

Ali AJ

\* Introduction

**M**y name is Alijah.

I'd prefer to be called AJ but for some reason everyone insists on calling me Ali. And not *Abb-lee* like Mohammed, the old school boxer from like back in the forties or fifties, or whatev. And not *Al-I* because that just really sounds dumb, though it actually makes more sense. No, the correct pronunciation is Al-EE like the place where businesses throw their leftover food at night or where people leave their old furniture when they move or just don't want it anymore. Alley. SMH.

Mom says it was Daddy's idea to call me Ali so that's why I don't fight against it too much. Daddy, for whatever reason, thought it was a good idea. He's dead now so I can't really confront him about his foolish decision in applying a nickname that would forever be my label whether I like it or not. But for some reason I really don't think my dad would toss or turn in any way if the rest of the world

got with it and just called me something sensible. Like AJ. Besides, it was his name for me and therefore should be sacred, should it not? But that won't happen because people are too stubborn to support my desire for change. And so, Ali it is.

Sigh...I still get sad at times when I think of Daddy. I don't cry though. Not since I was 8. My dad, Carl McKenna, died when I was just 7. He was a cop and got shot while off duty. Yeah, you heard that right – off duty. Some stupid boy was trying to beat up his girlfriend and my dad, forever the hero, intervened. The even stupider girl [and yes, I know stupider is not a word and my highly educated mother would kill me for using it] got angry that my dad was hurting her guy. She ran to their car and grabbed the guy's gun and shot it. She said she wasn't trying to shoot him, just scare him off.

But just like that, Daddy was gone.

It was real hard after 'cause my mom just couldn't stop crying long enough to do anything and my aunts, my mother's sisters [and there are like 6 of them], stepped in to care for me and my siblings. I don't know how anyone found time to cry in that house with all the people here and there. Every time I blinked, sneezed, coughed, or peed one of my aunts was there to oversee it on my mother's behalf.

Millie took it nearly as hard as mom and he wasn't even her real dad. Millicent is my older sister and the unfortunate product of an affair my mother had, prior to meeting D'asia's and my father, with a Cuban/Dominican American that she met while backpacking through Europe. If I didn't think that God would possibly deny me passage into heaven, I would hate Millie but I'll explain that a little later.

D'asia is my younger sister; I'm barely a year older. Though she's the smartest of us all, she just could not seem to grasp the reality

that our dad would not be returning to us. Every night for a month – and I do mean every single night – D’asia would crawl in bed beside me and ask, “Ali, is Daddy coming home tonight?” And every night I had the unfortunate duty to respond, “No, D’asia. Daddy lives with God now. He’s not coming back.”

For the first year I didn’t shed one tear. I was angry with Daddy for leaving so abruptly and making Mom and Millie sad and causing my aunts to take over our home. Besides, even if I had it in me to cry I certainly could not. While my aunts took turns tending to the elder women of my home [let us pause here and see if I can successfully name them all in order by age: Veeona, Yashika, Jadonna & Jaclyn the twins, Renee, mom fits in here, and Corecia who actually now lives in Decatur, GA], I was left to mother the aloof D’asia.

My lack of waterworks seemed to give the impression that I was okay and didn’t need anyone to look after me emotionally. So I didn’t [got that?]. At least not until late the following year when mom met, fell in love with, and accepted a marriage proposal from Laurence Carter. I ran away every chance I got, if you count showing up on my best friend Justin or my other bestie Erika’s front porch running away. Wasn’t too hard for anyone to find me and drag me by the ear and fuming back home.

So that’s the legacy that my daddy left me. A nickname that on paper looks like the name of his fav boxer. OMG! I can’t believe it just hit me now while I’m talking to you. That’s why he called me Ali. Eh, well I guess the name isn’t so bad but feel free to call me AJ if the mood strikes.

### Big & Small Differences

Clearly I come from a huge, estrogen filled family. That is another source of contention in my life. Contention: A struggling together in

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opposition; strife. I learned that word today. Mom keeps a calendar posted in the kitchen and insists that we all learn the Word of the Day and use it in a sentence as often as possible to cement it into our brains. Unlike D'asia, I'm only good for the day I learn the word. There's just one slot available for new vocabulary; tomorrow it will certainly be replaced with the next word. Guess in that sense I'm way better than Millie who forgets the word the moment she walks out the door.

Growing up in a family made up mostly of super strong and dominant women is one thing. I can pretty much handle that. I am so totally a descendant of the Greene clan [my mom's maiden name] in that respect. Unfortunately for me, that's where similarity draws a crazy line.

Okay, so for this to make any sense, I'm going to have to paint you a mental picture of myself. My skin is sort of a mix between copper and fallow [I learned to recognize the color in Mrs. Borstein's art class. You might wanna Google it]. My eyes are a deep brown and sorta almond shaped. People tell me that I have a great smile and since Mom is such a stickler for dentistry, none of us have any issues with our teeth. Most definitely oral hygiene is on point which is the key to making a great first impression.

