# WHEN I WAS THE GREATEST

JASON REYNOLDS

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*Special thanks to Elena Giovinazzo and Caitlyn Dlouhy.*
*And, of course, my family.*

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"Okay, I got one. Would you rather live every day for the rest of your life with stinky breath, or lick the sidewalk for five minutes?" Noodles asked. He turned and looked at me with a huge grin on his face because he knew this was a tough one.

"It depends. Does gum or mints work?"

"Nope. Just shit breath, forever!" He busted out laughing.

I thought for a second. "Well, if I licked the ground, I mean, that might be the grossest thing I could ever do, but when the five minutes was up, I could just clean my mouth out." In my head I was going back and forth between the two options. "But if I got bad breath, forever, then I might not ever be able to kiss the ladies. So, I guess I gotta go with licking the ground, man."

Just saying it made me queasy.

"Freakin' disgusting," Needles said, frowning, looking out at the sidewalk. "But I would probably do the same thing."

A sick black SUV came flying down the block. The stereo was blasting, but the music was all drowned out by the loud

rattle of the bass, bumping, shaking the entire back of the truck.

"Aight, aight, I got another one," Noodles said as the truck passed. He shook his soda can to see if anything was left in it. "Would you rather trade your little sister for a million bucks, or for a big brother, if that big brother was Jay-Z?"

"Easy. Neither," I said, plain.

"Come on, man, you gotta pick one."

"Nope. I wouldn't trade her."

Another car came cruising down the street. This time, a busted-up gray hooptie with music blasting just as loud as the fresh SUV's.

"So you tellin' me, you wouldn't trade Jazz for a million bucks?"

"Nope."

"You wouldn't wanna be Jay-Z's lil brother?" Noodles looked at me with a side eye like I was lying.

"Of course, but I wouldn't trade Jazz for it!" I said, now looking at him crazy. "She's my sister, man, and I don't know how you and your brother roll, but for me, family is family, no matter what."

Family is family. You can't pick them, and you sure as hell can't give them back. I've heard it a zillion times because it's my mom's favorite thing to say whenever she's pissed off at me or my little sister, Jazz. It usually comes after she yells at us about something we were supposed to do but didn't. And with my mom, yelling ain't just yelling. She gives it

everything she's got, and I swear it feels like her words come down heavy and hard, beating on us just as bad as a leather strap. She's never spanked us, but she always threatens to, and trust me, that's just as bad. It happens the same every time. The shout, then the whole thing about family being family, and how you can't pick them or give them back. Every now and then I wonder if she would give us back, if she could. Maybe trade Jazz and me in for a little dog, or an everlasting gift card for Macy's, or something. I doubt she'd do it, but I think about that sometimes.

Me and Jazz always joke about how we didn't get to choose either. Sometimes we say if we had a choice, we would've chose Oprah for a mom, but the truth is, we probably still would've gone with good ol' Doris Brooks. I mean, she's a pretty tough lady and she don't always get it right, but there's no doubt that she loves us. And we know we're lucky, even when we're getting barked at. Plus, it's not always about us. I mean, sometimes it is, but other times it's about other things, like our mom just being stressed out from work. She's a social worker, and all that really means is that she takes care of mentally sick people. She makes sure they get things they need, kind of like being a step-step-stepmother to them. At least that's the way she breaks it down to us. I could see how that could be stressful, so Jazz and I do the best we can to not add to it.

What's crazy is that we don't ever really see our mother that much anyway, mainly because she also has another gig at a department store in the city. So she works with the mentally

ill from nine to five, and then sells clothes to folks who she swears are just plain crazy, from six to nine thirty, and all day on Saturday. Sunday she takes off. She says it's God's day, even though she spends most of it sleeping, not praying. But I'm sure God can understand that she's had a long week. I sure do.

Mom says the only reason she has to work so hard in the first place is because our rent keeps going up. We live in Bed-Stuy, and she's always complaining about the reason they keep raising the rent so much around this part of Brooklyn, is because white people are moving in. I don't really get that. I mean, if I'm in a restaurant, and I order some food, and a white person walks in, all of a sudden I have to pay more for my meal? Makes no sense, but that's what she says. I don't really see the big deal, but that might be because no white people live on my block yet. And I can't see none moving around here no time soon either. Shoot, black people don't even like to move on this block. People say it's bad, and sometimes it is, but I like to focus on the positives. We got bodegas on both ends, which is cool, and a whole bunch of what my mom calls "interesting" folks who live in the middle. To me, that just equals a good time, most of the time.

