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Alex Carr Johnson

Every Day Like Today: Learning How to Be a Man in Love

An Excerpt from the Manuscript

Over the last few years, I've taken to running on the shoulders of mountains like a coyote. Letting my muscles and tendons find the route through the juniper and sage. Climbing three thousand feet and screaming from the summit. Letting my heart, a knot of muscle, tell me how fast and slow. I run out the door, into the wilderness, and then find my way back. It's a habit I began learning when I was 14, lost in the adolescent wastelands of suburban St. Louis. I remember the night clearly. My parents were out; my brother, Matt, was doing sit-ups with his feet tucked under the couch. Too proud to grunt. I lay sprawled on top of it as I half-watched a stupid sitcom. He just said it, you're so lazy. I said, I'll show you lazy, and walked right out the front door wearing cargo shorts, a baggy cotton shirt, and sneakers.

I was mostly angry at the easy way Matt moved through the world, confident, handsome, strong. The differences between us were always obvious. Matt took to sports since before he could walk and had always won them all: soccer and baseball, foot races and biking, home run derbies and fishing. I never tried. Couldn't catch a lobbed ball to save all the daisies in the world. Instead, I drew, piecing together elaborate marble machines, making blueprints for dream homes. I told myself stories. I stared at ants. Matt played the trumpet; I played the viola. Matt made out with girls; I jump roped with them.

My brother and his friends reminded me daily how I was *a pussy, a dork, a fag*. For years, I hid and dodged. Devised games of escape so I would not have to be caught looking weak or weird or gay. I studied my brother endlessly, especially as he grew into his power. He hit me. Threatened violence. Minor, of course. The most minor of daily offenses. He yelled at my mom. Admired my dad. And he cultivated an adoring crowd. For his abilities to hit home runs. Score goals. Be so fucking confident. With such a good example ready at hand, I grew quite good at the game of becoming a man. I cut my hair short. I stopped playing with girls. I hid my viola, stopped drawing.

I didn't even notice as I was becoming one of them. Except there was still one, terrible, sneaking, monstrous thing that would keep me from being a man like my brother.

All my life I had been told I would inherit the Earth. I would be powerful. I would do great things. But I was fucking it all up by being soft and sweet and quiet and gay. I was a traitor. Worse than a girl, because at least girls never have the power to begin with. The terror grew inside my darkest places like a terrible illness, except I could not blame a bug or a virus. I could only blame myself. The older and stronger I appeared, the more successfully I passed as a man, the greater the terror grew inside my heart. And the hate. How do I describe it except this? I was more scared of the terrible wildness in myself than I was of the violence that it might cause toward me. I wasn't angry at my brother; I was angry at my own failure for being him. How could I not learn to hate myself? I despised myself. Quietly. Wordlessly. Endlessly. A person can't last long this way. So something broke.

I pumped my scrawny arms and legs out into the darkened street. I went heaving down the sidewalk. At each street lamp, I crossed the street to the darkness to avoid any unseen eyes. I wanted no one to see this, see me. I kept running when my street ended and the blacktop of the middle school parking lot began, kept running across the lot to the soccer field, kept running to the cinder practice track where I could dig in my toes and sprint. No one could see my chest heaving, could hear me sucking in the dull starless sky, could witness me learning how to turn fear into anger and anger into freedom.

I never really stopped after that. Ranging, I guess. I left that suburb the first chance I could get. South and east to South Carolina, Florida, Georgia for a gap year volunteering. Then north to Wisconsin, the shore of Lake Superior for college. Summers, finding ways to go out farther. Found gigs in Anchorage. With a semester left, quit college to lead a trail crew for a year out of Juneau. Hawaii. Montana. Mexico. A dozen years of running and ranging. I might have looked lost from a thousand miles away, but it didn't much feel that way to me. It felt like an education. I was learning the shape of the continent by crossing it back and forth, following its edges, looking down box canyons and up long ranges. Learning how to migrate. Learning home. Learning what it meant to be my own kind of man.

