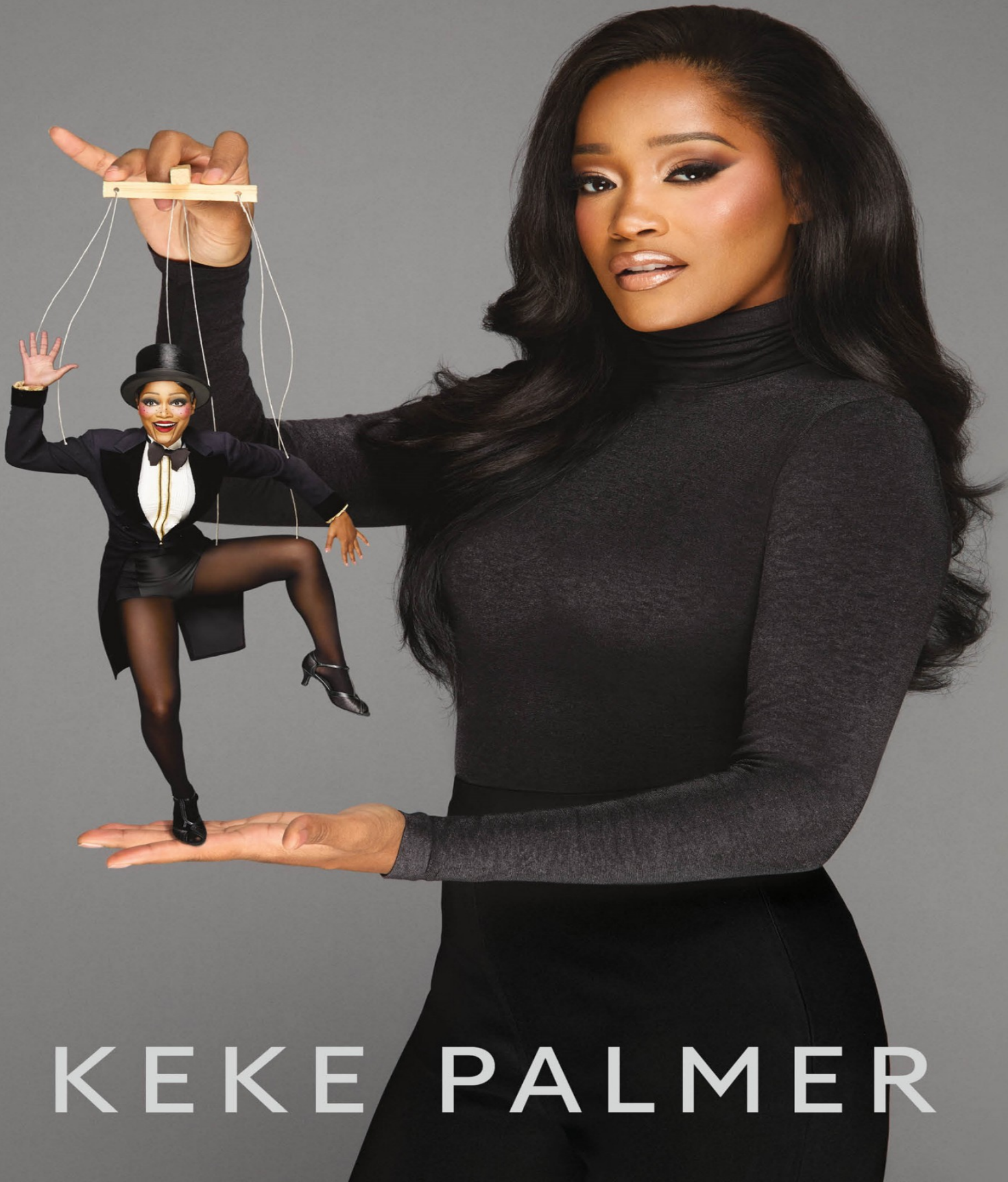


# MASTER OF ME



# KEKE PALMER

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The Secret to Controlling Your Narrative



Keke Palmer



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I dedicate this book to my son,  
and the person I became because of him.

I have always been an observer of myself.  
For years, at the mercy of others. Not anymore.



## INTRODUCTION

Here is a woman. Her name is Lauren but, to the world, she goes by Keke. Keke loves to perform. She can do it all, honey. She acts. She sings. She hosts. She creates. Keke has a vision for the life she wants to live. (She's a Virgo—didn't you know?) She loves her family. She loves her friends. She loves herself. And she loves God. See how Keke smiles? She is very happy.

