

Episode 1: "On God"

[00:00:00] [Inaudible crosstalk over a music track and the sound of rain. Two voices, one male and one female, sound as if they're speaking over a telephone line. Their voices intersect and layer over one another and the music.]

[00:01:26] [phone ringtone]

[00:01:34] Justen LeRoy: Tyler Mitchell . . .

[00:01:40] Tyler Mitchell: Justen LeRoy . . . hello, hello friend, it's nice to be sending you this voice message tonight. **[00:01:50]** A little late, a little late on top of being late, but here now. And um . . . yeah, I want to be wary of the train that goes by **[00:02:00]** sometimes in the background for me. But three things that I'm grateful for . . . to be honest with you man, three things that I've been thinking **[00:02:10]** about, one of them is simply the roof over my head. I'm grateful for this roof I have over my head right now in Brooklyn. **[00:02:20]** It has been crazy out here in Brooklyn and I know as simple as it may sound to be grateful for something like that, times are getting desperate out here. **[00:02:30]** And every day, I come in home here, I'm thankful for it and I'm grateful for it, and I am grateful to be here. Things are tough outside right now and I'm seeing crazier and crazier stuff every day.

[00:02:40] I'm grateful for the conversation that I had today with some amazing NYU studio art students. **[00:02:50]** I was invited by Lyle Ashton Harris to go and talk to his group of students and **[00:03:00]** they made me feel like the future is bright. Even being a young person myself, and seeing other younger people making some **[00:03:10]** amazing stuff and just . . . just *talking*, you know? Going back and forth with the kids and going back and forth with Lyle about what good work is—**[00:03:20]** what *my* work is about, what *their* work is about, what *Lyle's* work is about—and just passing the baton amongst each other as artists and as humans was really special.

[00:03:30] [The sound of rain reemerges in the background, layered with slow-paced saxophone music. Tyler continues speaking over the soundtrack.]

[00:03:40] Damn, third thing that I'm thankful for . . . I mean, I think I have to be thankful for two things, I'm going to give it four **[00:03:50]** instead of three. I'm thankful for the people around me in my life right now in New York, my immediate community here of friends, and my extended **[00:04:00]** community of people, whether that's online in other cities, people like yourself, Justen, people in London, my girlfriend,

and everyone else **[00:04:10]** who I'm close to and who serves as some form and function of my support system, and who I hopefully support as well. **[00:04:20]** I'm also thankful for new possibilities. I'm grateful for new possibilities upcoming on the horizon. I'm grateful for the opportunity to **[00:04:30]** turn over a new leaf . . . as a creative person, as an artist. To forge ahead, making new stuff and to see what the road will **[00:04:40]** bring me. So, yeah. Damn, I was really long-winded bro, I'm sorry, I'm rambling now and I hope some of this works out for you. Your project at *Made in L.A.* is going to be sick anyway. I love you, bye.

[00:04:50] [The saxophone music comes to the forefront. A voice begins to speak.]

[00:05:00] Speaker 1 [female voice]:

On God I thirst for grace, in its thickness.

On God, I need conviction.

[00:05:10] Over me, coupled with embrace.

I deserve to be fought for, on God.

[00:05:20] On God, I wish you'd call me with a new language.

A new sense.

On God, I'm scared I've outgrown all this shit.

[00:05:30] On God, I want more.

More freedom than I've ever seen.

More integrity than I've ever rocked.

[00:05:40] More blunts than I've ever tucked.

More rest.

Guilt free.

[00:05:50] On God, I miss Nip.

On God, I dream three times.

One in the morning, I swear I wasn't gonna make it.

[00:06:00] On God when the soles of my feet touch the earth.

I ain't got no words for that shit.

[00:06:10] On God, I want a witness. how strong do you think I am?

On God, niggas just be born.

[00:06:20] And that's okay, until it's not.

This shit here, on God, on me.

[00:06:30] [The voice stops speaking. The rain sounds continue in the background, and a variety of songs are heard indistinctly, as though someone is turning the reception dial on a radio.]

[00:07:30] ["Around" by LA Timpa begins.]

[00:11:20] [An instrumental track begins.]

[00:11:50] [Layered voices speak over one another.]

[00:12:10] ["Lazy Eater Bets On Her Likeness" by (Liv).e begins.]

[00:14:00] [phone ringtone]

[00:14:20] [Voices begin speaking, one female voice and two male voices. They each say "I remember everything" and their statements layer over one another, intermixed with ambient city noises.]

