



THE WISDOM  
OF GUNCLES  
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*To the ancestors and path finders, especially  
queer heroes whose stories are hidden*

*To my family—both biological and chosen—who taught me  
how to leave a place more welcoming than how I found it*

*And to my niblings, godchildren and protégés for whom I pray  
these stories can serve as evidence that we are always worthy*

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THE  
BLACK SHEEP

# The Black Sheep, Introduced

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Her eyes are my mother's eyes—almond shaped with double eyelids encasing mahogany-brown pupils that exude a pensive, piercing stare. From her small, round nose, high cheekbones, straight, jet-black hair and smooth, brown skin, she bears the vibrant, resolute features of the women of my vast Filipino family. She wore a cream-colored wool sweater I had just given her after she took her shower, one of several cold-weather items I would lend her in the coming days. As we set the table, poured wine, and prepared dinner, she marveled at the snow that quickly blanketed the world outside my kitchen window. She reflected on the startling contrast to the harsh deserts and arid plains she was racing through only a few days earlier. Weather reports had predicted a late February blizzard that evening, and all signs indicated we would not be disappointed.

Her name is Tala. Through a strange calculus of fate, she is the daughter of my grandmother's youngest brother, who himself was younger than my mother, which makes her my

mother's cousin and therefore my aunty in our cultural tradition. But because she is almost a decade younger than me, I regard her as a younger cousin. However, looking at her from across the table, I could already tell that whatever she was running away from or running toward had bestowed a gravitas not typical for someone who was barely twenty-two years old.

Tala didn't seem weary despite having driven across the country from her home in Las Vegas, through Memphis and then Richmond, eventually arriving at my doorstep in Washington, DC. She had called me only a few days prior to ask if she could stay with me a few nights, which itself was surprising as we had not spoken in years. I was already away at university when her family immigrated to America, so we didn't grow up together. I would mostly see her at holiday gatherings and celebrations, and only in the cacophonous company of our cousins.

When she first called me, Tala didn't exactly express that her trip was a secret though I intuited something in her voice meant she wanted me to remain discreet. She called me from her stops along the way to let me know she was safe, and I could tell she was more excited than scared of whatever she was headed toward. That first night in DC, when the plates were cleared, the wine was finished, and thoughts turned to cocktails, she finally relayed her story.

She married her husband when they were both eighteen. I remembered my mother calling me to complain that it was a dry wedding and they had to smuggle alcohol like bootleggers. He was a US Marine who was frequently deployed,

leaving her often alone. When he was home, he would spend his time gambling and partying with friends on the Vegas strip, spending their meager earnings at poker tables instead of their mortgage. Eventually, they stopped being able to meet their payments and their house was foreclosed upon. Their separation, then divorce, soon followed, as would the disappointment from the family and a growing sadness in my cousin. Then a job opportunity opened up in DC, offering a potential escape and chance to start over. Upon finding out she got the position, she sold everything she couldn't fit in her car and drove away.

As I poured some whiskey, lemon and honey into hot water, I asked her why she considered DC. That's when she said, "Well, I knew I needed to get as far away from Las Vegas as I could, but I didn't want to be completely alone either. Then I remembered that *you* live in DC. And I knew of all the people in our family, you were the least likely to judge me for what happened. I mean, you left, too. And I know it wasn't under the best circumstances either, especially since you're... well. But you're surviving and thriving. And I thought, maybe I could do that, too. Start fresh, like you.

"And besides, us black sheep have to stick together."

That's what lingered. Those words—black sheep. They stayed aloft in the air even as she continued to tell me about her new job and the places she wanted to explore. While part of me paid attention, a deeper part of me knew that at that moment I had to choose whether to regard those words as a brand of shame or a badge of honor. I decided then that as an out, queer, brown immigrant who left my family to chart



my own destiny, I was and am a proud black sheep. But it would take me years to truly define what that meant and to fully comprehend why it was so important that I be one for my family.

