

Pray the Gay Away

Have you ever had that feeling in life where everything around you is in some way against you? This is exactly how I feel being a Christian who identifies as a pansexual. It's not as crazy as it sounds, knowing that being anything other than straight is automatically a sin. What's crazy is witnessing the pastor praying for people who are other than straight to become perhaps straight. Yet, that is the same pastor who eats pork. The same pastor who judges people based on how they dress and/ or looks. How can those who believe in God despise the rest? I thought only God can judge, maybe I should look into the bible more and see if I can find a book, chapter, or verse that talks about how humans are allowed to judge, because they withhold a high title in the church. I'm no bible expert but doesn't the bible state that no sin is greater than the other? And doesn't the bible state that God forgives all sin? Actually it does, this can be found in Matthew 12:31-32 states, "Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." So, apparently God forgives me every time, I mean after all I have no control over whom I am attracted to. Okay, so back to the beginning where I mentioned the pastor trying to pray the gay away. Hearing such a prayer was hurtful, because I love the pastor yet I have realized that the pastor may not love me just as much. That prayer was offensive. I wondered if she was praying hard enough, being I'm still attracted to anything else more than I am attracted to men. That prayer wasn't hard enough, it was more so self hatred than it was to LGBTQ+ members because whenever you are bothered by someone else it is a reflection of your own self esteem. I kept this prayer in mind, because I knew that one day it all was going to come back onto her.

A few months later, about three to five, it was time for the church oratorical contest. This is the biggest church event of the year. This event takes place once a year and always happens in August. A oratorical contest is when all of the branches of the church come together and they're all in a hotel located in Cherry Hill. This year, spending the weekend at a hotel couldn't happen because of covid. So, instead the bishop decided to do it virtual. At the church I attend, Ebenezer Pentecostal Church, which is located a few feet away from my middle school Mastery Charter Harrity, no youth ever volunteers. I guess youth and church doesn't collide, because you will think that the youth doesn't even exist. Trying to get them to do things is like talking to dirt, forget about a brick wall. Because of the deadness within the youth, Minister Cummings contacted me. Minister Cummings and I have a strong bond; like mother and daughter. She even calls me daughter, and I call her mom; we've had this ongoing bond since I was twelve years old. When I was twelve, I gave my life to the Lord. When you give your life to the Lord, for the youth, you must attend bible study and some children's church services. For the adults, you must do this long program, which doesn't have anything to do with the Lord. It's basically like work, work, work instead of worship, worship, worship. I said the salvation prayer myself twice, before saying it in front of a church. I found the prayer on youtube. It is even located in the bible, but I preferred to repeat it after someone so I can know what to say. I said the salvation prayer back in third grade and I did it again a few years later. Maybe that's why pastor couldn't pray the gay away, because every time you turned around I was saying that sinner's prayer. Church wasn't really my thing, but bible study was something different. For me, bible study was history and I love history. I had seen the group message a few days before Minister Cummings contacted me. The church folks and leaders were all in multiple big group chats. The church members were looking for someone who was between the age of twelve and nineteen to represent the church. Only youth are allowed to volunteer, because it is based around the youth; it puts the youth to the

test. Since nobody volunteered, she knew that I wouldn't let her down, so she contacted me about it. She texted me on the weekend, asking me if I'm interested. I have a bad habit of not being able to tell the ones I love "no." So of course, I said yes. There were two topics to choose from. One was about how quarantine affected you and your relationship with God, and the other was about activism and how you will continue the legacies of those activists who died before us. As I mentioned before, I love history. It's kind of obvious which one I picked; the second choice. I clicked the link and I registered as a competitor. What could possibly go wrong? When it came to writing essays, nobody could take my pencil nor power away from me.

After registering, I began planning out what I wanted to write about. I was stuck, because it had to be based on one activist, and I'm not the type of writer who only focuses on one person when it comes to writing about black lives mattering. You see, when I write essays that are based around the concept of black lives, I tend to use those activists who really aren't talked about perhaps neglected. So, deciding one activist was hard. At this point, I was sitting on the couch in the living room with a laptop on my lap. I wanted to give myself a brain break, because there was just so much going on in my head at once. I picked up the remote, turned on the tv, and turned on Hulu. I tend to watch shows or movies, and I tend not to finish them. I was browsing through the things I didn't finish, so that I can have a little background noise while trying to decide on an activist and *boom*. That's where I saw the Marsha P. Johnson documentary that I never completed. When I clicked on it, that's where it had hit me. Witnessing a pastor trying to pray the gay away. If she can offend a part of my identity, then I can become biased to her in her own church. That's it, I chose Marsha P. Johnson.

