

# Tefillin

By Alberto Hernandez

She first encountered a queer in your community. She cleaned houses at the time, she still does, for rich people, and so obviously one of those houses was going to be Jewish. The Kadishes, very kind people. The father worked for some humanitarian organization, the mother Gloria was a doctor. They had two children, the little one being the gay ghost.

The older one played cello in some orchestra, very important, they were very proud. He would call Gloria every day, let her know how his children were doing, let her know how much his wife made him smile, and she loved all of it. Connection is what she told my mother. "I love that we are connected so closely, that God keeps our love together and warm." Though she was only the housekeeper, my mother was kept informed about most of the goings-on in the family; they liked her a lot. And though she didn't know much English at the time (and the Kadishes knew not a lick of Spanish), she could tell how close everyone was to each other, a Jewish closeness. That's why the photos bothered her so much.

You see, Hispanic mothers have a tendency to extend their families. Here were a couple of beautiful Jewish patrons, and her only job was to keep their house as pristine as their faiths. But no, she had to go and care about the lot, and the photographs on Gloria's desk bothered her like my limp wrists: there was something off about them, and it was not entirely their faults.

There were two pictures of the little one, the gay ghost, right next to Gloria's macbook and her handmade Israeli plaque with the loudest SHALOM. One of them was of his seven-year-old self, arms akimbo, head slightly tilted skyward, the biggest grin in front of the biggest pool my poor seven-year-old self would ever see. The other was of a teenage self, middle school more than likely, and he was in some androgynous get-up, some David Bowie type of pantsuit, for a theater production of who knows what (my mother couldn't tell me because the only theatrical arts she knew were *telenovelas*).

The second picture made sense to her because of the closet. In it were several dresses, masks, make-up kits, things a teenage drama kid would have died without. My mother knew the dresses weren't Gloria's because Gloria never wears dresses. Besides, they were too small and too showy to be worn by a fifty-something-year-old conservative Jewish woman. No, they were his, my mother knew. The gay ghost, the one with the most beautiful red curls she'd ever seen photographed.

Passover was a busy day for Gloria because she had to get everything organized (apparently, all Jewish people converge to the biggest house on the biggest holiday), and so that meant it was a busy day for my mother. "Maria, make sure there are enough seats at the table to fit us all, and those two have to be right there." My

mother obviously had it together because Hispanic housekeepers know exactly what they're doing. Especially if they're mothers.

The kippahs came in one by one, and you could have taken the mass of Jewish smiles and braided all those happy curves together to make a month-long supply of challahs. As my mother helped Gloria bring out the matzah to the table, there was a knock on the door. The family thought it was just another girl scout trying to sell her whole shipment to a mass of rich happy Jews, but it wasn't. It was a beautiful Jewish boy, one with the brightest set of red curls my mother had ever seen. Even compared to those in the photos.

He entered the house followed by the other. Gloria hugged both of them and told them to take their seats at the table. They were to sit in the pair of chairs right next to Gloria. The family greeted them both with kisses and chag sameachs galore, and everyone sat down to pray. After God was thanked for breaking the chains, the feast began. My mother kept bringing out food, each matzah seemed flatter but heavier on the towered tray.

Though she knew she shouldn't, she kept staring because Hispanic women can't help but be snoopers (you would be one too if most Hispanic husbands have a reputation for being skirt chasers (along with their sons)). As she'd take the dirty dishes and bring back new ones, she couldn't help but be fascinated by the body of someone absent, by the presence of his smile, by the joy she knew he had in the photographs and was waiting to witness in the flesh. The only thing that concerned her this time was him, the other one. He was taller, brunette, didn't seem Jewish but this was not what concerned my mother most.

My mother had heard about gay people but had never met any. Any gay person in El Salvador was impossible to meet because they'd die soon after people would find out about their gay. Gay was bad not because of God (though gay was bad because of God too) but because it never lasted. Gay people were ghosts, just like Gloria's youngest had been for the eleven years she had cleaned for them. Not a phone call, not a visit, nothing. My mother couldn't stop staring because even after thirteen years of being an immigrant in the U.S., the land for everyone, the land of everyone, she'd never seen a gay, and she was scared that he'd vanish just as quickly as he had appeared.

