

BOY SQUA

AKHIM YUSEFF CABEY

I GREW UP IN THE BRONX IN THE 1980s WITH AN IMAGINATION SO FAT AND FRENZIED, GOD COULD HAVE MADE TWO BOYS OUT OF ME — AND HERE IS WHAT I REMEMBER OF THAT LIFE.

My mind had a mind of its own, and over the top of the real world, my mind's mind projected a world that to me was even more real. Creston Avenue — the street I lived on with my mother and my older sister, Asia — was two streets: one the way it actually was, and one the way it ought to be. A gushing fire hydrant drenching kids in the street became a small gargoyle shooting acid from its mouth to dissolve its enemies. I was sure at any moment the kids' smiles would turn to cries

of pain as they disintegrated into puddles of flesh, bone, and blood. At night I'd slip from my bottom bunk bed and stare out across the ignited borough. The cars I saw from my fifth-floor window were giant metal cockroaches with glowing eyes, and the gunshots I heard in the distance were fights between those mutant bugs. (Mommy tried to fool me once by telling me they were backfiring mufflers, but I knew better.) The real world itself was nothing more than a place my mind's mind delivered me back to every now and again so that I could take baths, eat dinner, get my hair braided or picked, and go to bed. In this place I was Keemy; in the other world I was King.

My mind's mind was relentless. Even my own mother became two people: my mother, a tall woman with big lips, a wide nose and forehead, and bulging eyes; and a being named Mommy, the throbbing source of heat, food, and affection. My mother had a nasty temper, but Mommy was wildly affection-



RED

GLORIA BAKER FEINSTEIN

ate. When she was just a mother, I rarely noticed the jewelry that adorned her ears and wrists and fingers; as Mommy, her earlobes were forged from gold, the silver bracelets and rings born from bolts of lightning. She smelled constantly of perfume, breath mints, and lip balm, and had slender fingers, which she once told me would have been excellent for the piano, if only she had learned to play. I rarely saw my mother's hair, because Mommy so often wore African head wraps — a different color each day — that I believed *were* her hair. From this being named Mommy, I first understood the notion of *pretty*.

Only Asia, who was two years older than I was, remained the same in both worlds: Just sister. Just girl. Hardly real to me at all.

THE apartment building on Creston was the first place I remember us living as a family. Before that Asia and I had spent

a year living with a friend of my mother's named Ms. Maye, a fierce old woman with dark skin and hair like wild electricity who called a boy's dick a "stick" and a girl's pussy a "purse." She often whipped Asia for supposedly letting boys rub their sticks against her purse. I wasn't partial to purses and paid no real attention to my own stick, but Ms. Maye punished me for not eating my vegetables. She refused to let me have any fried chicken until I'd finished every last bite of the slimy okra that she piled on my paper plate. Most nights I'd get through less than half of it before gagging and spitting up the mush onto the table. While I cried, Ms. Maye would stand with her arms folded and threaten to let me starve if I didn't realize how important vegetables were and clean my plate.

"Just swallow it, Keem," Asia said to me one night. "Don't think about it. Just put it in your mouth and swallow quick."

Ms. Maye held a plateful of fried chicken, still sizzling

atop the wads of paper towels she used to soak up the excess oil. I longed for the deep-fried meat, the crunchy skin, the salty bone that I'd split open with my canines so I could suck out the marrow. The aroma was delicious, and it was torture. I managed to force a few more forkfuls of okra down, aided by the memory of what fried chicken tasted like. But after I was done, all I got were two runty legs that had barely any meat on them.

When Mommy showed up at the end of each month to pay Ms. Maye for keeping us, I'd tell her how the woman had made me eat nasty vegetables.

"Don't you want to be strong like Popeye?" Mommy would ask.

Of course I did, I said, but Popeye ate spinach, not okra, which tasted like snot.

"How do you know what snot tastes like?" she asked.

I broke into tears, partly because of how I had suffered at the dinner table, but mostly because of the burgundy-plaid poncho Mommy was wearing, the sparkling earrings that hung from her lobes, fine as tinsel, and the glorious hair atop her head, which was vanilla-ice-cream white that day. The scent of her perfume stretched across the space between us, drawing me in. She looked and smelled the same as the last time I'd seen her. These visits hurt, because her presence meant that soon she would be gone for another four weeks. It was like having a mother and not having one. And so I cried.

"She be *forcing* him to eat it," Asia snapped, wagging her finger in the air. "That ain't right."

"Oh, girl, stop being so damn dramatic," Mommy said. "Ain't nothing wrong with okra."

The three of us were standing in the hallway of Ms. Maye's apartment. On the wall next to the door hung a cluster of diamond-shaped mirrors. Mommy caught sight of herself in them and frowned. Her arms came out from beneath the poncho to unravel a section of her white hair, pull it tight, and then fasten it back. She did her lips with a tube of lip balm and gave each of her wrists a long inhale before turning on us like we'd just cursed her name: "I ain't playing with *either* of you. You *best* behave yourselves. I mean it."

Asia and I both knew the sudden anger in her voice was a ploy to distract us from the fact she was about to walk out the door and be gone for another month. I clung to her, my arms reaching inside the poncho. She struggled to free herself, telling me to hush up all that damn crying. Asia was crying too, but without much noise, her arms folded and her face creased with anger. Finally Mommy sighed, kissed me on top of the head, and told me that she'd see me real soon: "I promise, baby." But I wouldn't let go.

Then she said to Asia, "You ain't gonna hug me?"

"How come you gotta leave us all the time?" Asia said.

"Don't I always come back?"

"You know what I mean. Take us *with* you."

"Girl, don't make me out to be evil," Mommy said. "I'll see y'all real soon, and you *know* it."

"You a liar."

"Watch yourself now."

While they argued, I pressed myself hard into Mommy's body, the side of my face smashed against her stomach. Her promises slipped directly into my head while Asia's pleas swept into my free ear, their voices slamming into one another inside me.

"Be strong for Mommy," Mommy said to Asia, her tone low and tender now, the way it got when I was sick and she came toward me with a spoonful of cod-liver oil. "You *know* you have to take care of our little man. You *know* how he is. How he gets. I don't have anybody but you to look after him, and you *know* that. Right?"

"Yes," Asia said.

"Right?"

Asia said it again: "Yes."

I had no idea they were talking about me; I was busy pulling on my mother's hips, trying to drive my face and shoulders back into her belly so there would be no way she could leave without me. For all I cared, Asia could stay there with Ms. Maye's mean old ass and the plates of okra and fried chicken.

"Let go, Keem," Asia said, slipping her arm around me. "Let her go."

Mommy unhooked my arms from her waist and helped Asia restrain me as I went wild, my eyes shut tight and arms flailing. Mommy was still close enough that I could smell her, and my feet brushed against her leg when I kicked, but the image of her was slowly disappearing from my head. I couldn't go another month without seeing her, without any evidence of her I could rely on in my minds.

A short time after that, I took hold of a boy's ear at school and tried to pull it off his head because he'd skipped in front of me in the line to the bathroom. Ms. Maye called Mommy and told her that she couldn't take it anymore; it was time for her to come get her damn kids.

(end of excerpt)