



CORA AND BENJI'S GREAT ESCAPE

BY MARIAMA J. LOCKINGTON

“I am too old for this mess,” I say under my breath as Mom lines my siblings and me up in front of our minivan in matching, crisp black hoodies that read *Black Is Beautiful* in block lettering with a Black Power fist on the front.

“Cora, please smile. This will only take a second. Then we can get on the road!” Mom yells from the end of the driveway as she places her iPhone tripod in the perfect position in front of us.

“Come on, Coco,” my twelve-year-old twin sisters, Amelia and Freya, whisper at me in unison. “We want to leave. Let’s get this over with.”

“Plus,” Freya continues on her own now, “Sam and

Drew-Drew are not going to be able to keep still much longer.”

Sighing, I look down the line at Sam, my six-year-old brother, and Andrew, who just turned four. Sam is starting to kick up imaginary dirt with his sneakers like it’s his job, and Drew-Drew is swinging his arms side to side and looking wistfully at his abandoned plastic pickup truck a few feet away in the walkway.

I plaster on a smile. “Okay, I’m ready,” I say through gritted teeth. It doesn’t matter that I’m almost sixteen, Mom still thinks I’m her forever baby. She still has me sharing a room with Amelia and Freya, even though I told her I don’t mind moving into her “office” in the basement. But Mom says she needs her “Boss Babe Cave” to be a kid-free zone so she can do all her momfluencer work in peace. I don’t understand why she needs a whole basement just to edit reels of our family and ship out feminist cross-stitch pieces from her small Etsy store, but whatever.

“Oh, you guys just look so cute!” Mom squeals before setting the timer and running over to join us in the shot. She is wearing an identical shirt, except hers says *My Kids Are Black & Beautiful*, sans fist. If Dad were home, she’d have him in one too, standing next to her, and then we’d be complete: “The O’Henry Family—A Salt & Pepper Story.”

If you haven’t guessed already, we—me and my siblings—are the pepper. Each one of us is adopted and Black, and our parents—Lily and James O’Henry from

Madison, Wisconsin—they are the salt.

“Oh, that’s just perfect!” Mom squeals, checking her phone as we all scatter and claim our seats in the minivan. The tension in my shoulders eases up a little as I climb into the passenger seat up front. Dad’s out of town this weekend for work, so that means I get shotgun, Sam and Drew-Drew will be in the middle seats in their boosters, and the twins get the back row. Mom throws her tripod and ring light in the trunk on top of all our bags, and then she hops into the driver’s seat and buckles in.

“Give me just one sec, and then we’re off to Camp Unity!”

“Yay!” Everyone in the car cheers, except me.

“Finally,” I mutter as I watch Mom open Instagram to post our latest family portrait.

“Cora—help me think of some good hashtags.”

“How about, #letsgetontheroad #now.”

Mom purses her thin lips but doesn’t take her eyes off her phone. “Very funny, Cora. I don’t get why you’re so moody these days. You used to love this weekend away.”

I watch Mom type out her caption: “When your family is Black & Beautiful and headed to Camp Unity.” #roadtrip #transracialfamily #momof4 #blackgirlmagic #blackboy-magic #mixedfamily #asaltandpepperstory.

“And posted!” she squeals. “All right, fam bam. Let’s blow this Popsicle stand.”

And with that, Mom revs the engine and we are finally on the road.



Camp Unity—“A Black Identity Experience” is a family retreat my family has been participating in ever since I was five years old. From Friday through Monday of MLK weekend, a bunch of families just like ours make our way to a big lakeside conference center just outside Milwaukee to be in community, learn about our Black heritage, and take workshops on antiracism or whatever. Well, it’s really just our white parents that take the intense workshops—us kids, well, we kinda just get to chill until the final night, when there’s a big family celebration, with African drumming, dancing, a raffle, and soul food. It used to be a lot more fun when I was younger—they play a lot of movies for us and have an arts and crafts room, but once you get past the age of like twelve, there’s not much for us to do. In fact, if it wasn’t for Benji, I would have begged Mom to stay home this weekend. Benji (Benjamina to her parents) is my best friend at camp and has been since forever. Benji was adopted as a toddler, like me, and she lives in Chicago with her two moms and a pug named Lolly and is just six months older than me. I only get to see Benji in person once or twice a year, otherwise we stay in touch via text and email, so at least this weekend we get to be bored together.

When we pull into the conference center a couple hours later, it’s midafternoon and the parking lot is full of cars, vans, and SUVs as families spill out of them and head inside to check in. Freya and Amelia immediately spot their

friend Lauren a few cars over and run to envelop her in a hug. I leave Mom in the front seat checking her IG account and get Sam and Drew-Drew out of their seats.

“Grab your bags, boys,” I say, moving to unpack our luggage. “And don’t forget your truck, Drew-Drew.”

“It’s my butt truck!” Drew-Drew says, grabbing his toy.

“That’s not a butt, Drew-Drew.” Sam laughs. “It’s a dump truck.”

“Bump truck!” Drew-Drew tries again, throwing Sam into a fit of giggles.

