

# kendra allen

## WHEN YOU LEARN THE ALPHABET

**ANSWER THE QUESTION:** *in fifth grade, when you were asked to identify your ethnicity on the test, why did you circle “other” on the scantron?*

*hint: it wasn't because you didn't know that you were, you are, black.*

*answer: you circled “other” on that scantron because you didn't see a box that was labeled “black,” and you thought that maybe the people in charge just forgot. instead, you saw a box that was marked “african american.” and you knew that if black was bad, then african american had to be horrible. you didn't know that they allegedly are synonymous. so you chose “other” instead. “other” is safe. “other” can be anything. “other” cannot hinder you.*

you felt good about finally being an “other.” you weren't *too black* or *too loud* on paper. the “other” made you desirable, but your mama and daddy made you black... so it's best to love yourself now.

**B**lood will look thick when you see it melting into a concrete pavement. it looks like the stuff the vampires on *True Blood* drink, like fruit juice that isn't as sweet anymore because it's leaving a dead boy's body, it's normal now. it's just juice. and he is overflowing into the gutter. the body will be left on the street hours after his soul has evaporated into the clouds. his mother will be crying because they are making an example out of her boy. they are making an example out of unfulfilled and unnecessary life. the cops on duty will extend this public display of exploitation by saying something like: they can't touch the crime scene

like: there are no witnesses

and most falsely, something

like: we will find the person who did this

the news stations and other various forms of media will say something like: he had a criminal record.

like: this is a picture from his Facebook page, he was probably holding up a gang sign and more than likely a gang member. i.e., sagging pants and a hat covering his eyes.

something like: he was caught with weed one time in ninth grade which definitely means he was a crazed drug addict.

and when you see the dead boy still in the street on your tv, they will make sure to zoom in on his big lips just to reiterate who the target is.

side note: isn't it funny that black people were once mocked for having big, thick, soup-cooling lips, and now the world praises everyone for implanting a pair to achieve a "fuller look."

isn't it funny that

the lips of that dead boy is now the poster child for sexy.

**Church** is non-negotiable. every sunday morning you ask why must you go, every sunday. why can't you miss a service every once in a while. you go to church on wednesdays for youth meeting, thursdays for choir rehearsal and sometimes saturday morning for holiday program rehearsals, and on sundays, you go twice. once at ten a.m., and again for three o'clock services. your mama says that as long as you live in her house and she's paying the bills, you will go wherever she tells you to go. you say there ain't that much praising the Lord in the world but you will still get dressed and purposely scratch a hole into your pantyhose just to prove a point.

church will teach you all the books of the bible. everything will end with revelation and you can't wait to see how the locusts will look. but what you'll remember most is genesis 1:1 when God created the heavens and earth. he made woman out of man. he made flesh out of flesh. sometimes you scratch your skin and leave pieces of your old self under your fingertips and call it a flesh-eating disease. you will join the children's choir, you will sing a solo every now and then, and all the kids in the choir-stand will pass Now & Later candy back and forth from the same package until there is none left. the old women ushers always have red peppermints

in their purses, that's what they give the kids to make them shut up and some sundays you will settle for them even though you like green peppermints best.

(special) **D**elivery at your doorstep: a case of strawberry and chocolate milk. your dad, the truck-driving milkman for the moment, left it there, but he didn't stay.

maybe they forget that sensitivity and manliness is the same goddamn thing.

**E**ating cereal out of the same bowl for nine straight days gives you time to predict the stamina of material things. by day six, the plastic bowl is still standing strong, but your spoon is weak, it's bending and twisting but you make it last. you need this spoon for tomorrow and the day after. if you can keep it strong for the next three days, it can make it through the next three weeks. all it takes is determination.

your mama warned you about eating food that was cooked by unfamiliar hands. because you don't know who made it or how their houses look... they could have roaches in them, they might never wash their hands. you never know. one time at church this lady made collard greens and your mama said there were baby roaches inside of the pot. now you only eat your granny's greens. you don't eat everyone's mashed potatoes or dressing either. mostly because you're scared of seeing roaches, and more than likely, it don't taste as good as when your mama makes it anyways.

**"Fear is stronger than love. remember that. all the love i gave didn't mean nothing when it came to fear."** — tupac

*fear is stronger than love. fear is stronger than love.*

you made a list of all the things that frighten you. fear was number one.

