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**R. Eric Thomas**

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# **Kings of B'Moré**

**BY R. ERIC THOMAS**



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**For Electra**



“I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood.”

—AUDRE LORDE

“The Truth must dazzle gradually.”

—EMILY DICKINSON





**Wednesday**



**2:00 p.m.**

“Now, *this* is living,” Linus said standing in the middle of the empty cemetery.

Harrison ignored him.

Linus swooped into Harrison’s eyeline. His height made his animated face unavoidable even though Harrison had developed a sudden intense interest in a cloud. Harrison stared back as if to say *You’re really trying it*.

Linus wiggled his eyebrows. *Do you get it?*

Yeah, Harrison got it. *Hilarious. Gets more hilarious every time we visit.*

“Now, this is living!” Linus repeated, this time calling out triumphantly into the endless June sky. His voice carried over sprawling green hills and into the city beneath them, startling a couple of nearby crows into flight.

Baltimore Cemetery was a huge old-timey hillside burial ground packed to bursting with elaborate historical grave markers and, tucked among them, two 16-year-olds pretending to be annoyed with each other. Their trip, as always, was Linus’s idea. The main purpose of the space aside, Linus’s affinity for this cemetery wasn’t morbid. They always came in daylight, and

Linus was primarily interested in the space between the dates on each marker and what had happened within it. To Harrison's mind, the thing that kept them coming back was the fact that it didn't feel creepy or forbidding, but rather that it was one of the most wide-open, awe-inspiring spaces they'd ever encountered. Here amongst the stone and the crows and those who belonged only to history, they felt like they'd stumbled into a dazzling new perspective on a city they'd always called home.

Now, this was living.

"There's no place like this," Harrison conceded, still refusing to acknowledge that he was in the presence of a comedy genius. Linus thrust his arms out now and spun in a slow circle. Very *Sound of Music*, except these hills were not alive. If the hills were alive, he and his friend would be in some trouble, and the next bus wasn't coming for another twenty-five minutes. He plopped himself down onto a patch of grass and gazed up at a 12-foot blue-gray angel standing on top of a gravestone. Harrison stepped over Linus's legs, wandered around the base of the gravestone, and made his way to the asphalt driveway. He cast a look back; Linus was the one staring up at the clouds now, not a care in the world, it seemed.

"You going somewhere?" Linus called.

"Just—Nowhere. I'm still here." He couldn't stop moving, fidgeting, futzing with his glasses. He didn't know why. He wasn't going anywhere, but he sure was in a hurry to get there.

Harrison turned and faced the horizon. The cemetery rose up

at the end of flat North Avenue like it was built upon the back of a poorly disguised dragon. From the top you could see all the way downtown to the Harbor south of them, all the way to the tall, narrow houses of West Baltimore, where Linus lived, north to the slightly nearer neighborhood with the wider, shorter homes, where Harrison lived, and out to the docks and highways in the East, through which the city dribbled out into the water in rivulets. If it weren't, you know, a final resting place, Harrison would have thought it rather serene, like a statue garden. Or maybe that was why it was serene. He didn't know. It unnerved him, but the fact that it didn't unnerve Linus gave him license to see it in a different way.

No shade to all the souls gathered there, but they did have a favorite amongst all the statuelike gravestones. It was the one against which Linus was leaning—a tall angel atop a grave from 1860. She had a bowed head, and from one raised hand she pointed her index finger skyward. The first time they'd seen it, Harrison had said, "She looks like she's at a party, going, 'Yes! They're playing my song!'" Linus had laughed so hard, he fell over. They dubbed her "DJ, Turn It Up!"

Though the cemetery was open to the public, that summer it felt like it belonged only to them. An old station wagon sat by the gate most days, and initially the boys held their breath, waiting to be chased away, as if their mere presence was evidence of a crime. But no one ever came. A rarity, a respite. And so they would take the bus from the middle of the city to trek up the hill more and

more frequently. They came to wander and to talk and to gaze into the horizon from the only place where they could find it in every direction.

Now Harrison gnawed on the corner of his thumb as he leaned over to look at the name carved on a squat rectangular stone. It seemed everyone in the past had a fanciful name, like something out of a folktale. He wondered when names got so boring. He wanted to live in a world that was just a bit more eccentric. Not the past, he'd correct himself quickly. The past was not exactly ideal for two Black queer boys. But a version of the present that had a bit more magical potential.

This particular stone left a little something to be desired in the name department. It was just a block that bore the word FATHER. Simply FATHER. Father to us all. Next to it was a block of the same size and shape that read MOTHER. So, that's the family. Linus came over and sat next to FATHER. Family meeting. Harrison forced himself to sit down, too. They were surrounded on all sides by statues—many ten or twelve feet high—columns, and figures, and vases, and plinths carved to look like they were shrouded in cloth. Some stones had become discolored—brown, black, gray, with a splash of mustard-yellow moss on a few. Often the graves were slightly tilted, leaning forward or to the side, as if the dragon had stirred in its sleep ages ago. Harrison looked over at Linus and decided that he was uncharacteristically quiet today. Or maybe it was just that Harrison was full of internal chatter. There were times, Harrison thought, that they were totally in sync,

like when they communicated without bothering to use words. But there were still times when Harrison wondered about the mystery of his friend and the mystery of himself. Linus always had a lot to say—more questions, more ideas, more grand plans, more jokes. This is the way Harrison preferred it. Most of the time in life, Harrison felt like he could never find the right words despite everything going on inside. He realized that the moving, the fidgeting, was the same feeling he got right before going onstage in a play at school—like there was a motor sputtering somewhere between his chest and his stomach. Like there was more energy inside than scientists recommend. Like, well, like he was anxious. More than usual. He stopped gnawing on his thumb. That was it—Harrison was anxious, and if there was ever a person not to be anxious around, it was Linus.

Harrison's strategy for avoiding being anxious mostly consisted of declining to have outside thoughts, only inside thoughts. During rehearsal at school once, it had been explained to him that the reason there are songs in musicals is because when characters can't find the words to express themselves, they sing. The songs aren't happening in real life. They're the interior life, the better life, the bigger self. That was Harrison. He was a song, he thought. He would never say as much, of course. Or sing it, as it were. Judging by the parts in which he was cast, his musical talents were something of an open question. But it was a fact he carried inside himself, like the fact of his and Linus's friendship, which had finally felt cemented that summer.