Here is Keke's family: Mother, Father, Older Sister, Twin Sister, and Twin Brother. Mother makes sure Keke's calendar is organized and filled to the brim. Father shares scriptures and encouraging quotes in the family's group chat. Older Sister shows patience and modest wisdom. Twin Sister borrows Keke's clothes from movie sets. Twin Brother reminds Keke she'll always just be his sister. Keke's family is a circle of support, traveling from the suburbs of Chicago to California to watch her dreams come true. See how they stick by Keke's side? They love her.

Here is a man. He has a wonderful sense of humor and deep brown eyes. He makes Keke laugh and puts butterflies in the deepest parts of her body. Keke loves the man. The man loves Keke. Together they have a baby. Keke's purpose expands to include Baby's happiness. She works smarter, harder,

and longer hours to give Baby the life he deserves. See how Baby coos for Keke? He loves her. He is very happy.

Here is Keke again. She wants to do it all (and to be clear—she *can* do it all). But she is also a human. Sometimes she feels tired. Sometimes she feels misunderstood. Sometimes she just feels like she doesn't belong. Then there are the videos, the clickbait headlines, the comments underneath her pictures—digital footprints she can't erase. She's embarrassed. She's annoyed. She cries. She hides. She takes time to herself, for herself. And the gag is that even though Keke is in the dark, she's still putting in that work. Behind closed doors, she redirects her anger. She harnesses the power she's spent years cultivating. She takes control of the narrative—her narrative—one chapter at a time. And she wants to share her lessons and these tools with you, too.

Maybe you'll value these lessons and put them into practice, or maybe you won't. And that's totally okay.

Either way, turn the page. See Keke shine.





*“It goes back to being pulled out of the hat.”*

## Part I

# PERFORMANCE

[phonetic: per-**fawr**-muhns]

### **noun**

1. a musical, dramatic, or other entertainment presented before an audience.
2. the act of performing a ceremony, play, piece of music, etc.
3. the execution or accomplishment of work, acts, feats, etc.
4. a particular action, deed, or proceeding.
5. an action or proceeding of an unusual or spectacular kind:

| *His temper tantrum was quite a performance.*

6. the act of performing.
7. the manner in which or the efficiency with which something reacts or fulfills its intended purpose.<sup>1</sup>

## **PODCAST CLIP: WHO ARE YOU REALLY? WITH AMY POEHLER**

Keke Palmer: As I'm getting older, I actually find myself being like, well, you got it. I almost think more—feel more validated in my working hard and feeling like that's what I owe.

You know, I have the freedom I have now because of all the work that I put in in my early years. And so I'm not sure how I even feel and want to respond to that whole productivity thing in, in the world, because I do feel there's something to be said about it. However, there is a reality where the lack of productivity and just kind of, you know, flowing through—yeah, sometimes that does get you what you want as well.

Amy Poehler: I know, it's—that's why I love that, I love the, the riddle because the, the part of me that likes to get things done has served me so well. It's given, it's given me everything that I feel like I have. So I don't want to, um, reject that part of me. And I, and I want to thank that part of me.

I just wonder now if I want that part of me to always be running the show, because the what-I-do part is, am I what I do? Like, that's the question.

## WHO IS PULLING YOUR STRINGS?

The truth is this: I never really wanted to be a *performer*, but I always wanted to make people feel something deeply. For me, the essence of the human experience lies in emotions—the capacity to feel, to connect, and to empathize. In my mind it’s the only true reason we are here. Otherwise, we’d just be a floating spirit untethered from the ideas of self, emotion, and understanding, but I digress. What I’m saying is, none of us know why we are here, and that’s scary. We have an idea, whether spiritual or scientific, but the *why* is still unknown, so we reflect on these reasons. All the while, we’re navigating life’s intense experiences, which take us on a wild, emotional ride—from happiness to sadness and everywhere in between—as we try to make sense of it all. In my search for answers I’ve noticed a trend across generations: this reluctance to embrace how those questions and our collective uncertainty make us feel. As if the coolest person is the one who doesn’t give a damn, the one who remains indifferent all the time. But it’s silly because we all have emotions, no matter how challenging they can be to

process. Dissonance is isolating, while facing them head-on is where the true magic happens—the sweet spot where pain makes way for connection and community. This outlook on the human experience has not only informed my work but creates the drive for it. As I’ve grown in my craft, I’ve come to realize that my true gift lies in tapping into this emotional resonance and sharing it with others. In acting, I’ve found that taking on a character’s perspective without judgment and stepping into their shoes has given me the permission and freedom to explore emotions I might not have been able to access as myself. Through this process, I’ve gained a deeper understanding of human emotions, which has enabled me to support others with more courage and empathy. By performing, I help others access places they never knew they needed to reach—a truly rewarding experience. It brings me immense joy to facilitate in the journey of self-discovery, and I’ve been fortunate enough to recognize my talent for it from a young age—a spark that’s only grown stronger with time.