**G**od gave her power and now her face looks like ripples in the ocean. you know that she's gonna die. it's her time to go. she died at ninety-four years old and years before she was gone, her mind made her forget that you were born in 1994.

your great-grandmother used to have all of her great-grandchildren on the floor of her yellow house counting out quarters. she had a flower vase full of coins next

to her favorite pull-out chair and every time you all visited, she would spread them out across the floor. she'd tell us to each grab a pile and count it out. however much was in your assigned pile, you could keep. one time all four of you received over ten dollars in quarters and made a trip to sonic because when kids get money they forget to keep it. you all bought drinks; sodas and slushies and not one of you offered to buy her a thing, or to say thank you for the money you were using to buy the drinks. you couldn't understand why she never let you count quarters again.

you remember this whenever you remember her, and you remember that death isn't that bad. you try to explain this to those who miss her that she was scared of life and she was scared of death and everyone knew, but now that she's gone, those fears have passed. you knew that this wouldn't make sense. you knew there'd be days like this and no one had to tell you.

but your grammar is fucked up and no one ever understands a word that you say.

**H**orror story: your childhood friend goes to jail for not snitching.

when his whole life, he has been told that a snitch is the worst thing he could be. that there is no safe recovering from it. as a child there were times when ya'll were told to "stop telling all the time." it was important to determine if you'd be defined by whether or not you were loyal. your friend was just doing what he was told.

but part of you blames him that he's still in a small cell almost five years later for a crime he didn't commit. part of you blames him for committing to be loyal only. part of you still blames him that he fell into the system that was designed specifically for him.

he knows when he returns home, he will be respected. you know that respect is a lot, but it is not everything.

**I**gnore the idea that people actually care what you think. they only care whether or not you think the same way that they do. and when you don't, they stop listening.

sometimes you feel that you shouldn't say anything real. because you are still

surprised by how fully developed adults, with whole families and whole careers, lose their whole mind when someone doesn't agree with them. this is what you call complacency.

**J**ournalism was supposed to be your career. you came to college wanting to write about music, wanting to be a critic, because you love to intimidate people with how musically inclined you are. in your introduction to journalism class they wanted you to write about popular culture, news, about politics, about other things you did not care about because politics and news stations do not care about the headline:

“ANOTHER NIGGA SHOT 13 TIMES BY A COP”

followed by the subheading:

*when white people can't disguise their racism any longer*

they don't want to talk about that stuff. they'd say you're too close to it, that you have to stick with fact as if the complete disregard of the lives of your cousins uncles friends do not qualify as fact. that's what journalism is supposed to be though, fact.

fact 1. they can, but won't, print a headline with the “n-word” in it. they will say that you can't say that word, that it is offensive (in 2015, a nigga saying nigga is now offensive to white people) but when they say that it is offensive, what they really mean is that they're just upset that they can't say it, publicly anyways, and especially in a headline.

fact 2. if you had stuck with fact, the headline would've read instead:

“WHY IS IT OKAY FOR YOU TO CALL ME A NIGGA IN THE PRIVACY OF YOUR HOME BUT I'M NOT ALLOWED TO SAY MY OWN NAME”

followed by a longer subheading that's not really a subheading:

*black people were offended when you allowed us to breastfeed your children but wouldn't let us use the same bathroom in fear of catching nigga diseases. black people were offended when ya'll blamed rap music for a fraternity's racist chant. black people still offended that ya'll thought we would give a fuck that george zimmerman was shot in the face.*

followed by a shorter subheading:

*so niggas freely using the word nigga is just something ya'll gone have to deal with.*

but they would just tell you that a subheading can't be that long.

**K**inetic energy flows through the nigga veins apparently. they can jump higher, dance better, dunk a ball with style, prophesize from prison, make a crowd laugh, throw a punch harder, be a human auction, write a rap song with finesse, have their hair stand tall, be target practice, throw a football, pick cotton in a hot field, play an instrument seductively, start a riot while trying to start a revolution. and, if it's absolutely necessary, they can even outrun a fat ass cop, because you know they're on their second strike and ain't tryna get locked back up. you know we're good at going to prison.

**L**ying to God may be illegal, you're not sure, but sometimes you do it and just in case you run out of mercy you say, *forgive me.*

i'm sorry. i won't do it again.

that was the last time for i have sinned

lying to the priest is still legal in all fifty states though, especially texas.

**M**oney will always be an issue. you don't love money and everyone around you is in a by-any-means-necessary sacrificial relationship to get it. they love the idea of money more than they love themselves. there are no millionaires in your family and you

hope there never will be, in panic that materialism will destroy fragile dreams. they spend their checks on cash cars and weed, praying for the day that it becomes legal in dallas to roll up on neighborhood streets.

when the money runs low, they just sell their food stamps for half-price and call it a day.

Next semester's tuition will be going up by only .3%. only .3%. they think you should be grateful of this.

bria says you should strip, you can cover that .3% in one night. you tell her your ass isn't big enough. she tells you to start squatting and eventually it will round out, you tell her you bend over backwards for enough people already.