Gloria stepped into the kitchen to get two more bottles of wine (probably too expensive for my mother to even try to pronounce with her broken English), and, leaning, she whispered to my mother, "Maria, I'm so happy. This is the first time in fourteen years that the entire family's together." My mother smiled and said, "your son is beautifo, jus like the pichures." Gloria grabbed her hand, smiled at it, looked into her eyes. "It's the connection," she told my mother. "God is keeping this love together and warm." The eldest brother yelled to Gloria to hurry with the wine, and Gloria rushed happily back too quickly to see my mother's gratitude.

My mother feared my limp wrists because she feared my gay, my gay that

would turn queer eventually. She would sometimes not be able to sleep because she'd think about my vanishing; sometimes she'd cry and my dad wouldn't understand because Hispanic men have machismo programmed so intensely that feeling is a foreign language. But on that Passover, amongst the unleavened bread, something joyous rose within her. A conservative Jewish woman had revived her ghost of a child through love. My mother, one more Catholic than the Pope because she was Hispanic, poor, and really knew what "fear of God" meant, didn't know any of the histories of your most sacred holiday, but it didn't matter. Something was liberated that day, and in my mind that freedom can never be separated from you.

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The puddle in front of us is as roiled and gray as the skies above. I'm mad at you, and the day agreed with me until just now. The final drops fall on the redbud branches above, collect into tiny sips in the cups of flowers, spill in gulps on my afro and your kippah. The bench is soaked and cold, and there's too much space in between us for any of that Jewish khohm to find its way to my little brown body. We keep watch over our domains: you look up at the sky past all the branches, I look down at the ground past the puddled memories.

I stare at the water and remember the skype call I had with my mother yesterday, the one that prompted this wet reunion. I don't think this has anything to do with being Hispanic or lower class—my mother just cannot figure out technology. I had to guide her through an hour's worth of clicks, refreshes, and "¡qué porquería!" until she successfully reinstalled and opened the program.

Seeing my mother on the screen is always strange because you don't feel her full presence. Anyone that's been to a Hispanic household knows the presence of a Hispanic mother, especially Salvadoran mothers. They're the loudest and proudest, but the Catholic in her balances that out. She had on the apron her mother sent her, the one with the images of women carrying large *jarros* of water on their heads. She sometimes called me out on being a spoiled American boy, never having to do manual labor like she used to do back in her poor farm childhood. At least she stopped making me feel bad about how weak I was compared to her when she was a kid. My little limp wrists couldn't carry anything back then. Not much has changed.

We talk about everything because even though she had slip-ups like the "I forgot I gave birth to a girl" statements, my mother was the haven for my little gay childhood. I would tell her everything (except my gayness) and she would tell me everything (except her fears of my gayness). Now that I'm violently queer and she accepts it because she's always loved me violently, there's nothing to hide, so I told her all about you and how I'm angry that you won't queer.

She yelled at me, telling me that a twenty-year-old can't go around expecting to queer people because he believes that his politics will lead to more love in the world. I explained that I love you and she explained that I don't. "If you loved him, you wouldn't want to change anything. You would just want to have him with you and

learn about him, about his god.” I still don’t know how right she is about this.

I asked her what she thought about me being with a Jewish man. I can’t believe I can talk to her about being with a man at all, but fortunately we needed each other so much back then—she had just recently immigrated to the U.S. and felt so alone, and I was just born, so needing her was the only thing I had going on for me—that she learned to love my queer.

“You can be with any man as long as you don’t disappear on me.”

“But what about a Jewish man? What do Catholics think about being with Jewish people?”

“Love is the same in the Old as in the New. Love is eternal. As long as he loves you back, you can have this love.”

