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LOVE RADIO

Ebony LaDelle



USBORNE

[LOVE RADIO TRANSCRIPT]

[CROSSFADE OF SONG HERE]

PRINCE JONES: Detroit, what up doe! I'm DJ LoveJones, the prince of love and your new host for the three to four p.m. hour, with DJ Mike coming in for rush hour from four to seven. Welcome to the LOVE RADIO! I can't thank you enough for the outpouring of love with my segment "Last Night a DJ Saved My Life." You kept emailing and DMing us with so many questions that 98.6 decided I needed my own show time! And even crazier, at fifteen I'm the youngest person to ever have a show here.

So, there you have it. Follow me online at @DJLoveJones or call me between three and four every day, and I'll answer any love questions you may have. But trust me, I ain't forgot what time it is – I'll still be spinning all the hits. So hit me up too for requests and with all your love problems. I know you got them…and I have all the solutions.

I'm your guy. Your certified high school love coach.

[PRINCE PLAYS A SONG]

Chapter One

Broken Record

Danielle

I've never met a person more drunk on love than my mom. She's got a list of old-school romance movies she's always been obsessed with and has the nerve to rate them in order of her favourites. Thing is, that order changes every month.

For September it's:

1. *Love Jones*
2. *Love & Basketball*
3. *Waiting to Exhale*
4. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*
5. *Jason's Lyric*

6… the list goes on and on. But you get the point.

I'd be lying if I said I've never watched these movies with her…multiple times…maybe more like thousands of times. But the verdict is still out on how I feel about them.

"This is the best part, sweetie," Mom says, pointing at the screen. "Look!"

Every part is the best part, according to her.

I watch her as she's intensely focused on a movie she's seen over and over again, her feet tucked underneath her butt, her elbow perched on the couch's armrest, and her head resting in her hands. Everyone says my forehead scrunches just like hers when we're concentrating, the brown of it all creasing like the frosting on a caramel cake. "Camille spit you out," says every single relative.

I study her face as her bright, big eyes widen and take in the movie. I guess I have her laser-sharp cheekbones and thick, long hair. But besides that, I'm all Dad. Thank god he's not the constantly lovesick one.

She clasps her hands together as the hero and heroine kiss. "Isn't that everything, baby?"

I roll my eyes.

On the one hand, I appreciate Black artistry in all forms. But these movies always follow the same formula:

1. You got your main characters – the strong Black female lead who has had enough with life and needs to get rid of some sort of deadweight. Usually she does something drastic – like chopping off her long hair, taking a trip to a remote island, or just throwing herself into her work.

2. And then you got your supporting cast. Friends, colleagues, that one over-the-top person who brings comedic relief to the story.

2A. They fit into one of two categories as well. Either they are strongly encouraging the main character to go

after the love interest…

2B. …or they're strongly discouraging them until the main character has some epiphany about their unhappiness or lack of love and manages to come around at the end.

The plotlines are predictable and *always* come to a lackluster climax. Super stale. But everyone thinks that's just my cynical behind.

Take *Love Jones*. Within the first five minutes, the scene opens with a neon-red sign in the cut, illuminating the Sanctuary, a local, moody, smoke-filled poetry spot where the main characters, Darius and Nina, meet, all while listening to the sleek sounds of a woke brotha schooling Black people about how to talk to one another *basic*. Then smooth-ass Darius rolls up on the stage, reciting some poem that was inspired by Nina, speaking on blues and funk…and sex. Nina blows him off at first, but they eventually get together. Had that been me, I guess the movie would be over before it began, because there's no way he would have gotten a first date eroticizing me like that.

As the two characters profess their love for one another *again*, my mom glances over in my direction, expecting me to complain. But I don't – this time. She would just say that these romance tropes are everywhere, and with White Hollywood feeding us Black trauma porn, why not show more romances onscreen with Black leads?

And so, I'm conflicted. As a writer I love watching for the cinematography, the banter, the showcase of a Black love

story blossoming. But at my core, I'm not a rom-com type of girl. The tropes alone make me uneasy when you really think about them.

Childhood friends? I gag at the thought of dating anyone in the cesspool of boys from my childhood.

Falling in love with a bad boy? Let's examine the abusiveness of this trope.

Enemies to lovers? Funniest one yet.

Forbidden love? Mkay.