My seal brown hair [yet another color learned courtesy of Borstein] is pretty long, hangs just beyond my shoulders and naturally curls. I keep it in a ponytail or two braids most of the time since:

a.) I don't know what else to do with it and...

b.) I play sports and it would get in my way.

None of that is very significant.

But this is and this is the detail about me that you mustn't forget:

I am 4 feet and  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch tall and weigh in at exactly 98 lbs.

Now, in order for you to get why this stat is sooo disturbing you must first understand what sort of physical attributes the women in my family possess. Of all the Greene women living in various sections of Eden Grove, my mother is the smallest of them all, standing at 5'4  $\frac{3}{4}$ " in height and weighing in at a hearty 165 lbs [and she would kill me if she knew I was telling you this]. Their heights range from mom's to Aunts Jaclyn and Jadonna who are both 5'7 and weight gets as high as the 265 lbs that make up Aunt Veeona.

Now I wouldn't call them fat [I would NEVER call them fat. I value my life too much]. According to Aunt Vee the women in my family are robust. So sure there are like a gang of adjectives you could use here:

Thick

Big-boned

Brickhouse

Chunky

Fluffy

But Aunt Vee [and the crew agrees] those terms are rude, crass and furthermore don't do them justice. And the term diva is just plain overused in her infinite wisdom. So my aunts and my mother consider themselves as: Robust Beauties.

And although their sizes vary and some are more robust than others, most all of the women in my family share a common thread when it comes to things like height and curves. Even Millie, who has managed to maintain her size 4 frame throughout her entire high school career, is lucky enough to be 5'6" with D-cup boobies.

With nearly every woman around me leading with their breasts

makes life a little challenging considering I pretty much have... well...none. An A cup. That's all. I suppose an A isn't the worst since Wikipedia says the smallest is a double A. But if that isn't bad enough, my family doesn't let me forget that I have the breast size of an overweight teenage boy! Ugh!

I get so sick of hearing about how awesome it is to be a woman with curves and how sorry they are for poor l'il me:

*"All these skinny little white gals and black gals out here trying to get that silly-cone mess stuffed under they skin to get what God done blessed the Greene girls with! Well...almost all the Greene girls."* That's Aunt Yashika [who we call Tee Tee Yashi]

*"You gone be alright, Ali-girl. When you get some babies I bet all that gone just fill right in!"* That's Aunt Vee.

They are so over it [as in the hill for you other fogies, if you're nose-y enough to be reading this] and I am so over them.

And Erika and Simone aren't helpful – at all. Indeed they are my BFF's but sometimes they are just so completely insufferable. Simone developed first. Got her period the summer we met and was borrowing her mom's good bras by 7th grade. Erika's puberty gene didn't kick in too far behind. And even though Reilly [Simone's and my friend. Erika and Reilly can't stand each other] is as prepubescent as me up top, her rump more than makes up for her lacking in the upper region. Not to sound racist but who knew a regular ol' Caucasian girl could have it going on like that? Woe is me.

## Sibling Rivals

Despite my envy over their expedited development, if it wasn't for Erika and Simone, I would not have sisters.

I get it. To you this makes no sense. What about this Millie and D'asia that I have spoken of over the past six pages? Sure, courtesy of a biological connection to one Sha'Toya Bernadette Greene-Carter [who goes by Dette and will always be Greene-McKenna to me], the three of us indeed are siblings. Even better, sisters. But only biology dictates that. And biology couldn't have gotten it any more wrong.

### EXHIBIT A: MILLIE AND EZAN TORRES-MCKENNA

So, like I said before, Mom went all Woodstock back in the day and took a hiatus from her dorm at Bethune-Cookman College after her third year. Instead of going home for summer break as she normally would and as my grandparents expected, she channeled her inner renegade and took all the money she'd saved from doing odd jobs over the prior year and boarded a plane for Europe.

She was gone for a month and apparently my grandmother Ophelia nearly went out of her mind from worry and rage. She saw Paris, London, and Amsterdam, just to name a few. It was in Venice that she met Yoan Oliva-Torres, a budding entrepreneur [now super successful and super-super wealthy] and fell in young-love. They spent the rest of her time there together doing goodness knows because when she came home to face my grammy and grandpa, she was carrying the spawn of Satan in her womb.

Millie, in a word is...well...Mom would so totally kill me if I say the word that she is. So let's just say it starts with the second letter of the alphabet and rhymes with the first syllable of kitchen. And she hates me. She doesn't like D'asia either but I think she kinda has a soft spot for her that she hates to 'fess to. She has no soft spot for me. And yea, it's pretty sad but no woe-is-me just 'cause my stupid

older sister thinks I'm a pain. I think she's a spaz and a complete and utter lame and so we have something in common.

