible. With a truth that most in my family were not ready for me to learn, whatever their reasons:

"THAT'S WHY YOUR REAL NAME IS GEORGE."

I stood there shocked at the statement. First, because I thought, *What a stupid comeback*. Second, because I just knew that it wasn't true. So, I said to him, "No, it's not!" To which he responded, "Yes, it is. Your name is George not Matthew." This time, I got upset and started yelling, "My name is not George, my name is Matthew!" repeatedly until Nanny walked from the kitchen into the dining room, where we were arguing.

"What is all this noise?"

I looked at her and said, "Little Rall keeps saying my name is George, that my name isn't Matthew." Her face became stone solid, teeth clenched. She looked at Little Rall with that face that every Black child fears

from a Black mother. That face where you could see the words in their eyes before they spoke them: "I'm gonna beat your ass when everyone goes home." Luckily for Little Rall, she could see how upset I was and opted to deal with him later.

"Come into the living room, Matt, and let's talk."

I sat on the couch with Nanny and she explained that Little Rall was correct, that my real name was George. I just remember sitting there and pondering what that meant. Like, did that mean I was supposed to be a different person? Was some mistake made when I was born? Did everyone else in the family go by fake names, too?

I was devastated by the news. It felt like my whole reality had been shattered, and I could not process what it all meant. I asked a bunch of questions, starting with, "Why don't y'all use my real name?"

Pull up your seats, everyone, because it's story time. Stories are a common theme in this book, so you might wanna get some popcorn, too. Although I wasn't told at the time why my family decided to not use my given name, they felt more comfortable sharing the story once I got older.

Let's go back to the hospital room where I was born . . .

My parents and grandmother were gathered around as they made the decision about what I would be named. At the time, my father was insistent upon all his sons' names starting with a *G*. My older brother was already a junior—named Gregory Girard Johnson Jr., after my dad. So, my dad, in all his creativity, thought my name should be Girard Gregory Johnson. Did I mention my father was country? You'll understand why later. Thankfully, my mother and Nanny gave him an emphatic "try again."

So then my father decided that I would follow in the line of *his* father and brother and be named "George." My grandfather's name was George Washington Johnson. It's okay to laugh, as I did when I first heard it as a child. And my father's brother was named George Stevenson Johnson. And it's okay to laugh at his name, too. The second attempt at my name was to make me a junior under his brother—George Stevenson Johnson Jr.—since my uncle had three daughters. To this idea, my mother and Nanny gave him another "try again." Anyone who knows my father knows he is the king of his castle and wants things his way. So,

when it was all said and done, they compromised: He could pick my first name as long as Nanny and my mother could pick the middle one.

It was in that moment that Nanny pulled out her Bible and told my mother, "This baby is going to have a biblical middle name, because there is no way in hell that I am calling a little baby George." As they thumbed through the chapters, "Matthew" struck a chord with them. He was a good character from the Bible, in their opinion, and they felt that I looked like a Matthew. On that day, George Matthew Johnson entered the world, but Matthew Johnson left that hospital.

Jumping back to that night in the Big House: Nanny felt I was too young to hear that story, knowing it would've only led to me asking more questions, so she gave me a generic answer, "We just decided to go with your middle name."

That night, my mom came to pick me and my brother up, and my grandmother told her what had happened. Mom asked if I was okay, and I told her, "Yeah, I'm fine." But honestly, I wasn't. She thought nothing more of it and drove us back home. Little did she know that this issue was far from over for me.

The next day, I went to school and everything seemed normal. Mrs. P. called out the attendance like she did every day—going down the list of names to see who was absent on her roster. "Matthew Johnson" she said aloud, to which I responded, "Here." Class went on as it usually did that day. We had a quiz, and she gave us thirty minutes to complete it.

"Pencils down everyone," Mrs. P. called as the timer rang.

When she got to my desk, I handed her my paper. She glanced at it, then looked at me, and down at the paper again. It seemed as if she knew something was going on but wasn't sure if it was one of those things that should be addressed in front of the class or in private. She said nothing at the time and moved on to correcting papers. Throughout the day she gave out other assignments for the English and science portions of class. Each time she gave us another paper, I did my work and then wrote my name on top:

George Johnson

It never even crossed my mind that the teacher might be concerned that I was having an identity crisis. As a kid, I adapted very quickly to change, much better than I ever have as an adult. I was able to shift from

the night before, where I felt my whole life had been a lie, to the next day, where I thought it was cool that I had a different name. This ease showcased my ability to just go with the flow. I had agency—the power to control my narrative—and this was a moment where I was choosing to do what I felt was best for me, no questions asked. As a child who so rarely got to choose his path, in a society that expected me to check off a particular box about my identity, this was one choice I was able to make. One identity marker that I had the power to define.

I was excited to write my name every chance I got that day. I kept going back and forth with the way I would make my *G*'s. I was in my own little world, telling all my friends that my real name was George. To an eight-year-old, this was headline news. Their friend whose name was Matthew just yesterday was now going by George! The event caused a bit of a ruckus, because of course other kids wanted to change their names, too. I kept telling them they would have to check with their parents first to get permission, as I did.

After school, we walked to Nanny's house as usual, sat at the table, and began doing our homework. As soon as we wrapped that up, we went upstairs to my

cousins' room and began playing video games. We could hear the phone ringing, but we hardly ever got any phone calls, so we rarely answered—unless Nanny shouted, "Get the damn phone." This time, she didn't, and I heard Nanny answer it herself in her usual white-lady voice, saying, "Hellooo." After a minute or two, she yelled for me.