My parents weren’t always present because they were busy being adults, obvi! And as a parent myself, I’m constantly learning that adulthood and the well-being of a tiny human being (or really being a provider to anyone other than yourself) come with a lot of responsibilities. Not to say that I felt invisible when I was younger. I did notice my parents were really engaged whenever my siblings and I were talking about creative stuff, like recent movies that we watched or new music that we just discovered that they already knew of. We’d have conversations about the Temptations, down to reciting the lines from the days-long TV special: “Ain’t nobody coming to see you, Otis!” Or we’d cry watching Fantasia’s winning performance on *American Idol*. My goodness, Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs’s acting in *Cooley High* almost made up for how mad he made us when playing Joe Jackson in *The Jacksons: An American Dream*. It was all the hours spent watching that movie that birthed my Angela Bassett impression. Those moments with my family fueled my own creativity. And it was so cathartic to realize that a thirty-minute show or a ninety-minute movie were not solely for

entertainment purposes; they also allowed me to confront more serious topics in my own life.

When I was young, something happened to me that I couldn't understand. I didn't have the language to describe it, but I felt an overwhelming sense of violation. My parents struggled to find the words to address what had happened to me. But then, while watching an episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, we saw a story that explored the impact of childhood abuse—in the story it was a child who had endured sexual abuse by his piano teacher. That child then became an adult and repeated the same behavior with his now adolescent students. This moment marked a turning point in my understanding of the impact of media on our lives and the ways in which creative works can provide a framework for navigating complex emotions and experiences. As I reflected on this experience, I realized that being violated at a young age is traumatic. It also warps your idea of what is normal and acceptable. This turning point taught me two valuable lessons: that I wasn't alone in my experience and that my feelings were valid. This was a relief; it allowed me to see that what I was speaking to wasn't considered taboo or irrational.

It also taught me who I *didn't* want to be—which I think people forget is just as important. India Arie sang, "I am not my hair," and the words I want to sing are, "I am not my trauma." I knew I wanted to be in control of my future as much as the next person. And so much of that is contingent upon the work we do to understand the damage that's been done, even though we have survived it. That's the thing. When we survive things, we assume that means we got out of Dodge, but hold on, Caravan! Whenever a car crashes, it doesn't matter if the engine is roaring; there is still all this debris that must be cleaned up before you can move forward. There are a million and one possibilities for survivors of traumatic events, and the reality is how we get through it and come out of it on the other side matters. Our response can mold and shape the trajectory of our entire lives. And it's especially hard when we don't have the proper resources (institutional or not) to get to the versions of ourselves that we want to be. I knew there was power in art and

performance before I watched that *Law & Order: SVU* episode, but that moment validated my own feelings. And while it didn't entirely heal my inner wounds all at once, it acknowledged where I was hurting and made me feel seen. If the actors in Dick Wolf's legal drama could plant that seed for a six-year-old child, I could only imagine the ways art could be of service and how many others could use it as an emotional icebreaker. For as long as I can remember, I've always admired this profession and the professionals who constantly choose to do this work with extreme grace.

And the revelations continue to happen even to this day. The other day I was watching this movie from 2018 called *The Tale* (warning: slight spoiler ahead, so if this is on your watch list, you can go ahead and stream it, but viewer discretion is advised). In the movie, the main character, Jennifer, aka Jenny, played by Laura Dern, is in her forties (maybe even her fifties; she looks FAB! Plus fine-ass Common plays her BF, whew!) and reflecting on the relationship she'd had with an older man as a teen. At the time of these flashbacks, she's supposed to be thirteen, but you can tell that the actual actor who's supposed to play her young self looks a bit older. The idea is that Jenny is misremembering her adolescence, still trying to piece the past together. But twenty minutes into the movie, there's this switcheroo and the director makes this intentional and very impactful choice to change the original young Jenny we thought we'd be following. Her mother, played by Ellen Burstyn, is basically going through old photos with Jenny like, "No, you didn't look like that, you looked like this." She points to a picture of thirteen-year-old Jenny in a photo album that no longer looks like a movie thirteen but looks like a real, prepubescent thirteen. The scenes that the audience had witnessed up to then are re-shot with this younger girl, played by Isabelle Nélisse, at the core of these traumatic events. Once this happens, it is practically unbearable to watch—which is the point. It's a genius and innovative move on the director's end, but it's devastating to watch as an audience member.