Now let's see if you're paying attention. Mr. Torres is rich. Fabulously so. He, like, invented some fantastic tactic for doing investment banking [who knows, I don't ask questions. I just know he's a rich man that makes richer men even richer]. Mom is pretty open about her past but she stops shy of spilling the real about what happened after she told Yoan she was carrying his kid. The memory kinda sets her off.

So here's the cliff notes version as I've pieced together. Mr. Torres was still kinda struggling at the time but he came and swept my mother off her feet and vowed to take care of her and his kid forever. Then he caught the big fish, got really rich really fast, traded in his Volvo for a Beemer and mom in for the dark haired, olive skinned, accented imported beauty Frederica who is now his wife and mother of the sons he's always wanted.

Fine by me cause it made Mom available to meet Daddy and have D'asia and me. But for Millie, for as much as she loved my dad and he loved her, this was really the beginning of her nightmarish existence. Here's the dealio: Mr. Torres was so happy when Frederica had their first kid Gabe, that he hardly spent any time with Millie at all. And two years later when Millie was 7 and Jorge was born, he was out of her life altogether in the physical sense.

You think I should feel sorry for her, don't you? Yea, it sucks he's not there for her. But as a consolation he gives her anything she wants. And I do mean – anything. For her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday she wanted this Tiffany charm bracelet and to have her birthday party with ten of her closest friends at Magic Kingdom. Not only did she get the bracelet, she got earrings to match. And when Mom insisted that D'asia and I get to go with to her party, Millie had such a fit that



Mom canceled it and made her have a party at the local Chuck E Cheese and invite her entire 5th grade class. She fumed the entire time.

That was the first of many occasions that Mom's authority trumped that of Mr. Torres. She didn't think it fair that Millie got whatever she asked for when me and D'asia could not. And well... Mom's right. It is sorta sucky when there's so much we want and can't have. But still, it's not like it's our doing. We never complained about it. Still...Millie blames us and it shows.

### Exhibit B: D'asia Raquel McKenna

Sister #2 is a different breed altogether and like Millie, I think I hold a soft spot for her as well. With that said, it's misleading to say that I like her. Not completely. D'asia's been different since she was little. We're just a year apart so we should be like, total BFF's. Not. We couldn't be anymore different. While I was throwing my alphabet soup on the kitchen floor, D'asia was spelling words with hers. When I was splashing in mud puddles on rainy days, D'asia was conducting archeological digs and trying to prove that Native Americans used to set up shop on our property.

She's a total recluse who rarely sees sunshine because she's always shut away in her room with her nose stuck so far in a book that often we forget she's even here. She doesn't care enough to comb her hair so I've taken up the habit of carrying a comb and brush to make her look presentable on the bus before we arrive at school. I don't know what she'll do next year when I'm gone. She frequently doesn't quite match and mom's eyeglass frame choice doesn't help much.

Surprisingly no one really bothers her. I think it's because Millie was like the queen of Arthur Ashe and she probably put out an order

of protection on poor little D’asia. And though she wants to hate her as much as she hates me ‘cause mom puts limits on her materialism, I think part of her feels sorry for D’asia. Like, she thinks something is mentally wrong with her. But nothing is wrong with D’asia. She’s just socially underdeveloped. Most geniuses are and I am convinced, even if no one else is, that my little sister is some sort of genius.

Okay, so what’s the prob? Not her smarts. I’m proud of that. But...well, because she’s so smart, I always have to take a back seat. Millie can have what she wants mostly. All she has to do is send her dad a memo. In a sense, D’asia is just as privileged. I love sports. Love ‘em. Looooove ‘em. All of ‘em. But with Mom, academia always trumps athleticism. Always. Period. No questions asked. I need money for a new uniform for soccer and D’asia needs money for space camp, who do you think is getting a check and who is going on a fund-raising quest, scouring the neighborhood for odd jobs?

Now I think you’re getting it. Siblings.

The only one that doesn’t give much grief is my little brother Maddex. He’s only 4 and the product of Mom’s union with her husband of five years, Laurence. I used to run away when Mom and Laurence were first planning to get married but he’s grown on me since. I guess he’s not such a bad guy. He loves us and treats us as his own and he’s an awesome dad to little Maddie.

Maddex has been a joy since he was born and he seems to be all that me and my stupid sisters have in common. He’s what keeps us kinda bonded. I just hope he doesn’t become a nuisance like them when he gets older.

Ali M (Super Fat!)