As I bid her goodnight, I looked at Tala a little more closely. In her face I saw all the nieces and young cousins in our own family with whom I had always formed a natural kinship. Bright young protégés who called me Uncle or “*kuya*” (the Tagalog honorific for “big brother”) whom I mentored over the years. Family members who sought me out as an escape and safe harbor from traditions that didn’t always know how to embrace or nurture the divergent or pattern-breaking among us. At the same time, I saw my mother, and her mother, the aunties and the elders, all members of the court of matriarchs who ruled our Filipino clan with stern eyes, unyielding expectations, and fierce embraces. I saw the intentions that our families carried in their frayed suitcases across vast oceans and limitless skies, the villages and heartbreak they left behind, and the uncertainty they faced when they arrived on this foreign American shore. I saw all the times queer children like me had fulfilled our parents’ aspirations by succeeding, and all the ways we betrayed them by living our truth.

Above all, I saw proof that with a new generation’s resolve, our once stubbornly immutable cultures were, indeed, capable of change. I saw hope that one day, black sheep like us might never feel the need to escape. Until that time, I decided to always keep my home and heart open, wine uncorked, and advice ready to flow.

I am a guncle, after all, and it is a role I am honored to play.

So, what—or rather, who—is a guncle? The term refers to “gay uncle,” but here it covers a much wider range: queer godfathers, older cousins, surrogate father figures, and yes, uncles, any queer relative in a position to pass along their wisdom to a younger generation. These include guncles and quncles (queer uncles), to l’aunties (lesbian aunties) and quanties (queer aunties) to everyday queeroes (queer heroes). Within *biological* families, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ+) people are often cast in the role as the ultimate “black sheep.”

Indeed, as the embodiment of the black sheep, queer people are cast aside, warned about, and frequently erased from memory. For most, this is done with violence and results in deep, life-changing trauma. These experiences condition us to chart our own paths and redefine what it means to be family. To our biological families, we are disruptions to tradition and long-held beliefs. We represent change and evolution in the family tree—that is, when we’re recognized as part of it and correctly identified when our mark is made. But we are also people who are sought out by those who never fit in because we demonstrate what happens—for better or worse—when we break and recreate the molds of expectation.

Because of this, we become beacons for our beloved nibblings (the gender-neutral term for nieces and nephews), godchildren, younger cousins and protégés. We are their mentors, career counselors, style consultants, cheerleaders and keepers of the family’s secrets and memories. We are “parent-adjacent” in that we may not have been there for the conception, but we

were there shortly after the birth, gripping our sister's tired hands, holding our brother steady, or keeping the smartphone fixed on the baby held tightly by newly minted grandparents. We buy our protégés their first pair of heels, give them their first sip of champagne, help plot their perfect prom-posal, and then promise to be there should rejection and heartache loom. We unlock the doors to their heritage, provide words of caution born from our mistakes, and teach them how to leave a space more welcoming than how they found it.

Throughout these children's lives we serve as the cool, non-judgmental adult they turn to for the stuff they can't talk to Mom and Dad about. As queer people, we know what it means to hide a secret, to discover the truth about ourselves and find the courage to face the forces that would otherwise tell us to keep quiet. We are there to help them shout that truth from their hearts, just as we did and likely continue to do every day. When we tell them to be themselves, to love themselves, that they are perfect just the way they are, we do so with life-hardened conviction because we ourselves know just how difficult it can be to believe it. And when we tell them we love them, that we will protect and elevate them, we do so with passion and ferocity because they are every bit a part of who we are.

I wrote this book for those seeking advice about how to live their most authentic selves. And while many guncles are out there, I truly believe guncles are unique. Our stories impart wisdom about living by your design on your terms. If allowed to be diverse, the ideas born from our queer narratives have the power to set trends, redefine language, and articulate culture. When empowered to be truly authentic, our experiences

birth ideas that pave the way to new ways of seeing, being, and living. Consider how LGBTQ+ contributions have challenged and changed perceptions on identity and expression, acknowledging the complexity (and the artifice) that defies gender and sexual binaries. Or the ways we have elevated the role of the chosen family as the primary source of nurturing, love, and affirmation when biological families aren't up to the task.

