

Speakeasy with Denene: Love

Denene Millner: 00:04 (Music)

This is Speakeasy with Denene, a podcast from Georgia Public Broadcasting. I'm your host, Denene Millner. You may know me as a co-host of A Seat at the Table on GPB TV. I'm also a mom, a New York Times bestselling author, and I run a website called mybrownbaby.com. Speakeasy with Denene is a podcast that speaks to a specific topic and we dive into how it affects the African American community. Welcome. And just so you know, this is a podcast for grownups, so you might hear some explicit language. Today we're talking about love and to start, let's head into my home in Atlanta where the view is amazing.

We are right now on the balcony deck of my apartment in Midtown Atlanta, kind of West Atlanta, near Atlantic Station, and I am looking at this spectacular view, which was the view that convinced me that this was a place that I needed to be when I decided that I wanted to get a divorce and be on my own. I don't know if I'm really ready for a relationship with anyone, but I do know that I am ready to love Denene exactly the way that Denene needs to be loved. And this is one of those moments where I'm thinking about it constantly in my life. In what ways can I love myself wholly, fully, unapologetically in a way that I've never done before. So we're going to go inside now so that I can finish up my gumbo. I'm making a big old, gigantic pot of gumbo for my girlfriends, Ida and Joyce. They're going to come over here and have a war council with me on dating in Atlanta and what it takes to be in love in a city that seems like the odds are against us black women.

This is good eating right here, I'm telling you, you're going to hurt yourself, smack somebody's momma. I'm going to make sure I'm not standing near you when you taste this.

Ida: 02:32 Hey! How are you?

Joyce: 02:32 Good. How are you?

Denene Millner: 02:35 My girlfriend, Joyce shows up with her daughter, ready for some gumbo and girl talk. A few minutes later, my other friend Ida arrives. All three of us have something in common: we're single black women living in Atlanta, and it's not easy. When we talk about love, I think about a survey from a few years ago. The

Martin Prosperity Institute analyzed census data and found there are roughly 80,000 more single women than single men in Atlanta. We wanted to dive into this as part of our dinner. After we finished the main meal, Joyce, Ida and I take the war council from the kitchen to the dining room. As we eat cookies and talk, something occurs to me. There haven't been any men at this table since I moved in. Joyce thinks this is absolutely unacceptable.

- Joyce: 03:23 Wow. Denene that must change.
- Denene Millner: 03:27 We'll see.
- Ida: 03:29 Well, what would change that?
- Denene Millner: 03:32 That question from Ida is the million dollar question. It's one I've been thinking about a lot lately since I'm dating after being with my ex husband for more than 20 years. That's two decades, y'all and dating has changed, a lot. Now. I'm not ready for a committed relationship, but I still want to feel valued. What happened to dates at concerts and walks in the park and homemade dinners? Let's head back to the war council.
- I'm going out with a guy. We had made plans. I had went away for vacation. I hadn't seen him for almost three weeks. He texted and said, hey, I really miss you, I'd really like to see you. Now, before I went on vacation, I kind of felt like I had been put into this box, this, you know, this booty call box. You know, I'm going to-
- Ida: 04:23 Absence makes the heart grow fonder.
- Denene Millner: 04:25 Right. I'm going to spend exactly, you know, just the amount of effort I need to have sex with her and then that I'm going to make just enough time in my schedule for that act and then find a reason to be gone. Which you know y'all know how that feels, you know how that feels.
- Ida: 04:46 Yeah, like shit.
- Denene Millner: 04:47 Right. It's horrible and I don't understand why they don't get that like duh, I noticed it. I'm not stupid. I'm grown.
- My friend Ida sheds a light on what might be holding some men back.
- Ida: 05:01 You got to remember who you are, right?

Denene Millner: 05:04 I'm god damn Denene Millner be clear.

Ida: 05:07 Very clear. And so they know that too.

Denene Millner: 05:10 Right?

Ida: 05:11 And so when I'm dealing with a Denene Millner or Joyce Davis, it's like this is the bar is the standard that I have to meet if I can't meet that, but I still want to engage with a Joyce Davis or Denene Millner, if I got some good (explicit). That'll keep me going for a minute.

Denene Millner: 05:38 For a minute. Not forever though. Cause you will get cut off.

Joyce: 05:42 Well that's what-

Ida: 05:42 Maybe or maybe not.

Joyce: 05:44 That's what was happening yesterday.

Denene Millner: 05:45 You will get cut off.

