

BLACK BOY JOY



17 Stories
Celebrating
Black Boyhood

EDITED BY **KWAME MBALIA**

New York Times bestselling author of the *Tristan Strong* series

ZOUMZ

SNEAK PEEK

BLACK BOY JOY

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THIS IS AN UNCORRECTED ADVANCE EXCERPT

THE GRIOT OF GROVER STREET

BY KWAME MBALIA

PART ONE

HOMEGOING. That's what Fort's mother and Aunt Jess and Mimi called it. Homegoing. Sounded fun, actually, like returning to your own bedroom after sleeping over your cousin's house for a week. Or a party at three p.m. every day when school let out to celebrate being done with classes. That would've been cool. But homegoing meant something different.

It meant a funeral.

The church marquee read ANTOINETTE ROBINSON'S HOMEGOING, FRIDAY 5:30 P.M., and it was wrong. Nobody knew an Antoinette Robinson—they called her Aunt Netta. She had the warmest hugs, the biggest smiles, and the sweetest apple turnovers Fort Jones had ever tasted, which she dusted with sugar and served after church services at the repast.

Fort would miss the turnovers, not because they were delicious (they were) or because she made one special

for him when he couldn't sit still during the sermon and got sent to the kitchen to help (she always had one set aside), but because as he sat there kicking his feet and eating the hot, sticky dessert, Aunt Netta would sing.

He'd miss the singing too.

That's what Fort was thinking about when the strange old man appeared in front of him like magic. There Fort was, running out the Grover Street Church's double doors into the Carolina sun, sprinting through the parking lot to the grassy field on the other side, cuffing the tears out his eyes, when the man materialized out of nowhere. Fort almost managed to pull up and sidestep to the left.

CRASH

Suddenly down was up, left was right, his knee throbbed painfully, and Fort tasted the delightful flavor of dirt. Crunchy dirt. He was going to have to brush his teeth for an hour to get the taste out. But as he lay on his back staring up at the sky thinking of the amount of mouthwash he'd need, he heard the strangest thing. Words, yes, but strung together like he'd never heard before.

“The lightning! Spilled the lightning! And the fireflies, oh, they'll be angry. Hmm, is that—Oh, biscuits! The chuckle-snorts!”

Fort sat up to find the strange old man on his knees,

digging through an overturned wagon with the saddest expression. And if that wasn't weird enough, the man's outfit was. He wore a long cape—black on the outside, purple on the inside—silver pants, mismatched flip-flops with the tag still attached, and, to top it all off, a yellow derby hat with a white feather, the words *Gary the Griot* stenciled on the brim.

Fort gawked at him, but when the man finally looked up and their eyes met, the boy hurried to help.

“Sorry!” Fort said. “I didn’t see you. I was . . . well, I wasn’t paying attention.” He didn’t want to mention the tears or the reason behind them. Why did there have to be so much sadness in the world? But before the corners of his eyes could prickle all over again, Fort spotted a humongous glass jar tilted on its side and frowned.

“Happens to the best of us at the worst of times,” the old man said. “Apology accepted. I’m sure you didn’t OH, BISCUITS, THE JOY IS GONE!” He reached down and grunted and heaved the jar into the air, studying a giant crack that ran along the bottom.

Actually, maybe humongous was an understatement.

The jar came up to Fort’s waist, and he was tall for his eleven years. And not only was it big, it was wide as well, so wide that Fort struggled to understand how it could have fit inside the wagon with the rest of the stuff in the first place. The glass was stained blue, so

much so that it looked like it used to hold blue raspberry Kool-Aid.

“The joy, the joy! It’s gone! My last delivery, gone!” The man waved his arms in the air—which should’ve been impossible because he still held the jar—in dismay.

Fort went to dust himself off, then tried not to groan as his hands came away wet and stained. He was going to be in so much trouble. Bad enough he’d left the church in the middle of the service, crying like a toddler, but now this. His one good suit (he was getting too big for it; his ankles were peeking out from under his cuffs) was covered in that blue stuff, and . . . what *was* it?

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault,” Fort apologized. “I was—”

“FORTITUDE JONES, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?”

Uh-oh.

