

## My Brother's Sexuality Journey

One day, Rico came home from kindergarten with his chest poked out a mile long. I raised one eyebrow out of curiosity and stared at him for a moment. He felt me looking and asked, "What are you staring at?"

"You, of course." I answered. "You've been strutting and prancing around here for a minute. So, what's up?"

He high-stepped across the multi-brown carpet and sat beside me on the fuzzy, worn couch. "I have a secret," he whispered.

I looked at him with wonder and asked, "What secret?"

He leaned in closer, "I have a girlfriend."

My eyes widened and I looked at him with a curious expression, "What do you mean girlfriend? Do you even like girls?"

At that moment, he stared back at me with his lips poked out and a scowl on his face. He opened his mouth and replied, "I do like girls. I mean I like her. I haven't told her that...yet."

I rolled my eyes before saying "In that case, she's not your girlfriend. You just have a crush on her. Let me know when you tell her or get a kiss or something."

Angered by my snide comment, he punched me in the arm and hopped off the couch.

As I rubbed my upper arm, I couldn't help but giggle at the notion that this four-year-old could grasp the concept of what a crush was. I was eight and didn't understand

it, so how could a four-year-old? I didn't think of it at the time, but his affirmation was, at best, a little off-putting, and, at worst, a little questionable. After all, this was the same boy who from age one to three would run around our small, two-bedroom apartment, with either a blanket or towel on his head; he loved to pretend that he was one of his favorite female singers: Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, or Janet Jackson. He would put on a show for the family as "the hair" swung back and forth and side to side. If you can imagine a little black boy parading around the living room as a grown woman, well, you know that it was a sight to see.

That interaction was typical of our opposite personalities. Rico exuded head-to-toe masculinity and strength while I, on the other hand, was a timid, sensitive, art geek. Between my controlling perfectionism and his selfish manipulation, there were many times that I believed that one of us was not going to make it to adolescence. This was due to our daily verbal, sometimes physical, assaults that were reminiscent of two amateur boxers battling it out in a ring.

The cat-and-dog fights gave way to a mutual admiration and understanding that had never been there before and, in our teenage years, we were able to become friendly. But for me, there was still this unspoken secret that neither one of us wanted to address. This secret soon came to light.

Rico and I wanted a computer so badly that we pestered our mom until she caved. She purchased an HP desktop computer, which sat on our faux wood computer desk, for us. It stayed there for years. Like most teenagers, the computer was a homework helper, gaming opponent, and, most importantly, a gateway to the world with both good and bad results.

One evening, while looking for an article of clothing in Rico's bedroom, I found printouts of naked men hidden under his bed. I rose from under the bed with wide eyes and raised eyebrows. I backed up towards the wall. This discovery caused me to question my relationship with my brother as well as his sexuality.

As we grew from care-free children to idealistic teenagers, there was a definite shift in Rico's sweet disposition. Our parents' separation changed him from an inquisitive, mischievous, young boy to a secretive, aggressive, young man. Moving into our new apartment gave my brother mixed feelings. Having the proverbial rug pulled from under him gave him a darker perspective on life. This was only the beginning Rico as the biggest transformation of his life – confronting his sexuality.

One day, while sitting in my sparsely decorated living room, I became curious about my brother's sexual journey. "So when did you first find out that you were attracted to men?" I asked.

He was open with his answer. "When I was in sixth grade, around the age of eleven," he stated. "I would catch myself staring at other boys in the hallway or classroom. But these weren't the usual stare, they verged on raunchy daydreams. If you can call kissing someone raunchy at that age." He told me that he looked away in shame after catching himself thinking about that stuff. He also told me that he had begun to question what he was thinking and, eventually, placed those thoughts in the back of his mind. "Those thoughts made me question myself. All I could think were what are these feelings? Was I bisexual? Was I gay?"

We grew up in Greenwood, South Carolina. It was a typical, small, southern city where churches, banks, and fast food joints were at almost every corner and football reigned as king. Accented evergreen, dogwood trees, and patchy green grass was the cornerstones of the city decorations. It was a place where almost everyone sat in Bible study on Wednesday, cheered on the Greenwood High football team on Friday, and went to church service on Sunday.

King Cotton and hard labor gave way to the mediocre healthcare of the local hospital. And, with post-Antebellum racism in the mix, it was awkward for him to try to navigate his identity. Being a young black boy growing up in the American South, he was bombarded from all sides when it came to his sexual confusion.

I was worried, so I came out and asked him, “What was it like having the church tell you were going to hell while the media was saying it’s okay to be gay?”

His brown eyes searched the room as he pondered the question. Eventually he answered me. “It was weird. From what I saw in my community and society, in general, was that being homosexual was the greatest sin. But at the same time, I was dealing with being black, overweight, and living in the South. I didn’t want to add ‘gay’ on top of that. Plus, I didn’t know if I was bisexual or gay, so I didn’t feel comfortable letting people in like that until I figured things out myself.” In my opinion, these labels made a lonely, complicated, existence for someone who was already going through the agonizing roller coaster of adolescence.