“Okay, you two. Very funny,” I say, but I also have a big smile on my face.

Freya and Amelia finally extract themselves from their huddle with Lauren and come running back over, asking Mom if they can go down to the gazebo and explore.

“You need to get your bags first!” I say before Mom can chime in. “I’m not carrying all your stuff for you like I did when we left the house. What did you even pack that’s so heavy? It better not be your nail polish collection. That stuff stinks, and you know people have sensitivities.”

Freya and Amelia roll their eyes at me.

“Don’t roll your—” I start.

“Girls,” Mom chides as she steps out of the driver’s seat. “Grab your own bags, please. Let’s all get checked in and find our room assignments. You can see your friends at the opening session.”

Amelia and Freya scowl.

My pocket buzzes, and I pull out my phone.

Benji: You here yet? My moms are irritating me already. Also—are there more families wearing kente cloth patterns this year or is that just me?

I snort, and quickly snap a picture of my hoodie. Then I type: Just got here. And I can't speak to the African prints, but this is what my mom had us wear this weekend.

Benji: Cora . . . what on this green earth.

Me: It was for her Instagram. I'm taking this off as soon as we get to our rooms.

Benji: You better. I can't be seen with you in that.

Me: Shut up. See you soon. I'll text after we check in.

Benji: 🙄

It takes forever to check in, not because it's a super complicated process, but because Mom won't stop talking with other parents, and then Drew-Drew has to use the potty and Sam needs a snack, and by the time this all gets sorted out and we make our way to our dorm-style rooms (one for Mom and the boys, one for me and the twins next door), it's time for the welcome session.

Meet in the auditorium? Save me a seat, I type to Benji as I throw my duffle on the bed closest to the window.

Benji: Yep, got you one. Back row.

I grin and shimmy out of my *Black Is Beautiful* sweatshirt. I replace it with a chunky marigold cardigan; then, in front of the full-length closet mirror, I inspect my fit.

I'm wearing high-waisted, gray-washed boyfriend jeans, my black Doc Martens, and under my cardigan a tight, black-and-white-striped tank top. My hair falls around my shoulders in a series of tight box braids, with teal and purple braided into them. It's the first style my mom let me choose on my own, and she didn't insist on trying to do it herself. I love it. I've been keeping my edges meticulous and even using a toothbrush on them like other Black girls on YouTube do. When I see myself with this hair, instead of the messy twist-out Mom used to try to help me style, I feel like a literal queen, a goddess. I hope Benji likes it too. Benji, who has an open adoption, sees her first mom and cousins every few weeks or so. One of the things they make sure to hook her up with are the most immaculate hairstyles. Every time I see Benji, she's rocking a new do—like Goddess braids with gold beads in them, perfectly sectioned out Bantu knots, or a braided headband crown—and for once I'm gonna be just as cool as she is.

“Okay, Cora, we get it. Your hair is amazing. You look like fricken Beyoncé,” Amelia chimes in now as she and Freya come out from the bathroom, where they've no doubt been trying to find a spot to stash their smelly nail polish supply.

“It is amazing,” Freya chimes in with no sarcasm. “I wish Mom would let us get braids like that.” She looks longingly at me and then pats her two Afro puffs.

“She might let you if you keep asking,” I say. “You just

have to be persistent. Wear her down.”

“No way,” Amelia says. “Mom’s feelings would be too hurt. You know how much she loves to do our hair in new natural styles. It’s like half of her content on IG.”

“Yeah, but it’s *your* hair. Not hers,” I nudge gently. Ever since they were born, Mom has had their faces all over her social media, doing all kinds of photo shoots and tutorials with them in matching clothes. Then, when the twins were four and I was seven, she took one class with KidStyles in Chicago—an organization that helps white parents learn how to do their Black kids’ hair—and immediately decided she was an expert. The twins have always had it worse than me, but this year I finally got sick of it. I told Mom that I didn’t want to be in any more of her hair-styling videos. I wanted to go to a salon to get mine done. I think it hurt her feelings, but I still don’t get why. She doesn’t let us play with her hair, she gets to have hers dyed and layered professionally every few months, so why can’t I? In the end, she and Dad gave in.

“That’s what I said,” Freya mumbles. “It’s my hair. Plus, we’re too old for some of the hairstyles she puts us in anyway.”

Amelia gives her a sharp look and then grabs her by the hand. “Come on, let’s go. We’re going to be late for the opening.”

“Conversation to be continued, I guess.” I sigh, grabbing my lanyard, my phone, a tube of cherry ChapStick, and the

key to our room. Then I follow the twins down the hallway and out into the cold January air.

In the auditorium, I find Benji right where she said she'd be. I take the auditorium steps two at a time, toward Benji, who is rocking an amazing, curly mohawk with the sides braided up. She's got small gold hoops in each ear and is wearing a lavender jumpsuit, rainbow Doc Martens, and her signature clear cat-eye glasses.

"Cora!" she says, jumping up to hug me. "Excuse me, your hair is fire. When did this happen?"