Mama’s voice was so sharp it could cut glass. As Fort turned to see her marching down the stairs—her black dress and black shawl fluttering in the summer breeze, one hand on her back, one hand on her rounded stomach, one week away from her due date—he braced for the tongue lashing sure to come. This wasn’t the first time he’d gotten in trouble at church, and it wouldn’t be the last.

So when she stepped past him to help the strange man, Fort was confused.

“Are you okay, Mr. G?” Mama asked.

Did she know this guy?

The strange old man, still struggling under the weight of the giant cracked jar, waddled around to face her and tried to bow. “Of course, Madam Jones, it was but an accident.”

At least, that’s what Fort thought he tried to say. But the man, Mr. G, had his face smushed against the bottom of the jar, so what it sounded like was “Offacoursh, bagabones, lizard butt dragon lint.” It was so preposterous that Fort started to smile, which of course was the exact moment when Mama whirled around and laid into him.

“Fortitude Jones, how many times have I told you to watch where you’re going? You get so excited you don’t look but two feet in front of you. Did you apologize?”

“Yes, Mama,” Fort said, but for good measure he turned to Mr. G and did so again. “Sorry for knocking over all your stuff.”

Mr. G sighed and flapped a hand (nearly dropping the jar—Fort was starting to get concerned). “No worries, young man, provided, of course”—Mr. G waddled over and peered at the boy from beneath a pair of impressively bushy eyebrows, which looked like a caterpillar doing the worm when they moved—“you help me refill the jar.”

Wait. Fort started to shake his head. “I don’t think—”

“That’s a *wonderful* idea,” Mama said. “Fortitude, you go on and help Mr. G. I gotta get back inside and help out. Go on, now! Aunt Netta wouldn’t have wanted you ’round outside anyway.”

Mama’s tone left no room for argument, and—if he was being honest—she was right. Aunt Netta always told him moping and a quarter could buy him a soda.

The world is harsh. Find your joy, Fortitude, and it’ll be your night-light when everything is dark.

So, before Mama’s eyes could narrow, he dusted off his pants and stood. “Yes, Mama.”

She nodded, kissed his forehead, and went inside. It was hard on her, being not quite nine months pregnant and losing one of her closest friends in Aunt Netta. Fort tried to help out, tried to do as much as he could for her, but getting in trouble was definitely *not* making things easier.

“Well then, young Fortitude.”

Fort turned to find Mr. G studying him, before the man handed him a butterfly net, two nickels, and a broken bubble wand. Fort held all the items, confused, but the old man had already twirled around (yes, twirled, with more agility than seemed possible) and pranced over (yes, pranced, is this going to be a thing?) to the wagon before Fort could ask any questions—like what,

exactly, they were meant to be collecting. Mr. G tucked the jar inside, then pulled out a bright blue nylon roll. He yanked a cord, skipped backward, then clapped his hands together and laughed.

Fort stared in amazement. Where there had been nothing but painted yellow lines in the church parking lot there now stood a large inflatable door.

A door.

Fort rubbed his eyes, blinked, then squinted.

Mr. G was already lugging the wagon and whistling as he unzipped the air-filled entrance and pulled it open. Instead of revealing the other side of the parking lot, bright and sweltering in the midday sun, Fort saw cool darkness and silver stars dangling at ground level on the other side.

“Come on, young man, come on! The final delivery of joy must be collected if balance is to be found!” And the strange old man danced through the doorway, the wagon disappearing behind him.

Fort stepped closer to the door. It shimmered as he approached, and . . . was it growing bigger? He could smell something delicious coming from inside . . . like . . . apple turnovers. Fort looked back at the church. He couldn’t go back there—if Mama didn’t catch him, someone else would and he’d still get in trouble. It takes a village to ground a child, apparently.

“Well?”

Fort startled out of his thoughts.

Mr. G stuck his head out the doorway and frowned. “Aren’t you coming to help?”

Find your joy, Fortitude.

Fort took a deep breath, nodded, and stepped into wonder.



Imagine walking through the stars. An interactive planetarium where you can reach out and touch worlds. Galaxies. Nebulas. Clusters of suns that appear and disappear with every step. Imagine trailing your fingers through the tail of a comet that burns through space right beside you. Fort saw all this and more.

Mama would flip if she was here. Did she know about it? She always did love to look at the stars, point out meteors, and just sit and hum under the light of the moon. As Fort turned in wonder, a planet the size of a beach ball with two marble-sized moons floated toward him.