It’s amazing how queer my mother has become, to come to accept you and your kippah and your traditions. To come to accept your rich and white. I smiled at her and told her I loved her. She told me she loved me too, and that she couldn’t wait to meet her new Jewish family at the wedding. My mother has a ways to go before she understands my queer.

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I tell you all this, and ask you, and you say:

“I can’t do it”

“Why not?”

“Because I have borders and I expect you to respect them.”

“I’m not forcing you to kiss me. I just asked.”

“Asking is still an act of crossing.”

I look away from the puddle and see a couple, locked in handhold, walk through the slosh and grass to get to their car. They’ll probably drive off somewhere together and kiss because there are no politics between their skins, unlike ours. Then again, we’re both together because of the same strange phenomenon: choice. They chose each other; they chose to chase each other in the rain. We chose each other for who knows what reason. The only one I can think of now is because we need someone really different from ourselves—even if it hurts us or lets us down.

Oh darling, your skin is so dangerous, and I have no idea why I’m after it. Your skin has made borders between itself and brown skin for years now. I may not be Palestinian, but I share the same hatred and feeling of littleness to walls. To the world, your skin is worth dollars while mine is worth cents. To the world, your skin is peace and mine is danger. And on top of all these borders, your skin is straight and mine isn’t. You’re completely forbidden ground to me, and I persist in my attempts to bless it with my skin. We have different gods, and we can’t escape this.

All these feelings of separation return me to Passover. What if you were to take me to Passover at your house? What would happen? Would you even be able to think this? Would your family be able to comprehend how much of a revolution this would be—how much liberation would happen if I got to eat the bitter herbs on your table

and could share my own? I can't even stay in this thought for too long because it hurts that its completely impossible, and I once again doubt my choices and my heart.

I snap back as it splashes. The pebble lands directly in the middle of the puddle, which is a miracle because you're completely uncoordinated (is this Jewish too?).

"Well, what should I do?"

"What do you mean?"

"You have the worst memory of anyone I've ever met. Have all those traumas of growing up brown and queer trashed your memory?"

"Not funny."

He apologizes, but we were both being awkwardly lighthearted anyway.

"After you told me that you can't deal with this border, I asked you what I could do that could help you. You just dropped your gaze and spaced out in the puddle."

"Oh. Right."

Even as my poetic tendencies take me into the deepest recesses of my imaginings, you can still bring me back with your care. It reaches like some mighty hand and pulls me from the profundity of reverie; it brings me into this dream-reality where your love and your limits blue any type of clarity. I smile confusedly at you because of this.

At first, I just want to tell you again to kiss me. That's really all I want, and I don't want it to be a romantic or sexual gesture. I just want our lips to cross the borders of our embedded structures—your whiteness and straightness, my colored, queer radicalism—and finally reach each other. We would say, "yes, we've made it to the other side; I can know you now because there's no other place where you could be other than yourself." But I don't ask for that, more than likely because I'm scared you'll send me straight back into the puddle. I don't just space out into these things for nothing, you know. These delusions are my only protection.

"You brought it, right?"

"The tefillin?"

"Yes."

"Take it out."

He does.

"Put it on me."

"The tefillin? I can't do that."

You first put it on when I asked you to show me something that held your god. You couldn't help but laugh because I was (still am) an ignorant goy. Still, you said you'd think of something, and you thought of tefillin.

You sat me down beside you on this very bench underneath the redbud tree, the branches as bare as my unfounded want. You unzipped the black bag, pulled out the two black boxes, and began to coil. First you wrapped your left arm, three rings 'round the bicep, seven 'round the lower arm, the box keeping watch over your heart,

as if it knew I was there and the danger my wrists posed. The wrapping ended in a ring around your middle finger, perpetual band of betrothal to a god you weren't sure about. Obviously I was jealous of it.

After you placed the other box atop your head and tightened the strap, the transformation was done. You were officially my Other; our shapes were different; our bodies simply could not fit together. Granted, you never said that your Judaism or your god were against our love. And that's not what it felt like. What I mean is the lines you placed on your body, those leather straps, those borders that have plagued my unbelonged body, were a sign of your existing relationships. You were committed to your god and your community. I wasn't allowed into that love. I smiled at you because you liked showing me this, this side of you that was faithful to something. I never told you how much I wanted to rip those straps from your body and wrap myself on you instead.