So, that's me in a nutshell. Alijah "Ali [AJ]" Dominique McKenna. I'm 14 and in the 8th grade and am sooo thrilled to be leaving Arthur Ashe behind. It's a cool place to go to school and I like most of the teachers [except my Aunt Renee 'cause she teaches my Language Arts class this year and insists I call her Mrs. Jackson and scolds me in front of the class when I forget and call her Auntie Nay even though everybody knows I'm her niece and she says, "There will be no special treatment, Ms. McKenna" though in my opinion she treats me especially different just 'cause we're related].

Next month is graduation and I couldn't be happier. Though Millie's been gone for three years, her legacy remains and because of it I'm always being reminded how I'm "nothing like your big sister, Millie. She's so beautiful and charismatic. Such a delight." Notice they don't say how "she is so intelligent." They save that for the comparison between me and D'asia. That's another reason I am only too thrilled to leave this school behind. I must break away from these girls and find my own identity without them.

Now of course Millie will be at Wilma Rudolph High when I get there. And I am so sure she's just as legendary there as she was in elementary school, especially since she started modeling last school year. But I'm mentally prepared for dealing with that and without D'asia there, it'll be a little easier to do so. And since Mom promised that I could go to soccer camp up North this summer, I'll be more than ready for varsity try-outs (who needs frosh-soph?).

Yeah, it's going to be so completely awesome. A new school. A new life with new and more advanced sports. A chance to start over and show everyone that just because I'm small doesn't mean that my presence isn't big. Finally, a chance to make my mark on the town of Eden Grove. And with Erika, Simone, Justin, and Reilly by my side, what could possibly go wrong??

# Arthur Ashe

Teachers Suck 

**M**rs. Parker is standing in front of the blackboard lecturing about...about...well, about something. IDK what, I've turned down the volume completely. I have better things to think about besides recapping Newton's two laws of motion. Or was it three laws? Eh. What does it matter? Okay, I suppose some of the lecture seeped through my defenses. Better make 'em higher. Besides, who really cares at this point? I'm so sure I passed else she would have told Auntie Nay – I mean, Mrs. Jackson – who would have told Mom who would have already grounded me before report cards even come out.

Graduation is three weeks away and there is sooo much to do. There's the 8th grade trip that I need a new outfit for. There's the 8th grade luncheon that I need a new outfit for. There's graduation itself which I already have my dress for [mom, D'asia, and I went shopping for it the moment it looked promising that graduating was even in my future]. There's the after graduation family dinner that I so cannot show up to in the same clothes I walk across the stage in,

and therefore need a new outfit for.

And then there's the post 8th grade party that it's rumored that Demitry Haggardy is throwing at the end of the summer. It's all the Arthur Ashe graduating class has been talking about lately. This is where my mind is focused when Mrs. Parker calls on me to answer some scientific question that I probably wouldn't have the answer to anyway even if I had heard it.

"Alijah, I am waiting."

I jerk to attention. What did she ask?? I dart my eyes from left to right, hoping to get a clue from somewhere. All eyes are on me and of course none are trying to assist. I strain slightly to see Erika who's holding up her notebook and pointing at something I can't see [she's such a smarty pants] because stupid Chauncey Denton is blocking her and on purpose. I know 'cause he's smirking at me while he's doing it.

"Ms. McKenna," Mrs. Parker says, addressing me again.

"I...I'm sorry. I didn't hear the question."

Mrs. Parker closes her eyes and shakes her head gently, in that way that adults do to say they are so disappointed in you. She sits her chalk down and walks toward my desk. All the boys like her. They think she's just such a honey. I disagree. Her head is shaped like a light bulb and her nose is like the shape of an arrow. But she does have gorge green eyes and the bottom of a video vixen [not at all appropriate for a teacher. There should be a clause in the her contract or something forcing her to shrink it].

She reaches her finger toward my desk and before I realize what she's doing and react to stop her, she has the piece of notebook paper I'd been thoughtlessly scribbling on. My heartbeat speeds up just a bit as she glances over it.

“So, this is what has you so distracted that you can’t answer my question.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll...uhm, just ask...me...” my voice fades though IDK Y. Nerves I suppose.

“Since you don’t seem to be all that interested in what Newton had to say, maybe you’d like to tell the class what you find to be more entertaining.”

I swallow hard and glance around. My eyes pick up on the smirk on Demitry’s face and I turn back to Mrs. Parker quickly. My voice is hardly audible when I answer, “I’d rather not.”

“Oh, yes. I would love to know more about...what is this? How to get an invite to Demi-”

I jump from my seat so fast you could swear I have rockets strapped to my ankles. I snatch the paper from her hand. I hadn’t meant to do that. I only want to stop her from completely humiliating me. She’s so lame. But I did it. I snatched it and she’s none too happy.

“Well, class, it would seem Ms. McKenna is beyond my scope of authority and believes it acceptable to snatch things from the hands of her teachers.”