“What is this place?” he whispered.

“The Between.” Mr. G’s voice came from somewhere ahead. “The realm between worlds.”

“A different realm?”

“And a shortcut.” The old man appeared to Fort’s left. As he pulled his wagon, he was sprinkling what looked like sparks into the air above his head. When he reached Fort he stopped, turned around, and blew out a strong puff of air. The sparks scattered, speckling the dark and twinkling.

They’re stars, Fort realized.

Mr. G dusted his hands and nodded thoughtfully. “Traveling from world to world would be terribly inefficient if not for the Between. Could you imagine the fuel costs? Astronomical. Not to mention all the rest stops. No, no, simply impossible. But we have the Between, and thus the joy can be collected like that!” He snapped a finger. “Now, where’s that net?”

“What do you mean, joy?” Fort asked as he handed over the butterfly net. “How did you find this place?”

Mr. G laughed. “Find? Ha! No one finds the Between, young one. They are shown. Led. Taught. My teacher showed me, and now I show you. This will be your responsibility soon.”

“Me? Why?”

The old man reached forward, his hand disappearing behind Fort’s head, then reappearing with one of the nickels he’d given the boy. “Balance. You wondered why there had to be so much sadness, my boy. Oh, don’t make that face, I know you were thinking it. And where

there's a question, there must be an answer. Besides, you broke the collecting jar, so now you have to replenish the joy. Your mother said so."

The words whizzed around Fort's head like moons around a planet. Nothing made sense. Maybe he could sneak back and find the weird inflatable door, and then he could go back to . . .

To what? To Aunt Netta's homegoing? To be alone with the sadness again? *No*. He might as well help the strange old man. Maybe if he spent enough time here, the pain he felt would go away.

Besides, the Between was pretty cool.

"Okay," Fort said, taking a deep breath. "So we have to collect joy, whatever that means. How can I help?"

Mr. G grinned, held out a tiny bottle labeled *Gary the Griot's Splendiferous Story Solution* and the bubble wand (now taped back together), then brandished the butterfly net like a baseball bat. "Looks like there's a story of joy ready to be told."

He nodded at the planet that bobbed waist-high next to Fort. "Blow the bubbles at that world, my young Fortitude."

"But," Fort hesitated. "Why bubbles?"

"Joy is a fragile thing, my boy, and must be treated as such. Too harsh and it disintegrates. Rush, and it dis-

appears. So we coax it forth. Feed it, like kindling to a fire.”

“So . . . you’re saying we should do something fun in order to draw it out?”

Mr. G snapped his fingers and pointed. “That’s it! And what’s more fun than blowing bubbles? Nothing. Unless you’re blowing one of my patented splendiferous bubbles.”

O . . . kaaaay.

Fort opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head. Whatever. He turned, dipped the wand into the jar, then pulled it out and blew a gentle stream of air through the circles at the planet. Rainbow-colored bubbles collided with the tiny clouds. Dozens. Hundreds. Soon the planet was covered and the bubbles began to multiply. They combined, split, then joined again, forming one giant bubble that engulfed the world, and on its surface . . .

“I see something!” Fort shouted.

“Excellent!” Mr. G said. “What do you see?”

Fort leaned in. “Well, there’s a boy with a list . . .”

Mr. G deftly snagged the giant bubble, now heavy with shimmering, smaller bubbles inside. Fort saw faces, grins, celebrations dance across their surface.

“Is that joy?” he asked.

The bubble wobbled into the giant jar, where it promptly burst. Fort placed a hand on the jar, then jerked back. The glass felt warm. And there was a pulsing, rhythmic hum running along it—as if something, or someone, was singing.

Mr. G leaned on the net and wiped his brow. “Requires a lot of concentration, making the transfer. Not as young as I was a hundred years ago. Now, what did you ask? Joy? Yes! That’s the joy. But no time to dawdle, young Fortitude. We’ve more worlds to visit, more joy to find! Forthwith!”