This movie triggered me, and I found myself reflecting on my own teenage years when I was in a relationship with a twenty-year-old man at the

age of fifteen. Because in my mind at the time, it seemed appropriate. Our minds do this interesting thing where, even as we grow, our ideas of certain things will stay the same unless we look back and force our current perspective to observe the past, in hindsight. It's crazy how we can reframe moments like these in order to keep one foot in front of the other, in order to survive. There's that amazing survival instinct again that gets you through the hardship by kind of dampening its intensity, but you still need that Aquaphor for the third-degree burn you forgot you had! In the same way Laura Dern's character reframed the entire event to make it seem like she was older and wiser, I also reframed my actions at the time. I was making what I considered "Big Girl Money" and felt comfortable in the driver's seat of my life. But, if I'm being honest, when I think about those formative years, I also have to consider my attitude and outlook towards life. To be real, I was in a very vulnerable place. I stayed with this person until I was about twenty and struggled emotionally. The power dynamic put me in a place that harmed me in ways I couldn't have known. I didn't have the language or the strength to accept that who he met was a child, not the woman I wanted to become.

My parents couldn't object to what they didn't know about. And by the time they knew about our relationship, I had a level of freedom that would allow me to do what I wanted regardless. They would have had to assume I was lying to them all the time—which I often was—to meet up with him. In reality, young people find ways to assert their autonomy, especially when they have the means to do so. I think my parents opted to speak to me and get the truth so that they could stay close to the situation; it's the classic case of keeping your friends close, but your enemies closer. But I don't think there was a way for them to manage it any better than anyone who has experienced something similar. When your children are growing and learning and trying to step into their own independence, you can only lock them in a cage for so long. When I was tired of the relationship and was ready to walk away, they were the first ones I told.



Now I can say with my whole chest, “Keke girl, this grown man fully took advantage of you in every way possible. He used your youth as an opportunity to groom you into someone who could benefit him. With no regard and no respect for the chance you had to become your own person and experience the ages between fifteen and twenty individually.” Even ten years later, I am still understanding, unlearning, and healing from the impact that relationship had on me.

It’s wild that a movie that came out only a few years ago brought me back fifteen years, back to a place I subconsciously sought to suppress. Who knew that over a business dinner with Amy Poehler, I’d get a movie reference that would allow me to tap into something that existed within me, within my past? Honestly, she probably did, because she’s a Virgo and we are deep like that. I’m kidding! But seriously, that’s the power of art. As much as I’ve always loved to entertain, that love was rooted in my parents, wanting them to be present and engaged. Which is just an artistic expression of my deep desire to make people embrace the good, the bad, and the ugly—so they, too, can feel alive, because without doing that you might as well not be living but existing. That’s how performance became a useful tool for me. I want to help people find joy in difficult circumstances, confront the parts of themselves they might be trying to hide, and find connection in the shared human experience. When I’m able to do that, it feels like a spark of magic happens—like we’re all suddenly more alive, more connected, and more human.

Whether I’m writing or sharing my own story or performing something like a romance, comedy, or tragedy, I have compassion for the characters I embody and the real people who’ve lived these extraordinary lives. At the end of the day, we are all living our own unique lives, and we’re all trying to make it and get through our circumstances. I just think there’s so much beauty in the understanding of how life is always continuing at this steady pace where we’re all the authors of our own stories. Ever sat on a bench in the park, watching the world go by? I find myself doing it everywhere, at the gym, on the beach. It’s like a real-life soap opera in my mind. Turn your head, and you’ll catch a group of friends cracking up, sharing secrets, and

spilling tea (and you're low-key trying to eavesdrop). Nearby, a community group is slack-roping (yep, that's a thing!), while a sun worshipper is soaking up the rays in an itty-bitsy bikini, wondering if that text will ever come through (same, girl, same). All around us, another story is being written, another plot is thickening. Everybody is the main character in their own storyline, including you. And in that moment, it's a humbling reminder that we're all connected, different threads in the same tapestry.