I never told anyone, "Hey! I am writing about Marsha P. Johnson, who fought for LGBTQ+ rights and who was also a drag queen." I wasn't obligated to, because I am the one who is representing the church, not them. The church leaders just had to find out when I wanted them to. I wasn't keeping it a secret or anything, because, after all, this speech is being played in front of hundreds of church people. I knew that this was going to be biased, since Christianity is supposed to look perfect and be just as holy as the Creator Himself. Well, I'd like to break it to you, that's not what Christianity is about. You aren't supposed to run along and make yourself seem superior, instead you're supposed to spread love. It's not about following the Ten Commandments, giving people the Holy Ghost, going to church every Tuesday and Thursday for prayer, Wednesday for bible study, and Sunday for Church; it's about having a relationship with God. I must admit, Christians often preach the wrong message, which turns people away from Christianity and Christians always wonder why people refuse to go to church. There is just too much judgment and criticism within Christianity. I still decided to take this risk, because when I get offended by someone I will do anything in my power to get my point across, and nobody was going to stop me. I started drafting out what I was going to talk about. I basically made a biography connecting myself to Marsha P. Johnson. After all, me and her were similar. I didn't want to be like everyone else who decided to choose an activist everyone knows. I wanted to choose an activist I can relate to, and also feel for. I felt for Marsha, because just like me, she went through a phase of being neglected, hated, and discriminated against because of who she was. Not only did I choose her based on my connection with her, I always chose her because of how badly Christians neglect and ignore the LGBTQ+ community. How can I go to a church where they neglect my own people? I started to feel bad for myself, at one point I hated myself for allowing myself to sit within this cycle of Christianity perfection. It was disgusting and ignorant. I felt

like a hypocrite, because I sat through churching knowing how badly they neglected me. If there was a time to speak it, it was now.

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I was quite a bit nervous to vocalize my thoughts, openly, to the leaders of the church. Me and the leaders have a strong bond, but I didn't want them to look at me any different because I decided to talk about something that I withhold dearly. They should understand right? Would me speaking up for the LGBTQ+ community make me a traitor? There were so many thoughts fluttering within my mind, so many possibilities that can come true. I began to have an anxiety attack, just thinking about how within a few minutes I can also be neglected. I always had this mindset of not caring about what people have to say about me, because I was me and nobody could change that, not even me. Yet when it came down to this particular situation, I was stuck in between. I didn't know if I should or shouldn't care about what they had to say. The only thing I did know is that I was in the right. What was right though? Going up against the bible or going up against a pastor's prayer? I forgot my existence inside of the zoom, until I was greeted by Minister Marecedes.

"Good afternoon Sister. Aylin! How are you?"

"Good afternoon Sister Marecedes! I'm good and how are you?"

"Good. That's good to hear."

You will never be inside of a zoom room, without being properly greeted. Their greeting was a way of trying to get to know how your day is going and if there's anything wrong in your life.

"We're just waiting for a few more people to join and we'll begin."

Church folks always wait for everyone to join, before starting. If they were missing someone or a few people, they would call that person and wait for them to join. If they would get the answering machine, they would text you or text the group chat to let you know that they're waiting for you to begin. That's just how things work.

When everyone had joined, the meeting began. They went over the essay topics and rules, and after awhile I got tired of hearing about the rules. I just wanted to state my idea and how I was going to go about it, but then I had to remember it's church. Church is going to take however long it pleases, and you can't complain. In all honesty I didn't even think that the meeting was for me. By the time they got to me, I was already dozing off and it was the afternoon! I am never sleepy in the afternoon, never ever! By the time it was time for me to speak on my ideas, I was already halfway asleep. Literally, 50% into my way of being asleep.

"Sister Aylin, what are your ideas so far?"

"I was thinking about the LGBTQ+ activism and how that had an impact on today."

They went silent for a bit, but they understood that I'm Aylin and whether or not they don't like something, I'm still going to do it. I think my personality played a major role in their acceptance, because they understood that homosexuality was forbidden yet they also understood who I am as a person. My heart is very different compared to your average sized Christians; I see all sin as equal, not different. My perspective is exactly why I chose Marsha. I knew that my speech was going to be biased towards the bible, church, and Christianity but I didn't care not one bit. If I had something on my mind, then it must come off. And it will.

"Who is this activism based around?"