"I've been thinking about it, and I have an idea," Harrison said, at last giving voice to the thing he'd been hemming and hawing and gnawing about all day. The motor in his chest was still rumbling. This is what happens, he reminded himself, when you move inside thoughts outside. "What would you think about us going to the same college?"

They were entering the eleventh grade and were on the precipice of, well, everything. The horizon of standardized testing and college and, beyond that, adulthood was filled with terrifying unknowns and looming pressures, and every time they talked about it, they got overwhelmed. The future wanted to eat them alive. Which is why they had to face it together.

"I've been thinking about it, too," Linus replied.

Now the motor in Harrison's chest revved to life. He felt a burst of energy, like the times he went buck wild and had a soda at lunch. "Oh, good! My mother sent me a website where you fill out a survey and it tells you what colleges you might want to go to, so I've been filling one out for me and also one for you, and then I'm going to compare the lists and we can pick," Harrison continued.

"What are you filling out for me?" Linus asked.

To be honest, the whole survey had been a real pickle right from the start. Harrison had gone in with the idea that he'd study musical theater, but then he started thinking about the process of auditioning (not a strength) and also the whole singing and dancing of it all (a challenge) and he'd gotten stressed out. Could



you go to college for musical theater enthusiasm alone? The survey was inconclusive. Then when he'd filled it out for Linus, he'd checked off premed even though that was clearly a lie to everyone but Linus's father.

"Obviously, your dad is only going to pay for a premed program," Harrison said, "but you can do whatever you want."

"Boy, my dad isn't paying for a thing," Linus said.

This was news. "Then what's your plan?"

"Scholarships. Where you been? There was never one question in my mind about that. I have a whole spreadsheet."

Of course he had a spreadsheet. "Well, yeah, I need to get scholarships, too," Harrison said, pretending that he had in any way thought this through. "But our parents have to help. It's not like we're geniuses."

Linus arched an eyebrow. *Speak for yourself.* Then aloud, he said, "My dad is going to do what my dad is going to do." He flicked at a fuzzy dandelion head. The motor inside Harrison started to sputter.

"Well, we'll figure out the whole college part of college. Not important. The point is that we should have a plan. Together." Linus didn't respond. "Eleventh grade isn't too early." Still nothing from Linus. Harrison tried a joke. "So far in the plan I have: Step one—decide where to go to college. Step two—Money???" Linus laughed. "Step three—literally forget about the existence of everyone we've ever met." Linus laughed again.

"Oh, you're doing the Corrine plan," Linus said.

“Yeah. My sister went to school and was like ‘Harrison who?’ ‘Baltimore where?’”

Linus was still chuckling, but Harrison felt himself getting anxious again. What was the problem?

“Anyway,” Harrison said, “that’s what I’ve been thinking.”

Linus lay back on the grass next to FATHER. He had features that, in some lights, looked like one of the stone statues that dotted the hill. His nose, broad and strong, an expressive brow, full lips that were always talking or smirking or curled up in thought. It was a shame statues only came in white, Harrison thought. Linus’s dark skin wouldn’t fit in at the cemetery, but everything about his look, even the way his purposefully oversized clothes seemed to hang off his wiry frame, seemed like art.

Harrison tried a different tactic. “If you *were* going to go for premed, what kind of doctor would you be?”

“I don’t want to be a doctor.”

“Okay, but if you had to. Like, if it was required by law.”

Linus hitched himself up. *There’s no law*, his side-eye said. He lay back down. “Podiatrist.”

This made sense. Sister Dale was the richest Black person at their church—well, at what used to be their church—and she was a podiatrist. Linus and his father didn’t go anymore. It was unclear if the church kept being theirs even if they weren’t in the building. In any case, Sister Dale went to Iceland every summer and had a big house, where she’d just hosted a Juneteenth party, so what other evidence did you need?

"You really want to look at feet all day?" Harrison asked. He wriggled his foot out of his sandal and poked Linus in the side with it.

"Boy, if you don't get your grody hoof out of my face!"

"This is the medical school entrance interview."

"If they come at me with some bare feet, I'm out." Linus only wore low, flat, old-school tennis shoes. Every day, all year.

"I'm on the interview committee. You have to take this seriously."

"You're a doctor now?"

"Well, they asked me to help out."

"Who all is on this committee with you?"

"It's . . ." Harrison struggled to think of any doctor. "Dr. Okeke." (His pediatrician.) "Sister Dale." (Her house has four bathrooms.) "Dr. Fran-N-Furter." (From *Rocky Horror*; Linus hadn't been allowed to go.) "And Dr. Jill Biden."

Linus laughed. "Not Dr. Biden! She's an education doctor. She's the only one I'm trying to talk to, actually."

"Well, you have to go through the foot."

"You're gross and I hate you."

"That's fine. Hate me while we make a plan. Your idea that we should get the same job this summer was, like, in the top-ten best ideas ever. We'll keep working together when school starts, we'll go to the same college, then I'll go to Broadway, and if you don't become a doctor, you'll become a . . . wait, what do you do with a history degree?"

“Now you sound like my dad.” Linus looked at him askance. “The point is: What you start out doing doesn’t need to be what you end up doing. Mr. Mirepoix went to college for gender studies.”

Oh, Mr. Mirepoix, *Mr. Mirepoix*. In ninth grade, Linus had taken AP World History with Mr. Mirepoix, and it was all he wanted to talk about for months. Linus went to Harper, a public magnet school, and Harrison went to Plowshares, a private school out in Baltimore County. Prior to Mr. Mirepoix, Linus and Harrison’s regular afternoon phone calls had mostly consisted of Harrison filling Linus in on the drama from the Plowshares drama department. But with the advent of AP World History, suddenly Linus had urgent daily updates. It was clear that Linus idolized Mr. Mirepoix. He said that when Mr. Mirepoix talked about world events, all the trivia and little-known facts and ideas in Linus’s head were organized into something that felt revelatory.