"MATT!!! Come down here and get the phone. It's your mommy."

I came running into the foyer area, where Nanny was standing. "Here, baby." She passed the phone over.

"Hey, Matt. I want to talk about what name you want to use," my mother said. "The teacher called home today and was concerned about you changing your name on all of your papers to George."

I remember telling her, "Yeah, I wrote it since it's my real name."

"I know, but now you have a decision to make. You can either go by George or you can go by Matthew. You can take some time to decide. But you can't go back and forth, so we gotta choose one." In that moment, I got a little nervous. Nervous that I would disappoint them by going with George over Matthew.

Before I could say anything else, she said, "No one will be mad at you for changing it. You are old enough to make this decision on your own."

My mother always knew just what to say to me. She knew how important it was for me, even at the age of eight, to be making this decision for myself. One that I didn't have a choice in originally. I paused for a few seconds to think about it. Nanny was still standing there, waiting for me to decide. Then I said, "I'm gonna keep Matthew."

"Okay . . . Matthew it is. I'll let your teacher know. I'll see you later, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy!"

And just like that, my name was back to Matthew.

I was able to use the name Matthew all the way up through middle school—which happened to be in the public school system. In public school, they allowed me to go by my middle name on all the rosters. By the time I got to ninth grade however, Matthew was a no-go for the strict standards of my Catholic school.

"George Johnson" was the legal name on the attendance roll that first day of ninth grade, and no, they were not willing to change that to Matthew Johnson.

There were a few kids in the Catholic school that had gone to elementary and middle school with me. As soon as they heard the name and me say "Here," they looked at me like, "Who the f*** is George?" That first week, I remember saying, "Yes, that's my real name" over and over again. Funny enough, my entire family was also still not going for it. So in school I was called George all day, only to get home and be Matthew to my family, friends, and anyone else who had known me growing up.

My name has been George to some and Matthew to others since that time. And although I think this is a funnier story in the lexicon of what has been my interesting life, I feel there is a deeper meaning here. This story isn't about my name. It isn't about the shock of the eight-year-old who felt some cruel trick was being played on him, or the thirteen-year-old who would have to accept using his first name.

This is about identity. This is about culture and how it dictates what is a "good" and "bad" name, especially in the Black community. This is about the politics around sex and gender, and that when our parents choose a name that we as children are uncomfortable with, we have the right to change it.

My mother respected my agency by allowing me to choose what would work best for me. But would that conversation have been so simple if I'd wanted my name to be Dominique or Samantha? Even as a child, there was an understanding that the name I went by was meant for the comfort of my family. That yes, even though they didn't want to call a baby George, at some point it would no longer be their decision to make. My name was meant for me, and me alone.

Going to a Catholic school that didn't allow me to use a "preferred name" also taught me a valuable lesson in conformity. In addition to having students wear the same uniforms, the school expected us to uphold a set of social and behavioral standards. We were all forced to attend Mass and take a religion class, despite what our own religious beliefs may have been. And we were disciplined for anything that questioned or didn't fit within any of these standards. As restrictive as these standards were, they prepared me for when I entered spaces later in life that required me to meet respectability standards in order to be accepted. These conformist structures did force me to act out in other ways while in school.

In one specific instance, I wore a basketball head-

band on a dress-down day. I had made it through three periods before a teacher told me I had to take it off, which I refused to do. She repeated, "You are not allowed to wear that headband in my class."

"Well, I'm not taking it off, so what is the next step?" I said.

In a very smug voice, she said, "I'm writing you up and assigning you detention."

"Okay, but this headband is staying on."

Agency—a word I didn't know when I was that young—is a guiding principle that I wish we taught young kids about more. Rather than saying, "You are wearing this," I hope more adults will ask, "What would you like to wear?" And then have a conversation about those choices. When we see our children not conforming to the societal standards of heterosexuality or we see them gravitating to things of the "opposite gender," I would love for us to ask the deeper questions about who and what they are.

Your name is one of the most important pieces of your identity. It is the thing that you own. It is attached to every piece of work that you put into the world. Your name holds power when you walk into a room. No

two people with the same name are the same person. It's important that, like everything else you grow to love in life, your name is something you appreciate as well.

Should you not like your name, change it. It is yours, and it will stay with you forever, so do with it what you wish. As we continue to grow through sex and gender, many people will take back their power and change their names—choosing one that fits the person they are, not the one society pushed them to be. Keep your name if you like it. But know that you don't have to.

The most important thing to realize is that you have the agency to make decisions that are in your best interest. The power to push back against society and even those in your own home. It is unfortunate that we live in a world where owning your agency could be met with rejection, disrespect, or even violence—especially for those owning their queer identity from a young age.

Suffice it to say, respect people for their names, and for how they choose to identify. This also goes for respecting people and their choice of pronouns—he/him, she/her, they/them, god, goddess, or whatever. We are

conditioned to think these things should be the exception. People being allowed to be called by their chosen names and their gender pronouns *is the rule*.

Let yourself unlearn everything you thought you knew about yourself, and listen to what you need to know about those who navigate life outside the margins of a heterosexual box. I bet most of you never thought to ever question if you even like your name. Or question if that was something you had the power to change if you didn't. I hope you will now . . .