A lot of the stuff that gives my neighborhood a bad name, I don't really mess with. The guns and drugs and all that, not really my thing. When you one of Doris's kids, you learn early in life that school is all you need to worry about. And when it's summertime, all you need to be concerned with then is making sure your butt got some kind of job, and staying out

of trouble so that you can go back to school in September. Of course, Jazz isn't old enough to work yet, but even she makes a few bucks every now and then, doing her little homegirls' hair. The point is, Doris don't play with her kids fooling around in all that street mess. Lucky for her, I don't really have the heart to be gangster anyway. I ain't no punk or nothing, but growing up here, I've seen too many dudes go down early over stupid crap like street cred, trying to prove who's the hardest. I'm not trying to die no time soon, and I damn sure ain't trying to go to jail. I've heard stories, and it definitely don't sound like the place for me. So I always just keep cool and lay low on my block, where at least I know all the characters and how to deal with all their "interesting" nonsense.

Like my next-door neighbors, Needles and Noodles. They're brothers, and when you talk about having a bunch of drama, these dudes might be the masters. They're both my friends, but Noodles, the younger brother, is my ace. He's only younger than Needles by a year, so it's more like they're twins, but the kind that look different. Not identical, the other kind. And really, when I think about it, Noodles actually is more like the big brother in their house, but only because Needles's situation, which I'll get to, makes it hard for him to do certain things sometimes.

I met them almost five years ago, when I was eleven, after the Brysons left the neighborhood. The Brysons were an old couple who lived next door, who everyone loved. Mr. Bryson had lived in that house since he was a kid, and when he met

Mrs. Bryson on a Greyhound bus coming from the March on Washington, a story he used to tell me all the time, they got married and she moved in that house with him. They lived there until they were old, and out of the blue one day they were gone. Not dead. Just gone. They moved to Florida. When they got there, they sent me a postcard from their new home. On the front was a picture of Martin Luther King Jr., and on the back it said, in Mrs. Bryson's handwriting:

*Dear Allen,*
*We had a dream too . . . that one day we wouldn't have to take the "A" train ever again. Our dream has come true.*
*With love,*
*The Brysons*

I never heard from the Brysons again, and after they left, their brownstone got grimy. I don't know who took it over, but whoever it was, they didn't care too much about nothing when it came to who they let live there. All kinds of wild stuff started happening up in there, from crackheads to hookers. I guess the easiest way to put it is, it became a slum building—a death trap—which was crazy because it was such a nice place when the Brysons had it. Then one day Needles and Noodles showed up. Well, really just Noodles. It was a Sunday morning, and I was running to the bodega to get some bread, and when I came out the house, Noodles was sitting on my stoop. I had never seen him before, and like normal in New

York, I ignored him and went on about my business. But when I got back from the store, he was still sitting there.

We made eye contact and sort of did the whole head-nod thing. Then he spoke.

"Yo," he said. His voice was kind of raspy. I noticed he was holding a crumpled ripped-out page of a comic book, and a little pocket-size notebook that he was scribbling in.

"Yo," I said. "You new?"

The guy looked exhausted, even though it was the middle of the day. The sun was baking, and sweat was pouring down his forehead.

I glanced down at the comic. Couldn't recognize which one it was, which didn't surprise me. They were never really my thing.

"Yeah," he said, tough. He quickly folded the colorful paper up and slid it between the pages of the tiny notebook. Then he smushed it all down into his pocket.

"What floor?" I asked. I was a little confused because I didn't think anybody had moved out.

"Second." He tugged at the already stretched-out collar of his T-shirt.

I laughed but was still confused. I guess I just figured he was joking.

"Come on, man, I live on the second floor, so I know you don't live there."

"Yeah, I live on the second too," he said with a straight face. "Over there." He nodded his head to the house next door. The death trap.

I was stunned, but I knew better than to make it weird.

"So what you doing over here?" I asked, putting the grocery bag down on the steps.

"Sitting," he muttered, staring at the next step down. "Would you sit on that stoop if you was me?"

Hell no, I thought. Noodles explained that he couldn't stay all cooped up in that place, so he came outside to get some fresh air. But then he realized he also didn't want nobody to think he lived there, so his plan was to sit on my stoop until it got dark, and then slip back into his own building. I wasn't sure what to say. I didn't want to start nothing because he seemed tough, and I didn't know him yet. He looked mad, and I couldn't help but think that wherever he came from was much better than this place. Had to be.

"I'm Ali," I said to him, holding my hand out for dap.

He looked at it as if he was trying to figure out if he wanted to give me five or not. Then he reached out and grabbed it, our palms making that popping sound.

"Word. Roland."

"It's cool if you chill out here," I said, like I owned the building or something. As if I could stop him from sitting on the concrete stairs.