After class one day, Linus had told Mr. Mirepoix about how he’d recently become obsessed with the *Titanic*. How he wanted to find everything out about the ship and the sinking, and the second ship, the *Britannic*, that had also sunk. “There’s just so many stories from the past,” Linus had said, “and I’m like, is everyone just walking around knowing this?”

Mr. Mirepoix had offered that there was a point when he was young when the *Titanic* was literally all anyone talked about. Linus was agog. “Everybody saw the movie multiple times, of course,” Mr. Mirepoix said. “And that song! Well, you know I’m a

Celine Dion—head anyway.” Mr. Mirepoix found the oddest ways of working stories about the many times he’d seen Celine Dion in concert into his lessons. One minute you’re learning about rebuilding Europe after World War II, and the next minute Mr. Mirepoix is casually dropping an anecdote about the merchandise counter at London’s O2 Arena. It was so much. The next week, Mr. Mirepoix had brought in a souvenir book about the movie *Titanic* and lent it to Linus. Linus was annoyed, but he had to admit it had some incredible research about the real event.

“You can go to college to be like Mr. Mirepoix,” Harrison offered, hitching himself up next to FATHER. “You can do whatever you want. All I know is that everybody is going to have an opinion about what we need to be doing, and I feel like eleventh grade was when Corrine started making her plans, and it just seems like the best idea if we do . . . whatever it is we need to do, together.” Corrine was Harrison’s older sister. She’d blasted off from high school, a rocket of promise, and then, midway through her sophomore year of college, came plummeting back to their parents’ house, a strange and surly version of herself. Whatever transformation she’d undergone was a mystery that hovered ghostlike in their home, a warning to Harrison.

Things would be different for him, though, because he would not be doing it alone.

Linus pulled himself up slowly from the grass around the grave, like a vampire starting their day. The sun sketched shallow shadows on the sides of his features. And for just a moment,

Harrison released his thoughts from judgment. The thought in question, one that had never occurred to him before but which now seemed as natural and long-standing as if it were his part of his molecular structure, was simple. He observed Linus, a few short locks falling across his face, his eyes searching the air above him for answers about the future, and a thought presented itself to Harrison: He is beautiful. It showed up like a fact. The color-of-the-sky kind of fact. And for a moment, Harrison let his thought be true and untroubled and free.

Was it unusual to think one's friend was beautiful? Uh, maybe. Depends on who your friend is, Harrison surmised. But didn't knowing a friend, really knowing them, mean that you got to hang out in the light of the best parts of them? Maybe no one else had friendships like this. Maybe Harrison and Linus had wandered into some new way of being friends. That was fine, too.

The slight breeze wrapped them in June's warmth. The day, like his friend and their friendship, beautiful.

Did Harrison feel the same way about himself? Well, physically, the two boys had different looks. Linus was partial to boxy shirts and long-sleeved tees and thrifted finds that he dubbed "dadcore" (FATHER would approve, Harrison guessed). Harrison didn't put much thought into his "look." He wore what fit, sometimes perplexed by his rounder face, his spiky twists that refused to grow, his softer frame, the different way that he moved through the world. Today he'd chosen a plain T-shirt plucked from a pile

on the floor, a pair of jean shorts, and sliders all in the interest of staying as cool as possible. What was his look? “Lukewarmcore.”

Harrison pulled out his phone to take a picture. Linus waved him off. “You look cool! Pose!” Harrison insisted. Linus sucked his teeth and flashed a begrudging V-sign with two fingers.

“Okay, model!” Harrison said.

Linus shook his head. “You’re corny.”

*Yeah, Harrison’s eye roll said. I’m the corny one. Okay.*

Harrison slipped his phone back into his pocket, lay back on the grass, and lost himself in the sky, so vivid that the cloudless blue seemed to take on dimension. It went on forever, a space he could inhabit.

“I have something to tell you,” Linus said at last. His voice floated in over Harrison.

The motor inside Harrison started up again. He hoped it was something about college, something about their plan, something good. Or nothing, which would be even better. But he got the feeling he should sit up for what would come next. He searched Linus’s face for clues, but for once his face had nothing to say.

Harrison tried his words. “Yeah?”

“So the thing is . . . I’m moving away.”



Though they’d known each other basically all their lives, Harrison and Linus’s friendship had taken the scenic route. Harrison’s family, the Merediths, and Linus’s, the Munros, had gone to the same church when they were little, and they’d see each other

around and sometimes play at each other's houses when their parents were having dinner. But back then, all their friendships were basically dictated by whoever their parents were hanging out with or whoever could babysit. Still, because they went to different schools and lived in different neighborhoods, it sometimes felt like they were worlds apart. Then when Linus's parents split up, he went to live with his mom. She'd bring him to church, but the visits with Harrison stopped.

They were in middle school at that point, and when the pandemic hit, their lives collapsed into their respective homes and whatever they could find online. Harrison hadn't seen Linus for months, and although he wouldn't have said they were friends, he thought of Linus a lot during that period. He just kept coming to mind. Linus didn't have any social media or, apparently, any way to be reached. Harrison himself didn't have a phone yet, but he had a laptop that he could use for school and keeping up with people. And so when he logged on to a Zoom hosted by the church, advertised as "Youth Rap with Brother Aldo," and Harrison saw Linus's face in one of the small, fuzzy squares, his heart did a little leap.

Hello, Harrison typed in a private chat to Linus that afternoon. Brother Aldo was yelling at people to mute themselves.

Do you remember me? Harrison followed up.

Duh. Linus wrote back. Your mom is a good singer.

Okay, that was nice, but it wasn't technically about Harrison; he'd let it slide. He was feeling generous.



They messaged back and forth during the youth rap, both a little perplexed that the chat feature hadn't been disabled like it was in school. As the session came to a close, Linus wrote, I just got email. Do you?

What did that mean? Everybody had email. Harrison sent back his Plowshares email address, and Linus sent him an email right away. Hi this is Linus. The city sent my mom a Chromebook for me to do school and I got this email address but I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it. So we can just talk.