This is because the core queer experience is the black sheep's courage to challenge cultural, religious, social, political, and other traditional beliefs. These ideas have historically taught us that to be anything other than heterosexual and cisgender is an abomination against nature and an affront to God. The decision to live that truth and "come out" is quickly faced with the reality that "coming out" is never a one-time action but a daily calibration of how much truth can be surfaced based on the moment's level of physical, psychological, and/or professional safety. Because of this, queer people are masterful at hiding parts of ourselves. Known as code-switching, queer people—and especially queer people of color—are forced to become experts in the act of altering one's expression to optimize comfort, safety or opportunity based on the discriminatory standards of white supremacy, xenophobia, toxic masculinity, and heteronormativity. We are also well aware of the costs of code-switching and both the burden it places on our mental health and its unfortunate complicity in perpetuating the very systems of oppression that demand its performance.

This constant negotiation of self and truth means queer people know what it is to live and love regardless of what others think because, in many cases, we do so with the entire world

against us. To simply exist as a queer person is an act of audacious defiance. And in that core truth of our narrative endures lessons and insights about what it means to truly “be yourself”—both the sacrifices one bears to get there as well as the glorious benefits one reaps. This is what we are compelled to pour into our protégés with hard-earned pride.

This book is a collection of our hard-won wisdom born from the kind of disruptive and transformative self-discovery that comes with living the life of a black sheep. We were always the different ones—set apart, frequently not by choice. Many of us were the ones to leave—once again, not always by choice and frequently as a means of survival. We are the family members who forged new beginnings and are often referred to by the family as a cautionary tale or example of what *not* to become; unbeknownst to the family, we are also the north star and safe harbor for those members who secretly want to follow our path because they too feel they don’t belong.

That’s what happened to me and many people in this book. The stories here come from family, friends, collaborators, and my own heroes whom I met throughout various stages of my life. Our stories are intertwined and reflect the power of community. Fellow artists who choose to use music and performance to combat injustice. Coworkers in industry with whom I have created spaces that are safe and inclusive. Audacious activists and fearless intellectuals who taught me to rebuke the supremacy of “it’s always been that way.” Friends whom I have known since the halcyon days of my queer-becoming when we would dance bare-chested under mirror balls until dawn. And family who inspire me to stand firm with conviction while embracing the fluidity of change.

Because I'm the type of gay man who loves to organize things into well-labeled compartments, I've allocated my stories into a pantheon of archetypes that evoke a specific insight or lesson. While every story represents different origins, professional backgrounds, and ages, many experiences echo from person to person. Many started as the perfect, favored golden child who used achievements to hide their internal conflicts, only to later become the designated "black sheep" of the family with estranged relationships some are just starting to repair. Many departed from all they knew—their families, neighborhoods, and faiths—to venture into the unknown because the promise of being able to discover and define oneself was better than a lifetime of living a lie. All sought or created chosen families they credit with helping them become their true selves—and in some cases, saved their lives entirely. Every single one yearns to be the change in their families that makes it easier for the next generation.

As I left my family in California and drove across a continent to discover myself in uncharted lands, I became a destination to follow for younger family members who didn't fit in, Tala included. In many ways this book is an unapologetic celebration of queer people who challenged and evolved the expectations that define us through family and community. It is a reflection of our relationships with our families, those that may have forced us out, as well as those who seek our empathy and counsel. It is less a catalogue of advice—though there is a lot of it to go around—but a collection of experiences that we hope may impart wisdom to those who heed them. Like any book about family, whether born into it or chosen, it is grounded on love; no matter how we choose to define it.