The two of us sat on the stoop for a while. I wanted to ask him what comic he was reading, but judging by how fast he folded it up, that didn't seem like a good idea. I don't think we talked about anything in particular. I just remember acting like a tour guide, pointing out who was who and what was what on the block. I figured it was the least I could do, since

he was new around here. The hard part was trying not to point to his house and say, "And that's where all the junkies stay."

The sun had gone almost all the way down, and the streetlights were flickering, when my mother poked her head out the window to call me up for dinner.

"Who's that, Ali?" she asked, sort of harsh.

"This is Roland. Just moved in . . . next door," I said, looking up at her, trying to drop a hint without being too obvious. Roland turned around and leaned his head back so he could see her too.

"Hi, son," my mother said, the tone of her voice softening. I could tell that she was as surprised as I was to know that he was living in the slum building.

"Hello," he said sadly.

Doris looked at him for a moment, sizing him up. Then she shot her eyes back toward me.

"Ali, can you bring my bread inside!"—I totally forgot!—"And come on and eat before this food gets cold," she said in her usual gruff tone, but then turned toward Noodles, and said all nice and kind, "and you're welcome to come eat too, sweetheart."

As we ate, my mother asked him where he was from, but he avoided answering. Then Jazz, who at the time was only six, picked up where Doris left off and started interrogating him, asking him all kinds of crazy stuff.

"Your mom don't cook?" she asked. My mother shot her

a look, and before Noodles even had a chance to answer, Jazz changed the question.

"I mean, I mean," she stumbled while looking at Doris out the corner of her eye, "you like SpongeBob?"

"Yeah." The first time he smiled all day.

"Dora?" Jazz questioned.

"Yep."

*"The Young and the Restless?"*

"Of course," Noodles said, unfazed. Then he broke out laughing. He was obviously joking, but Jazz decided right then and there that she liked him.

After dinner he helped me wash dishes and thanked my mother for letting him come up and eat. Before he left, he pulled out his tiny notebook and scribbled a sketch of SpongeBob, that kinda looked like him, and kinda not, but it was still pretty good just from memory. Jazz had already left the table and was washing up for bed, so he told me to give it to her. And once it got dark enough outside, and quiet enough on the block, he made a dash into his apartment.

Though we weren't really friends yet, he was the first person I ever had come over to hang out. I don't really have any homeboys in the neighborhood, just because a lot of teenagers around here are messed up these days. Either they're selling or using, and the ones that aren't are pretending to, or have overprotective mothers like Doris who don't want their kids hanging with nobody around here either. I have a few dudes I chill with at school, but I never really get to see them too much during the summer, just because most of them live

in Harlem and I almost never go there. And they definitely don't come to Brooklyn. So I had no choice but to keep the friends to a minimum—until Noodles.

The next morning I looked out the window, and sure enough, Noodles was sitting out there on my stoop. I remember watching him pop his head up from a different torn comic-book page, and his notepad, to watch the kids play in the hydrant. I got dressed fast and ran out to see what was up.

I guess he didn't hear me open the door, because he flinched, big-time, when I said, "Yo, man."

"Yo, you scared me. Don't be creeping up on folks like that. Get you messed up, man." He didn't laugh, but I did. But once I realized he didn't, I stopped. Then he laughed.

"What's that?" I looked at the comic and the small piece of line paper covered in blue ink.

"Oh. Incredible Hulk," he murmured while folding it up in the mini pad.

I could tell he was a little embarrassed about the comic thing—maybe he thought I would think he was some kind of geek or something. I didn't really see what the big deal was. If you into comics, you into comics. And even though I wasn't, I knew who Incredible Hulk was. Who didn't?

"Aw, man, Bruce Banner a bad dude," I said.

He opened the notepad and handed it to me.

It was one of the scenes where Bruce was upset and was turning green and becoming the Hulk. Noodles had literally redrawn the whole thing perfectly, every muscle, every hair. The only difference was he drew a Yankees hat on the Hulk,

but it looked like it belonged there. The kid could really draw! Noodles said it was one of his favorites, but when I tried to give it back to him, he ripped the page out and told me I could have them both, the comic and the sketch.

He was on my stoop every single day after that, sunup to sundown. Noodles probably wouldn't have been the friend my mom would've picked for me, but she felt sorry for him, plus Jazz liked him, so Mom made sure there was always extra food for him every night.

Luckily, a couple weeks later the dude who owned that building finally straightened up the outside of the apartment. A new door and some new windows. Everybody in the hood was talking about how the inside was probably still a piss pot, but at least it didn't look as bad from the outside. At least Noodles could sit on his own stoop without feeling some kind of shame. Plus, I could sit with him, which was cool because I was getting tired of always sitting on my stoop all the time.