Ida: 05:47 maybe by Joyce Davis, but for other Denene Milner's of the world.

Denene Millner: 05:51 But they're not Denene Milners then.

Ida: 05:54 no, no. Let me tell you something. You're (explicit) and your heart has two separate brains.

Joyce: 06:03 I agree. Loneliness is a beast.

Denene Millner: 06:06 My friend Joyce makes the point that she'd rather be lonely than used.

Joyce: 06:11 I'm going two years without somebody seeing me in my boudoir. So I want to feel appreciated. And if I go a long time without feeling appreciated and I'm seeing somebody snip, snip, snip, I just, I don't want to feel underappreciated. I don't want to feel taken for granted. I would rather be alone. And that's a terrible thing to say because loneliness makes you trip out. Loneliness makes you, I mean, it really impacts your self worth, your happiness, your ability to parent well, your health. I mean, you know, it's a mental thing. Loneliness is a mental thing, but I would rather risk that than be just consistently up under some dude who just does not appreciate or taken for granted. I guess I've gotten to, and I've been in those situations where I have let

that go on for a long time, but I'm 47 years old, nope. No ma'am. No sir.

I know that I can be alright by myself or, and I know, and I also know because I'm 47 years old, that it ain't going to be forever. Right? It might be a month, it might be six weeks, it might be a year, but it ain't going to be forever.

Ida: 07:32 Right. As much as, I don't want to say this, it's, it's just true when you have these dope ass women out here that are like beyond over achieving, you know what I'm saying? It's really hard for the, the, the, the average man to meet that mark. You know what I'm saying? I really do think that that's part of the issue is that they themselves are insecure in that particular way when dealing with a woman, right, of just substance. Yeah. You know, and I, I often think it's easier for them to default. And then I also think too is that women are so abundant, like you said. You know what I'm saying? There's so many to go around.

Denene Millner: 08:33 I see myself coming and going all the time and then I'm like, Ooh, she is dope. I meet a lot of dope women. I have a lot of acquaintances, a few really close friends, but I have a lot of acquaintances who I'm like, dang, you bad. If I was a man, I be trying to get with you too.

Ida: 08:47 So if you got, if you got five of those at your disposal, right. You know what I'm saying?

Joyce: 08:54 There's no need for you to act right that's basically what you're saying.

Ida: 08:58 Basically and again, when, when they want you, they want you, they want you in the worst way.

Denene: I just wish that men would believe me when I say, listen, we can be human and treat each other like human beings. And I don't need a ring. I do not need to walk down the aisle.

I do not need to have a baby. I'm good. I did it for 20 years. And mind you, before I got married, I didn't date a whole lot. I didn't have a whole lot of, relationships. I just didn't, and so this is new for me and I'm going to get to the point where I can say, "Hey, this is what I need." And I came very close to it yesterday. I'm not going to give up and I'm going to try my best to enjoy being Denene and being Denene and learning to love Denene and all of her splendor and gloriousness and figure out what it will take to get someone to understand what it means to be invited to this table.

- Denene Millner: 10:17 Getting invited to the table is just one hurdle in a relationship. Making a relationship work for years. Well that has its own hurdles. Atlanta based Authur Tayari Jones' latest novel digs deep into what can shake our relationship to its core. I loved An American Marriage because it speaks to modern day black love in the midst of social injustice. The story has gotten a lot of attention for its beauty and insight. In the book, Tayari tells a story of a young successful black couple living in Atlanta, they're dealt a serious blow when the husband is arrested for a crime he didn't commit and sentenced to more than a decade in prison. This couple is forced to stand the test of racial injustice. And Tayari talked with me when she was still living in New York city, but now she's back in Atlanta teaching at Emory university. Terry told me why she wanted to focus on love and social injustice in her book.
- Tayari Jones: 11:11 I knew that I wanted to write something to engage the question of mass incarceration, but I was always interested in the way the collateral effects, the way it ripples out more so than like a novel about someone in prison.
- I knew I wanted to look at the ways that it affected the families the way, particularly wives and mothers. And so I went back home to Atlanta and when I was in the mall I heard a couple arguing. I heard the woman say, "Roy, you know you wouldn't have waited on me for seven years." And he kind of pushed back from the table and said to her, "I don't know what you're talking about. This wouldn't have happened to you in the first place." And when I heard that I was intrigued by the way that it felt like their romantic experience had been intersected with the question of criminal justice. Like they were arguing as a man to a woman, but they were also speaking against the backdrop of incarceration.
- Denene Millner: 12:17 Right. Oh wow. And so this, that all's it took, was that one sort of spark in the middle of a mall in Atlanta for you to be able to draw the stories from the research that you were doing?
- Tayari Jones: 12:32 Yes, because I was really intrigued by what she was asking me. She was saying would there be reciprocity? And he was saying it's irrelevant because you know there would never be an instance where that reciprocity would be called for. And that I felt like was a, I realized in that moment that the argument they were having is an argument that lots of couples have. It's just that it was turned up to 20 for them. I mean how many women have said to men, "what would you do if the tables were turned?" Would you, like on questions of say infidelity, right?