Just not feeling any of these. If we really want to go there, they're all problematic and simple. Give me writing with more conflict, more depth, something that's more nuanced and grips you, makes you question the world around you. Let's talk about real-life issues that affect us daily, and the traumas our community is untangling. At least, that's the type of writing I want to do.

I feel like the platform should be used to bring more meaning into this world than just a story about two people falling in love. Just my humble opinion.

Still, for some reason, every time I'm tasked with dusting the shelves of our basement entertainment center and my mom's DVD collection – yeah, don't even get me started – I can't help but pull out *Love Jones* and look at the package. It's the scene of Darius and Nina passionately kissing, in the rain. When no Black girl with a silk press is really gonna want to stand out there and lock lips while getting their hair drenched. And yet? Sometimes I catch myself daydreaming it's me.

"We all deserve a big love story," Mom says as the love scene fades out. "There's nothing better."

"I guess, Ma." I take a deep sigh and exhale it into my blanket. I don't want a lecture today.

I know I sound pessimistic and all over the place. But the truth is, the concept of love just ain't that simple anymore. What people call love now is merely infatuation – more about themselves than trying to actually get to know a person. Whatever happened to *actually* asking someone out to dinner, walking you up to your porch to make sure you get in safe, having picnics in the park or passing notes to profess your love? Whatever happened to love that isn't superficial?

I stare up at the family portrait still hanging beside the TV.

Take my parents. While climbing up the military ranks, my dad always said he was *searching for his "other rib"*. And he found her in my mother, a second-year student at University of Detroit Mercy, a private Catholic school in the city. My dad did it all; once he got to know my mom and what she liked, he prided himself on taking my mom places she didn't know about, even though she was born and bred in the Motor City. He wrote her love notes with lines from his favourite poems and her favourite songs, showered her with flowers because she had a budding interest in gardening. He *courted her*.

Meanwhile, most of the guys I know are way too shallow and self-absorbed. They send messages telling their new pursuits how sexy they are. Dudes hit you up depending on how valuable you are online; how many likes and comments you get from your most recent selfie. But the worst of it is,

guys don't show respect. No matter how you "present" yourself, how you act, what you do or don't do, a guy will still push it to the limit. Make you feel uncomfortable. Won't respect your wishes when no means…*no*.

I start chuckling when Mom bursts into tears from all the fake movie emotions.

"You laugh now," she says, catching me looking at her. "But wait until it's your heart. It reminds me so much of me and your dad."

I think of my mom and wonder, *How did she create me?* A girl who's so disconnected from love it's frightening. My mom lets out a sigh and turns off the DVD player as the credits roll.

"If that ever happens," I tell her, getting up from the couch and heading to the kitchen.

I snap open a can of Vernors, listening to the pop hiss as I pour and my mom fuss in the background.

Mom follows me into the kitchen. "You'll find love one day. And stop drinking pop in my mugs! Use a glass like a civilized human being."

"Well, the cup's already dirty, so," I say, sipping on my drink with a pinky in the air like a refined woman. I love teasing her.

My mom rolls her eyes. "Sooo, any guys at school you've been eyeing?"

"Meh," I mumble, grabbing a bag of Better Made chips from above the fridge. I'm already into the first week of senior year and over it.

Mom opens the dishwasher and adds a few more plates to

the load. "There are like, what, five hundred students there? I don't understand how there hasn't been *one* boy who's piqued your interest."

I dig loudly into the bag and my mom turns around, inspecting me since we just ate dinner while watching the movie. I find myself slouching, so I stand up straighter and fix my face, trying to do anything to make my anxiety less apparent. But my mom can read me like an open book.

"Are you stressed, Dani? What's going on with you?"

She's asking me about boys. Again. Yes, Ma, I'm stressed as hell.

"I'm a teenager. This is what we do," I grumble, arm deep in the bag of chips. "College applications are a headache, I'm still struggling with this freakin' essay, and I know New York is expensive, but I'm going to be low-key devastated if I don't get into any schools there."

She runs the dishwasher and fixes her gaze intently on me. "I know, baby. You've been anxious about that essay for a while now. But if it's too much to juggle right now, there's nothing wrong with staying here, either. Michigan has some great schools, and you can even live at home for a few years while you get yourself acclimated," she adds, smiling. "Plus, your old mama could always use the company."