When I indulge in existential thoughts (which is, like, often. Hehe), my mind drifts to fascinating stories like the *Titanic*. Beyond its tragic fate, I wonder: How many love stories unfolded on that ship? How many immigrants were seeking a new beginning? What secrets would the lives lost and the survivors' tales reveal? (And let's skip the debate about Rose and Jack's door—we all know the truth!) Anyway, I have so much gratitude for the experiences of others that inform my way of thinking. I'm passionate about bringing characters to life and serving their stories. When the cameras roll, I aim to tap into the essence of those experiences and honor them.

As I strive to be in service to the stories I tell and the experiences I have while the cameras roll, I find inspiration in the words of legendary performer and activist Josephine Baker. In a 1971 interview with journalist Erik Bye, she shared her profound approach to her craft and humanity. Erik recounts a moment when people were struck by her presence, saying, "You do something.... You make people happy." Josephine is resolute in her response: "I've never tried to make a business of making people happy. I've always tried to touch the sensibility of each human being. And I've always tried to find their good point because I believe that every human being on this earth has something good in them.... And I think that human beings, in general, if they have the opportunity or possibility, they can be extremely good." I find solace in her words, reminded of the power of empathy and compassion in storytelling. There is a lot more I could share about her, but I'll save that for another chapter!

I fully agree with Josephine. At the same time, I am also aware that it's not my sole duty on this earth to make every single person around me

process their own feelings through the work I've created. I mean, I should say that I'm aware and learning how to consistently put that into practice. It's incredibly impossible and exhausting, and now I have a little boy who's teething and taking tiny steps. But well before Leo Beo, I'd had experiences that tested this awareness. Just like you, I'm sure, I've encountered people who resist joy, just hell-bent on not having laughter in their lives. And whenever I would bring laughter, I'd attach a sense of validation to our relationship and consider it a good thing. Until it became a bad thing for me.

★ ★ ★

When I was younger, my mother passed down her theater expertise to me, which I'll forever be grateful for. In theater you're doing a little bit of everything—singing, dancing, acting. In some cases, like with Sammy Davis Jr., you may be a host and have a one-man or one-woman show. It's just you, the stage, and the audience. My mother, Sharon, was a huge fan of Judy Garland. She revered her, reading all her books and following her career closely. I've watched her portrayal of Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz* once or twice but I've heard the stories of her personal climb to fame more times than I can count. But my mother was a true stan; she never failed to point out whenever there was a new movie, book, or documentary coming out about Judy.

I can hear Sharon now: “Look at how she's speaking with her eyes, without lines. That's not as easy as it looks, she has depth, a true entertainer.” She would speak about her with so much veneration it made me want to make someone feel as inspired as my mother was by Judy.

Building on this inspiration, my mother's guidance taught me to embrace my own versatility and creativity. With her support, I never felt like I had to be or do one thing, no matter who was pressuring me to stay in one lane (and trust me, people have *tried*). In fact, one of the earliest lessons I learned from my mother was to find a way to incorporate all my skills even if the people on the other side of the table were only looking for one. I would use

every trick I had in my talent bag and try to surprise the casting directors; how else was I supposed to stand out from other people auditioning in the same room?

People might read this and think, “Oh, Keke, you were just doing the most!” And I was! But look at where “doing the most” got me. The same spirit that drove my mother to celebrate talents like Judy Garland, who defied categorization, is what I want to pass on to you: don’t be afraid to bring all your talents to the table, because the only thing too much is the limitations we place on ourselves. I’m not saying to overextend, but I am saying there is nothing wrong with bringing the table, the food, the drinks, *and* the chairs. I mean, you do what you want when you poppin’, right? Don’t block your blessings and potential opportunities by allowing the voices of other people to influence your actions. How you’re choosing to set yourself up for success is between you and the person looking back at you in the mirror.

As we embrace the spirit of “doing the most” and reject limitations, we unlock the power of being original and unique. That power of being original and unique is inherent in all of us. But the power we get by homing in on that uniqueness and owning it in every aspect of our being—whether that’s personal, professional, spiritual, or however—is the process that requires self-mastery. We’re all capable of opening doors, but how are you walking through them? Are you rushing through them so fast that you end up getting a cramp? Are you waltzing through them and admiring the architecture of the rooms? And, more importantly, are you opening them up wide enough for those who will come in after you? (More on this later.)

On the path of discovering my uniqueness, I also discovered the importance of self-validation. My first professional performance on the set of *Barbershop 2* was a thrilling experience, but also a challenging one. I was cast as Queen Latifah’s smart-mouthed niece in the presence of Ice Cube, Cedric the Entertainer, and so many others at just nine years old. I was excited, nervous, and eager to prove myself. I wanted to show everyone that I had what it took to succeed in the entertainment industry. I was only on set