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TWENTY-FOUR SECONDS FROM NOW

JASON REYNOLDS

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For my friends.
And our firsts.
And Judy.

A lover tries to stand in well with the pet dog of the house.

— Molière

Right now

I swear. If there was a category in the yearbook for *Ugliest Dog Ever*, you would have no competition. None. It'd be you all day. Because you . . . *ugly*. I mean, them eyes alone are enough to win the superlative. All wonky and whatnot. They somewhere between half sleep and fake mean. Somewhere between madness and . . . *madness*. Glaring at me like we got some kind of problem or something. But let me be clear, your crooked look don't scare me. Neither do them cement chips you got for teeth. Look at you. *Most Likely to Scare . . . Nobody.* Or at least not me. What I look like being worried about some stringy-haired mutt with an underbite severe enough to double as a bottle opener? Or Halloween fangs? Or whatever else is supposed to give off scary but ain't scary at all?

At least not to me. At least not tonight.

Tonight ain't for fear. Or for your face. Tonight is for. For us. Me and Aria. Aria and me. Tonight is for. For the winners of the *superlative* superlative. Which is *Most Likely to Like Each Other the Most.* Love each other. The most. And do. The most. Or more than usual. For each other. With each other. Tonight is for our first time and will be *our* first time. Together. *Together* together. And I'm ready. *Ready* ready. I think. I *think* I'm ready. I am. Ready. Except. For some reason . . . I'm still jammed in this bathroom, having a square-up and a stare-down with you like we enemies in a cowboy flick or a hood classic, which are basically the same except for the colour of the characters and the hats they got on.

You looking at me, head cocked like we got beef over turf. Like you got an issue with me being here even though this isn't even your house no more. Still, I can hear you yapping in my ear, trying your best to mess this up. Blow the mood. And that makes me feel ridiculous, because you ain't even *here* to interrupt me and Aria. You ain't even here to get in the way. You just some picture stuck in the metal frame of the medicine cabinet mirror, curling at the

corners. And yet I swear – I *swear* – if there was a category in the yearbook for *Worst Distraction During an Important Moment*, you'd also win that one. Because I'm definitely distracted. Standing here in my underwear, curling at the corners too. At least that's what it feels like. And I wish curling up was the only feeling I'm feeling. But it's not. I'm feeling. Stuff. More than I think I thought I would. More than anybody ever said.

For instance, how come nobody told me my fingers would tingle or that my face would burn? Why nobody said I would feel all the blood in my body? Feel all my veins spark like electrical wires from temple to toe? Like fireworks under my skin? How come nobody said that just before I . . . connected . . . with my girlfriend, she, who I've seen almost every day for the last two years, would look exactly how she looked the day I met her? That all of a sudden, my eyes would reset? Or maybe her face has reset and suddenly she looks better than good? Don't get me wrong, Aria *always* looks good. Or, I always like to joke, gooder than I don't know what. But tonight, for some reason, she looks different. She looks dazzling. That's

what I told her, and no lie, when I said it, her face became a diamond. And she sparkled at me, then kissed me and told me I looked dazzling too. And I tried not to laugh or look down because ain't nobody ever said *that* to me before. And even though she said it, I don't feel it. I don't feel dazzling at all. I feel sick. And excited. But mostly sick. But really excited too. Like what it must feel like, in fact, to be a tiny, ugly, distracting dog like you, Denzel Jeremy Washington. Especially when somebody comes to the door, and your whole body turns into a motor. Or maybe this is what it feels like to be an alarm clock just before wake-up. Sixty seconds before it's time to sing. To make noise and rattle the room and welcome the morning. But the anticipation of that ring makes that last minute the length of the entire night.

I feel. Like that. In fact, I hope there ain't no snooze button on this moment. But if there is, if Aria hits it and holds off this rise-and-shine, that's okay too. If she wants to do this at a different time, or just kiss or whatever, or do other stuff. Or whatever. I'm good with whatever she wants, as long as I make it out of this bathroom alive. Because it

feels like something's boiling in my belly, trying to take me out. And this ain't the time or place for dying or diarrhea.

Not here. Not now. Not right across the hall from her bedroom.

Nerves got some nerve showing up. Tonight of all nights. I said nerves, not fear. There's a difference that I won't even try to explain to you because you wouldn't understand. Because you a dog. Matter fact, if there was a category for *Least Likely to Understand*, you would win that one too! Actually, maybe you'd tie with Dodie, but still. Plus, I don't owe you no explanation and don't got time to give you one even if I did, because she in there waiting, while here I am, whisper-shouting at you! A *photo* of you.

Here I am gazing into the toilet, just in case those fries I had a half hour ago decide to exit through the chimney and not the basement door.

Here I am running laps from toilet to sink, sink to toilet, a three-step mile that got me all out of breath.

Here I am wondering what she's in her room doing. What she's thinking. If she's wondering where I am. If it

feels like there are teeth stuck in her throat. If there's a ceiling fan in her gut. If she's re-ponied her ponytail or checked the chicken on her breath.

Here I am.

Wondering how I got water all over the floor in here.

And if I remembered to put lotion on my legs.

And if I've licked my lips too much and now they smell like spit.

And I have to remember not to rip the condom open with my teeth like in the movies. Only had to practise that once to know it's a bad idea. Don't nobody want a kiss to taste like a tire dipped in Vaseline. That could *actually* kill the mood.

And if I *do* rip the condom open with my teeth like in the movies, I have to remember to be careful not to bite a hole in it.

And I have to remember to put it on right on the first try. She'll be watching. Pinch and roll. No fumbles.

And I have to remember, a bra is the most complicated lock to pick. So don't bother trying.

Which is why, which is why, which is why I should just

go in there and tell her. Just get myself together, dry my hands and face on the back of this towel, walk into her room, and say it. That I, Neon Benton, her boyfriend of two years,

am nervous. As shit. That's me.

The Most Nervous First-Timer.

Shit.

I forgot to put lotion on my legs.

Lucky for me, she loves me. She loves me enough to tell me I look dazzling and mean it. Ashy and all. Part of me wants her to tell me I look good. Just regular good. Put my feet back on the floor. But also tell me I look gooder than she don't know what. That my body's okay for her.

That it's enough.

Shit.

I hope this lasts longer than a song.

Get out your head.

I hope this feels like a song I can't get out my head.

Or a good movie, with a better sequel. And no actors. And a loose script that begins maybe with some kissing in the hallway of her empty house. Or maybe with chicken

tenders for her, fries for me. Or maybe with me at the door, knocking, waiting to tell her she looks dazzling, because she does.

Cut to:

Me, in the mirror, imagining what happens next. Talking to a picture of a dog I swear is barking, knowing I have to leave this bathroom. Taking deep breaths. Waiting on my stomach to quiet. Hearing the playlist she just started. Thinking about whether we'll keep the lights on or turn them off. Or maybe have just a little light. Wondering if she'll let me look at her. Before. And if she'll look at me. Before. And if we'll look at each other the same. After.