I hug her back, hard. Benji is my safe place. Her arms remind me to loosen my shoulders all the way, to breathe, to relax. Remind me that I can be myself.

"You like?" I say, flipping my braids over my shoulder dramatically.

"I like a lot. Might have to copy you," Benji says, nodding.

I grin so wide it hurts and then plop down next to her.

The lights dim as if on cue, and Ms. Jade and Ms. Alice—the codirectors of Camp Unity—make their way onstage. Ms. Jade is a tall, stylish Black woman from Zimbabwe, with a massive, sparkling Afro. She is a sociology professor at Northwestern and is in charge of all the camp's workshops and educational programs. Ms. Alice is an average-size white woman with short brown hair. She has a collection of homemade sweaters for every season and holiday, and today she's wearing a black-and-white sweater

with the image of Martin Luther King woven on the front. Ms. Alice—well, honestly, I don't know what Ms. Alice does. I think she organizes the raffle and entertainment for the final celebration, and her sons Leo and Thadius were the inspiration for starting the camp.

“I wanted my sons to feel PROUD of their Black skin,” Ms. Alice is saying now, a little too loudly, into the mic. “To feel a connection to their roots and their people, and to know they are beautiful! And I wanted to create a space for us, as the parents of Black children, to learn and grow and be better allies. So, welcome new families and old, this is our thirteenth year, and we're going to have a GREAT weekend. To start us off with a song, I'll pass the mic to my co-organizer, Ms. Jade.”

“Here we go,” Benji whispers as we both stand in the darkness out of habit.

Ms. Jade introduces her Black and brown college students, who are here to volunteer for the weekend, and then she asks everyone to rise for the Black national anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

“Please join along!” Ms. Jade commands the audience in between two verses. “For those of you who are new, there are sheets with lyrics in your welcome folders.”

A bunch of new families start to fumble through their folders or lean over the shoulder of someone who has the sheet. To be honest, I've been coming here for ten years, and even though I know all the lyrics now, I still don't

understand what the history of the song is, or why it's even considered the Black national anthem. Ms. Jade and Ms. Alice never explain this. We just all awkwardly sing it because it's something we're supposed to know, as Black people, I guess.

"We sound horrible," Benji says, leaning over, as if reading my mind.

"I know, right. This is a bad way to start a weekend about unity. We can't even sing in key."

Benji stifles a laugh. "They should just play the Beyoncé version and call it a day."

I nod. When I watched *Homecoming* and heard Beyoncé sing "Lift Every Voice," I got goose bumps. It felt like she was singing to me. This just feels awkward as hell, and they make us sing *every* verse, which takes forever.

"Wanna get out of here?" I mouth to Benji, who has stopped singing to look at her phone.

"Immediately, yes," she mouths back.

Nobody notices when we sneak through a side door and into the empty hallways of the center. When we're out, we grab hands and run as fast as we can into the harsh late-afternoon air and toward our favorite place on the grounds: the cafeteria.

The cafeteria is not open yet, but the pop machines work. Benji and I grab cups and fill them to the brim with root beer (our favorite). Then we pick a table in the far-left corner that

overlooks the lake, and we settle in. Dinner will start right after the welcome session is over, so really, we've just claimed our spot early before it gets busy. Until then, we have a whole forty minutes to ourselves to do what we love best: exchange poems. Nobody—not a soul in this whole wide world knows I write. Not my parents, not the twins, not my one friend back home, Rebecca, no one. No one, except Benji.

I didn't even know I was writing poetry until Benji helped me understand what it was. I just know that sometimes, the only way I can express all the sadness, anger, anxiety, and loneliness I feel is to open my phone and a new Notes app and type it all out. At first I didn't know what a stanza was or a line break or even what alliteration was. It was Benji and YouTube that helped me figure all that out. Benji—who not only knows she is a poet but competes in poetry cyphers all the time at her performing arts high school in Chicago. Benji—who has never been shy a day in her life and has the gift of commanding a room with her voice no matter if she's reading her poems or just talking. Benji—who never seems afraid that she'll be rejected or that her stories don't matter.

“Okay, so you got something new? I want to hear it.”

“You first,” I say, thumbing through my Notes app for what I want to share.

Normally, we email or text each other once a week with our pieces, but because we knew camp was this weekend, we saved up. I am trying to decide whether to read what I wrote a few days ago, about feeling like an alien at school,

or what I penned in the car ride up here while Mom and my siblings were having a sing-along to *Moana*. I hadn't had a chance to edit today's piece, but also, this is Benji. I can share my most unfiltered thoughts with her.

"No way," Benji says, shaking her head. "You're first. I always send you videos of me reading my poems aloud, but I hardly ever get to hear you read yours. I want a performance, darling!"

I feel my face and neck flush.

With the twins around, it's hard to ever get time to myself in my room. If I want to practice my poems out loud, I have to lock myself in the upstairs bathroom and turn the shower on, and that gets too steamy, not to mention wasteful. But I really, really don't want anyone in my family to know about my poems. They are mine, nobody else's, so normally I just email them to Benji. I glance around the room. There are only a few staff members by the buffet, starting to set things up for dinner. Coast is clear.