“I...I don’t...” I look over to Erika who shakes her head gently and gives me this look of empathy. Reluctantly and against my will, my eyes go back to the side of the room where Demitry and flunkie #1, Mya, are seated laughing at me just high enough that the kids around them are entertained but low enough that it doesn’t threaten Mrs. Parker’s coveted sense of authority.

Mrs. Parker hands the paper back to me and folds her arms across her chest which, unfortunately for her being a card carrying adult of normal height, is no bigger than mine. I think I’m headed back to my seat but clearly I’m wrong. “Why don’t you take this to

Mr. Fitzgerald and explain exactly what it has to do with Newton and/or Science in general.”

I pause in front of my desk, rolling my eyes so far to the back of my head that for a sec I'm so afraid that they're gonna get stuck. I think how this is completely unfair and I cannot wait until I don't have to see "Light Bright" any longer!

"Any day now, Ms. McKenna," Demitry volunteers. "Some of us wanna learn."

"Really. If only you were capable of such a thing," I reply thoughtlessly. I immediately regret it, for now I'll never get an invite and I absolutely have to go to this party. Everyone that's anyone will be there.

"Alijah," Mrs. Parker scolds. "As a matter of fact, go straight to Principal Bellamy."

"But—"

"Now."

"This is so unbelievable. Demitry can just say whatever she wants and I get sent to the Principal's office."

"Alijah."

"Too bad she's graduating. Now you'll have to find someone else to tell you how to do your job." Okay, now I know I've gone too far.

"Alijah McKenna, out. Now!"

Most of the class snickers and a few outright laugh. And I could just die right here. Right on the spot. But I don't. Instead I straighten my spine and stand as tall as possible, grab my books and shove them inside my backpack before turning away wordlessly, and walking toward the classroom door en route to discuss my insubordination with ol' Joe, the Principal. I've spent so much time with him we

should be on a mutual first name basis.

Princi-pal. I wonder why they spell it that way, different from principle. Yeah, he's no pal of mine. Before I leave I hear Demitry add: "I feel for her. Must be hard being the only little person in the entire 8th grade class."

The class roars with laughter. Most of them. I'm certain Erika doesn't find a thing funny, just as I'm certain Demitry will not be joining me on this little impromptu excursion.

I leave before our science teacher issues her idle threat to the class. No one but my friends believe me but I swear most of the teachers at Arthur Ashe treat me harsher because of Auntie Nay. They're so concerned with the other students not feeling that I get some sort of special treatment that they actually treat me completely unjust. It would be so terribly humorous if it wasn't so sad, but Demitry actually *does* get special treatment just 'cause her mom is the stoopid superintendent.

I'm halfway to the principal's office before I realize that I didn't wait around long enough to get a hall pass. Stephe Sinclair is on duty. You should know something about me, I'm not an unreasonable person and I don't just not like peeps for the thrill of it. But Stephe Sinclair is like maggots crawling under your skin so you need laser treatment to get rid of 'em.

She begins her stroll in my direction, a smug look already consuming her freckled face. Her red hair is split in two perfectly neat braids, not a strand out of place. Her brown rimmed, cat eye frames sit too high on her long nose [never mind that she is much too young for cat eye glasses]. And the plaid skirt she wears can stand to be a couple inches longer to conceal her knobby knees.

"Hall pass."



Ugh. "I don't have one, Stephie. I'm going to the office."

"You need a hall pass."

"Well, I don't have one. Sorry. Mrs. Parker is sending me to deliver a message to Principal Bellamy and she was kinda busy and forgot to give me a hall pass."

"That will be one demerit."

"What? I just – OMG. You're such–"

"Shall I make it two?"

"Just give me the demerit. Please." I add the nicety to satisfy her ego. Maybe she'll let me go faster.

"Name."

My head jerks and I tilt it sideways and my eyes go up to meet hers. "You're kidding me right?"

"Name."

"Stephie, c'mon. We've gone to the same school for like, all our lives."

"Name."

I sigh. "Alijah."

"Spell that."

"Really, Stephie? I need to go, like now." I begin to walk away and continue the normally quick trek to the office.

"Go and I'll just deliver 3 demerits to Mrs. Drake. That's an automatic detention," Stephie calls after me but I keep walking.

"You don't even know my name, so why do I care?"

"Fine. Detention it is for you, Alijah McKenna."

Heat rushes all the way from my toes, throughout my body and

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my cheeks are now hot. Now here's a science topic. You can fry an egg on my face. How is it that one little gap toothed Svengali has the ability to do such a thing to me physically [and by the way, Auntie Nay should be so totally proud that I even remembered that a Svengali is some evil jerk that manipulates another into doing what they want]?

I stalk back in her direction and reach for the demerit while biting my lip so hard that I actually draw blood, but I have to in order to prevent saying anything that could make matters worse.

“Name.”

“Alijah McKenna,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Spelling.”