Now, that answer to the question will have them even more shook. Not only was Marsha P. Johnson a member of the LGBTQ+ community, but she was also a transgender which is way worse to Christians than being just gay. Yet since they were old, they barely knew anything.

“This essay is based around Marsha P. Johnson.”

“I never heard of her, who’s she?”

“She’s someone who fought for gay rights when the StoneWall riots were happening.”

“Oh.”

After having to explain who Marsha P. Johnson was, they began to talk about how biased it will be for me to talk about someone who is gay since it’s a church contest. But I obviously knew what position I was placing myself in, but I didn’t give a damn. If I was going to be the one representing a church, I was going to be representing it my way. It was either I have it my way or they lose their only representative, someone had to surrender.

Minister Cummings always supported me, so she definitely supported what I wanted my essay to be based around. She told me she was proud, because not a lot of people would be brave enough to step up and talk about the accomplishments of the LGBTQ+ community since they are forbidden. In reality every Christian is supposed to be a member, because they’re supposed to be an ally but instead they’re homophobic. Minister Cummings knew that I didn’t care about who or what I was going against, because she knew how brave I am. When it comes to things that are important to me, you’re going to hear it. You technically don’t have a choice. If it’s my word against yours, I would definitely defeat your word at all costs. That was something she knew. Nobody could stop me, not even a prayer. After the meeting, me and her talked about how I will go about my essay without offending anyone. Time out! Offending? Why would Christians be offended by someone’s sexuality? Why be straight when there’s other things you can be? I didn’t even want anyone’s opinion on how my essay would be done, just give me the time and I’ll do it. That’s what exactly she did, gave me a few days to have my rough draft and the link to the next meeting.

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What she didn’t tell me was that the next meeting would have higher leaders. I mean, that didn’t shock me but pastor is what shocked me. In order to have things go through, everything must go through the pastor. It was always pastor, pastor, pastor. It was like an autocracy, the pastor was always in charge and what she says goes, everything was under her ruling. I never knew that pastors were so strict when it came to how their church was run, I always looked at church as being a democracy growing up but my assumptions were obviously wrong. There were about fifteen adults inside of that meeting, which meant fifteen high leaders of a church. I was kind of overwhelmed, because I get nervous when I have to present something, I guess it’s just stage fright. The day before the meeting I wrote, “only God can judge”, because I knew what type of person pastor was. I also knew that I was writing that will hush her up. I was known for being a shady person, and that was one of my ways of throwing shade at the pastor: putting God and judgment in one sentence.

Minister Cummings began to talk.

“Pastor, we have Aylin to go over her rough draft for the contest and we would like you to hear it so that it’s fine with you.”

“Okay, that’s fine.”

“Aylin, we’re ready when you are.”

There was my que to begin, as I said before I got nervous when having to read something, so I took a deep breath and began. While reading, I made sure to emphasize “only God can do the judging” because pastor needs to always remember that when trying to pray the gay away. The rest of my reading was quite shaky, because I was nervous, and that made me read faster and faster. Here’s the thing about church folks, you have to read to them slow because they’re old. So, I already knew that when it came to feedback that’ll be one issue. I made sure to hit every powerful word and saying with louder language, to emphasize its power.

When I was done reading, I hurried to mute myself, because I needed to take a few deep breaths. The adults began to type in the chat about how they liked it and some even began to talk on the mic. I really didn’t want to hear others feedback, I wanted to hear pastors. At this moment, it was me vs pastor, because not only am I representing her but I’m going against her prayer after all. Pastor is the type of person to wait until everyone else is done to talk, and that’s what made me wait patiently for her to speak. I just couldn’t wait for her feedback, I was like a little kid whose parents just told her that she can get some candy after not having it in a week. I wanted that candy, I wanted to hear what she had to say. I was beyond anxious to hear what she had to say. The words that may come off of her tongue is exactly what I wanted to hear, I was eager. After everyone else went, it was time for the pastor to go. In my head, I thought *yes!* It’s her turn, I’m going to hear what the hell she has to say. It’s about time! Waiting on her is like waiting for a church service to be done. And then she unmuted her mic and began to speak. The first thing that she mentioned was my pace and how I had no expressions. She said it was like my words weren’t as important as what they were, I made them have no meaning. She was right, because I never had expressions while reading. Reading just didn’t seem to require expressions, unless you were reading about someone else. When it came to me reading what I wrote, it really didn’t have any effect on me which is the reason why I didn’t have any expressions. It’s like when I know the impact of my writing, it was such a *so what* moment and I don’t have any expressions. If it was someone else’s writing, well damn right, I would have expressions because I’m the one who’s feeling their impact. She also commented on the fact that it was biased, since it was highlighting the importance and accomplishments of the LGBTQ+ community. Other than that, she said it was good. Good? Pastor thought that essay was good? I couldn’t believe it, what must’ve got her was the beginning about how only God can judge. That must’ve really hit her, because she’s all about God and using God against her will never fail.

