KING OF NOTHING

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1

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Pour ma Kikine



Fights are never like what you see on TV. The hero punches one guy once, and they get knocked out immediately. In real life, there's all this wrestling and trying to floor each other. The other guy's zip scratches your face, and the blows never land like they should. The films are a lie.

The only reason people don't mess with me and the mandem is because they know we'd win any fight. Still, every now and then, someone disrespects us and we have to prove a point.

Like this afternoon, something got said on the playground which we couldn't let slide. Femi said that girls find Kehinde so creepy his nickname should be Friday the 13th. So when Kehinde came in after lunch,

he spat on Femi's journal, kicked his chair and raced to the back of the class before Femi could even react. I don't have nothing against the guy, but when Femi stood up like he was gonna retaliate, he forgot one simple rule. You step to one of us, you're stepping to all of us.

It don't matter who spit on who first. What matters is that if someone starts something I'll be the one to finish it, unless it's a marathon or a salad. And that's what I did. Kehinde didn't even have to move, one quick nod to me and Caleb was enough. I pushed Femi away, and Caleb flung him over a table. Marcus was filming because we like to watch stuff back, otherwise what's the point? When we're all thirty, we're gonna look back at these videos and laugh at the antics.

Nobody can square up to us here, and I prowl these corridors like my kingdom come. When kids see me, they ten toes it, like antelope at a watering hole. If they ain't scared of me, then how they gonna respect me? Quick maths, fam.

The only problem with being top of the food chain is that people are rooting for your downfall. If it ain't Year Eights getting mouthy or Year Tens getting edgy about starting their GCSEs, it's teachers tryna prove a point, show you they're still boss. There are one or two who are calm, but the ones who take out their failed dreams on us are still dotted about. Ain't my fault you wanted to be

an astronaut and got stuck in a South London classroom. Dreams are for Tottenham fans and Martin Luther King. I don't need none of that. I'm king of the school, already living my best life. Nothing else matters.

Right now, though, I'm on my way to detention, with Marcus, while Kehinde and Caleb are off somewhere eating their chicken and chips. They're supposed to be coming with us. They don't care, though. Caleb's parents stopped answering calls from the school time ago, and Kehinde just does what he wants. I rate it, even if we're only here because of what he did to Femi.

We're strolling down the corridor when Marcus's phone rings. He starts fumbling it, panic in his eyes. It's his mum – she's the only one who can strike fear into his heart like this.

'Anton, I beg you don't say anything about detention.' He says it so fast, getting the words out before quickly answering, 'Hi, Mummy.' His voice is so high-pitched I have to bend down and hold my breath from laughing. He waves me away and tries to walk off. 'Yeah, no, I got football today, I won't be home till later.'

'Mummy, I love you, Mummy,' I whisper.

He stops dead in his tracks and turns away to avoid my smirking. 'I'm sorry, Mummy, I forgot.' There's another pause before he responds. 'No, I'm not in trouble at school again. I swear, I just got football today.' Bro, the

way this guy is sweating like a ham roll in the sun, it's not even funny. It only ends when, mid apology, she hangs up. Man doing the whole 'I'm sorry, Mummy. I – hello? Mummy?' and then when we heard the phone cut, he bowed his head like a child, defeated. No respect.

'Did. . . did your mum just hang up on you?' This time I can't hold it in, I start screaming with laughter. 'Bruv, you just got finished. Man said she left you a one-star review like Tripadvisor.' I'm still laughing when we get to the classroom door.

He gives me side-eye. 'Whatever, fam. You don't know what she's like,' he says quietly.

'Nah, I know I ain't never been disrespected like that in my life. How you gonna let her toss you aside like a non-recyclable?' I've met his mum, she's not one to be messed with, but that level of contempt, though, that's how you know she don't treat him like a main event. 'I heard she asked the maternity ward for a refund.'

'What about you?' He frowns. 'I'm not the only one going to this detention. If you weren't shook of your mum, you wouldn't have come. You'd be out with the others.'

'I ain't scared of my mum, and I could never allow her to do me like that. I just don't want the aggro. There's a difference.' Can't lie, my mum would end my world and release a four-track diss EP if she knew I was in detention for fighting.

'How is that different?'

'Because man needs to focus and stay tops out here. I can't do that if she's on my case like Sherlock.' Besides, Mum already thinks Kehinde's a bad influence, and this'd just give her more ammo. She makes it a big deal whenever he comes over that he never says hello to her, and he's always raiding her fridge. But she don't see that Kehinde's like me, just on a higher volume, and he don't care about what anybody thinks. When I started secondary and all the kids were mocking the fact my dad was inside, talking about how we can dress in matching orange jumpsuits for Halloween, Kehinde was the only one who had my back. He showed me how to turn that reputation into respect, and if that means occasionally landing in detention, then it's water off a duck's back, fam. Like hoisin sauce.