I exhale heavily but respond. After she jots my name down and stretches her arm in my direction, it takes everything in me not to snatch the demerit. I force a smile on my face and politely remove the piece of paper. I turn away silently and walk the remaining distance to the office.

I push into the office, actually relieved to be away from science and Stephie Sinclair. That is until –

“Ali? Why aren't you in class?”

“Auntie N – I mean, Mrs. Jackson. I – I...” Really, dude? This is where my day is headed?!

“You, you what? Ann, where is this child supposed to be right now? Clearly she done picked up a stutter and can't answer a simple question.”

The office admin, Mrs. Ann Drake, to my horror, responds in the honesty that I was trying to avoid. “Right up in here, Nay. Amelia called and told me to expect her and send her in to Principal

Bellamy.”

“What? For what this time?”

“Chile, what else?”

I swallow the lump in my throat. And then the other lump and try not to get caught sending death rays from my eyes to Mrs. Drake.

“That mouth of yours is gonna get you in some trouble you can’t get yourself out of some day.”

“But I didn’t do anything, Aunt – I mean, Mrs. Jackson.”

“Mmhm.”

“I swear.”

At this moment, Principal Bellamy steps out the office and I am summoned.

“Don’t try to convince me that Mrs. Parker sent you out for no good reason. Explain it to your momma when you get home tonight.”

My eyes widen as Auntie Nay grabs her stack of papers, waves goodbye to Mrs. Drake, and walks out the office without another word to me.

“Ali McKenna,” the principal bellows.

I inhale deeply and trudge his way.

Family Bizzyness 

My bed is moving in perfect rhythm beneath me. I roll from my belly and onto my back, bringing my cush pillow with me. I lay for a moment longer, just hoping that it’ll stop on it’s own. It does not.

“Maddie,” I say. But granted, there’s a frog in my throat so huge

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I'm sure it has warts. "Maddie."

The bouncing continues and the bed dips sporadically in different places. "Awi."

I snatch the pillow from my face and slam it at my side. I love my little brother very much – but not always at the same level. "Maddex! Oh my God!"

The jumping ceases. "Oooh."

"Alijah Dominique!" That voice belongs to my mother, who yells from some unknown place in the hall just beyond my room.

"I'm sorry."

But my apology doesn't register and quickly her frowned face is in my doorway. "What have I told you about taking our Lord's name in vain? What does he have to do with what you have going on in here?"

"But, Mom, Maddie keeps—"

"You and that mouth of yours. I swear, little girl. You're gonna get enough. You're already grounded for talking back to Mrs. Parker. Don't make me add on to your sentence."

And then she's off to tend to whatever it was she was doing when she somehow managed to hear my plea to Father God above for peace. And there's Maddex again. Bounce. Bounce. Bounce. I grab the pillow and cover my face once more.

"Aaaaaaaaaarrrgh!!!!"

"Fix. Me. Some. Eggs. Fix. Me. Some. Eggs. Fix—"

"Tell Mom to make you eggs," I say, except it's really muffled and since he can't understand he insists that I repeat myself. I toss the pillow away. "Moooooom! Maddie wants eggs!"

"He asked you, didn't he?" she calls from the end of the hall.

"I. Asked. You. I. Asked. You."

I sit up in bed, all set to grill him until he gets intimidated enough to change his mind. But he's just too cute. Annoying. But really cute. I catch him mid jump and pull him to me. He's laughing and squirming cause I'm tickling his little rib cage. I stop and he calms though he's still breathing pretty hard.

I pull his face back and look into his eyes. Mine are crossed and he laughs. "Why didn't you ask Millie? She makes better eggs than me."

"No she doesn't," he says, almost disgusted by the idea. I feel a little proud about that. "She ain't here."

"Alijah, correct him," Mom yells. How does she hear everything?

"She's not here," I say.

"She not here," Maddex repeats.

I sigh and gently push him away as I tumble to the edge of the bed. I sit for a moment processing that I'm awake at...uhm, 9:15 on a Saturday morning. My naked toes feel around for my brand new Nick & Nora monkey slippers. They're so completely the hotness. I stand and grab Maddie's hand, leading him out of my room. As we pass by D'asia's room, I hear the tap-tapping of keys. I could care less what she's working on. Probably her friggin' college thesis for all I know.

"Mornin', D," I grumble in passing.

"D'asia and good morning." She hates to be called simply by her initial. Generally I'm respectful but mornings like this, who cares?

"Well, look who done joined the land of the living. Good morning, Squirrel."

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PAUSE! You were not supposed to hear that! Grrr... Fine. Yes. Squirrel. That's the nickname my family decided was so befitting of me. Actually it's a name my Poppa [aka my granddad] gave me when I was a kid because I was so small. They hardly ever use it anymore anyhow because they know I hate the name, unless Poppa is the one saying it, of course. But this isn't Poppa standing in my kitchen. It's my new uncle Parker Greene, Tee Tee Yashi's most recent husband. I don't know who gave him a pass to call me Squirrel, and I don't like it.