[00:15:20] Speaker 2 [male voice]: I'm just learning to be more humble and be the best man **[00:15:30]** I could be as far as a better family man, taking care of the family, not bring shame for my family. I want to make them happy and make them proud of me just as I want to be proud of them **[00:15:40]** because family is everything. That's all you got when it's all said and done. At the same time, I just want to be a better man, so I can start my own family. **[00:15:50]** Do my thing with my woman and eventually have my own kids and stuff like that, because right now I got no kids. I just turned thirty. I know for a Black man that's *surprising*, you know? **[00:16:00]** Don't get me wrong, I want kids, but I'm focused on other things. I want to be an entrepreneur. I want to own multiple business. I want my grandkids **[00:16:10]** to be like, "Okay, grandpa made sure we were straight." You feel me? I'm looking forward towards the future. Just staying focused **[00:16:20]** and bettering my craft, staying on this music, 'cause opportunities is out there for me now. Back then, I always been doing music, but now I feel it's my time. **[00:16:31]** Engineers . . . studios, I got plenty of studios I could go to. I know producers, that send me beats so I can get beats so easy.

[00:16:40] I'm starting to find my voice, and I'm starting to find my talent more. I'm just working hard and pushing every day. Even if I'm not in a studio I'm still writing or reading books. **[00:16:50]** That's a big thing. I read a lot of books too. I'm reading Robert Greene, *33 Strategies of War*, right now. I'm on the last two chapters and then I'm moving on **[00:17:00]** to *The 48 Laws of Power*. I'm always trying to find new ways to elevate myself and self-educate because you can always learn something new. Especially every time I read a

book [00:17:10] I feel like I learn something new. I'm just always willing to learn. You got to just always be, "Keep your mind open." You can't keep a closed mind. You know what I'm saying? I always keep an open mind because [00:17:20] opportunities come with an open mind. I want to say opportunities, like in the universe, [00:17:30] is infinity, it's unlimited . . .

[00:17:40] [The speaker's voice fades out, "Residual Love" by Matthew Jamal begins.]

[00:20:00] [phone ringtone]

[00:20:20] **Justen LeRoy:** I grew up in North Philly and usually when you make that distinction for people [00:20:30] who are from outside or aware of the area, they'll go, "Oh you from the hood hood." Which ain't a lie but North Philly, [00:20:40] for as violent as it can be, it was full of love. I tell people all the time, it was where I first learned to use my imagination [00:20:50] as a survival tactic. Me and the other kids in my neighborhood, we were growing up with such a lack that we had to make our own pathways [00:21:00] towards joy and creativity. One of my favorite summers was when we would get the street blocked off for a certain period of time so that we could all just go outside and play [00:21:10] uninterrupted by cars and whatnot. My mom had bought us a pool and we would have a blast with one another. It was just so happened that [00:21:20] one summer, there was a lot of neighborhood beef between the drug dealers over corner territory, or whatever, that boiled over into an afternoon while myself [00:21:30] and my friends, we were out front in my swimming pool, just doing as kids do until we had to duck under the water as two dudes ran down the block shooting at each other [00:21:40] with machine guns or whatever. They were just huge guns. It's crazy, because after that scare, we all just kinda laughed it off, [00:21:50] because it was becoming more normal to witness.

[00:22:00] [Music begins, a solo reed instrument playing slowly.]

[00:22:10] **Justen LeRoy continues:** I grew up in a home with my grandmother and my mother, where Christianity was practiced, but we didn't go to church. [00:22:20] If I went to church as a child, that was usually with my father's mom who is a devout Baptist, and she attends church weekly, [00:22:30] every Sunday. Despite that, my childhood home was a space devoted to Christ. On Sundays, we would have our own form of church, [00:22:40] my mom or my grandmom would cook. Together we'd all clean the house, and music would be blasting over the stereo. It would [00:22:50] go from Shirley Caesar singing "No Charge" to Mary J. Blige singing "I'm Going Down." It was definitely a spiritual experience for us [00:23:00] in our own

little way, but not only that, it was the objects around the house as well that left that imprint on my notion of spirituality. **[00:23:10]** We had the family bible open at the bottom of the staircase. Outside my bedroom was an oil painting of white Jesus **[00:23:20]** that had been in my family for generations. I remember it smelling like old cardboard whenever I would get up close to it. I remember also being **[00:23:30]** really frightened by the painting as a kid because, one, another church said Jesus was Black, but then also, two, this white man feels like he is policing me **[00:23:40]** in my own house. And as I got older . . . more socialized, puberty spiking, it's kind of weird to say it but this painting of Jesus outside **[00:23:50]** my bedroom really started to contribute to a lot of the shame I was beginning to feel regarding my sexuality. As soon as I exited **[00:24:00]** my bedroom, and all of that freedom that it contained, I was forced to place it somewhere else. I felt more constricted to **[00:24:10]** support a spiritual practice that deemed who I was becoming as sinful.