Like there is an expectation that men have a little more wiggle room with that and the woman would say, well, what would you do with the tables turned? And he's like, yeah, but these tables don't turn.

So it gave me a familiar place also to start to write, then instead of thinking of my characters as this totally foreign experience that I know nothing about, I realized that their experience is really the question of an American marriage. It's about equality, it's about compromise, it's about work life balance, like how much of your life do you give to your relationship and how much do you use to pursue your own dreams, how to set change if your husband is not only incarcerated but wrongfully incarcerated.

- Denene Millner: 13:49 Right, right. I find it ironic that the conversation from a man's perspective is it's not the same. You would never have to deal with what we deal with and you know that's not statistically true, right. There's the, the amounts of black women incarcerated is soaring here in America and I wonder if we would get the reciprocity.
- Tayari Jones: 14:19 The number of women in prison is rising at a very quick, at a very high rate. And it's because you know, private prisons, they have to be filled and we've kind of almost reached capacity with men. So there's a new population to, to imprison. But the question of reciprocity, people who work in prisons will tell you that women take care of the entire prison population. I mean they take care of sons in prisons, husbands in prisons, daughters in prison, that, that care, because when a loved one is incarcerated, basically you serve as a caretaker to that person. And care taking generally falls to women,
- Denene Millner: 14:55 right? And so we're the nurturers. And that doesn't change when someone is imprisoned. That's love.
- Tayari Jones: 15:01 And also taking care of the kids. That's also a huge thing that falls onto women. You know, one in every 28 American children has an incarcerated parent, which means they are probably being reared and cared for by a woman.
- Denene Millner: 15:15 Can love withstand injustice?
- Tayari Jones: 15:19 You know, I think that it can, but I think that a lot of our expectations, particularly about incarceration and the idea of the man being taken away, this is, this is a way of looking at things that dates way back. I mean in high school didn't you read the Odyssey? Like Odysseus is away all those years and

what he wants is for he wants to come home to a chased woman and a clean house and and An American marriage. This is what my character Roy wants. He wants the same thing that a man was lobbying for in like 60 BC.

I do think that love can withstand it, but I think that it would have to be, well I think there's a lot of things but one I was thinking a lot about, you know how they say that for black people you have to work twice as hard for everything and I feel that this is true also relationship wise that this young couple in an American Marriage, what is asked of them is super human. They for their love to- they were only married 18 months and he's given a 12 year sentence. And for that romantic relationship to survive would require them to be superheroes. And that's a lot to ask of anyone. And I feel that for women, the superhero contribution is normalized. Like if you are anything less than a superhero, you are a failure.

Denene Millner: 16:51 Right. And particularly in the black community that expects black women to show up, right? Like to not just simply love her man, but to love the black community enough to stand by her man.

Tayari Jones: 17:04 At the expense of everything else. I mean, in an American Marriage, Celestial is an artist. Her career is taking off. I feel like Celestial wants from her life, the same things I want from my life, but a lot of readers push back and they're really angry with her for daring to live. It's almost as though her success is at her husband's expense. But I don't think that that's a fair way to read her life.

Denene Millner: 17:34 Another underlying theme that struck me was how much hope is the heartbeat of love. Like Celestial hopes that her husband can get justice and his freedom. Roy hopes that Celestial can move past the devastation of a decision they made his first months in prison and really hopes that it hasn't ruined their love or her hope for him. And then Andre, their mutual friend, and at some point Celestial's lover hopes the woman he's loved since childhood will love him back. So why is hope necessary for this particular couple and what makes it so hard to maintain?