I use the refrigerator door as a shield and try not to get caught rolling my eyes. "Hey, Uncle Park."

"Ya mama say you graduating."

"Yep. Next week," I say, faking enthusiasm. I'm excited but not really trying to have this conversation with the old guy.

"Ooh, chile. I can't hardly believe you old enough to be anywhere near wearing somebody cap and gown. Yo' l'il teeny self."

I cringe. I've given a pass to Uncle Park cause he hasn't been around long but the novelty of my size really should have worn off by now. I grab the eggs and butter from the 'fridge and try hard not to slam them on the counter.

"Uncle Park, no disrespect intended but can you please not call me teeny."

"Why? You are."

These aren't Uncle Park's words. I turn toward the open back door, where Millie is walking through. She's in sweats and one of her boyfriend's varsity tees, with her hair pulled back in a rough ponytail [which I'm so sure she did on purpose which is incredibly oxymoronic like buying brand new used jeans].

"Shut up, Millie. You don't even know what's going on in here."

"Oooh, Awi say, shet up," says Maddex.

"Mom," Millie cries out.

"Oh my gosh, Millie, you're such a tattle."

"Mom, Ali's talking trash to me!"

"Am not," I scream.

"Ma. Awi say, shet up."

My eyes bulge in Maddie's direction. I'm cooking him breakfast, he's supposed to be on #teamalijah. Where's the loyalty around here? Millie laughs and walks out the kitchen after greeting Uncle Park who just looks way too amused by the entire scenario.

"Alijah! Whatever is going on down there, cut it out!"

"Ugh! I didn't even do anything. Uncle Park, can you please tell her Millie started it?"

He just laughs. "Uhn uhn, Squirrel. I learned a long time ago don't get in family business."

"But you're family."

"My name Bennet and I ain't in it."

"Ugh! So unfair."

"Awi say, shet up."

I close my eyes tight and shake my head, quietly counting down the years until I can leave this place.

 Graduation Day

Today is my day. Finally, it's here.

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“Alijah, hurry up in there. Other people need to get ready. I swear you gonna be late to your own funeral.” I hear my mom fidgeting on the other side of the bathroom door. I suppose she’s combing D’asia’s hair cause I here her complaining. D’asia is tender-headed, partly because her hair is so thick. The other part is because she’s too lazy to comb it properly.

It’s my day.

“For goodness sake, Ali, will you please get out the bathroom! I need to flat iron my hair, else I’m not going to this stupid thing,” Millie calls out.

“You’re going, Millicent,” Mom says.

“Not if my hair looks like this.”

“Millie, you’re going.”

“Uh, she’s such a lame.”

I listen to the sound of Millie stalking away. My day.

“I got go potty. Ma, ma! I got go potty.”

“Maddie-honey, you have to wait. Ali’s in the bathroom.”

“But I got go potty.”

“Then tell Ali to hurry out of the bathroom.”

“A-wi! I got go potty, now!”

“Alijah-”

“Be out in a minute,” I lie. I’m not doing anything. Just standing in front of the mirror staring at my reflection. Today is my last day as a grade schooler. I’ll take as much time as I feel I need.

“Goodness. Okay, Maddie, go in Mommy’s room and knock on my bathroom door and tell daddy you have an emergency.” I hear



his little feet take flight. "D'asia, you come with me. I'm sure Millie's got something in that beauty salon of hers that can tame this mess."

I listen as they depart. My smile broadens. Yep, it is so my day.



"Aliiiiiiii," Simone squeals as soon as I walk into the auditorium. A broad smile breaks out on my face and I rush in her direction and we hug tight.

"Where's Erika?"

Simone points to Erika who couldn't look less enthusiastic about the day. She heads our way. Simone places her thick palms firmly on her hips and tilts her head slightly as she watches Erika on the approach. I stand beside her, my arms folded across my chest and lips twisted.

I know that we look odd standing here. Simone is tall. She's like, 5'5" [5'7" in her moms pumps she's wearing] and we still have another 4 years of growing to do. She's very beautiful with her slanty brown eyes and new pageboy cut that reaches just beyond the cap she's wearing.

"Why does she look so miserable?" I ask just as Erika reaches us.

"I do not look miserable."

"You totally look miserable," says Simone.

"I'm fine. I just wanna get this over with."

Erika looks beautiful, too. Her gown is open and I can see the pretty purple knee-length dress and small pearls around her neck. Classy and classic. Her hair is pinned to the side of her head with a purple flower attached. She's taller than me [everyone is taller than me] but not as tall as Simone.