They emailed back and forth every day, sometimes multiple times a day. They bonded over the strict controls their parents put on their lives, which had only gotten stricter in quarantine. Linus would go on and on about the random historical events he was learning about, about the Wikipedia wormholes he'd treated himself to, about the little-known facts he'd discovered. He'd always ask Harrison, Did you know this? And Harrison would always write, You know I did not. And Linus would write back, Baby boy, what are they teaching you at that fancy school? He had a point, but Harrison always wondered exactly how many middle schoolers were learning about the Bay of Pigs invasion, for instance.

They moved from trivia to fact and from fact to feeling. Linus wrote, I feel bad for my mom because it's hard having me here. Harrison felt a door to his friend open up, but he didn't know how to walk through or show that he understood, because the truth was that he didn't understand. Harrison wrote, I think my sister

likes her friend Keshona, who is a girl, and when Linus wrote, That's cool, Harrison followed up with By the way, did you know I'm gay? As if this was knowledge that anyone had. As if he was talking about a weather-related rumor. By the way, did you hear we might get a snow day? Casual, casual.

Of course it hadn't seemed so ridiculous when, a month later, Linus had been writing about his latest online find and then closed the mini lecture with By the way, did you know I'm gay? He stole Harrison's entire line! No credit given! Grand larceny!

Their back-and-forth went on for the rest of the school year. Linus talked about his excitement for heading to high school at Harper. Harrison talked about how, since Plowshares was a K—12, he'd just be going to different classrooms but it still made him feel anxious because everything made him feel anxious. Linus confessed that he was nervous, too, but that high school felt like the beginning of anything, everything. He wrote something Harrison thought about all the time: "There's been so much ending, I just want something to begin." A few weeks later, Harrison said that making a friend, a real friend, felt like a beginning, too. Linus replied, "We've known each other forever." They decided they were both right. They both wondered sometimes whether the other had a bunch of other email friendships going on with people all over the city. To Harrison's surprise, Linus actually asked it. An outside thought, loose in the world. Harrison couldn't imagine emailing anyone else.

And then, when the school year ended, it was over. Linus

moved in with his dad and, without internet access, seemingly dropped off the face of the earth for a year. They started having church in person again, but neither Linus nor his parents were there. And then a few months later, when Linus's mother came back to church, sitting in her usual pew, which had been reclaimed by another family in the absence of the Munros, she was there alone.



"You're moving away? To where?" Harrison asked now. His voice was like an old-school fade: high and tight. Linus was pacing around FATHER.

"Charleston."

Harrison suddenly forgot all geography. "Where is that?"

"South Carolina."

The motor inside him was going berserk. "I don't understand."

"My dad says he can't keep doing the rideshare and the bar; it's not working. My aunt Bird got him a job down there."

"He can't commute?"

"Harrison, will you be serious?"

He *was* being serious. He did not understand what was happening to him.

"My dad says he needs to take this job. He says it's for both of us. The school down there is good and we can live with Aunt Bird for free, and he said he'd even be able to save a little to help me with college." Linus wouldn't meet Harrison's gaze.

"When? When is this happening?"

"Sunday."

"Why are you just now telling me?" Harrison cried.

A couple crows startled and took off briefly before landing nearby. "Dad has to start work Monday," Linus said.

"This is . . ." Harrison, again, was at a loss for words.

"This is awful," Linus said. "I can't believe he would do this to me. I mean, I know it's important and it's been hard on him since the divorce, but . . ."

"We'll figure something out."

"Like what? Like . . . there's no option here."

"Your mom . . .?"

"No," Linus said quietly. "I'm just so—" He stopped himself. Harrison could see he was getting worked up. "Thanks for listening."

"Always."

Then they both ran out of words.

*This is not how life is supposed to be,* Harrison thought. An inside thought that, powered by the motor running wild inside him, rushed up to his mouth and burst into the air. "We are going to make a plan."

"A plan for what?" Linus asked.

"A plan to fix this. Or . . ." He was thinking too fast; he couldn't keep up with himself. He couldn't find words to say what he was actually trying to communicate. "We can still do all the things we've been talking about. We can still have, like, everything. We just need a plan."

"I don't know."

"Linus, this isn't bigger than us. We just need a big plan."

Linus shook his head. "Trust—grand gestures aren't going to change the facts. This is what it is."

Harrison deflated. They just looked at each other. After a moment, his phone pinged with a message coming in over the family location-tracking app called Check In, from Harrison's dad: Heading home? It was 3:45. The cemetery would be closing soon. They wordlessly got up and started walking to the exit. Linus paused at DJ, Turn It Up! and considered her sadly.

"Do you want me to take a picture of you with her?" Harrison asked. Linus shook his head and kept walking.

As they waited for the bus, Harrison made one more attempt. "I'll throw a party for you. Not a going-away party. But we can invite our friends. If you want to invite people from school, that would be nice."

"I don't know about all that," Linus said. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I think . . . I think today is enough, you know? I just need to make a clean break."

Harrison felt his chest constrict.

Linus continued, "I been through enough messy breaks, my mom and everything. I just want to close the door. I don't have another choice. My dad says we both need a clean break and to start over."

Harrison looked at him. *Even from me?* Linus's gaze wasn't focused, and Harrison couldn't tell if he was just not responding

or simply saying the thing Harrison most feared. Linus was, for a second time, unreachable. They rode together in their separate worlds until they reached the stop nearest Harrison's house. Linus said he wasn't feeling up to hanging out longer. Harrison watched his profile, so striking, in the window as the bus pulled off. Linus didn't even wave.

**4:30 p.m.**

As Linus rode the 20 minutes from Harrison's bus stop to his own, he kept asking himself why hadn't he waved. He didn't have an answer. It was as if every moment of life was an emotional SAT that he hadn't studied for. Which was ridiculous because Linus always studied. Linus studied for tests he didn't have to take. A fun night at home? Flash cards. So why was he coming up short here? Why hadn't he waved to his best friend? Why was he failing this test? He'd have to petition his grade.

Despite his concern, Linus couldn't help but chuckle as he got off the bus—he was being so dramatic. Normally that was Harrison's domain. It was one of his favorite aspects of his friend, who had a reservoir of thoughts, and feelings, and, yes, drama inside. Linus had no patience for dramatics—life was dramatic enough—but from Harrison they were a delight. Every time they hung out, Linus felt like he understood life differently. Everything felt more expansive. More possible.