"Fine," I say. I take a big gulp of my pop and then lean over the table, closer to Benji. "This isn't finished yet. I just wrote it on the way here, so—"

"NO DISCLAIMERS!" Benji practically yells.

"Okay, okay. Geez. Calm yourself. Here I go," I say, then recite:

*i see myself in the blurred landscapes
snaking by the windows as we speed*

*down the highway the snow catching light
catching all the colors of brown and black
and bright
my face in the windowpane distorted and contorted
an illusion of a girl
who is more fiction than fact
more movement than stillness
more wanting than having
more undone than understood
the car travels mile by mile
and all my faces unravel
until I am everywhere
as far as the eye can see
Black and stretching out forever
my body lifted up and out and flying away*

until

I am free

“That’s as far as I got,” I say, after a beat to catch my breath.

“Wow.” Benji whistles under her breath. “That was amazing. And no, I don’t think that’s the ending. You need to keep writing, see what else comes. I was feeling a lot of the imagery. Especially the part about being ‘more undone than understood’—a whole mood.”

“Thanks,” I say. I knew Benji would get it. That she wouldn’t tell me I was being too dramatic or be confused about why I sometimes feel “distorted and contorted.” When kids at school find out I’m adopted, they say things like *Wow, you’re lucky* or *Wow, you must be so glad your mom decided to give you up so you could have a better life*. Or my least favorite, *Wow, I wish I was adopted. That must be so cool*.

It is cool, sometimes. But more and more these days, it’s also confusing to be me. I have all this sadness, and more and more I find that my poems are full of the ways I don’t fit in here or there, blurry landscapes, and trying to see myself more clearly in a foggy mirror. More and more I look at myself and think, *Whose lips do I have? Whose eyes? Who might I have been if I’d been kept instead? Would I still feel so undone?*

And I don’t have to say any of this to Benji. When she reads me her poem next, it’s different but also full of the same questioning and wondering as mine. It’s about going into a store with her moms and getting followed around by the clerk until they realized who she was with. And when she ends with the line, “So step off my neck, Karen, and let me live!” I clap for her, loud and proud across the table, and my claps echo through the empty cafeteria.

“Thank you, thank you,” Benji says, standing up and giving a small curtsy. “I’m still working on memorizing it, but I think it’s getting there.”

“Oh, it’s there,” I say. “In fact, I bet you could perform it if you tried. You barely looked at your phone the whole time.”

Benji gets a gleaming, mischievous look in her eye. “Okay, listen. I have an idea,” she says, sitting back down and waving me in closer.

I lean over the table so that our noses are almost touching.

“So, you know how my first cousin, Treasure, goes to University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee?”

“Yeah, she’s a sophomore, right?”

“Yep. So, listen. Sunday night, she says the BSU is putting on an MLK celebration with an open mic, and we should come.”

“But Sunday night is the final camp celebration. I don’t think we can miss it. Plus, how would we even get there?”

“Treasure said she and her girlfriend can come get us. But yeah, we’d have to sneak out. My moms don’t know Treasure like that, and I’m only really supposed to be in a car with my first mom.”

“I don’t know, Benji . . . I mean, won’t they know we’re not college students?”

“Please. We’ll fit right in. Promise. Plus, Treasure will be there, and she’s an adult.”

“Barely.”

“Come on. You know that the final celebration is always the same. Once our parents start dancing along to the drumming and the food comes out, that room is so crowded nobody can tell where anybody is. I bet they will

barely miss us. Plus, if they text, we can say we went back to our rooms early to hang out.”

I raise my eyebrow. Ditching the final camp celebration *is* appealing. “I’ll think about it.”

“Okay. Well, think quick because if Treasure is going to come rescue us, I need to text her soon.”

“A real open mic? A college open mic?”

“Yes! It will be low-key amazing. I mean, Treasure says it’s a whole scene, that all the Black students on campus get together for it, and there’s a DJ and pizza and shit. She said it’s a whole vibe.”

I gulp. It sounds like a dream, but also, I have this feeling that me and my awkward self might mess up whatever “vibe” the event has going for it.

“Okay—well let me know,” Benji says. “Looks like dinner is opening up. I better go find my parents in line so I can get my meal coupon.”

“Same,” I say, standing up with her.

“Meet you back here when we we have our plates?”

The first night of camp (Friday night), they always play a movie for us kids while the parents have antiracist book clubs. Benji and I have made it a tradition to steal cookies from the cafeteria so we can eat them in the back of the movie room and gossip. Tonight they’re screening *Black Panther*, which I’ve literally seen five million times because Sam thinks he *is* Black Panther. So I doubt I will pay attention.

“You bet. See you soon!”

And then we scatter, our words left dancing in the air like ghosts.