THERE'S GOING TO BE A FIGHT IN THE CAFETERIA ON FRIDAY AND YOU BETTER NOT BRING BATMAN

BY LAMAR GILES

~~**Batman (perma-
banned)**~~

~~Spider-Man~~

~~Captain America~~

~~Superman~~

~~Waf Machine~~

~~Wonder Woman~~

~~Thor~~

~~Iron Man~~

~~The Hulk~~

~~The Winter~~

~~Soldier~~

~~The Flash~~

~~Wolverine~~

~~Doctor Strange~~

~~Thanos~~

~~Black Panther~~



The school bus squealed to a stop at the corner by Cornell's house. Other kids from the neighborhood got off, but he was too busy rereading that stupid list to notice. Black Panther gone. Superman gone. The Hulk—

“Cornell!” Mr. Jeffries shouted from the driver's

seat. “You ain’t about to have me doubling back because you missed your stop again. Pay attention!”

“Sorry. Sorry.” Cornell scooted from his seat and brushed past his laughing schoolmates, including Amaya Arnold. Amaya was more *giggling* than *laughing*, and Cornell could tell she wasn’t being mean. Actually, her giggle was kind of pretty. Almost as pretty as her.

But he wasn’t brave enough to look her way too long, so his eyes wandered . . . to Tobin Pitts. Who was staring at him. Hard.

Tobin swiped his red bangs away from his eyes and freckled forehead. “Hope you’re ready.”

Cornell shook his head and exited the bus with that stupid list taking up the space in his head he’d rather reserve for Amaya.

But, unless she got superpowers before lunch tomorrow, she wasn’t going to be much help.



The cars in the driveway told Cornell everyone was home except Mom, who was still on the West Coast for her business trip. He weaved between Carter’s beat-up burgundy Chevy “starter car,” Dad’s might-be-time-for-an-upgrade-if-he-can-convince-Mom black Audi, and Pop-Pop’s classics-are-the-way-to-go baby blue Cadillac

until he reached the side door. He removed the lanyard from his neck where his single silver key dangled and jiggled it in the knob.

Before she left, Mom had told them all, “Don’t think because I’m away it’s supposed to be Bruhs Gone Wild. I want this house looking like humans live here when I get back.”

Inside, the funky-ripe smell of the overfull kitchen trash can suggested they had work to do.

First things first, though. “Carter! Hey, Carter! I need your help.”

Cornell’s brother wasn’t in the kitchen, and the house wasn’t shaking from rap bass, so he probably wasn’t in his bedroom. Cornell rushed through the dining room, scooted by Mom’s home office, cut through the foyer, kicked his shoes off before stepping into the living room no one ever sat in, and came to a skidding stop at the den, where he found his brother on the wraparound couch with a guest.

“Hi,” Cornell said, surprised.

The girl gushed. “Oh, you must be Carter’s brother!”

She had dark brown skin, supercool red-framed glasses, and an Afro puff on each side of her head. She reminded Cornell of Amaya. Her jean jacket had a bunch of buttons pinned to the collar and pockets. Cornell leaned forward, trying to read some—BLACK LIVES

MATTER; LOVE IS LOVE—when Carter reminded them he was in the room. “Whatchu need, Lil’ Man?”

Cornell’s chin jerked up. Carter never called him “Lil’ Man” before. Also, “Why’s your voice sound like that?”

Carter coughed and cleared his throat. The weird deepness became his normal little-bit-whiny voice. “We’re studying.”

The girl told Carter, “Hey, I want *you* to introduce *me* to this little cutie.”

Cornell smiled. “Thank you!”

Mom taught him how to take a compliment.

Carter . . . was not smiling. “Raven, that’s Cornell. Cornell, Raven. What. Do. You. Want?”

“Oh, right!” Cornell fished the list from his back pocket and hopped over the back of the couch. It was a nimble leap. He landed right between the study buddies.

Raven clapped like Cornell had done some YouTube-level parkour. Carter stared, his face twitching in a super weird way. He was probably just focusing real hard so he could be as helpful as possible, Cornell figured.

“There’s this thing that happens in the cafeteria on Fridays,” Cornell said, “where everyone gathers around and argues about which superheroes can do what. Sometimes it’s just about who’s better, and sometimes it’s about who would beat who in a fight. It’s a big thing. Anyway, my name got pulled out the hat again, so I have

to go tomorrow, except I can't use any of the characters on this list because—”

Carter stood up.

Oh.

Maybe he thought better on his feet.

“Come with me.” Carter left the room.

Cornell hopped off the couch and waved bye to Raven.