I bet you're wondering how he started getting called Noodles. Well, if you ask him, he'll say he was given that name by the hood, just because he always tries to be hard. But the truth is, it came from Jazz, who's pretty much the master of nicknames. As a matter of fact, she's the person who started calling me Ali. My real name is Allen, but that's not where Ali comes from. Jazz gave me Ali after one of my boxing lessons from old man Malloy, who I'll tell you about later. I remember leaving Malloy's house, running down the block, busting

into our apartment all gassed up, excited to show Jazz what I learned. I was bouncing around the living room, bobbing and weaving, punching the air all silly. I think Malloy had just taught me the left hook, and I hadn't really got it down yet, so my arms were flying all over the place. Jazz laughed her head off, and made some joke about how I could be the next Muhammad Ali, as long as I keep fighting air and not real people. I won't lie, that stung a little bit, especially since she knew I was kinda scared to have any real matches. But whatever. From then on, that's what she called me, Ali, and then everybody else started to, too.

Noodles's nickname story is better than mine, though. Jazz liked him a lot, especially after *The Young and the Restless* joke, and the SpongeBob drawing, which she had taped to her wall. Every time they saw each other after that, which was pretty much every day, they would crack jokes and tease. One day she found the perfect ammunition. She saw Noodles out the window kissing some butt-ugly girl on the stoop—Jazz's words, not mine. She told me that the girl was twice Noodles's size and looked like she was trying to eat his face, and she couldn't tell if the girl was our age, or if she was an old lady, dressed like a girl our age. She said Noodles looked so scared, and that his lips were poking out and puckered so tight that it looked like he was slurping spaghetti. The next time Jazz saw him, she rode him hard about it, squeezing her lips up like a fish. At first Noodles tried to deny it. Then he said it was one of his mother's friends, and that it was more like a family-type kiss. Whatever it was, I wasn't about to ask

no questions. I could tell he was pissed, and I was starting to figure out that he didn't take embarrassment too well.

I was worried that he would stop being cool with me. I mean, I still didn't know him that well for Jazz to be clowning him so bad. But I guess he had a soft spot for her, and if not her, a soft spot for dinner at my house. Either way, Jazz promised to never let it go, calling him "noodle slurper," and stuff like that, and after a while he ended up just getting over it. And that's how he got the name Noodles. Before that, he was just Roland James. That name is nowhere near as cool as Noodles, and even though he never gives my little sister credit, we all know he's thankful for it now, even if it is a funny story.

Okay, so as for Needles, he's only technically been called Needles for about a year, and his nickname story is nowhere near as funny as Noodles's and mine, but it is way more interesting. But in order for it to make any sense, I have to start at the beginning.

I didn't even meet Needles until about three months after I met Noodles, which I thought was weird. I mean, I knew Noodles had a brother, but I never saw him. I always wondered if he was forced to stay in the house, if he wanted to stay in the house, or if he was just someplace else, like with his father or something. All Noodles ever said about him was that he was kind of wild, which is pretty much what everybody always says about their brothers and sisters, so that wasn't a big deal.

When I finally met him, he was with Noodles. They were walking down the block, coming from the corner store,

Noodles ripping paper off cheap dime candy and tossing it on the sidewalk. I first gave Noodles some dap because I already knew him, and as soon as I reached for Needles's hand to introduce myself, he basically started cussing me out. Scared me half to death, I swear. I couldn't tell if this was some sort of joke, or if he just didn't like me, but I couldn't understand how he could not like me when we didn't even know each other yet. But after he finished dogging me, he said, "Wassup, man" in a superquiet voice like he was scared but cool. He also apologized for coming at me that way. That really confused me. And then, to top it all off, Noodles slapped him in the back of the head. I didn't think that was cool, but I didn't know them well enough to be standing up for nobody.

So yeah, I thought Needles was a little bit weird, but when I told my mom about it, she made it clear, and I do mean clear, that there was nothing funny about Needles's condition. She said the proper term for it is Tourette syndrome. So I guess it's a syndrome and not a condition. She said that what happens is he blurts out all kinds of words whenever his brain tells him to. Not regular words like "run" or "yo" but crazy stuff like "buttface" and "fat ass." I figured that's what Noodles meant when he told me that Needles was "wild."

My mother told me she had a girl on her caseload who suffered from it, and that once people learn to manage it, they can usually live normal enough lives. But judging by the way Needles acted when he spoke, and how Noodles slapped him around, I could see it being tough to, especially since it had to be pretty embarrassing.