I grab her wrist and pull her nearer to us. "It's graduation day. Oh. Em. Gee. You should be so psyched. Arthur Ashe, no more. Wilma Rudolph, here we come."

Erika loses her battle with faux negativity and gives up a smirk. "I'm happy, guys. Of course. I just...this ritual...I don't feel like sitting here forever while some pompous jerk drones on about all the wonderful lessons learned here at Arthur Ashe Elementary and Junior High."

"Aahhh," Simone and I sigh in unison.

"Aahh, what? What is that supposed to mean?"

Simone glances at me for support before speaking. "Aren't you, like, totally one of those pompous speech giving...jerks?"

My eyes widen and I nudge her in the ribs with my elbow. "Simone."

"Well. Her words, not mine."

Erika frowns. "If you're implying that I'm upset because Toby Carter beat me out for valedictorian—"

"No, no...never," we lie.

"I told you before, I could care less. It's just a stupid title. Besides, he only got it because I was out for two weeks thanks to stupid appendicitis. And I'm still salutatorian, so it's fine."

"Guys. Guys."

"What is it, Simone?" I inquire.

Her teeth are gritted when she responds. "Look who is headed this way."

I shrug, then pause because I see him. I totally see him and I have no idea what he's doing here, but I take a wild guess. Gage

Campbell is walking directly toward us. I glance around. It must be a mistake, maybe he's going to see someone else. He hardly spoke to us when he attended Arthur Ashe, why would he approach us now? But to my right is Simone and on my left is Erika and I see no one else but Mom and Mrs. Toledo [D'asia's homeroom teacher] chatting several steps away.

"Is he coming for us?" Simone asks under her breath. "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. Gage Campbell is approaching us. What do I look like? Is my makeup okay?"

"Shhh," Erika scolds. "He's just a stupid boy, and why are you wearing makeup anyway?"

"It's graduation day. Duh?"

We're standing in a row with me low center, trying to be discreet but we must look so obvious in our ogling. "Will you guys be quiet," I mutter as my mind drifts off into fantasyland. In my world, Gage is walking toward us in slow motion. There's a crazy blur filter around him cause, duh, nothing is more important in this moment than he is. He's flashing his killer smile and perfect white teeth [his Pops is a dentist]. He is so uber-fashionable, moreso now that he's in high school.

He's in front of us now. His mouth is moving but I don't know what he's saying. I don't really care. I only watch his mouth and those teeth and now his gorgeous brown eyes and back to his teeth. Now he's looking at me directly. No one else matters. Not Simone. Not Erika. Not Demitry Haggardy who he dated until he graduated last year and decided it would be best for them to not try to sustain a long distance relationship, though I'm pretty sure she's the reason he's even at our graduation.

His mouth is moving and since no sound is coming out I do my

best to read his lips. He says...I...love...you...I love you! “Me too,” I sigh.

Erika glances down and nudges me hard. Then Simone does the same. I jerk back into reality. Oh my gosh! What have I said? What have I done? I glance panicked between the two of them, then swallow the lump in my throat before focusing on Gage again.

He chuckles, a look of utter confusion on his face. “Yea, alright. Maybe I’ll see you guys around.” And like that, he’s gone.

Simone and Erika wave goodbye. Me? I’m way too embarrassed to make a move. Once the distance is safe, they both turn to face and hover above me. Never before have I actually felt my height so much.

“What was that?” Simone questions.

“I don’t...I don’t know. Oh my god, what did he say?”

Erika answers, “He said you look nice today.”

I panic. “And what did I say?”

Simone answers, “Me too.”

Oh the horror! Me too? Gage Campbell told me that I look nice and I answered, me too?!

And as if she can sense I did something stupid, Millie walks past and says, “Dork.”

“Ignore her,” Erika tells me.

“Yea, sure,” I whisper. I’ll ignore my sis but Demitry Haggardy is shooting darts in my direction with her eyes. How do I ignore her? I may not like her, but I need to be invited to her party. I shrug and head to my seat as the graduation is called to order. This is my day. Nothing will ruin it for me. Okay, so yes, I just made a bit of a fool

of myself. But still. My day.

D'asia rushes behind me just as I'm about to take my place and whispers in my ear. "Guess what? Mrs. Toledo set up a meeting for next week with Principal Bellamy, mom and me."

"That's great, D'asia. I'm proud of whatever new accomplishment you achieved but can we discuss it later? I'm kinda about to graduate," I whisper back.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. It's just that, I think I'm getting promoted."

"Yea, D'asia, straight A's. You'll get promoted to the 8th grade like you get promoted every year."

"No. Promoted to 9th grade. I think I'm going to high school with you."

I turn to face her and my rear misses the chair. I squeal in pain when I hit my knee and Kyle McKenzie laughs. I turn around and scowl at him before refocusing on D'asia. "You're what?"

"Going to high school with you next year."

And just like that, my life is over.