**O**ppression will come mostly in darker hues: negro, vato, arab, *black*. and you know that the world is not black and white, but that's just because no one wants to admit that it is.

you want to be actively black. that is why you will buy a black hoodie with the words "racially profiled" across its center and make sure that you wear it whenever you go to places like the airport or school or to take out the trash. your dad will tell you that no matter how much you are aware of white people issues, about the drugs they use, about the lives they live, they don't give a damn about the black ones. he will say they don't give a fuck about us in the most houston way that he can. it'll have the time his boss called him a nigger inside of his throat when he says it. he choked him out. you can hear that he's still mad about that one. you can also hear that he's still proud about that one, you will be proud of him. he says that they don't care to relate to you, that they care only about creating *from* you. and you'll sit on the couch and stare at all three of your white roommates and say to yourself that you've read every bullshit john green novel there is, but they've never heard of the name walter mosley, that they never even asked what the real issue was as you watched the ferguson riots on bullshit cnn, because they'd rather be watching *How I Met Your Mother*. because you will remember when patrick said that there is nothing anyone could say or do to him that can make him feel bad about being white.

**P**sychology sold the dream of meaning and you watched societal norms attempt to victimize your decisions and behaviors and personality. every questionnaire that you

have taken has labeled you an extrovert but your idea of a fun time is sitting in your room staring at the ceiling with a bag of hot chips.

so somebody lying.

Your aunt was yelling *I HOPE YOU O-D ON THE MEDICINE!!! I HOPE YOU O-D ON THE MEDICINE!!!* because she acts crazy when she hasn't swallowed a couple of pills. but she also acts crazy when she has, so maybe she's just crazy. the doctor told her that she's bipolar, has ocd, and tourette's syndrome. when she told you this you laughed and so did she, but she will get three checks every month and she will accept whatever they say is wrong with her. she tells people this ridiculous diagnosis. but she, and her doctors, forget to say that a man beat her everyday just for being pretty, which will be why she likes to fight. that she won't sit still because she has crack in her system that is working and eating at her cells. her teeth will chatter because she hasn't had enough money for a hit in about a week so she'll lash out at anyone who isn't fighting a twenty-year addiction.

but the doctors will tell her that she's bipolar, has ocd, and tourette syndrome, but nah, she's a drug addict.

you pray for her, because prayer hands are stronger than weighted ones.

**Q**uiet rooms are the ones holding all of the family secrets. places like funerals, and weddings, and grandparent's houses.

at the funeral your mama said that grandmother was mean and racist and she had favorites. and your grandmother's kids, and their kids, haven't spoken to ya'll since.

at the wedding, someone said, "they not gon' last" you roll your eyes and tell them to go find a man.

at your grandparent's house, no one talks about how your cousin is not really your cousin. but you and him are the only dark skinned people on that side of the family, so you never ask either because you need him to remind you of who you are.

**R**epeat the phrase: *lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil*

side note: everything you know about the bible, your mother told you. when you



read for yourself, for some reason, you get really drowsy.

**Sixteen candles.** you've completed childhood so you take one trip to wal-mart.

when you turned sixteen you asked for a purity ring. you don't know why you didn't think to go to a bible store or somewhere that specializes in cleansing the body because all of the jewelry stores in the mall said they weren't sure if they sold purity rings, that they do have rings that you could buy and just default as a purity ring. like a backup plan ring. like a plan b ring. they will say that it's a good thing to see a young girl wanting one though. you'll say thanks and settle for a ring with two hearts intertwined together, one pink, one silver.

your purity was worth only one hundred dollars;  
it's probably worth at least five hundred by now.

**Two is not better than one** and you have a problem with greedy people.

you're nineteen with two jobs and a full-time academic schedule. at your morning job they rake in over one million dollars black friday weekend and you work those mornings dragging your feet with a seven thousand dollar balance still in your student account. you work the cashier and the people you work with actually care about this job. you can't physically handle the idea of being passionate about being a best buy employee. at nineteen this is a good job, you get benefits 'n shit. it's a good job if you don't mind those walkie talkies tracking your every move. it's a good job if you don't mind spending hours taking online tests that determine whether or not you're gifted and talented enough to call the credit card company when a customer's card gets declined. it's a good job if you don't mind that same customer cussing your ass out. it's a good job if you don't mind that you work at an electronics store, but you are using the first computer ever made for checkouts and the screen freezes regularly. it's a good job if you've been there for two months and you don't mind one of the managers moving you out of the way because he's trying to impress a pretty lady at your register and you are moving too slowly and making him look incompetent. it's only a good job if you plan on staying there.