He waved to a neighbor sitting on the worn marble steps of the house next door and let himself into the two-story brick-row home he shared with his father. The door didn't open all the way, bumping on the corner of half-packed box just inside. The

living room was basically gone. His father had stayed up the night before, taking care of it. Linus had declined the invitation to help, instead lying in his bed and staring at the ceiling as the sound of the tape gun and his father's random sighs and grunts occasionally pierced the door. This, too, was dramatic and unlike Linus. But he didn't know what else to do. His life was disappearing into boxes, and one of the first things to get taken off the shelf and boxed up was any say he had over what was happening to him.

"We have to move," his father had said abruptly one night. When Linus had come home, Dad had been making a crawfish boil. Linus thought it was just a fun rare treat, but it turned out to be some kind of bribe. "This is what they eat in South Carolina!" he'd said after he broke the news. "You love this stuff." Not anymore. A whole lot of trouble to go through just to ruin your son's appetite. His dad was always Doing Too Much to make up for all the small things that didn't go right for the two of them. Linus hated it. Why did everything have to be a big production? He tried to be good, to make things easier for his dad; he didn't ask for much. He didn't want big plans. All he wanted was to stay.

Linus and his father had argued that night, and every day since, and each time Linus had found himself less and less able to say the thing that he wanted to say, which was "If we leave, I might lose my friend. And I don't want to lose my friend." The only person he could tell the things he really wanted to say was Harrison. It wasn't that he didn't understand his father's expla-



nations about money and savings and work and life. But didn't Linus have a say?

Harrison had been the only constant through the storm of Linus's parents' divorce, and the unsettled, hard period when he'd lived with his mom, and this new, strange time of living with his dad. He'd been desperate, in that year after he'd moved out of his mom's, to reestablish that easy friendship he'd had with Harrison. All Linus had wanted for so long was just to be able to be with the people he cared about, and . . . well, it hadn't worked out with anyone. Almost anyone. So, of course, he figured out a way that they could spend their summers together. He'd felt so lucky—he was sure Harrison had plans for wild and fun adventures with his group of school friends. But Harrison had said yes immediately. And the summer, what they'd gotten to spend of it, had been amazing. So amazing, in fact, that when he found out about the move weeks earlier, Linus had refused to allow himself to break the news to Harrison until the very last minute. It was as if he might prove it was all just a dream. That was not looking likely.

The shifting reality of distance had always been the thing that complicated things for them. But it was rarely geographical. Harper, was one of the better schools in the city, but it seemed to exist on a totally different world from Plowshares, the intimate private school in the suburban county that Harrison's parents drove him to every day. Linus decided that that was why Harrison had such a different experience with school friends than he did.

It wasn't that he didn't know people at school, but for Harrison, school friends extended to a whole social group. Linus got to hang around with them, but he sometimes felt like he was missing something.

Linus wasn't envious. Envy was dramatic. Well, maybe he was a little envious. Or, more than that, just sad. But mostly he understood that sometimes people forget about you if you're not there. And Linus couldn't let that happen again.

Before his dad had made a complete mess of Linus's life, he'd decided he was going to try to hang out with some of the people he liked the most at his own school, invite them to hang with him and Harrison. Phil Truong, Fab Figueroa, Mazz Reber. A whole group. Now Fab was even texting him to see if he was hanging out that weekend.

"I don't really understand why we're talking right now, but this is cute, I guess." Fab's warm, laugh-filled voice was coming through Linus's cell. He hadn't had the energy to keep the phone to his ear, so he'd put it on speaker and was now lying back on his bed, staring at the ceiling again, and yelling into the air like Alexander Graham Bell testing out his first prototype.

"Oh!" he shouted into his empty bedroom and in the general direction of his phone. "I thought it would be easier if I called to answer your question."

"Uh. Okay. Great," said Fab. "Well, I'm glad to hear your voice. And I'm excited to get a live answer to my text question, which was: Are you going to Pride?"

"No."

There was a long pause, and then Fab said, "Is there more to that answer?"

"No," Linus replied.

"So glad we are speaking on the phone about it. What's the deal? Your dad won't let you?"

"I'm moving away!"

"What?! But it's Pride!"

Linus could only moan in response.

"Oh, Linus. I'm going to miss you. I like you a lot. Where are you moving?"

"South Carolina."

"Lucky for you, I have this girl that I was kind of dating who lives in North Carolina, so if you're looking for local lesbians, I can hook you up," Fab said. At the same time, a text came through, also from Fab, with a photo of a girl with braids piled high on her head. Linus presumed this was the girl from North Carolina, but really she could have been anyone.

"Did she use to live here?" Linus asked.

"No. We met because we just started commenting on each other's fanfics, and you know how that is."

"I don't think I do."

"Linus, shut up! Yes, you do. You read the one fic I wrote. Remember when Mr. Mirepoix was doing that unit on the forties and he let me turn in that story about two women falling in love while working at an airplane factory during World War II instead

of, like, writing a paper? I put it up on my site and then she liked it and then I liked her thing about Storm from *X-Men* and Okoye from *Black Panther* falling in love. And it went on like that.”

“Have you met her? In person?” Linus asked.

“No! How am I supposed to get to North Carolina? That’s kind of why we broke up, to be honest. Long distance is hard. But it’s very much not a big a deal, so don’t say anything about it when you meet her.”

Linus sighed loudly and sat up. He could hear his father boxing and taping again; he smelled dinner. Tonight’s Doing Too Much feast was shrimp and grits, another South Carolina staple. And another bribe. Maybe if he spent less money buying seafood for these big elaborate schemes, they could afford to stay.

“That’s the problem,” he told Fab. “I just want to keep Harrison in my life. People talk about long-distance relationships, but what is a long-distance friendship? Is that a thing? Friendship is kind of, like, whatever. What is there to hold on to with all this distance?”

“It’s not like you’re moving to Mars. I feel like it should be easier than trying to long-distance date because you’re not thinking about when you’re going to make out or whatever.”