Tayari Jones: 18:09 Well, love is a gamble. Love is such a gamble. And for anyone to love is that you have to put faith in something that you can't control. And that's what luck is, that hope, hope is faith and something that you can't control. And I think it's true for all couples. I think with these couples facing such incredible odds, they have to lean more on faith and hope that it'll all work out. But you know what I think they learn? I think they learn that

love, as Celestial says, "you can never unlove someone, it changes form sometimes, but it's still there." And I think they all had to learn to be less rigid about what it means to be loved. That love is not owning another person. It's not control. It's not a possession. It's a deep caring. Love is wanting someone else to be, you want the best for the other person, not only for your purposes of your own satisfaction.

All three of them had to learn to give to the others and hope as you will hope for the best and that the best may not look the way you thought it would.

Denene Millner: 19:20

Can you imagine if we all looked at love and hope in that way, how much better we would be?

Tayari Jones: 19:26

This book really challenged me with these questions. I think also, you know with it being about marriage and everyone likes to think that marriage is about sexual fidelity as though that is the only measure of love and care and these, I mean I feel like the challenges they face with Roy's incarceration, with his early release, with Celestial having another lover in Andre, whom she's loved since they were infants and they all had to stop and rethink and let go of some of these toxic ideas about masculinity, toxic ideas about ownership. They had to, when you face an incredible challenge, sometimes you just have to hit the reset button and think about things differently, more expansively.

Denene Millner: 20:16

What's the message about love and particularly the truth of black love that you're pulling in this storytelling?

Tayari Jones: 20:24

I didn't feel that I had to write this book to defend black love or to make a kind of a propaganda picture of it, that the complexity of this love is enough to justify its prominence in my thoughts, but one of the things that I was really interested in is that how many different ways people find their lives together. People get off to rocky starts. People get off to smooth starts like love is a human interaction and it is vital to our lives. But one thing that I had a lot of fun with was looking at the generational gap in the question of love and marriage.

I feel that the younger people believe that they should be happy in their marriages and their parents think that's a silly luxury to think you're supposed to be happy, happy, happy. I think the parents think that you're supposed to be satisfied and sustained, but that happy seems like such a luxury, but I think that is what the sacrifices of their earlier generation gave the younger generation this expectation of joy, fulfillment, equality

and that's part of the struggle I think in trying to decide how do we love in the face of injustice?, How do we sacrifice?, How much sacrifice is too much and you know, what do we allow to hold back for the love of ourselves? Because self love I think is a very important part of black love.

Denene Millner: 22:19 That was Tayari Jones, author of the award winning *An American Marriage*. It's a beautiful love story about a couple that has to figure out love, hope and truth in the face of adversity. I've spent my entire career exploring black love, black love that shared in the community black love as it relates to a couple learning how to love one another, black love as a mother, loving her children and loving them through a society that doesn't necessarily give them the regard that we reserve for children. And so it's beautiful to be able to sit and talk and commiserate with someone like Tayari Jones who uses the written word to shine a light on what we know is true. That black love is true love, that we love hard, we love strong, we love thoughtfully, we love ourselves, we love our community, we love our babies. And to have a book like *An American Marriage* shine a light in the way that it did in the way that Tayari chose to tell that story just lets me know that black love is alive and that the keepers are still here, the keepers of the truth are still here.

So I so appreciate Tayari and her work. She's done some fabulous work, but she just, she really laid it down with an *American Marriage* and it's inspiring to me as a mother, as someone who loves love, wants to be in love and loves hard and strong.

(Music)

I'm Denene Millner and you're listening to *Speakeasy* with Denene from Georgia Public Broadcasting.

Now let's hear from an artist whose music embodies black love.

Avery Sunshine: 24:21 (Singing) I'd give up ice cream just for you. I'd sell my bags and give away my shoes. I'd give you my happy and take your blues.

Denene Millner: 24:37 That's Atlanta based artists, Denise White who goes by the stage name Avery sunshine. The song you're listening to is *The Ice Cream Song*. Avery wrote it for her husband, Dana Johnson.

Avery Sunshine: 24:47 (singing continues)

[inaudible 00:24:52] I'd even give you my last little shrimp to eat what I'm trying to say is there aint no telling what I'd.

