

## TEXT 2

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Christy DeGallerie

### Out of the Closet and Into the Garden

*My Jamaican mother's hopes for life in America did not include my being gay. So how would I ever bloom?*

I came out to my mother the day she was deported<sup>1</sup>.

Probably not the best timing, but there is no good time to say "Hey, I'm gay!" to a God-fearing  
5 immigrant woman with the grit<sup>2</sup> of a true New Yorker.

As the firstborn American in my family, I have only an oral history of my parents' journey from the Caribbean to the United States, their stories of living in basements, working as dishwashers, cleaning mansions and taking care of Upper East Side<sup>3</sup> children.

After a long day, my parents would search for the nearest Jamaican restaurant to eat curry goat and  
10 hear a familiar tongue. They felt alive when they saw themselves in others, especially in a foreign land. It gave them hope that they too could make a life in the great U.S. of A.

There were many times I wanted to come out to my mother.[...]

I wanted to tell her during a January winter when I was 12 and had tied myself to the iron bar on the stoop of our Harlem building to protest my mother's packing our things into a taxi to move us to  
15 Westchester, where a wealthy family had rented her an apartment so she could be their nanny.

As she untied the rope and grabbed my shoulders, I cried, wanting to scream, "I have a girlfriend!"

"Don't cry," she said. "You're an American."

I heard that often, how privileged I was to be an American. My classmates didn't even know they had social security cards, but my mother had framed mine as if it were a family heirloom<sup>4</sup>. Her religious  
20 faith and her determination to make it in America did not leave room for lesbianism, gender identity, sexuality or any "isms" that would disrupt her plan for me. [...]

My mother loved me so much, but as an undocumented Black woman already facing so many hurdles, she didn't want her child to check off yet another marginalized box. So I stayed in the closet [...]. And when I felt sorry for myself and wanted to cry, she was quick to remind me how good I had it.

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<sup>1</sup> udvist

<sup>2</sup> mod

<sup>3</sup> *Upper East Side*: velhaverkvarter i New York

<sup>4</sup> arvestykke

25 My mother did the hard work and contributed to the land of the free, and she had a plan for my future, like so many American children with immigrant parents. We anchor babies<sup>5</sup> [...] must apply to Ivy League<sup>6</sup> schools and choose a career from an approved list: doctor, lawyer, engineer, professor, even immigration enforcement agent! Anything but a queer<sup>7</sup> writer.

I never had the opportunity to tell her because it was never part of our plan. But when she had to  
30 confess her undocumented status to immigration officers, that plan was demolished. [...]

First, she just disappeared, and none of us knew where she was for weeks. When we finally learned that she had been detained, I swung into action, contacting a lawyer, trying to come up with a plan.

Then I received a phone call. And my mother and I had to talk to each other as if it were our last day on earth, because that's what it felt like. I had only a few minutes to explain how we were going to try to  
35 keep her here, to remind her of our hustle<sup>8</sup>, and, most importantly, to tell her that our love could survive this.

Then I remembered the closest I had ever come to telling my mother I was gay.

The sky was peach-colored, and I had a small cut on my knee that I got from fighting a boy who called me a "dyke<sup>9</sup>." And during a New York summer, the last thing you want is a sticky hug, but I needed my  
40 mother. I wanted her to know what I was called. I wanted her to tell me that it would be OK.

I saw all the Caribbean women one by one exit the bus. I waited to see her face and she had such glee<sup>10</sup>, I jumped in her arms, and she said, "Let's make a garden!"

Inspired by the gardens she saw in the wealthy neighborhoods where she worked, she was certain that one day she would have her own. This dream of hers pushed me right back into the closet.

45 I squeezed her tight, wiped my face and agreed.

See, I had taken this class in school where I learned all about gardens. I knew the proper steps, knew what it would take to achieve this dream. I wanted my mother to have her garden, and I was scared to ruin the foundation of the roots she had planted. I thought coming out was going to be too big of a storm for my mother to manage with all the other flower beds she was tending, all the dreams that  
50 she had planted in America that were still desperate for water.

Step 1: Make your bed<sup>11</sup>

You must prepare the soil for planting, digging your hands into the soil and getting a feel for where you want to lay a healthy plant.

My mother migrated to a new country, assimilated as best she could and worked hard. She made her  
55 flower beds to survive, and doing so prepared her for a new life. [...]

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<sup>5</sup> *anchor babies*: (nedsættende om) børn, som bliver amerikanske statsborgere ved fødslen, selvom deres mødre ikke er det

<sup>6</sup> *Ivy League*: de kendteste amerikanske universiteter, fx Harvard, Yale, Princeton

<sup>7</sup> som ikke identificerer sig som normen, fx homoseksuel

<sup>8</sup> (her) energiske anstrengelser

<sup>9</sup> (nedsættende slang) lebbe

<sup>10</sup> glæde

<sup>11</sup> blomsterbed

On the phone with her, I heard a voice in the background, urging her to hurry up.

"I have a minute left, Christy," she said.

My heart almost fell out of my T-shirt. Before she left this land, I needed her to know who I was. [...]

"Mom, I'm gay," I said. "Like Ellen<sup>12</sup>."

60 I could hear her smile. She is someone whose smile makes a sound. Maybe it was a smile of relief, of no more secrets for either of us.

When she finally spoke, her voice was shaky and soft: "I know how long you've been wanting to tell me that, and how hard it's been. Back on the island I'll finally start my garden, and I'll plant flowers. I'll make hundreds of beds for the number of times you wanted to tell me who you are. I'll water them. I  
65 will accept them in every shape they bloom. I love you, my daughter."

Then the line went dead.

A week later, I was notified of her whereabouts. She was back in her home country.

Step 2: Add your plants

70 Dig a hole, place your plant, cover it with soil and water generously. It now has been five years of my being formally out, five years of crying even though I'm an American. And five years of growth that I thought was impossible.

I bloom in every season. And I thank my mother every day for Step 1.

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<sup>12</sup> Ellen DeGeneres (1958-) amerikansk TV-vært og erklæret homoseksuel