Now I stare at you and grab your hand, the one holding the tefillin. I squeeze it like my mother squeezes mine when she wants to convey her need to keep me. You look at me like I am pushing it, which I am, but you understand. You start coiling it around me as it begins to drizzle.

Once the wedding band is made, you let go of the strap. I look down at the puddle and see a murky me in tefillin, bound by leather straps that would have never touched my skin if it weren't for you. I giggle a little at how silly I look, and then I stop because the foreignness of my figure scares me. How much am I willing to do to get to you? How many lines must be drawn on me before I receive amnesty, before I am allowed to enter your life?

I look up. "How do I look like?"

You laugh at me. "You look like a shiksa that doesn't know what he's doing."

We laugh and keep laughing because we don't know who we are and this whole thing is ridiculous. What are you doing placing such a piece of you on me? What am I doing accepting this without accepting you?

I look up at the sky and a drop falls on the middle of my forehead, the same spot my mother kisses me whenever I need a sense of home. The rain keeps hitting my eyes, so I close them and see Gloria smiling at us. We're sitting to her left, me being the closest to her, and the gay ghost and his other are to her right. They're conversing about marriage and kids, about white fences and beach houses, about things that my queer soul could never live with. You aren't paying attention. You're conversing with Gloria's husband about Buber because you think that there needs to be more I-Thou in the world. There needs to be more mutuality, more change. You pause your conversation for a moment to glance at me, a sly smile, an "I love you" spelled with your face and shoulder.

I was about to tell you I love you but Gloria grabs my hand. I look at her, scared because I don't know her and she was invading my life without trying. She leans in and whispers, "Don't disappear from his life. He needs you." She lets go of

my hand and leaves for a moment. She returns with my mother and gives her the seat.

My mother looks at Gloria as she sits on the other side of the table, and then she turns to me. She whispers, “This is not our table, but here you are, sitting with them. They even invited me to sit. Maybe you were right. Maybe you *can* queer them.” The gay ghost quickly shifts his gaze towards me, as if he’s heard my mother and my silent prayer of gratitude for this moment. He looks at me like I belong there, like I am a person in a photograph that had gone missing from his life, like I am coming back to life through love, and with your voice he says, “take the tefillin off.”

I open my eyes as you pull at the straps, already soaked like my curls and your patience. A couple of redbuds fall into the puddles because of the droplets’ weight.

“You keep spacing out, and we’ve been sitting in this rain for an hour. Let’s go.”

“No.”

“No what?”

“No I don’t want to take the tefillin off.”

“Why not?”

“Because my mind and heart and soul are connected right now.”

You look at me confused.

“To you.”

“You’re always connected to me. We chose to be here.”

“Well then, I’m choosing to stay, even if we’ll always feel foreign to each other. I’ll make my own amnesty.”

This time you look at me differently, as if something has appeared, as if I wasn’t there before and now I am. Then you look at me like you know me and have known me for as long as you have been tying these leather straps on you. Then you look at me, and it feels as if you let me hide some part of me inside your black eyes.

Then you kiss me, and I know it wasn’t a puddle dream because it wasn’t murky. It was fast and intended and bright as the redbuds. It even felt like a redbud had grown on my cheek, rosy and delicate, and scared of falling off. Luckily there was no wind.

You hold me on the bench for a bit longer, the tefillin grows looser, eventually you take it off me. You put it back in the black bag and then we leave, feeling liberated of our fear of each other but still unsure about what we are. The puddles stay underneath the redbuds with yet more memories of borders and breakings, but as I walk back with you, it seems like all the puddles keep following us on the road, reflecting us, our faces together: picture frames that we didn’t ask for but will keep this memory for us regardless. We might need it later. It might be what keeps us connected. And the tefillin will keep this love together and warm.