“He’s got a whole life. And he’s going to go off to college. And he’s got all these friends at his school. And . . . he’s my best friend. But maybe he has a bunch of best friends. I don’t know.”

“Linus, this is so dramatic.”

“I know! It’s exhausting!”

"What does your friend say about it?"

"We ain't talked about it."

"Why?"

More questions Linus couldn't answer. Or rather, he wouldn't. He couldn't bring himself to say the truth. Fabiola sighed.

"Well, I gotta admit," she said, "this seems chaotic. Just tell him what you're thinking."

"I don't do deep feelings, is the thing," Linus said.

"I don't mean to upset you, but literally everything we've talked about on the phone has been the deepest possible feelings. Like, I never talk on the phone. You called me. On the phone! And jumped into the deep end. And I want to say thank you for trusting me and I def understand. But let's be real now. Phil and I are best friends and if she ever moved away, I'd call her up and be like, 'Yo, as you are aware, we're going to be in each other's lives forever.' We're like you guys: We don't want to date; we don't like each other like that, but yet we want to talk to each other every day forever. Just tell him. Text him if you don't want to call."

"I don't like texting."

"Then call."

"He doesn't really talk on the phone."

"You got a real star-crossed friendship here, Linus."



**Thursday**





**10:30 am**

The next morning met Harrison absolutely haggardly. He woke up late—what was there to get out of bed for?—and kicked at his comforter savagely, which sent a pile of clothes flying off the bed. He briefly considered that he might not be handling this whole thing about Linus leaving very well. But what did handling well mean at a time like this? Everything everywhere was, objectively, terrible and would be terrible for, pretty much, ever. Harrison slammed his head against his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut. He knew he was veering dangerously close to the point where he started to annoy himself with how bad a mood he was in. It happened often. He'd be really digging into a sulk, basically bathing in an internal tantrum, when the whole thing would dive off a cliff and it suddenly wouldn't be satisfying to be upset anymore, but rather just frustrating.

He knew that if he stayed in bed much longer, he would have no hope of rescuing his mood. He had no idea where his phone was, but judging from the context clues of the sun shining in his window and the absence of the sounds of his parents getting ready, he knew it was after 8:30. He didn't have to work at Balti-Tours—the place where he and Linus worked together but mostly

just talked to each other all day today. This made things even worse, since it meant he wouldn't have an excuse to lobby Linus in the ticket office between customers. They usually hung out on their days off, but Linus's words "a clean break" floated back up to the top of Harrison's mind, and he wondered if that break was already starting. If Linus had wanted to hang out today, why wasn't he already there? What was he doing? Packing? Practicing his Southern accent? Forgetting? Anything was possible.

He supposed he could invite Linus over to the Meredith family's "mandatory fun" movie night, as he usually did on Thursdays, but something in him resisted this thought. Was it possible he was angry at Linus? He was hungry. The crises were mounting, obviously. The night before, he had considered dramatically refusing to eat until Linus agreed to stay. Now his stomach growled, and he decided that the hunger strike could start maybe after breakfast. And lunch. He'd skip dinner. Well, he'd pick at it, perhaps. He wouldn't enjoy it. No act was too bold if it meant saving his friendship. Wait, movie night meant they were ordering pizza. He'd start the hunger strike tomorrow at the latest.

Should he cry about it? Would that help? Maybe! He scrunched up his face and tried. Nope. How did actors cry? He'd watched roughly 600 bootleg YouTube videos of people performing "She Used to Be Mine" from *Waitress* onstage, and like 90 percent of them seemed to be crying. It wasn't easy to see, though, because a lot of times the video quality wasn't good or the camera was far from the stage. But Harrison felt pretty

confident that most of the actresses were crying as they sang. Shoshana Bean? Absolutely bawling.

He fished around in the tangled mess of his comforter until he found his phone. Left uncharged the night before, it had only 8 percent battery, and his charger was . . . maybe in the sheets, too? He didn't know. Ah, the desperateness of this time. There was a text from Linus: Hello. What was that supposed to mean? In person, Linus never shut up, but over text he was basically a mime. Harrison decided he couldn't handle the terseness at the moment. It was all too much. He did the only thing left for him to do in the moment: He cued up "She Used to Be Mine" and played it over and over again until his phone died.



After a breakfast of a slightly under-toasted waffle, eaten standing up, by hand, with no syrup, Harrison decided that his next healthy coping mechanism would be to sit in the backyard and be miserable in public. Or semipublic, since his neighbors never used their yards and the only person he ever saw when sitting miserably in public was the junkman pushing a shopping cart up the alley.

But, of course, because nothing could go right for him, he discovered Corrine already sitting out there, sunbathing next to a bowl of rocks. Harrison's trials, it seemed, were unending.

Corrine had come back from college "woo-woo." Harrison's sister had always marched to the beat of her own drum. Or, as Harrison might have put it during some of their more conten-

tious battles, Corrine always did exactly what she wanted. But when she'd returned home suddenly a year and a half earlier than expected and taken up residence again in the bedroom next to Harrison's, something had changed. The posters of Cardi and FKA and Meg came down; a new paint color—purple—went up on the bare walls, and with it an abstract silver mural she'd created herself. She started talking about an app that told her her horoscope every single day, something that neither of their decidedly non-woo-woo parents seemed to take issue with, surprisingly. And, perhaps most vexingly, Corrine had gotten really into rocks. Harrison knew there was another name for the rocks, or a series of names, a whole dictionary of rock words, but he didn't learn them and he wasn't trying to. So when he found his sister sitting in their tiny patch of backyard and cement, leaning back in a plastic chair, untwisting her hair, with a kitchen mixing bowl full of rocks sitting on the ground between her feet, that's what he called them.

"You tanning your rocks?" he said, shutting the screen door behind him. Corrine didn't respond. He wasn't sure she heard him or was even aware of his presence, as her eyes were shielded by a huge pair of amber sunglasses. She continued dutifully unwrapping her hair, bundled in tight knots from the night before and soon to be coaxed out and released again into the curly twist-out halo she usually sported. Harrison stepped in front of her, accidentally kicking the bowl. Nothing too hard, but Corrine snapped forward and pulled the bowl back.