The next morning, I lie in my bed listening to the twins giggle under their covers, and I think about Benji’s proposal. I know she’s right about one thing: nobody will notice if we are gone. In fact, except for last night at dinner, when I grabbed my meal coupon, I’ve barely seen Mom or the boys, and the twins have been on their own agenda since we arrived. That’s the thing about Camp Unity—everyone here is someone’s family, and we have the whole conference space to ourselves. So, even though at home Mom keeps a close eye on me and my siblings, here she lets us roam and pick what we want to do while she gets to hang out with all the parents and attend workshops. To be honest, it’s really nice not being in her spotlight so much. Mom’s love is big and warm, and when she finally puts her phone down, she makes sure each one of us has what we need to face the day. But her love can also feel obsessive sometimes—like if we don’t give her back as much energy as she gives us, then somehow, we’re letting her down.

“Knock-knock, girls.” Mom’s voice comes through our door now. “Breakfast is opening in fifteen minutes, so please don’t miss it.”

Amelia opens the door, yawning. “Good morning, Mama.”

“Good morning, Pumpkin.” Then she peers around and says, “Good morning, Sweets and Coco.”

“Mmmhmmm,” Freya mumbles from under the covers. She is the night owl; Amelia is the early bird.

“Hi, Mom,” I say, standing up and stretching.

“What’s on the agenda for you all today? I saw they have a bunch of activities for you this weekend,” Mom says.

“Freya and I are going to do the origami workshop this morning,” Amelia pipes up, pulling out her schedule for the day. “Then, after lunch, we have affinity groups, so I guess we’ll be in the Black girls’ group with Cora.”

“Wait, what?” I say, pulling out my own schedule, which I’ve barely looked at. “What’s the point of separating us out like that?”

“I don’t know, but they have a special guest speaker for the boys and one for the girls. So we all have to be there,” Amelia continues matter-of-factly.

I groan. I wonder if Benji knows about this.

“So, Coco. What are you going to do this morning?” Mom continues.

I glance hastily over my agenda. “Uh, hmm. Benji and I are gonna do the, uh, the yoga and meditation workshop.”

“That sounds nice,” Mom says. “Wish I could join you.”

I smile at her. I absolutely do not want to do yoga with my mom. In fact, I don’t really want to do yoga at all, but it’s the only thing on the agenda that sounds remotely low-key.

“Yeah, well, perks of still being a kid at these things,” I finally say. “What’s on your agenda?”

“Oh, we have a long day ahead of us. We’re going to be learning how to decolonize our bookshelves and how to make a road map for success in our white allyship. You know, how we can better understand what it might be like in this world for you kids, and things like that.”

“Shouldn’t that be, like, a family discussion?” I ask, pulling my sweatshirt over my head. “I mean, like, so we can all talk together?”

Mom shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so. It’s just for parents. It will be too boring for all of you. You’ll have more fun elsewhere.”

I nod, but I don’t understand how our parents are going to learn to be allies if they never talk to us kids directly. I guess that’s why I write my poems. At least the page is there to listen, and anyway, Mom is right. I don’t really want to be in a room full of white parents talking about all that. Sounds exhausting.

“Ma-ma, Drew-Drew changed the channel!” Sam screams from the room next door.

“Oh, boy. Okay, Sammy. I’m coming,” she yells. “Okay, girls. Have fun this morning. See you at lunch.”

We all wave and then scramble to get dressed. When I’ve pulled on a pair of leggings and laced my boots, I text Benji.

Me: Yoga & Meditation?

Benji: I guess. It’s the best of the worst.

Me: Did you see they have us in a girls' group later?

Benji: I did. Sounds interesting . . .

Me: My thoughts exactly.

Benji: Did you think any more about my plan?

Me: . . .

Benji: Ok, we'll talk more later. See you at breakfast.

Me: 🙄

We don't talk about Benji's plan at breakfast, or during the yoga and meditation workshop, which turns out to be way cooler than we thought. Ms. Ruby, a Black adult adoptee from New York—yes, her white parents named her after Ruby Bridges—leads us through a guided meditation and then asks us to tune in to the parts of our bodies that hold the most tension. Then she starts talking about how our bodies hold trauma, and even though we might not remember all the things that happened to us as babies or kids, our bodies do. When she talks about how she holds a ton of tension in her shoulders and how, when she met her first mom finally in her early twenties, that tension went away, I feel like crying. It's hard for me there too, my neck and shoulders are always tight and full of knots. I never thought about what I might be holding in them—that maybe it's not just physical, but emotional too.

Then Ms. Ruby leads us through some gentle yoga poses and breath work to help with anxiety, and it low-key feels amazing. I feel peaceful afterward. I think Benji does too,

because we hardly speak a word to one another during the workshop.

At lunch, we are so hungry from all the moving and breathing, we shovel food into our mouths and then chat with other kids at our table. I briefly see Mom and the boys at another table and wave. Then it's time for affinity groups, and all of us Black girls shuffle into a room where there are two of Ms. Jade's college volunteers—a Black woman named Tamika and a brown woman named Jessenia. I can tell they are nervous, because they kinda fumble through some icebreakers at the beginning, and we all go around and say our names and one thing we like to do on the weekends. When it's my turn, I say "sleep," but really, I like to write poems on the weekends and watch my favorite spoken word poets on YouTube and text Benji. But people don't need to know my business. The icebreaker ends, and then things get awkward. Ms. Tamika and Ms. Jessenia tell us how hard it can be in this world for Black and brown women, how people are going to assume that we're more grown-up than we are and oversexualize us. Then they ask if anyone has experience with this happening. The room is quiet, and a new girl named Mazie raises her hand.

