

THINGS

WE

COULDN'T

SAY

JAY

COLES



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I'M SO BORED DURING Mrs. Oberst's lesson on Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, I could literally kill an actual mockingbird right now.

And I mean, it's not just that her voice sounds like a quail that has a rubber duck stuck in its throat. To tell the truth, I'm not into the whole notion that Harper Lee wrote this book to talk about how bad racism in America is. It's not a book about racism. It's a book about white people's feelings on racism.

I try my best to tune out Mrs. Oberst's lesson, like I do with most other lessons of hers. The problem is, when I do that, I get trapped in my thoughts. And sometimes my thoughts transport me to dark places.

Like now. My thoughts transport me back to when my birth mom walked out on the family.

My mom opens the front door wide, so I can see the rain splashing in the street. She waves at me with tears in the corners of her eyes and says, "Bye, bye, G-Bug!"

Some of her hair is in her face as she takes a step out the door, the rain getting her all wet, the thunder roaring in the distance. I want to reach out and grab her, maybe protect her.

But it doesn't work. My hands don't work.

I want to call after her, but my voice fails me. I want to take a step forward, but I can't.

Something tugs at me on the inside, but I don't know what it is. She gets farther and farther away from me. Darkness creeps from all around and swallows her.

Thick tears roll down my cheeks, working fine.

Something touches my back. I can tell it's Pops by the way the hand feels. Hard and calloused. But I stay focused on the darkness as it completely consumes her and sneaks over to me. The thunder and sirens get louder and closer—loud enough for me to realize this might just be how I'm going to feel forever.

Mrs. Oberst slams a book on my desk to bring me back. I jolt in my seat, nearly falling out, causing some of my classmates to crack up.

“What does the character Atticus represent?” Mrs. Oberst, in her polka-dotted dress and glasses on the bridge of her white, pointed nose, asks the class. She walks around the aisles of the classroom with kind of a strut, like she's not one to play with. And with the amount of detention slips she's written, I'd say she isn't actually one to mess with.

Ayesha Chamberlain, one of my best friends since elementary school, raises her hand. She's my Black best friend. Olly is my other bestie, and he's white, but if you ask him, he'll try to say he's beige because he's not like other white people. Olly's dope and I wouldn't trade his white—I mean *beige*—ass for a million dollars, but if you flipped open the dictionary to white

privilege, you'd see a picture of Olly and his family. He even dresses like he comes from money. Ayesha and I became friends with him around the same time when we first got to high school and saw this lonely-looking kid sitting in the corner by himself at lunch.

Mrs. Oberst calls on her. "Yes, Miss Chamberlain?"

"Um, never mind," she says hesitantly. "I forgot my answer."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," she goes, but then she locks eyes with me. "I think Gio has an answer, though."

Shit. What the hell is she doing? I was definitely not raising my hand. I was drawing some random music notes on a piece of paper as an escape from this hellhole, but now Mrs. Oberst is staring at me.

"Giovanni," she says. Mrs. Oberst calls me by my full government name because my name comes from a book by James Baldwin that she loves. This isn't a coincidence. My birth mom loved the book, too, according to Pops. "What do you think?"

Honestly, if I'm being real, I'd straight-up just tell her off about my feelings on this book, but I don't. There's a place and time for hood me to come out. Right now is not the time, I'm telling myself.

"I'm not reading the book," I say, and swallow hot spit.

"And why is that, Giovanni? Do you think you're better than everyone else in this room?"

"No," I say, looking around. "I just don't relate to it." I'm probably sounding like a real dick.

"You sound ridiculous, Giovanni" is her response. And what

I really wanna do is let her know that her class is almost as ridiculous as her Party City wig. But I don't.

She continues her silent strut, waiting for someone else to volunteer. I try to avoid all eye contact, because, like I said, Mrs. Oberst doesn't play—and she will call us out, if she wants.

I see a white hand go up out the corner of my eye. I look back and it's Penelope Roe. She's the head cheerleader and is known to be a real Blue Lives Matter supporter. Her and her boujee parents who bought her a hot pink Mercedes to drive to school.

“Yes, Miss Roe?”

“He's the lawyer and therefore he's the hero. He shows the judge that racism is wrong.”

I look back at Ayesha and we both roll our eyes. I know Ayesha wants to fight her. She wants to fight everybody.

Without raising her hand first, Ayesha interjects, “Actually, that white man isn't the hero. The man is complicit in the oppression of Black people.”

Problematic-Ass Penelope Roe goes all the way quiet. Ayesha and I high-five with our minds.

Ben Davis High School is *pretty* diverse, like more than half the school is Black or brown, but white folks 'round here still act a fool.

The bell rings, so I don't have to roll my eyes at another white kid who's suddenly realizing racism is a thing. I've got basketball practice tonight, and I'm looking more forward to it than ever since we've got a string of big games coming up.

That's the kind of distraction I don't mind: a clear one.

The other thoughts are way too messy.

* * *

I make my way to my locker, where Ayesha and Olly meet me, the air smelling like recently lit weed and gym socks. I trade out the books from my backpack and put in the ones I need for my homework tonight. The Paramore poster in my locker makes me smile for a second.

“Can you believe that bitch talking ’bout how that white man was a hero?” Ayesha goes, smacking away at her gum.

“Yeah, I know, right,” I say. “She’s trash.”

“Can’t believe I almost dated her,” Olly says.

“Yeah, I’m glad you didn’t, dude,” I say.

“I would’ve probably stopped being your friend. For real,” Ayesha says.

“Dramatic,” Olly says. And I laugh. He’s kind of right, though. Ayesha is pretty dramatic, but it’s one of my favorite things about her. I wouldn’t change her for the world. We dated when we were freshmen and now we’re all juniors. We broke up because it was weird going from childhood best friends to awkward hand-holding and terrible kisses.

“Screw you,” Ayesha says to Olly. Then she play-punches my arm.

“I’m sorry,” Olly says, still laughing.

Ayesha clears her throat. “Whatever. Are we hanging out tonight or what?”

“We can,” I say.

“Our usual? Creamy Kones?” Olly asks.

“I’m in,” I say.

“I’ll text you guys after my date.”