"They're crystals, dummy."

“Oh, so you *did* hear me.”

Harrison paused, expecting Corrine to explain why she had a bowl of rocks—excuse me, crystals—hanging out in the backyard with her like it was some old breakfast oatmeal. Corrine’s hands had not left her hair, searching around her head in a well-practiced order, like she knew every strand by heart. Her shaded eyes, however, had made a brief jaunt to appraise Harrison before returning to a spot on the chain-link fence or maybe some bit of errant grass in the alley or maybe something far beyond that. Harrison rolled his eyes with his whole body and tried again.

“Why are you tanning your crystals?”

Corrine didn’t stop staring into the middle distance, but she did pause her untwisting. “Last night was a full moon,” she said. As if that was illuminating. Thanks for the astronomy lesson. All questions answered. Very thorough. Please get up from the lawn chair now; Harrison needed it to sulk. Harrison was so consumed by his own annoyance that he almost missed the fact that Corrine had started speaking again. “I set them out to charge in the moonlight, and now they’re sunbathing for a bit before I take them back inside.” See? That? Woo-woo.

“Woo-woo” was not a phrase that got thrown around all too often in the Meredith household. It was old-timey, like something senior Black folks would say. Which is why Harrison liked it. He’d first heard it from his grandfather on his father’s side, who they called Pop. Pop was always talking about his roommate, Phyllis, who liked incense and said she was a little psychic. There

was nothing especially weird about that—Phyllis had predicted that Harrison would not get cast as Tevye in *Fiddler*, after all. But to be honest, that was clear to everyone. Nevertheless, sometimes her habits got on Pop’s nerves. It was mostly the incense. “I have sensitive sinuses,” he’d explain. And then he’d go on to say that he had no idea why he chose to let someone as woo-woo as Phyllis move in to his house and how he didn’t even need the money, it was just the company, and on and on and on. “Woo-woo,” it seemed, could mean something as simple as accurately casting a high-school play or as complex as casting a spell. Or whatever it was that charging crystals in the moonlight was meant to accomplish. Harrison had no idea.

“What happens after they recharge?” he asked.

Corrine sighed and looked at him. “Do you really care?”

“I mean, I did, but if you’re going to be a jerk about it, never mind.”

Corrine shook out her hair, all finished. “They push out bad energy. And they bring in good energy. And I need as much of that stuff as I can get. It’s like anything—praying or yoga or setting an intention. But it doesn’t just come from inside you. You’re tapping into something powerful in the universe. We’re all so small; why wouldn’t we want to do that?”

Sometimes Corrine actually made sense to Harrison. They had always seen the world differently, their whole lives, but since she’d come back, that had been a problem. She might say they had different energies. He might agree. But when she talked

about connecting to something larger in the universe, something pricked up in him and he remembered the thing that hadn't been far from his mind since he heard Linus's news. Would that Harrison had a way to harness some power in the universe to stop this move. Would that he had any power at all. The world of adulthood and adult decisions swirled around them, moving them like chess pieces. Everyone said that he had big choices to make coming up—classes, tests, college, literally the rest of his life—but all of it seemed so removed from his current life, where other people made choices around him and he just had to react. He just had to deal with it. He just had to accept it and move on. He hated that. He needed a plan. Maybe he should get a crystal!

"Can I hold one?" he asked, already reaching down.

Corrine swatted his hand away. "Harrison, you have atrocious energy! Absolutely not." She looked at him in the face now. "Wait, what's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's something going on with you."

"Oh God, who are you? Phyllis?" he said. Corrine laughed at that, big and loud. A burst of energy.

"Next thing you know, Pop is going to start calling me woo-woo," she said. Nobody tell her that Harrison had already gotten there first. "No, seriously, though. You look miserable. What's wrong?"

Harrison kicked a pebble into the alley behind the house. "Linus is moving away. To South Carolina."

“Oh no! That sucks. I’m sorry.” She sounded genuinely sad for him. “When is he moving?”

“Sunday.”

“God, that sucks even more. Aww. I know y’all are close. I see you two huddled up all the time in the living room, clucking. It’s nice to have a best friend.” She shrugged. “He is your best friend, right? I can never tell. The Phalanx of Sad Boys has so many rotating cast members.”

The Phalanx of Sad Boys was Corrine’s nickname for Harrison’s general group of friends. He wasn’t even sure who was supposedly in the phalanx (whatever a phalanx was). Definitely Linus. And Dario Lushovsky. Dario, one of Harrison’s classmates, was the king of Sad Boys—handsome like the White Boy of the Month on a cable-TV show about morose teenagers, Dario was full to the brim with abs and emotion. He would often send text messages that were just the entire lyrics of a particularly emo song, including all the choruses. He loved crying. The world was not big enough for Dario’s feelings, but he didn’t seem to notice. One of Harrison’s favorite facts about Dario was that Dario had a fainting couch in his bedroom at his mom’s house. Harrison had seen it. It was, to be honest, just a regular couch, but Dario had collapsed on it in a flurry of limbs and groans one afternoon after one of the lacrosse players he was in love with took too long to text back.

To be honest, Harrison actually did like Dario. It was nice to be with someone who was prone to drama but not formally



involved in the theater department. Dario was real-world dramatic. They'd hung out a lot freshman year and the summer after, but then Linus had met Dario and quickly developed a crush on him. Harrison got tired of hearing Linus casually (but not casually) asking about Dario when Harrison and Linus would call each other after school, and he certainly had had enough of Dario daydreaming about Linus every minute he was in school. Why didn't they just text each other and leave him out of it? Annoying! By sophomore year, Linus had stopped asking, which was a relief. But the last time Harrison had seen Dario before the school year ended, Dario cornered Harrison by the Meditation Room and declared, "I am desperate to see your handsome melancholic friend with the bird body. I think Linus may be my husband!"

"Okay," Harrison had said.