He found Carter in the kitchen, leaning on the fridge, his face tight. “Do you see what’s happening out there?”

“Yeah, you’re studying with Raven.”

Carter’s chest heaved. He snatched the paper from Cornell’s hand. “Gimme that list.”

“Rude.”

His eyebrows rose. “Batman’s perma-banned?”

“Yep. Everyone thinks he’s overrated. Plus, it’s not cool how he practices his karate on, like, his neighbors.”

“True. Don’t even get me started on him fighting Superman. I mean, an orbital blast of Heat Vision beats a stupid bat-shaped boomerang any day of the week.”

“That’s what I said.”

Carter’s mouth screwed up. He rubbed the back of his head with one hand. “You need a super who’s not on this list?”

“No!” Cornell got to the really alarming part he was trying to explain on the couch. “I need *three*. Tomorrow’s category is Battle Royale *Trios*.”

“Y’all have categories? That is weirdly precise.” He seemed impressed.

“It’s the last debate before school’s out and I always lose. Help. Me.”

“Okay, okay.” Carter cracked the fridge, grabbed three ginger ales in the glass bottles that Dad liked while he contemplated the list.

Cornell plucked the magnetized bottle opener from the fridge door and popped the caps off. He liked the clinking noise they made when they hit the granite counter.

“Can’t use Black Panther?” Carter said.

“Naw.”

“Luke Cage?”

Cornell pointed to the back of the sheet. Luke Cage had already been used in a previous battle, too.

“Black Green Lantern?”

Cornell chewed his lip. “Someone used a white Green Lantern before, so since they’re both Green Lantern, it might not work.”

“That’s trash,” Carter said, but moved on. “You really gotta know your stuff to work these rules. Okay, seems to me you need a pretty versatile team to be safe. Someone techy. Someone magic. Maybe some kind of wild card. Like a telepath, or a *teleporter*.”

“If Shuri or Riri Williams isn’t on the list, you’ve still got good techy options.” Raven stood in the doorway be-

tween the kitchen and the den, obviously catching all of their conversation even though they'd tried to be quiet.

Carter straightened, then sort of leaned diagonal on the counter like someone was about to take his picture. "Bae, didn't know you were into this."

He was also back to his funky not-normal voice. What was wrong with Carter?

Raven joined them at the counter. "May I see your list, Cornell?"

"Yep." He passed it to her.

Raven smoothed the paper on the countertop, reviewed it, then flipped it over. "Can I have a pen, please?"

Cornell looked to Carter. Carter looked confused but retrieved a pen from the junk drawer. Raven began quick scribbling on the list. Then: "Here."

Batman (perma-banned)	Thor	Doctor Strange
Spider-Man Silk	Iron Man Piri	Thanos
Captain America	Ironheart	Black Panther
Superman	The Hulk She-Hulk	Shuri
Waf Machine	The Winter Soldier	
Wonder Woman	The Flash	
Nubia	Wolverine X-23	

Cornell didn't know what to say. This was genius.

"Pro tip," Raven said, "don't sleep on the ladies. Now you have options."

Carter gawked like he'd just met a real-life superhero. "Who are you?"

"Fan Girl," Raven said. "Now we probably should do a little studying."

"Absolutely," Carter grabbed two ginger ales and led Raven away.

Cornell went over the list again; Raven poked her head back in the room.

She said, "I don't know the rules for your debates, but in case your friends say you can't swap She-Hulk for Hulk or something, you might want some backups."

She was right. Of course. "Thanks, Raven. I'm glad you can tolerate Carter enough to be here."

Carter yelled, "Go. Away!"

But Cornell was already gone. Darting to the rec room for Dad's advice.

Hopefully he was as good as Raven.



“. . . All right, you Workout Warriors! Keep the High-Intensity Interval Training blast-off going! Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty . . .”

One of the really energetic but a little bit scary trainers from Dad's workout app screamed instructions Cornell heard before he entered the rec room. He burst in, found Dad on the couch sweaty and gasping.

Dad spotted Cornell and leapt up, rejoining the workout streaming on their big TV with an out-of-sync burpee.

"Thirty-two," he said, "thirty-three, thirty . . . hey, son. Let me pause this real quick."

Dad's hand shook when he exited out of the workout video instead of pausing it, then closed the app altogether.