"So, I . . . uh. Well, sometimes when my dad takes me out to restaurants, people give us funny looks," she begins. "And one time, when we got the check, the waiter told my dad that his 'girlfriend' was beautiful and winked at him. He was talking about me. I'm only fourteen, and my dad

is really old, so I don't know why they thought we were together. My dad laughed it off and said I was his daughter, but then he let it go. I felt really gross the whole way home. Like, did everyone in the restaurant think I was dating my dad?"

Ms. Tamika and Ms. Jessenia looked visibly shocked, like they weren't expecting this response at all. To be honest, the whole room is quiet, but then Ms. Jessenia recovers and thanks Mazie for sharing. "I'm really sorry that happened to you," she says. "Has this happened to anyone else—or something similar?"

I bite my lip and catch Benji's eye. She gives me a knowing nod. I have a whole poem about how all of a sudden, now that I have boobs and a butt, the white boys at my school call me a "Big Booty Ho," and how, in the grocery store with my dad one time when I was thirteen, this old white woman glared at me in line and whispered, "Disgraceful slut." Dad didn't notice, because he was paying and chatting with the attendant, but everyone in line behind us heard it. The only person who knew about this was Benji, and even though something like this never happened to her with her moms, she understood why it was so embarrassing. But I don't share this out loud or offer my story up to validate Mazie's. I just feel nauseated, like I might throw up. *What's the point of all this?*

I spend the rest of the session in a haze of anxiety as Ms. Tamika and Ms. Jessenia prompt us through more

discussion about our Black girl bodies and how we can try to keep safe if stopped by police, etc.—all things Mom and Dad never really talk to us about directly. Sure, we went downtown to the local rally for Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and we all marched and carried signs, and Mom got good photos of us all together in the crowds, but we never actually talk about how we—me, Freya, Amelia, Sam, and Drew-Drew—could be next . . . how any day, especially as we get older, we could be targeted. How scared I am sometimes, and angry too that the police keep killing us. But I don't know how to bring this up with my parents on my own. I think it would overwhelm them, so I just write it all down, and that works for me. I don't want to talk about this in front of strangers or with these volunteers who don't even understand what it's like to be adopted. I feel my body start to heat from within and my breath getting raggedy and short, and before I can excuse myself, Benji is raising her hand and asking if the two of us can use the bathroom. She leads me out into the hallway, and we walk and walk for what feels like forever, and then there is cold air hitting my face, reminding me to come back to myself.

“You can breathe,” Benji is saying.

“I . . . I can . . . br-reathe,” I repeat.

“Good. Say it again,” Benji prompts.

“I can . . . breathe,” I say, more confident in myself.

“Now breathe,” Benji says quietly.

We stand in the cold, watching our breath snake into the

air, until my lungs feel back to normal and my heart rate slows.

“Are you okay?” Benji asks after a beat. “It got real in there.”

I shake my head no. Because nothing is okay, and she’s the only person I feel I can say that to.

“Can I do anything?” she asks, giving me a hug.

“Yes. You can text your cousin. Let’s get out of here,” I mumble into her shoulder.

Benji leaps into the air and shrieks. “For real?”

“For real. I don’t think I can face the final celebration tomorrow.”

“Hell, yes!” she says. “Okay, let me text Treasure.”

I need an escape from my life, even if just for a night.

Sneaking out on Sunday evening is simpler than I’d imagined. After another full day of workshops and crafts for us kids, it’s time for the Camp Unity final celebration before we all head home in the morning. When it starts, at 5:30 that afternoon, Benji and I make our rounds and say a quick “hi” to our parents and siblings, so we’re seen at least once. Then we wait until the hallways outside are empty and everyone is in the room, and we watch the lid come off the first tray of soul food. Then Ms. Alice gets onstage and introduces the same African drumming troupe they hire *every* year, and the room fills with the urgent rhythms of djembes as five Black men and women dance and drum

their way to the front of the room. As predicted, all the parents and younger kids go crazy, dancing and clapping along with the music, and soon there is a big crowd up front, where everyone's attention is turned.

Benji squeezes my arm and glances at her phone. "Go time," she mouths.

I nod, taking one more look around to make sure my siblings and Mom are not watching. Then Benji and I slip out into the hallway and run outside, where Treasure and her girlfriend Stephanie have just pulled up in a black Ford Focus.

"What in the Zamunda is going on there?" Treasure shouts from the passenger side as Benji and I hop into the back seat, the drumming still audible from the curb.

Benji chortles, understanding a reference that's totally lost on me. "Thanks for scooping us, Cuz. It's a whole mess in there," she responds. "This is my friend Cora. She's the one who makes me a better poet."

I give Treasure and Stephanie a quick wave, but shyness takes over and I can't find my voice. Plus, I'm still stuck on the fact that Benji thinks *I'm* the one who makes her a better poet. She makes *me* a better poet.

