

Bag of Snakes

He strides to the bus stop after school bearing that champion smile. Girls hollering to basketball players at practice detect his passing and turn like moons in his direction. They coo, “Hey, Kadeem. Where you rushin to?” He stops at the fence to mix it up with them: the feet shifting and leaning in, flirty tugs and weave tossing. He pulls away when he hears the bus and sees me sitting at a playground table.

I shake my head at this bad theater and return to my notebook. The grind of the bus gets closer but in half an hour the next one will pass under the El by the high school and I’ll take that one.

I look up from my notebook to the sky trying to see if the clouds are moving west to east as the science teacher said. East, then, is over by the new condos where a cloud inches along in the warm air past a crane. I pretend to blow it along when Kadeem pokes his head in the frame. I drop my eyes to the diagram in my notebook.

West to east.

The bus squeals to a stop across the street and I hold my breath wishing him gone. I think about something else. How Nana says they send the worst buses to our neighborhoods and Buelito, washing dishes at the sink, raises his soapy fist in solidarity. The bus pulls away coughing a trail of gray smoke through this corner of Queens.

And he’s still here.

“You always reading something,” Kadeem says and I want to roll something witty off my tongue but there’s a freeze creeping over my body. He leans over my book. “Clouds?” He says it loud enough that the girls on the fence turn and laugh. “Really?” Luisa who lives on my block laughs and repeats Kadeem but without the question mark: “Clouds. Really.” As if he should move on.

But he sits down on the other side of the table and moves his long brown fingers along the embedded chess squares.

“Do you play?” he asks.

It’s almost the end of the school year and warm, but there’s an August heat radiating from across the table. I want to close my book and go but I’m sure Luisa is still watching and there’s the problem of my frozen limbs.

“Somebody tried to teach me once but I can’t concentrate like that,” he says in such a human, confessional way it makes me look up to make sure it’s him. Then he says, “But bet a smart girl like you could get me to pay attention.”

He leans back and smiles in a way I can’t for sure read because his face is a distraction. The dark brown of his skin is without flaw and his lips part over straight and even teeth. It’s the first time he’s said anything to me although he checks me a lot. He pushed his way to the back of the bus last week to stand next to me but I turned away. You know, cause he’s one of them types. Different empty-head girl every week. Once he had to break up a fight between his old girl and the new one, the school cops doubled over laughing. But up close, I get it. There’s a heat rising in my own body, a deep down thaw is in progress. I drop my eyes back to the cloud diagram and the arrows pointing east.

Luisa and her girls are shouting at the players again.

“Azalea Soto.” He says my name deep and slow and I have to purse my lips to keep from grinning. Out the corner of my eye I make sure Luisa isn’t watching. He leans forward again and I don’t retreat. “Asked my dad about your name. He says azaleas are flowers that grow in trees back where he came from. Serious old country.”

“Here too,” I say and he leans in closer smelling of sweat and something sweet.

“Oh, you talk.” He puts a hand over his mouth and his eyes go big, acting surprised. His cell buzzes and without looking at it he turns it off and smiles.

“They thrive in a wide variety of growing conditions,” I say, meeting his eyes. This response is borrowed from one of Buelito’s seed catalogues and independent of my will to keep a distance from this person. I sit back and stiffly cross my arms. “Very pretty flowers. Ever seen one? Kind of hard to live up to that kind of beauty.”

This is a salvo across the table that will fly above his afro and he’ll shrug like Luisa and those do and move on.

But he stays.

“What?” He studies me. “You don’t think you pretty?”

I straighten myself on the bench and again meet those brown eyes with the long lashes.

I hear a basketball behind me and a couple of the players stop by to dap up Kadeem. I turn my face away so they aren’t looking at my birthmark. It’s a family thing. Like someone colored in a faint brown oval on my cheek. Nana says it gets lighter each time it appears and soon it will disappear from the family line. But I’m stuck with mine, she says, and wants me to cover it with makeup now that I’m older. But I like it because number one, it’s me and number two, it’s like belonging to my Aunt Ruby’s shoebox of family things. I hear the players go through the hole in the fence, the clang of metal on metal. A quiet drops over our chess table as the city knocks around outside.

“You don’t think you pretty?” he asks again.

“I just don’t think it necessary,” I fire back. His stares at me like he’s counting something.

“Okay. I get it,” he nods. “But it never hurts. For flowers to be pretty, I mean.”