I take a long look at my mom. At her silky smooth, dark brown face. At the few gray hairs leaping out of her scalp, the rest masked by her most recent colour touch-up. At the clear skin that hasn't even begun to grow crow's feet, or the other normal side effects of age I hear my classmates' mothers

complaining about. Thirty-nine. That's how old she is. When my friends used to marvel at how young she looked, my mom would simply remind them about the benefits of being Black, of having melanin. Studying her face closely right now, she barely looks thirty.

We're both hitting pinnacles. That's what Dad calls them. Me heading to college and her turning another decade. I love the age gap between us; she's young enough where I feel like she's been open in telling me so much about herself and her life in ways my mother's friends wouldn't dare.

But sometimes, I feel like she married my dad and settled into family before her life even began. This isn't the first conversation we've had about me applying for schools in-state while my dad's on the road. But as much as I love her, I know it's just as important for me to do my own thing. With all the love and support my parents have given me, I still feel like a caged bird. I gotta fly.

The hum of the dishwasher is the only sound we hear, which is clear – I've been quiet for too long – so she goes back to cleaning and pivots. "Plus, you'd probably be more interested in college boys anyway." Her statement causes me to jolt, and before I know it the mug slips out of my hand and shatters on the kitchen floor. We both jump.

"Dani, are you okay?" she asks.

I'm still standing there, watching the brown liquid fill up the spaces between each tile.

"Dani. Dani!" My mom touches me, and I recoil. Her soft gaze makes me want to curl in a ball and hide somewhere.

She stares for a moment too long. "Where did you go just now?"

Unsure of what to say next, I just shake my head.

"Baby, I know something is up. You've been acting like this for a while now." Her voice shakes a little. "Talk to me."

"It's nothing, Ma…" Her cell phone rings and my mom jerks.

She hesitates to answer the phone, but before she has time to challenge anything, I tap accept for her and my dad's face pops up on the screen.

"Hi, babyyyyy!" Dad says, gushing like a big kid and waving into the camera.

"Hey, Dad," I say, shooting him a head nod.

"How are my two beautiful ladies doing?"

"We're doing fine," Mom replies, still looking at me. I can tell she's trying to collect herself, and I use this time to quickly clean up the broken mug on the floor. She never likes to stress my dad out while he's away. "Just talking about Dani's college applications."

"And how is that going, Dani?"

"It's going fine, Dad," I say, throwing away the pieces, and then deflect, "And *Ma* was watching *Love and Basketball*. AGAIN! Getting all weepy over the part where Monica asked Quincy to play him for his heart."

My dad is cracking up and Mom gives me a playful push. "That scene gets me every time, had me wanting to learn how to hoop back in the day. Both of y'all can kiss my Black behind."

"Gladly," Dad says, and Mom giggles.

WHY.

I give them both a look of sheer horror. "Okay. Ew. Can y'all keep that to yourselves?" They both laugh again. "Dad, I'll talk to you later."

"Love you, sweetheart."

I blow him a kiss and leave, feeling my mom's stare burning the back of my neck.

I dart upstairs and dive onto my bed. I stare at the ceiling. I need to clear my mind, to think about something else. After taking a few deep breaths and waiting for my heart to slow, I take in my favourite place in the whole world – my bedroom. My safe haven.

Along with all things love, Mom is obsessed with DIY projects, so about a year ago, we overhauled my room and now the memory washes over me as I stare at my desk.

After we finished, Mom sat on my bed in awe of all we'd done together. Transformed my little girl room into a place for this new version of myself.

"It needs one last thing," she said before racing out of the room.

I sat there, waiting and wondering if she was going to try to have a talk with me about how I'd been reclusive and kept to myself. I prepared all the excuses. But when she returned, a large box sat in her arms. "Come. Sit at your desk. It's missing something and I have just the thing."

My heart thudded as I yanked the tape off the box. "Ma, oh my god, you've done enough!" I said. "What the heck is this?"

"Just open it." She beamed. "And don't try to pick it up. It's heavy."

I opened the lid, and inside was a mint-coloured Adler typewriter.

"I read somewhere that this collector bought Maya Angelou's electric Adler typewriter and said that he didn't care about how it looked or whether it still worked, but he cared that Maya Angelou had touched it. I wanted to get you something that inspired you just the same."

Together, we lifted the typewriter out. It was perfect. A vintage feel to it, with keys rich and black. The body was shiny and luminescent, like it had been buffed and waxed until it was made glossy and new.

"Did you restore this?" I asked.