When we walk into the detention classroom, I look to Marcus to tell me this isn't a joke. Mr Benjamin is sitting at the desk at the front. I don't actually believe it. This guy's always coming for me, this the same teacher who once gave me detention for coming to school in my sliders. Well, he offered me plimsols from lost and found, and I threw them in the bin. Kehinde still laughs about that to this day. I would've done the same to Crocs and anything Puma. Even now, Mr Benjamin starts on me the second that I walk in.

'Ah, gentlemen, thank you for gracing us with your presence. Please take a seat.' This guy's voice is so slimy. He thinks I don't get his sarcasm, but I ain't no send out. I pick up the chair closest to me.

'Take it where?' I say innocently.

Marcus is slyly grinning. He knows I'm just getting warmed up like cookie dough. There's a couple other heads in here with us, two girls in the third row near the window and some donny I don't know. They know me though, and they're looking up because they know they're in for a treat. Still, I wish the others were here to see it.

'Ah, you think you're funny, don't you, Mr Charles? How funny does another detention tomorrow sound?' Man's smirking at me like the bossman in Morley's who charges 20p for sauce. Marcus raises his eyebrow, waiting for me to respond. I can't speech him about disrespect and let this teacher finesse me immediately after.

'Not as funny as your shirt,' I tell him. 'Why is it so small? Out here looking like a Lego man in a crop top.'

'OK.' Mr Benjamin has got a fake grin, trying to play it off like bants, and I would let him off but I spot Marcus's phone in his hand, subtly recording. Can't stop now, the crowd wants a show and I ain't one to let them down. Can't look weak in front of my loyal subjects, and

I pay back their respect by entertaining them. So I look Mr Benjamin up and down for extra effect.

'Nah, for real, that shirt could rock a motive, you know. I can see the outlines of your vital organs, that shirt is so tight.' I pretend to squint at his stomach. 'Sir, are you digesting a bagel? I can literally see your heartbeat.'

'Right, that's enough.' He's gone bright red, and I can't tell if it's anger, or embarrassment, or that Ken-doll-sized shirt cutting off the circulation to his face.

'When you're done with it, you can donate it to Battersea Dogs Home. There's small dogs in there that need winter clothes, shout-out chihuahuas.'

'Right, that's another detention. You want to try for a fourth?' Mr Benjamin is so angry his voice is quivering like he's warming up for an R&B feature. It's only because Marcus ain't filming any more that I decide to allow this nobody. How's he gonna start on me when all I did was turn up to a stupid detention? I could've ditched it like Kehinde and Caleb. Now I'm here and I'm catching negative vibes like Henry VIII in a group chat with all his ex-wives.

Me and Marcus take seats at the back of the class, and Mr Benjamin hands us all a blank sheet of paper and a pen. He starts pacing around at the front of the classroom.

'Detention is a time of reflection, or at least it should be. So I'm asking you to reflect, write down where you

see yourselves in five years.' I roll my eyes as far back as they can go and Marcus snorts. Bruh, I hate that question. I'm in the here and now, fam. Top dog like an alpha wolf. Who cares about stuff that ain't even happened yet? The only future I wanna know is what Mum and Nanna are making me for dinner tonight. If it don't bang, I'm going rogue like a stray eyebrow hair that you can't stop staring at.

After ten minutes of me not writing anything, Mr Benjamin narrows his eyes, and so I write down that in five years' time I see myself as taller. I almost put down 'definitely not a teacher', but my Uncle Fred is a teacher, and it doesn't feel fair to him. And a lot of the teachers in this school are harmless, it's only Mr Benjamin who makes me feel like I'd rather lick a cheese grater than be in his lessons. So instead I write that I always had dreams of being a gardener: roses, palm trees, dem ting there. Aloe vera. Now I'm just listing plants even though I've never picked up a shovel in my life.

When I look over, I see Marcus has written serious answers. Talking about how he wants to go to uni, graduate in graphic design, become an animator and that. Like what is he thinking? This guy watches too much anime, it's putting ideas in his head. When he catches me looking, Marcus covers his paper with his elbow like we're in an exam.

‘Maybe you could draw a series about a guy called Marcus whose mum doesn’t parr him off whenever she calls,’ I say, grinning.

‘Allow me,’ he says, and shifts to cover up even more of his answers.

When Mr Benjamin comes over to pick up our papers, he pauses as he reads mine. Then he scowls and folds it up into his pocket. My eyes follow him back to his desk. I know what he’s gonna say before he says it. Please don’t call my mum. Don’t do it, you wasteman, don’t call her, don’t do me like that.

‘I’m sure your mother will be very interested to know how productive you’ve been today.’ He sneers. I knew he’d say it. Still, it proper makes me tense up. I can’t show him that though.