"Whew! Good workout." He heavy-gasped three times, then dropped to one knee like he needed to tie his shoe even though both sneakers were double-knotted. "Never stop moving, son. Never. Stop. Moving."

Cornell was concerned about his father's hard breathing. "Do you want to lie back on the couch, Dad?"

"After . . . *that*? No way. That was light work." He squeezed one eye shut against the sweat pouring off his forehead. "You need something?"

Dad looked like Carter (*and, I guess, me*, Cornell thought) just wider, with less hair on his head, but more (*gray!*) hair on his face. He liked cool bands like the Roots and really good singers like Mary J. Blige, and insisted they were better than Carter's and Cornell's

music—sometimes, maybe, they were. Dad loved funny Eddie Murphy movies, and serious TV like CNN and *Divorce Court*, and often wanted the whole family in the rec room on Saturday nights to play Monopoly or UNO. Since the superhero battles were kind of like a game, he might be into it. Cornell showed him the updated list and explained what he was looking for.

“I see,” Dad said. “Does it have to be strictly comics?”

“Naw. Someone said John Wick once and everyone was okay with it. Then the John Wick kid tried to say John Wick could use Kryptonite bullets. We all knew that was wrong, though.”

“Uh-huh.” Dad was still gasping, but less.

“Raven, Carter’s friend, gave me a good techy option with Riri Williams. Carter said it might not hurt to have a magic user.”

Dad perked. “That’s easy, then. Kazaam’s your guy.”

“Shazam?” Cornell flipped the list, almost certain that hero had been used, too.

Dad said, “Not *SHA*-zam. *KA*-zaam. The genie basketball legend Shaquille O’Neal played in the best movie of 1996.”

“Uhhhhhh.”

“Let me show you.” Dad opened the movie app on the TV and scrolled through the family library to the Ks.

“We own *Kazaam*?”

“Boy, I’ve owned *Kazaam* on VHS, DVD, Blu Ray—had to buy that one international because apparently the United States dropped the ball there—and now on digital.”

“Why?” The thumbnail photo of the basketball giant in golden genie clothes and the floppy-haired kid star of the film looked ridiculous.

Dad’s breathing was normal again—thank goodness—and he shambled to the couch, patting the cushion next to him. Cornell took a seat.

“This movie came out when I was about your brother’s age. To be honest, I got excited whenever I saw Black guys like us on the big screen. Pop-Pop would take me and your grandma to see any movie that Black folks were a part of, and I loved them all, even if they sometimes seemed silly.”

Dad worked the remote, scrolling through other movies in their digital library that Cornell never noticed. “There’s *The Meteor Man*. *Blankman*. *Steel*—another Shaq classic. *Spawn*. *Blade*. Those last two we might watch when you’re a little older. If you want, I mean.”

“How come you never showed me these before?” They watched movies together all the time, but never these.

“I tried with Carter when you were very young, but he

wasn't into it. Your generation have a lot of different—and better—things than me and your mom had. I get it. I still keep all this because I love it, and . . .” He wrung his hands in a way that made Cornell feel a little sad. “I like having something for y'all from when I was young. Even if you don't need it.”

Cornell took his list back, pressed it onto his thigh so he could write. He scribbled down his new additions.

Batman (perma-banned)	Thor	Doctor Strange
	Iron Man Piri/	Thanos
Spider-Man Silk	Ironheart	Black Panther
Captain America	The Hulk She-Hulk	Shuri
Superman	The Winter	Kazdam???
Waf Machine	Soldier	Meteor Man
Wonder Woman	The Flash	Blankman
Nubia	Wolverine X-23	

Cornell hopped off the couch. “Dad, I don't know about those Shaquille O'Neal movies, but could we maybe watch *Meteor Man* this weekend? His costume's cool.”

Dad beamed! And looked way less like he needed to go to the hospital. “Of course. Just catch me after

I'm done working out Saturday. Gotta keep my six-pack tight." He rubbed his round belly and cackled.

"Love you, Dad," Cornell said on his way out.

"Love you too."

"Hey, you said Pop-Pop took you to see those movies?"

"Every last one."

Cornell jogged up the stairs, bypassing his bedroom for the one at the far end of the hall. Pop-Pop's.

Time they had a little chat about his taste in film.