I was proud of myself, but that meeting was only the beginning. Next, I had to record myself saying the essay and also submit my essay. My essay needed a lot of editing, because I rushed through the whole thing. Literally. So, the church had to find someone to edit it and have it back within 24 hours and that’s exactly what they did. Once they found a top notch editor, they gave that person my essay and told them what to do with it. I am not a fan of editors, because they tend to erase some important ideas and concepts. I had that happen to me plenty of times, I sent my paper over to an editor and boom it’s a wtf moment. I just had to make sure that everything I wanted to be in my essay was there, and that’s exactly what I did. As soon as I got my essay back, I hurried to it. I had to see whether or not they took the importance out of my essay. Hey! They didn’t do that bad, the editing was quite good and I kind of liked it.

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The day I had to record was quite exhausting. Minister Cummings had picked me up early in the morning. to shoot me reading the essay. It wasn’t a one shot done deal, it took patience. Patience is

something I rarely have and that was the problem. I couldn't just stand for three hours trying to get something right, without making any mistakes. I stood in that church for hours and hours. I think me and Minister Cummings were there for three hours straight. It felt like hell. My thighs felt like I had been doing wall sits for hours, that type of hell. We did two more takes and then we ended up coming to a conclusion that out of the two last ones filmed, one had to be picked. After leaving the church, we got into the car and we went to fetch some Boston Market. I love Boston Market! The macaroni, creamy spinach, fluff, and a half of rotisserie chicken made me fall in love. I love the way the food melted in my mouth and how good it tasted, I deserved that Boston Market. It was a good treat, after a long, hardworking month I deserved it.

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The day of the results came, in order to find out who won I had to attend church. So, I did just that. If you don't know how church service goes, I'm here to tell you. It goes just as long and slow as a tortoise, maybe even slower. I'm talking one centimeter per hour, that type of slow especially in a black church. I logged on, they were singing of course. The singing lasted about fifteen minutes, and then next thing you know there were three standing contestants. I really didn't care whether or not I won. The only thing I cared about was my message and the impact it had on all of the Christians who neglected people who were anything but straight. I just wanted to get my message across, because whether I win or lose God knows I won. That evening, I was in third place and I felt kind of wronged, because how the hell did a girl who claimed she talked to God placed before me? And how the hell did a boy who basically mimicked my words score first place? All of this for \$25? The Devil might be a lie, but today's witnessing was a total loss. I spent damn near a month, just to get \$25? Pheww, I would never do that again. But hey, the church folks were proud and I guess I was too. I wonder what the pastor thought when she heard about me scoring in third place, everything is always a success once I touch it. I guess she couldn't pray the gay away, not from me. I don't care how holy you are, how high of a leader you are, how many people you "changed" when you touch me nothing is going to change at all. You can't take the pansexuality out of me, trust me I tried. There was one point where I tried to pray the gay away; I got on my knees six times everyday trying to take the gay from me. I told God that if He wanted me to change and loved me enough to send His only and son down, then he would change me. He just didn't. In the end, God created all things so that means that He created homosexuality. If you're praying the gay away, try to pray a little harder because it isn't working. Instead of praying for someone else to change, pray for yourself to change. Ask God to remove the negativity and hatred out of your life, instead of trying to pray someone else's gay away. Why would you be so bothered by someone's sexuality? I think it's you who needs the prayer.

Artist's Statement

Throughout *Born a Crime*, Trevor refers to his mother and her teachings a lot. Through my memoir, I refer to my own understanding and the Minister who I call my second mother. I never understood how she always supported me, while being biased to her own mother and religion. After a while, I began to understand and develop a sense of knowledge of being neglected and betrayed. These understanding began to form something larger: an impact. Also, a way to get the pastor to understand. During this memoir, I talk about a time where I experienced something that bothered me: the pastor was praying for the gay to go away. This situation had made me realize the level of depth I was being a pansexual Christian. It took patience and understanding to take that level of disrespect from a pastor, whom I am very close to. I felt a wave of hatred and betrayal wash over me, which led me to wanting to seek revenge.