Another flash of those teeth and he reaches for my notebook, turns it towards him and reads. I study him in gulps: the flat circular lobes of his ear and the tiny hairs on his square chin, his broad chest rising and falling beneath the school football jersey and those beautiful hands. It is very warm for this time of year and I could dab my forehead but don’t.

“You take good notes.” He reads on. “I’m trying to get at least a B in earth science.”

This is a *crazy* admission since he has never been to first-period class on time, instead creeping through the door mid-period tipping his big self to the back of class. But I don’t want this to show up on my face. I find it crazier that he’s talking to me like a human and on the one day I’m running late and throw on a wrinkled track suit and gather my hair into a woolly dark cloud on top of my head that I imagine wants to float east in this heat too.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be late to class,” I say with cool delivery, not like the girl jumping up and down inside me. More like the advice of a guidance counselor, like we talk every day, like I could care less. Basketball practice breaks up and I feel his eyes on me like café suns.

“Let’s go,” he says and stands. “I’ll walk you home. We can count clouds.”

At this hour the maze of streets in my neighborhood will wake from an afternoon calm and hustle with life. Nana will be on a crowded bus listening to NPR and we’ll hear all about it at dinner. Buelito will be on line at the bodega buying lottery tickets consisting of our birthdays and the secret number of the day whispered to him by Madame Jute. The men at the barbershop will be setting up folding chairs outside and commence a running commentary for the evening. The elementary school drill team will practice as they march around the school, parting to let people by and flowing back together. Old Farmers Presbyterian will prop open its red doors for the soup kitchen crowd. Volunteers will be combing the colonial cemetery for bottles of cheap wine and cigarette butts.

Life courses and collides on high volume around us but I hear every word he says like I’m wearing Kadeem earbuds. He is six feet tall and almost a hundred ninety pounds. He wants to play a little college football but for junior year might just switch to track. He taps his head. “Don’t want to scramble all this.”

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I tell him what colleges I want to visit next year far, far, away from Queens and the book I'm working on: *Girlfriends Rules for Success*.

"Sounds good," he circles me. "What's the first rule?"

I look at him and say: "Don't fall for tall, good-looking, shit-talking...boys. It's only a game to them." He stops in front of Tight Cuts, clutching his heart. The men ask him if he's hurt and he points to me. They laugh. They ask about my grandparents then nod their heads in tribal approval.

"Azzie," he says as we begin walking again. "Let me tell you about the bag of snakes story."

People watch us. I worry as the bus goes by that Lula Henry Soto will suddenly appear in our path. My Nana's a straight-talker from Georgia farm country who quickly sized up my last boy interest as undesirable and shooed him off the stoop. Buelito laughed and laughed. Said why should my wannabe boyfriends have it any easier than he did? He had been too light-skinned, too green-eyed and his Spanish accent too thick for a certain grits-and-sardines country girl who kept waving him away.

The thought of Kadeem's confidence withering under her glare makes me feel sorry for him but he's all into his story.

"This dude, let's call him Blue, comes up with a new type hustle. He's gonna put some rocks in a pillowcase, go down the subway and shake it at people saying it's a bag of hungry snakes." We pass Mr. Rue's liquor store and I glance at us in the window: a slender brown girl with a wooly float on her head accompanied by a tall, dark, square-shouldered him.

"So Blue practices how to do this, you know, be convincing," he pauses to make sure I'm paying attention.

"Go on," I say fighting a ridiculous girly smile.

"People get scared. Some throw money at him to run get food for the snakes, others go to another car. People believe he has

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snakes.” He stops, the heat waves between us. “You see, you can be all wrong about something.”

I think about this silly story and Kadeem Butler all night.

The morning brings a clear head and another rule for the handbook: Don’t fall for the snake crap. Their fathers have most likely told them this tale as a get over move. Resist. I choose to wear my purple Azalea Society of America tee-shirt, skinny black jeans. I yell bye to Nana and stop at the vestibule mirror to smooth stray hairs. I open the door to stop: Kadeem is outside talking with my grandfather in the community garden.

They both turn to look at me. Buelito whistles as he digs into the mulch, Kadeem smiles like he was just dropped from heaven.

“Ready?” he asks innocently, like this is our arrangement. I look up to see the kitchen curtains part.

“I’m ready.” I rush the words as Buelito snickers.

We walk to school under blue skies and eastward floating cumulus clouds. He doesn’t ask me about my birthmark or anything like where’s my mom. He wants to know what rule he’ll be in my handbook if this thing turns out okay.

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