Cornell knocked, a three-part rhythm. *Ta-da-thump!*

Pop-Pop called from the other side, "Who dat?"

Pop-Pop knew full well who it was because that *Ta-da-thump* was Cornell's knock, but this was part of the game they'd played since he was little-little. "It's Cornell Curry, your grandson, Pop-Pop."

"Are you sure you're Cornell and not some sneak thief coming for my gold?"

"The only gold you have is your tooth."

"Well, I definitely ain't letting you in, then. Because if you a sneak thief, how I'm supposed to chew?"

It was silly, and didn't make a lot of sense, but they'd been doing it since Cornell was four years old, and it still felt a little funny. Cornell knew it wasn't something

they'd do forever. But it was fine for now, and that was okay.

Cornell turned the knob, stepped inside, and immediately began coughing. His eyes burned. What was happening?

“Close that there door for me, Nelly.”

Cornell cupped his hand over his nose and mouth. “Are you sure?”

“Yep. Need your opinion on something.”

Sealing them in, Cornell adjusted to the weird scent his brain identified as spicy lemon juice ocean water.

Pop-Pop said, “I got Bible study tonight and Miss Felicia down at the church sent me one of them text messagings with a winky face saying she liked the cologne I had on the other Sunday. Thing is I switch it up *every* Sunday because you got to be unpredictable.” He motioned to a silver tray on his dresser that was jam-packed with half-drained cologne bottles. “Remember that, Cornell. Never let 'em see you comin'!”

“Who?”

“So Miss Felicia missed a couple of Sundays 'cause she was visiting her grandkids down in Florida. And I'm so unpredictable, I done went and fooled myself. I don't remember exactly which one I was wearing last time I saw her.”

Pop-Pop held two fancy colognes for Cornell to see.

One in murky blue glass shaped like a seashell. The other in a smoke gray bottle that looked like a test tube. Pop-Pop spritzed both nozzles at the same time and Cornell flinched away like bugs do when you shoot them with bug spray.

“Which one you like best?”

Cornell gagged. “Neither.”

“Boy! This ain’t no time to be joking around.”

“I just started wearing deodorant last month, Pop-Pop.”

Pop-Pop narrowed his eyes, nodding. “I s’pose you have a point. You don’t know what you don’t know. I’mma get you started with a Tommy Bahama gift set from down at the CVS for your birthday, though. Every man needs a supply of Smell Goods. You hear me?”

“I hear you, Pop-Pop. Can I ask you about something?”

“Always.”

“Okay . . .” Cornell recapped what he was facing in his superhero fight tomorrow, what he and Carter discussed, and how the discussion with Raven—who was very smart and pretty, the more Cornell thought about it—was better than the discussion with Carter, then what he and Dad discussed about Pop-Pop taking him and Grandma to see movies about Black heroes when Dad was a kid. Cornell finished with, “I wanna know who you think the best heroes are.”

“Well,” Pop-Pop said, leaning back in his chair, really thinking it over, “the ultimate superhero is the Lord.”

Cornell blinked.

Pop-Pop scratched at his beard. “S’pose that wouldn’t be a fair fight, now would it? Hmmm. Explain this here debate to me again.”

“I’ve got two potential picks—one from Raven, one from Dad. I need a third.”

“I’ve always been partial to John Shaft.”

“Never heard of him.”

“He’s a complicated man. No one understands him like his woman!”

The way Pop-Pop said it, Cornell figured it was supposed to mean something more than what it sounded like. Maybe?

Pop-Pop huffed. “You kids today, I swear. That line is from Shaft’s theme song. The man had his own song, Nelly.”

“That sounds cool.”

“It was. Coolest thing ever. Look. When I was growing up you didn’t see a lot of us in the pictures. Then, in the 1970s, Black filmmakers decided enough of that, we gon’ be the stars of our own movies, and they made a bunch where we were detectives, and kung fu masters, and even vampires!”

“Vampires?” That sounded even cooler.

“Now, some of them movies were better than others, but people who name stuff named them all ‘blaxploitation’ films. And, for my money, Shaft was king of the blaxploitation bunch. Way better than them Captain Spider-Hulks y’all mess with. Such a shame you never really got to know your grandma. On our first date she picked the movie. *Shaft in Africa*.”