"Bet," Stephanie says, pulling away and out onto the road. "Nice to meet you, Cora. You think you're going to spit tonight?"

"What?" I laugh. "Um, no way. I'm just excited to listen."

"That's not what Benji told us. She told us you both had

new pieces to share,” Treasure says, looking back at us. “We should get there in time for you both to get on the list. It usually fills up fast, but we’re getting there close to the start, so you should be good.”

Benji is avoiding my eyes.

“But I thought the open mic was for students—like who go to the university,” I say, already feeling like the biggest nerd.

“I mean it is,” Treasure says, “but we won’t tell if you don’t. Plus, you both look old enough to be freshmen. Nobody will care anyway. It’s all love, you’ll see.”

I gulp and go silent.

“Let’s just see how we feel when we get there,” Benji finally chimes in. “You think we’ll be able to be back by eight thirty?”

“Is that when y’all turn into pumpkins?” Stephanie jokes.

“Babe, stop playin’,” Treasure says, slapping her lightly on the shoulder.

Benji laughs. “Well, yeah. That’s about when things wind down for the night after the celebration. If we’re much later than that, it will be hard to sneak back in without our parents missing us.”

“Well, the open mic portion of the event is from six thirty to eight,” Treasure says. “So you should be good. We’ll get you back on time. Plus, we’re only ten minutes away.”

I look at the car clock. It’s 6:10 on a Sunday night, and I

am speeding fast down a dark street with my best friend and two women who already feel more like kin than my one friend Rebecca back home. Maybe it's also because Benji is here, and these are her people—Treasure is Benji's first cousin, connected by DNA and blood, the kind of family I only ever get to dream about. I can feel how Benji, too, is different. Her speech and body language are softer, easier, and she and Treasure launch into a teasing conversation, the kind of conversation two people who have known one another their whole lives can have. And God, it feels good to be away from camp. I can't wait until I have my real license, not just a permit, and a car of my own. A car is freedom, a way to fly without having wings. One day, I'm going to be able to go anywhere.

Soon enough, we're parking and walking into a big ballroom in the Student Center. It's full of mostly Black folks sitting at round tables, talking and laughing. On one side of the stage a DJ is rocking out as a Chloe x Halle song blares over the speakers, and behind the DJ on a projector screen are images of all kinds of Black leaders, from Martin Luther King to Kamala Harris, Stacey Abrams, and many others I recognize and some I don't. At the sides of the ballroom are tables filled with pizza, sodas, and water, and it is indeed a whole vibe.

“This is amazing,” Benji says, articulating my thoughts. “But I can't lie. I'm really nervous.”

“Well, if you want to sign up for the open mic, you go up

there to the DJ. He'll get your name on the list," Treasure tells us.

We drop our things at a table toward the middle in back of the room, so when we have to leave, it won't be too obvious, and then Stephanie and Treasure head off to get some food and say hi to a few friends. Benji and I sit at the table, still taking it all in. Benji is tapping her foot fast against the floor, so I know she's trying to make a decision.

"What are you going to do?" I ask her. "Are you going to sign up?"

"Thinking about it. But I can already tell this is going to be a bigger crowd than I'm used to. Will you do it with me?"

"Like come onstage with you?"

"No. I mean like signing up to read your poem too."

"No way," I say. "Never in my life. I'd freeze up there—or, even worse, throw up."

"Come on. Nobody here even knows you. It will be good practice."

"Fuck no," I say, letting the curse word roll off my tongue like I'm grown.

Benji sighs. "Okay, fine. I'm gonna do it. At least come with me to sign up."

I follow Benji to the DJ stand and watch her scrawl her name on the list. She's the tenth person on a list of fifteen, so I guess it is good we showed up a little early.

"Last chance," Benji says, holding the pen out to me with a raised eyebrow.

I shake my head no. "I'm serious. I'm not doing it."

"Okay, okay fine. You better cheer loud for me, though, even if I bomb."

"Deal. And you won't bomb. You're amazing. I bet you're better than most of the college kids anyway."

"You have to say that because you're my friend." Benji laughs. "But I love you for it."

We fill our plates with food and head back to the table to hang with Treasure and Stephanie. Soon the DJ is fading out the music and introducing the event.

"How's everybody feelin' tonight?" he yells into the mic.

"Good!" the audience responds.

"Oh, we can do better than that. Look how many beautiful Black faces we have up in here tonight. To be honest, I didn't even know there were this many of us on campus, and damn y'all are looking good. I said, how you feelin' tonight?"

The DJ is kind of corny, but the audience responds louder this time, and Benji and I even join in with a few shouts of our own. The energy in the room is contagious as the DJ hypes us up more and then plays a track where the voice of MLK is superimposed over a head-bobbing, hopeful bass beat. I even find myself nodding my head up and down along with the track, then catch myself and stop.