Who else was a Sad Boy? Possibly Aparna Aiyar. She was not a boy, but she was who Harrison hung out with the most besides Linus, so it's possible that Corrine was just lumping her in with the rest. She had a lot of dark clothes, and Harrison's dad had once called her Lydia Deetz, so that was a clue. Harrison was fairly certain that Aparna wasn't sad, though, despite her sometimes intense way of seeing the world. She was "realistic," she said, which was kind of true, except that her reality always seemed to swan dive into hijinks. She would definitely have objected to this characterization—"Things just happen around me, Harrison! I am literally just trying to have a normal life." Still, he lived for stories about how her attempts to beat her work nemesis at the

lotion and soap store where she worked after school somehow spiraled into all-out battles that left the break room covered in glittery bath-bomb dust. As their school's best stage manager, Aparna always had some manner of backstage farce to disentangle. And, as the child of two consummate do-gooders who had jobs Harrison didn't quite understand, Aparna was always getting herself caught up in social-justice drama involving petitions and invisible fences and some app that half the neighborhood used for snitching on others that, according to Aparna, was rife with terrible punctuation. Harrison thought Aparna was too busy to be sad.

The only other possible member of the Phalanx was Mondale Berz, who, to Harrison, wasn't so much Sad as he was On Another Planet. Mondale, a lanky Black and Filipino boy, was built like a collapsing Jenga tower, all angles and collarbones. He went everywhere with his enormous pink headphones resting just above his ears, like the eraser on one of those weirdly shaped pencils. Mondale got straight As even though he never had any idea what anybody was talking about in class or in casual conversation—probably because of the headphones. He didn't really seem to need to be friends with the rest of the group; he kept his own company. But he always accepted an invitation when offered, he always invited the Sad Boys to his house to watch anime, and he always gave the best gifts—for birthdays, the one year they randomly decided to do Secret Santa, or just because he was thinking about one of them. Mondale was thoughtful; he was, it seemed,

constructed completely out of thoughts. And that made him seem sad sometimes, Harrison guessed.

Harrison didn't think of himself as Sad, the present circumstances excluded. Everybody said he was quiet, but that's just because he didn't talk much. It wasn't the same thing. Sure, he felt insecure; sure, he worried that he wasn't going to be popular, ever; sure, he was anxious about the future. But he wasn't sad about it. Everybody got down sometimes. Best not to think too hard about it. Maybe a crystal!

Linus was Sad, though. Harrison knew that.

Sometimes it snuck up on him; sometimes it hung just over his head; sometimes it felt a part of his body, like the hunch of his shoulders around his ears or the way he sort of leaned when standing, his hip jutting out like it was searching for a wall to crumble on.

Linus was sad. And sometimes they were sad together. Harrison didn't know what they'd do when they had to be sad apart.

Harrison realized he'd never answered Corrine's question. And she'd let him stand there, moping in silence. He answered now. "It does suck." He hesitated and looked away. "I don't know what to do."

"Well, what are you going to do?"

"I just told you I don't know what to do!"

"First of all, take that bass out your voice. I didn't realize you meant you actually didn't know. Linus is always plotting and you stay going along with any harebrained scheme." She swept her

head wrap from around her neck and stuffed it in the pocket of her jeans as she stood up. She leaned down and picked up the bowl of crystals, cradling it in her arm as if it were a baby. A baby that held the power of the universe. "So come up with some harebrained scheme." She turned and started up the back stairs.

"You're leaving?" Harrison called.

"You obviously came out here to be sad, and I think you have that right."

"You could stay, though."

Corrine curled her lip and growled like a gunslinger from a Western. "This yard's not big enough fer the both uv us." She laughed at herself. "Enjoy the sun!"

"Wait."

"What?"

Harrison looked down the alley. A half-eaten carton of what looked like fried rice was sitting on the ground just beyond their yard. The fork was still in it.

"*What?*" Corrine said, this time in italics.

"Why are you being nice to me?"

Corrine didn't respond right away. Harrison regretted even saying anything.

"You're sad. Why wouldn't I be nice to you?"

"Just surprised you care is all."

"Your energy is truly awful. You need to get some help."

"Okay!"

"That was easy." Corrine could see that Harrison was in no

mood for needling. She set the bowl on the railing. It looked precarious, but maybe it was being balanced by space power. "You're my brother."

"And?"

"And . . . and what?"

"And when did you start caring about any of us?"

Corrine cocked her head curiously. "I've always cared."

"I don't believe that," Harrison said.

"I don't care what you believe." Corrine threw her hands up, jostling her bowl. The crystals teetered and she caught them. She scowled at Harrison. "Any other questions?"

"Thanks for the pep talk. You're a great sister."

"You're an asshole," Corrine said quietly. She swept into the house and let the screen door slam behind her—a huge transgression if their parents were home.

Harrison slumped into the newly empty chair and glared at the world around him: the chain-link fence, the alley, the tiny herb garden, the bird feeder that had been lying on its side since a squirrel knocked it down, the fried rice container, and the little patch of grass that nobody cared about but which, for some reason, Harrison still had to mow with a Weedwhacker every other week. The sounds of a summer afternoon in his neighborhood came to life around him. Kids shrieking and giggling in the street, the hungry growl of revving motorbikes, the exhausted grumble of buses sighing to a stop and then heaving themselves forward again like old men hoisting themselves off the couch, the

ever-present horror-movie soundtrack of the ice cream truck, and the white noise of cars driving by or idling on the corner with their stereos turned up. Everyone was having a great damn day.

And to make matters worse, it seemed that every car, every radio station, every playlist had “Press the Sky Higher” on it. Harrison heard it so many times wafting through the air over the scuttle of the neighborhood that he knew all the lyrics by midafternoon. He finally gave up and retreated to the air-conditioning. He could put up with the oppressive heat, but the ubiquitous song of the summer was a bridge too far.

What did the lyrics even mean? *“We been down and we been broken, but we’re pushing up and over / hard times ain’t coming back no more”*? Up and over where? Hard times ain’t coming back? Says who?! Ridiculous. And also, shouldn’t it be “push the sky,” not “press the sky”? Everyone loved the new song, but no one was talking about the fact that it was completely inaccurate. Even before this development with Linus, Harrison had had his doubts about the victory anthem’s message: that we have the power to lift the sky, to change the world. It was a song about hope in the future, and for Harrison, the sky had never seemed so low.