"Yeah, sort of," she said. "There were a few online that looked like they went through it. But I found this one and it didn't need much, just a little TLC. I figured a few touch-up coats and some new keys would make it look brand-new. And it did."

I ran my fingers over the keys, over the slick body of the machine. And then I saw an emblem underneath the strikers that made me stop dead in my tracks. On closer inspection, I realized the lettering wasn't a logo, but an inscription: MAYA, ALICE, ZORA, TONI, ROXANE, JESMYN, DANI. A knot formed in my throat and I started shaking until I felt my

mom's strong hands behind me, gripping me upright.

"It's powerful, isn't it? Seeing your name with the women you admire." I nodded, unable to form any words. Unable to draw in breath. I'd admired these writers for as long as I could remember, but in recent months their work was the only thing holding me together. To see my name next to theirs helped me see that one day I could be that voice for someone like me.

"I don't know if you'll ever use this typewriter to write, but if you do, I want you to see these names as you type *and* I want you to see your name next to them. They are strong, dynamic forces of nature. So are you. We come from a line of strong women, and this" – my mom pointed at the inscription – "is so you never forget that. You deserve to be next to each and every one of these women on this machine, you hear me?"

She'd given me an instrument to write my way through the gloom and toward my dream of being an author.

The same tears that stirred inside me then come back now. I try to use this as a reminder when I'm seated at my desk, tapping at my typewriter, frustrated that the words that used to spill out so easily no longer flow.

My phone buzzes, yanking me away from that memory.

DESTINY: You need to stop being antisocial and hit up this party with me later [sticking out tongue emoji]

I grimace as I switch my phone to silent mode and pull myself up and to my desk. It's been over a year, and occasionally Destiny still randomly hits me up like everything is normal.

I'm not ready to face her. I tried that already and she dismissed me, making me feel like I asked for it. So screw her.

And just like that, it's back. Everything from *that night* begins to repeat like a sports reel replaying on the news, and I'm panting. I try to shift my thoughts and recall an anxiety graphic I saw online. Ways to release the tension in your body:

Roll your head in a circle.

Drop your shoulders.

Take a deep, extended breath from your chest.

I repeat these exercises a few times, until the pressure in my chest begins to lessen and my breath slows.

After that night, my anxiety deepened, and it's been a struggle to write anything ever since. It started with the short stories I used to enjoy scribbling in my journal, and then spilled over into my college applications and the dreaded essay. *Think about an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.* After weeks of staring at my computer screen, I decided to move on to my typewriter, hoping the names my mom had inscribed on this piece of metal would carry me out of the writer's block. But the only thing that's seemed to help me was typing letters to writers I may never meet, sharing how their stories seem to be the only thing helping me. I sit in front of my typewriter now.

High school is a time to grow, to evolve, and for me it feels like I've receded, still not being able to shake something that should be behind me. Maybe I shouldn't be so stuck in the

past. Maybe I should get over it, but no matter what I try, nothing seems to work. Even in the privacy of my room, in my own damn thoughts, maybe there is *no* safe haven here. As much as I love this city, maybe I won't stop feeling like this until I'm out of Detroit, starting a new life with new people surrounding me. Building a new crew of people I can trust.

Sometimes it be the ones closest to you that hurt you the most.

Dear Maya,

I'm feeling what you felt growing up. A caged bird. I'm crying out to everyone and to no one at all. My mind is full of rage and hurt and…noise. I can't escape my shrieks and cries and yet I'm unable to sing a song to the people I love the most. My family. My friends.

I can tell my mom notices my retreat – I think she appreciates me being home more while my dad is away, but she knows my social life is at a standstill. She keeps asking about Rashida, and Esi, and Destiny. What do I tell her? That I have no trust in anyone? Even close friends? Because when they're supposed to have your back but don't, that pain is hard to shake. How do I tell her I need help without her prying and asking what's wrong? Without her wanting to know every detail of that humiliating night? How do I tell my dad, who grew up only understanding to pray the pain away, that prayer won't be enough?

The most important question is, why do I feel so deeply ashamed? I felt like you did, Maya, in that courtroom.

I felt strong in my convictions, that in the moment I didn't want it. But now I'm not so sure. I wish I knew, Maya, I wish I knew. How were you able to find your voice again? I keep rereading your words, looking for answers. Looking for closure.

In my darkest hour, thank you for continuing to give me what no one can. You are my remedy. You are my cure.

Dani