your night job is around the corner so you walk there in two minutes to start your second shift. this job won't let you paint your nails red or any other color

because it might chip into a customer's corned beef sandwich. and if it wasn't for the customer who asked you were you deaf because you couldn't input his sandwich order as swiftly as he recited it in all of three breaths, you'd understand. what you don't understand is why you're the cashier but you bus tables everyday, you waitress everyday, you clean windows all the time. what you don't understand is why your register is always short when this particular manager is closing.

one time seventy five dollars short.

after you counted out your register and brought him the receipt, you just stared at him for a long time. he understood your face. he said he'd figure it out. you thought, *of course you will.*

you go back home for christmas break with both of your jobs awaiting your return. while you're home, you watch an interview your favorite rapper gave on capitalism. he said that we as a people are accepting that our lives are only worth twelve dollars an hour (you get paid nine fifty) he said we on a plantation, making someone else richer while we still struggle to put food on the table every night. but we gotta eat, only if it's a little bit, so we stay on this plantation for all of our lives.

it takes seconds for you to decide that when you go back to school, you won't be going back to work. and you don't care to call and say that you quit. and you don't care to go pick up your last check. but you knew that it was only one hundred and sixty three dollars because they gave you minimum hours.

**Understand that telling a lie is the same as murder is the same as rape is the same as adultery. you're a liar.**

you lie, you steal.

you steal, you kill.

that's how this sinning thing works. until you got caught in a big lie, you didn't care how much you did it. you'd lie just to end a conversation. you'd lie so you could hear the TV again. you'd lie, and then someone would lie to you and somehow their lie was more potent. but you know that no sin is greater than the other.

so you have been practicing truth telling, they say that in twenty-eight days it

will become a habit.

so here it goes: black lives do not matter, and you wish they would stop lying for ratings,  
ignorance ain't bliss,  
violence isn't the answer, but... it gets shit done from time to time,  
and clinton had sexual relations with that woman.  
you go bill.

“Virginity isn't real,” your roommate says, “because your hymen grows back after you haven't had sex in a while. maybe a couple of months — *it... grows... back.*”

you want so bad to ask has her hymen grown back and has she ever met anyone whose hymen has grown back because if she has then there is a bigger issue that needs to be discussed.

everyone in the room agrees with her.

you want so badly to ask that if virginity isn't real, then why do you bleed when your hymen gets broken

but these are the same girls who don't know that pee doesn't come out of the same hole that a penis goes into, but they believe that your hymen grows back.

you don't know if this means that maybe it's time to redefine feminism because beyoncé did not make “single ladies” for this shit.

(you go through a spiritual) **W**ithdrawal from people who look like you. withdrawal from people with various complexions. your school is predominantly, and systematically, white. and one time you had to go over to kloe's room just to be around some familiarity. it felt kind of hypocritical because you came to this school not wanting to go to an historically black college and now you think about this decision a lot. that you thought too many black people wouldn't help you grow because you've spent your entire life around too many black people, and now you're in a place were you barely see them.

now you answer questions about weaves. you say they come in 12”

14”

16”

18”

up to 32 inches.

you answer questions asking whether or not you've personally been treated wrong by a white person (this one is a personal favorite)

you answer questions about how much seasoning you put on your food

you answer questions about putting hot sauce on practically anything edible

about your afro when you take your weave out

about whether or not your cocoa butter lotion will turn their skin dark

about how your hair isn't actually "natural" because it is colored

about everything you wouldn't have to answer if you went to a black college

you don't mind. you say that it is ok to ask. you just mind that you are solely looked upon to represent an entire race. you mind that white people can represent themselves, but what they think of you specifically will be what they believe your entire race is like. you mind that you have to give the correct answer, not your answer.

you mind that you have to be a collective voice.

you hope that they shiver when you speak.

**X** is the number of people who can embody selflessness: you do not know these people.

**Y**esterday you called your dad. he asked how you were doing. you said you were fine. he asked how is school. you said you're not going to get all a's this semester. he said that you just have to work harder next semester. the phone gets static on the line because no one is speaking.

you ask him what is he doing. he says he's watching the game. you ask who is playing. he says the rockets. you say that they are going to lose. he says they beat the sorry mavericks. you say barely. the phone gets static on the line because no one is speaking.

he asks do you want to watch the game with him. you ask what channel is it on.

he says channel 45. you go into your living room and turn on the tv. he asks are you watching. you say yea.

the phone gets static on the line because no one is speaking.

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**Zigzag** is the pattern that you have to run in if a snake is chasing you.

side note: you are still running in circles. 🕒