I look around, embarrassed to see if anyone has noticed how ridiculous I look, to see if anyone is recording me with

their phone to post on TikTok, but just as Treasure assured us, the room really is all love. Nobody seems to care what I'm doing, or that this is by far the most Black people I've ever been around, or that I'm only fifteen going on sixteen and I have no idea who I am or who I want to be. The room is all music, all sway and bodies and breath, all letting go and flowing and not having to be anybody but ourselves.

By the time the open mic begins, I am on my fourth slice of pizza and feeling like my pop must have booze in it, because I'm snapping along to each poet who graces the stage and I'm holding on to each word as if it is gold. When I get a text from Mom around seven, asking Where are you? I don't even panic. I just show the text to Benji, and mouth "I got this," and then, following our plan, I text back:

Got tired of the noise, hanging with Benji in her room.

Mom: It's not noise, it's art from your homeland! You're missing out.

Me: Africa is not my homeland. I was born in Michigan, remember?

Mom: 😏 Ok, fine. You know what I mean. It's your roots.

Me: I'll be in my room by 9. See you later, Mom.

I put my phone in my pocket. Mom has no idea where my roots are, and neither do I. All I know is that I feel more grounded in this ballroom than I have in a while.

"All right, my people," the DJ transitions. "Coming up next on the mic we have the lovely Benji Angelo. Benji is

originally from Chicago, and this is her first time on the UW mic. Let's give Benji a big round of applause."

"Wooooooh, go Benji!" I yell. But Benji doesn't move in her seat next to me. In fact, she's shaking, and before I can ask what's wrong, she whispers, "I'm going to be sick, Cora. I can't do this." And then she runs out of the room.

"Benji Angelo!" The DJ tries again. "Don't be shy, we don't bite. It's all love in here. We know you're going to bless the mic."

The crowd agrees, clapping hard with encouragement.

Benji is going to lose her spot. Before my brain can catch up with my body, I am walking toward the front of the room, my phone clutched in my hand. I am walking toward the stage, and then onto the stage, and whispering into the DJ's ear.

"Well, folks. My mistake. It looks like Benji has passed the mic to her BFF to perform tonight instead. So please give a warm welcome to Cora O'Henry."

The crowd murmurs but still claps it up, and then I am alone with a live mic staring back at me. I clear my throat and try to steady my knees, which I am sure are knocking together.

My heart is so loud, the mic must be picking it up, and I can tell I've sweat through my deodorant, because my arm-pits itch with moisture.

"Hi, everyone," I say, like a nerd. "Um, yeah. I'm going to

read a poem for you, so, uh. Thanks for listening.”

What are you doing?! My head screams as I open my Notes app and scroll back to the poem I shared with Benji earlier in the weekend. I’ve been working on it some more, but I’m still not sure if it’s done, done. This could be the biggest mistake I’ve ever made.

I clear my throat again.

“You got this, Cora!” the DJ nudges. “Let’s give her some extra love, folks. This isn’t easy, it takes a lot to get up here and share your voice.”

The crowd snaps and claps and cheers, and then, through all the noise, I hear one voice, clear as day, yell, “CORA ANABELLE O’HENRY, YOU BETTER SLAY UP THERE, WHOOOOO THAT’S MY BEST FRIEND! WHOOOOO!”

“Oh, okay, she’s throwing out your government name, Cora.” The DJ laughs. “I see you got a fan club here tonight.”

“I really do,” I say with a laugh.

Then I take a deep breath and let all my words flutter out and up into the air, until my voice is everywhere and full of light.

On the car ride back to camp, Benji, Treasure, and I celebrate our open mic triumphs by singing along as loud as we can to Beyoncé’s “Formation,” the car shaking with the tenor of our voices, fogging up with the heat of our breath. After I’d performed and been met by a standing ovation,

Benji, having calmed her nerves, got another chance to spit her poem. I screamed just as loudly for her as she did for me, and the crowd went wild when she finished. We were the stars of the evening. It felt like nobody could touch our joy.

Too soon, we are back at the conference center, tumbling out into the cold air, waving bye to Treasure and Stephanie as they speed away.

“Did that just happen?” Benji says, jumping up and down next to me. “Did you just get on a stage and fucking kill it? Like, did you see all those people clapping for you? You DID that.”

“I did that shit!” I yell, jumping up and down right beside her, giddy with a joy I’ve never felt. “And so did you!”

And then, because I’m feeling full, because I do know one thing for sure, I stop jumping and pull Benji into a hug.

“Thank you,” I say.

“For what, girl?”

“For understanding.”

“Understanding what?”

“Everything,” I say, motioning to all the silent spaces between and around us.

“Always,” Benji says, nodding.

And then, as if on cue, soft snowflakes begin to fall around us. We laugh and open our mouths, letting all the sparkling wetness dissolve on our tongues.

“Cora!” Amelia’s voice sounds through our laughter. She and Freya are peeking out of the conference center main doors with annoyed faces. “There you are. Mom says to get back inside, they’re presenting Ms. Jade and Ms. Alice with a gift soon. Where have you been?”

“Everywhere,” I say quietly as I wave okay to the twins.

Then Benji grabs my hand, and we run inside toward the sound of hollow drums.