Cornell perked. “He’s a king from Africa? Like Black Panther?”

“We all are!”

Cornell got his list out, added to it.

Batman (perma-banned)	Thor	Doctor Strange
Spider-Man Silk	Iron Man Riri/	Thanos
Captain America	Ironheart	Black Panther
Superman	The Hulk She-Hulk	Shuri
Waf Machine	The Winter Soldier	Kazam???
Wonder Woman	The Flash	Blankman
Nubia	Wolverine X-23	John Shaft

Pop-Pop said, “Back in the day, the best cologne was a brand known as Hai Karate. I bet that’s what John Shaft wore. They stopped making it about forty years

ago, but I've saved the last little bit I had for a special occasion."

He rummaged through his dozens of cologne bottles and retrieved one that was green and glowing like the plutonium stick on *The Simpsons*. "Wanna smell it?"

Cornell had already flung Pop-Pop's door open and was halfway down the hall. "Maybe later. Gotta put my team together."

A daring escape. Made in just the nick of time.



That evening, when Mom called for family FaceTime, Raven had gone home, Dad had showered, and Pop-Pop had just a few minutes before he had to leave for Bible study. All four of the Curry men gathered around Dad's iPad for a view of Mom's face as it filled the screen.

"All my fellas. Hey there!" she said.

They sounded off. All glad to see her. Cornell hadn't talked to the others much about it, but he missed her a bunch when she went out of town.

"How's the shoot going?" Dad asked.

"Fantastic," Mom said. "Might be the best adaptation of my work yet."

Mom's job was writing mystery books. So far, Hollywood had made three movies based on them. She was

visiting the set of the fourth. She asked, “What have y’all been up to?”

Everyone told a messy, pieced together version of helping Cornell with his superhero team.

Mom nodded through the explanation. “Okay. Cornell, have you settled on your heroes?”

The truth was he’d wanted to ask Mom first. She had the best imagination in the house, knew all kinds of stuff about comics, books, movies, songs, history, science . . . everything. Dad always said Cornell and Carter were lucky because they got half their genes from a genius, and the other half from him. Cornell hadn’t wanted to bother her on her movie set, though.

But since she’d asked . . .

“I’m close,” Cornell said. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Sort of. Why don’t you make up your own heroes?”

“I—” The thought stunned him. “I think that’s against the rules.”

“I used to think that too, sweetie. Then I did it anyway.”

Someone on Mom’s side of the call yelled, “Janice, you got a moment? Mr. Peele wants to discuss some script changes with you.”

Mom spoke over her shoulder. “Be right there.” Then, to her fellas, she said, “I gotta run. I’ll call back if it’s not too late. Love y’all.”

“We love you too,” they said together like they’d rehearsed. Dad’s iPad reverted to the Washington Wizards home screen and the call crowd dispersed.

Carter got a text from Raven and ran upstairs goofy-grinning. Dad heard the guest bathroom toilet running and went to investigate because he might have to hit Home Depot. Pop-Pop rolled out because he didn’t want to keep Miss Felicia waiting.

Cornell remained alone at the counter with his list. Thinking. About what he might do anyway.



The next day Cornell boarded his bus, ignoring Tobin’s taunting “I hope you’re ready.”

Cornell felt good about it. He had his team picked, plus some extras.

Amaya, with her hair in ribbons, smiled when he passed. He took the seat behind her and said, “Hey.”

She twisted so they were eye to eye, looking somewhat surprised. “Hey.”

“I wanna show you something.” Cornell unfolded a sheet of paper for her to see. Not the list—he was kinda over that—but a drawing. He was a decent artist, and after talking to Mom, he thought about what a cool hero of his own design might look like.

Amaya gawked, then snatched the paper. “Oh my goodness.”

It was a hero named Fan Girl, who wore Amaya’s favorite color—red, Cornell had noticed—and had her same long hair, with a matching mask and cape.

“She looks like me,” Amaya said, amazed.

Cornell grinned the grin he’d seen Carter practicing, laughed like his father, trusted that the single spritz of Pop-Pop’s cologne (not Hai Karate) was just enough, and let her in on the secret his mom told him. “Apparently, that’s a thing we can do. I thought you should know!”

As the bus pulled away from the curb, Cornell Curry felt like a winner. And the day was only going to get better.

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