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I was angry, too—sure, at Matt, but that was just the surface of the anger, he just the easiest target. I didn't realize how angry I'd been or for how long. But Matt made it most obvious. I was angry because I had never been told that I had another family: the queer and wild ones. I had never been told of these mothers and fathers and cousins and brothers whose stories were my inheritance.

I was more than angry because this inheritance was being wiped from the face of the Earth as I was being born, even as I was being brought into the world, learning how to speak and read and write and ride a bike. My family was dying with their stories. They were disappearing from this Earth.

I was more than angry because it wasn't just a virus that was killing my family, but a society that allowed that virus to kill these men because they were somehow wrong, somehow unnatural. That's the fag disease. These queers were dying because they did mean, dirty things in the dark. Things too evil, thank god, to do in the light of the day. I was more than angry because AIDS was still killing us, still staining all our hands, killing black people, killing Africans, killing Latinos, killing American Indians and Native Alaskans. It was killing poor people. The virus followed the fault lines of our society. It eroded away those people already made vulnerable.

I was more than angry because I knew more about the rich, white men who committed suicide after losing their fortunes in the '20s than I knew of the poor, queer men who committed suicide after being diagnosed with HIV—knowing that they would likely live no more than three years, knowing that their roommates would throw them out, that their families already had thrown them out, that their lovers and friends were dying themselves or taking care of the others who were dying, and that they might have to wait a year before they could even get into a hospital.

I was more than angry that I had to go out searching for my other family on my own. I remembered. It's the only way I can say it. I remembered that I had an inheritance. I remembered my other family.

I was more than angry because everyone had assumed I was straight. Matt did; Mom did; Dad did; I did. We all assumed I was a boy, too. And I suppose I was. I have become a man. How many different people did I once have the capacity to become? Why was I not allowed to know of those other possible people? Why did I have to fight so hard, the hardest kind of battle, the silent one inside myself, just to be this one man who I did discover I could be.

I was more than angry because our teachers never taught us Larry Kramer's "1,112 and Counting," or the Queer Nation Manifesto, or James Baldwin's *Another Country*. I was more than angry because my best friend told me I was not allowed to be angry. I am a man. I am white. I am privileged. I am not allowed to be angry.

I was more than angry because a part of me still believes my best friend. I believe that I am not allowed to be angry. I try not to be angry. I do not want to be angry.

I was more than angry because it was not Matt who had to be patient. It is not you who has to be patient; it's us. We are the ones who must keep loving you, even when you hate us. Even when you tell us we are unnatural. Even when you tell us that we are abominations. That our love should not exist. Even when some terrible part of us believes those things. Don't you see how if we turn away from our love then we turn away from our lives?

It is the love of possibility and creativity and imagination. It is a queer love. It is the love that extends out beyond your blood and beyond the walls of what we call ourselves. We can love other people's children. We can love the ones who came long before. We can love people we have yet to meet. We invent our love every day, and our families. We can press our outstretched hands to the gorgeous curves of difference. We can love animals. We can love the land. We can love a river. We can love our strange sphere of liquid rock spinning through space, living as it is, somehow changing, growing, becoming new.

But all that wildness in people's souls scares them. We have been taught to fear it. That way leads to sin. And death. And darkness. You know what the thing is about darkness? In darkness lies the unknown. In darkness lies possibility. In darkness lies hope.

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I wish I could tell you that Pete and I are now free. But we still can't hold hands when we walk down the street in town, not without the risk of physical threats to our lives. And do you want to know the really angering part? Our fear is nothing special. So many of us are not safe to walk down the street in our bodies. Our skin tone, the language we speak, our gender, the gods we praise, the love we have to give to the world. These are the things that are used against us. To keep us from living freely in the world.

The mountains don't care, though. Or the rivers. The bears and the terns. The swallow-tails and the porcupines. So I will keep going out to meet them. Their wildness is my freedom and my escape. They offer me my home, my family, and my peace. If we allow them to be burned and developed and tamed then we will be forever less wild, and so we will forever be less free. I will defend them, their wildness, in order to protect our own wildness, our own freedom, and our own love long after my body has gone away. This is the heart of it. Can you see it? It's beautiful, I swear.