‘Do you, innit.’ I kiss my teeth at him and get up, throw my things in my bag and walk out of the classroom.

When I get home, I hang out downstairs by the bins outside my block for a while. I don’t wanna go inside just yet. I know Mum’ll be stressing.

When I can’t stay out any longer, I take a deep breath and finally head up. The lights in the lift flicker like it’s haunted, but we’re used to it by now. The lift is out of action every few weeks, and then we have to walk up four flights of stairs. The lady next door with the pushchair

always asks me for help, which I do sometimes. Other times I'm not feeling it, so I wait for her to go inside without me. It's character-building.

When I get to my front door I take a deep breath, take my keys out and head inside. I can hear Mum playing Celine Dion, that's the white side of her family escaping from her soul. What will the neighbours think? I'll have to play loud drill music later to even things out.

Once I'm in yard, I'm sneaking down the hallway when her head pops round the kitchen door. Swear this woman's got a sixth sense. She's got those yellow cleaning gloves on and she's wearing the joke apron I got her for Christmas. It says, 'Fry me to the moon', and it's got a picture of an egg on the moon. It was funny at the time. Not so much now when her face looks like that.

'Anything you want to tell me?' she asks.

I know that she knows that I got in trouble again, it's almost like she wants me to lie to her.

'No, I'm good. Why? What's up?' My acting is *EastEnders* levels of terrible.

'You really want to play this game?' she huffs.

'What game?' I can't stop it at this point. Even if I wanted to, something in me tells me to see it through. Mum pulls her gloves off and puts her hands on her hips. Battle stations ready. I guess we're doing this.

'Anton, I can't keep having this conversation over and

over again. Mr Benjamin called and told me exactly what happened.' Of course he did. That guy would snake out his own mother for a tin of beans. 'Detention. Again. For fighting. And why do I have to hear it from a teacher? You've got a phone, why didn't you just ring and tell me?' Yo, she is spewing, spitting embers like Pompeii, fam. I just have to grit my teeth and wait for it to be done with. 'When are you going to start taking responsibility for yourself? Did I raise you to be disrespectful?'

'No, Mum.' I tell her what she wants to hear.

'And did I raise you to be a liar?' Her voice is getting higher.

'No, Mum.'

'And surprise, surprise, I then have to find out your friend Kehinde was involved.' I automatically roll my eyes, I can't help it, she always goes there. 'You can roll your eyes all you want, Anton, that boy drags you around by the skin of your nose.' This is when I get defensive, when she acts like I'm his sheepdog or something, like I'm not my own person.

'Kehinde wasn't even in the classroom with Mr Benjamin when I got in trouble.' Now *my* voice is getting high-pitched.

'Great. So he gets you in trouble and doesn't even turn up to face the consequences. That's the type of person you want to be around, is it?'

I shouldn't have said anything. I get out a feeble, 'You don't know what you're talking about,' but we both know she just bodied me with my own words. Let's just skip to the part where she gives me my punishment; hopefully she's too busy with work to follow through with it anyway. Mum's been working on this big project, some women's shelter or charity or summin, I dunno.

After a tense stand-off, her hands drop by her sides. 'No internet for a week.'

My jaw clenches and my hands ball into fists. *Don't answer back, don't answer back* . . . Last time I tried to argue, she upped it to two weeks, and changed the Wi-Fi password to 'AntonLuvsMummyWummy123'. She proper mocked it, the numbers were so unnecessary. She blocks my data allowance too. My phone is on a rolling contract, so she just calls them up and caps the internet. Swear down, she might be small, but my mum can be an evil genius sometimes. 'And you're taking your grandmother to the hospital tomorrow.'

'Allow me, tomorrow's Saturday, I got plans.' I'm meant to be meeting the boys for a park sesh, we're going Telegraph Hill. Besides, I've taken Nanna to the hospital loads recently. She keeps needing appointments because she's complaining that she gets dizzy very easily and has stomach issues. The stomach issues I can vouch for – you can tell when Nanna's been in the toilet

because she leaves remnants of her soul in there. She don't need a doctor, she needs a priest to exorcise the bathroom demons when she's done.

'You're taking her, and that's final. Now go and wash up before tea.' Wash up? Does she think I'm a scullery maid? I didn't know I was living in *Downton Abbey*. Mum goes back to cleaning the kitchen so I slink off to my room, avoiding the bathroom on the way. Before I even get there, my phone buzzes.

Kehinde

Yo, fam. You chillin tomorrow? Parklife

I start typing out my response.

Me

Got summin with my nan but finna to ditch her and just come out

Before I can hit send, though, I see the internet bars disappear. She's changed the password already. I bite my bottom lip in frustration and stomp into my bedroom, slamming the door behind me as hard as I can. The noise echoes through the flat. From the kitchen I hear Mum's voice call out, 'That's one month no internet.'