[00:24:20] [Music plays.]

[00:24:30] Justen LeRoy continues: My grandmother was really stern on me spending time with her, because I had moved away **[00:24:40]** from home and we didn't get to spend a lot of time together because when I would visit Philly, at this **[00:24:50]** time she was in a wheelchair and she had her nursing aide and our visits were limited to **[00:25:00]** just maybe thirty, forty-five minutes every trip to Philly. I always stopped by her house with my mom and we'd be in and out. **[00:25:10]** I wanted to film her and talk about **[00:25:20]** her relationship to the dark, because it really informed my relationship to the dark growing up as a child. **[00:25:30]** She was someone who was invested **[00:25:40]** in a kind of spirituality that wrestled with demons, wrestled with ghosts, **[00:25:50]** wrestled with all of the sort of things, the bad things that could happen. **[00:26:00]** I picked up a lot of that from her and usually, that's why I would sleep with her growing up, because I was so deeply afraid of the **[00:26:10]** dark, because of all the things that she had told me about it. It's where my imagination went wild, just as much as her imagination went wild. **[00:26:20]** We shared that in common in terms of our relationship to the dark, but we also mind the dark. I think **[00:26:30]** as two creative people, her being a singer, poet, and her passing that on to me, the dark was also a place where we would **[00:26:40]** roam and really see ourselves outside of **[00:26:50]** the day-to-day, the dark was where we really faced ourselves more than we think. **[00:27:00]** I know that my grandmother really dealt with a lot of troubles related **[00:27:10]** to addiction and things like that, a lot of the things that most people will label as dark. **[00:27:20]** I feel like she really did her best to work around that **[00:27:30]** and become the woman she would later become, the grandmother who she would become to me and my sisters and my niece and my nephew.

[00:27:40] [Music plays.]

[00:27:50] **Justen LeRoy continues:** The last conversation I had with my grandmother that was truly in-depth [00:28:00] was inside of her bedroom, which was a hospital bed and [00:28:10] the room was filled with old photographs and pill bottles [00:28:20] and just very beige. [chuckles] And I talked about her life and her [00:28:30] growing up and a lot of the stories she would tell me as a child that stuck with me. She had a Baby Phat shirt on. [laughs] I remember laughing at that. [00:28:40] We just talked for maybe about [00:28:50] an hour or so about just her trials and tribulations [00:29:00] and how she worked through them and how she became the woman that I knew. It was [00:29:10] very enlightening to experience that with her, as someone who is an artist now [00:29:20] and behind the camera. I just recall her saying that she was nervous. I'm just like, "Grandmom, it's me, you don't have to be nervous." I think in that moment, she [00:29:30] was able to open up and talk about and respond to some of the things that I was curious about. A lot of that was rooted in [00:29:40] these supernatural occurrences from ghosts coming in, [00:29:50] and witches riding backs, and being locked in the basement by ghosts, [00:30:00] and her being abducted by UFOs and it was just a very rich conversation [00:30:10] that really set off an alarm in me to how deeply [00:30:20] she had impacted my creativity as an artist, and I'll never forget it.

[00:30:20] [Music plays.]

[00:30:50] **Justen LeRoy continues:** It's very interesting as a [00:31:00] kid, I would often shrink myself to fit into this mold of being a man or [00:31:10] shrink myself to hide from others and wanting to be invisible. [00:31:20] As an artist working with light and trying to develop a language of materiality around it through Blackness and queerness, [00:31:30] particularly rooted in my own experiences . . . I see light as a material that doesn't shrink [00:31:40] itself, and a material that evades being constrained to one particular space, [00:31:50] one mode of space, and it does this fugitive thing that is so admirable that me. [00:32:00] As someone who would constrain and perform and hide [00:32:10] who I was growing up, it's a material that does all of the things [00:32:20] that I was afraid of. It's become a very important part [00:32:30] of this vernacular that I'm forming around being a Black gay man in my work, and [00:32:40] what space looks like through the lens of a Black gay man, and it's full of this light that doesn't shrink itself.

[00:32:50] [Music plays.]

[00:34:12] [END OF AUDIO]