- Denene Millner: 25:02 I have always adored Avery sunshine, but when I saw her and her husband performing this hit on NPRs Tiny desk series, I wondered what it took to write a beautiful love song, particularly when a lot of the music we hear isn't really about black love. We ask them to share some of their love music magic.
- Avery Sunshine: 25:20 Writing a love song is, it's simple for me because I am speaking about my experiences so I don't have to look very far. Thankfully I don't have to look, I don't have to depend on what's on the airwaves or you know, on YouTube or anything for it. I am tapping into my experiences and those love songs, the love that I have with my husband, the love from my parents to love for my children, the love for my sister.
- (Music)
- The elements of a good love song to me are honesty, the way the song moves melodically, you know? And sometimes you just know it when you hear it. One of one of my favorite love songs is, The system. Don't Disturb This Groove.
- Speaker 9: 25:20 (Singing) Pay attention, are you listening? You're my favorite girl. Excuse me for the moment I'm in another world. On a mountain, by a fountain, flowers blooming everywhere with Venus and with Cupid the picture's very clear.
- Avery Sunshine: 26:51 The way I felt when I heard that song, I wanted my Knight in shining armor to sweep me away on some roller skates or something. You know what I mean?
- Speaker 9: 27:08 (Singing continues) [inaudible]
- Avery Sunshine: 27:12 Don't disturb this groovy. It made me feel like I was, if I want, my husband is sing this. As a matter of fact sweetheart, at some point I need you to sing Don't Disturb This Groove when you propose to me again, I want you to sing Don't Disturb This Groove. To me it makes, there's something about a love, when a love song.
- Dana Johnson: 27:28 It's interesting you say that like that. We're kind of in this like mid eighties kind of thing with like SLS.
- Avery Sunshine: 27:37 Oh man, Yarbrough and Peoples, who else were, I mean-

Dana Johnson: 27:42 and all that where it was still funky but they were love songs, you know and I think there's room for it all.

Avery Sunshine: 27:50 And you know what's hard though as a, I will say what is hard as a writer is the thought that I need to divorce myself from those things. The eighties and the nineties in order to be present in the, in 2018 and for whatever reason I'm not able to.

(Singing). Forever's just that long for us to be together

The process when when I'm writing a song, it varies. There are times when one of the first love songs we wrote, it was called Forever's Just Not Long Enough.

(Singing continues) I could just go on and on, but I don't have time it's just not long enough. It's just not long enough.

That was our first tour. I'd drive. We'd switch off. I'd drive and Dana would be in the passenger seat with a guitar and he started playing bump, bump, bump, bump, bump. That was, that had to be 2010 and we just finished the song this year Forever's just not long enough for us to be together.

(Singing continues) A month of Sundays could go by with me gazing in your eyes

A story that we rarely tell I was going through a divorce when we met and he was my friend and he helped me through my divorce. Between my dear husband and my best friend who I was on the phone with when we saw each other, [inaudible 00:29:40] the two of them helped me through my divorce. I speak about writing songs about my experiences. That was, that was it.

(Singing continues).

Then The Ice Cream song came in no time.

(Singing) I almost sang the same old too long, but you came right on in all sweet and strong. You are the perfect chord in my song. Oh yes you are.

I said, when we get married, I want a song that I could sing to you and I wanted him to know how important he was to me, how important this thing was because we said we would never get married again.

(Singing) I'd give up ice cream just for ya.

When to tell you, I love ice cream. I could eat ice cream and not have no meat. I don't, I don't have to have nothing else. Give me ice cream. I want white turtle ice cream from Brusters and I want to watch them make it and they mix it with the pecans in the car-. I want to watch you- and then the Caramel, the Caramel, it doesn't harden. It stays nice and fluid in the ice cream and goo, just goo, that's the word gooey and so listen, [inaudible]. I'm trying to tell you if I give that up. I mean it, again it took no time to write that song.

Dana Johnson: 31:32

Yeah, that makes me feel pretty nice.

Avery Sunshine: 31:35

He's so sweet, but I think that is what it is about our relationship. That makes me even love him more. He, that's genuinely who he is. He's not putting on he's, and he's cool. He's like, yeah, that makes me feel nice.

(Singing) There aint no telling what I'd do. You can have my Jimmy Choo's

Denene Millner: 32:02

That's Atlanta based artist, Avery Sunshine. We also heard from her guitarist and husband Dana Johnson, and that's it for us today, but we want to hear from you. What's your favorite love song? You can reach us at speakeasywithDenene.com.

I'm Denene Millner. Keosha Howard and Sean Powers produce the show. Sarah Shariari is our editor. That theme music is by M. Fasol. We heard additional music from Blue Dot Sessions. Speakeasy with Denene as a production of Georgia Public Broadcasting. You can subscribe to us for free at gpb.org/podcasts and anywhere you get your podcasts and until the next time on Speakeasy be easy.

(Music)