

# Everyone Laughs

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My cousin Pop says, “We have a lot of orders to fill.” We’re already missing two afternoon cartoons. Granddad’s kitchen is full of creepy crawlers and we’re making more from a machine. It’s then I see a lanky figure come in the apartment. It’s Mills, Pop’s albino friend. His hands are full of more orders from spreading word all day. My intention is to ignore him. But their exchange holds my eyes. Pop says, just to him, “You’re the man.”

I keep pouring the plastigoop liquid into the Creepy Crawler Machine, but I’m able to see Pop hand Mills a crisp five-dollar bill. Now, Mills didn’t make any creepy crawlers so I’m seeing what would take me five hours. They’re both sixth-graders. We all make money from the orange and green machine. But he’s not family.

I’m watching with anger and frustration when Mills farewells Pop. They could have read my face if they’d have looked, but I hear Pop lock the door. Pop returns, staring at the orders spread across the kitchen table. At least I respect his hustle. Then he’s working beside me. Afterward, I find words to correct the wrong. We argue. In school, being teased is no longer acceptable. Pop has an epiphany and hands me a dollar bill. Then he says, “Happy now?”

I struggle to hide my smile.

The afternoon goes by like this and Granddad’s watching us in his room asleep. Our mothers come; they’re losing to work or sleep, no both, and soon we leave. Creepy crawlers are moving everywhere in Public School 260. They sell quick, pushing Pop’s ambition to the limit and pressing my new clothes back into my imagination. Teasing spares no one, as if it’s a hurricane designed

to leave a mark that'll last for years. Jokes come flying. I'm doing my school work, hoping. They miss.

When the jokes finish, everyone's laughing. I have on Pop's hand-me-down clothes but was spared. Ama, a new fourth-grader, has tears running down her face. Judgment is on her skin. She is crucified. Her being Ghanaian was a blackness we—Breukelen Project kids—couldn't see. Was I still the black boy who swelled with black pride? Poor Ama. If not her, then who? If not today, then when?

Tomorrow's another day sounds different when Granddad says it. At school, this is a lesson that can't be skipped, but now I'm here wishing not to have to learn at all. During the teasing lesson, a fight could happen. Sometimes the teaser still wins. We lose a sense of right and wrong. And teachers do nothing.

Later I find hope playing sports, out of necessity. It's not like video games. Select your opponent. Alter the difficulty. Control. The best players select teams. Sha-sha and Omar. Omar points to Macho, a new kid from Granddad's building. Sha-sha points to me. I see they're picking to play for keeps. This game is for the school's basketball team.

It's going, like more than a period, Sha-sha and Omar emulating their favorite players: Shaquille O'Neal and Kevin Garnett. The ball never sees me until I'm hanging under the rim, back to back against Macho. The ball bounces off the backboard ready to greet me.

I think, *I'll score this time*. Macho doesn't have anything at stake. But he has heart, despite being born with two holes in it. In this way, the game ends.

Creepy Crawlers are in the lunch room. They have girls on edge the way the basketball roster posted on the wall has me. When I see Macho's face glow, I know it's bad news. He has my spot.

I confront the gym teacher, who doubles as a lunchroom monitor. "He out-hustles you," he says. Girls begin screaming and knocking over food trays. I shake my head. *You must not show defeat. You must find another way.*

I try to listen to my inner voice. But my day is here. May-may, the one who scarred Ama for life, looks at my pants, wondering, then shaking her head. She's too fly to tease. A girl, so we can't fight. She locks eyes so I won't forget. "Those Guess What jeans?"

Then she's seeing words refuse to come out of my mouth. May-may repeats

herself with emphasis. Everyone laughs. I think, *This can't be happening*. So few words. So much power.

She's wearing Air Jordans, Pelle Pelle, and even has a name-plated belt. As she walks away, I find the courage to speak up. "You're skinny like a jump rope." But May-may is too far away to hear.

May-may leaves with some of my self-esteem. That night, lying on my twin-size bed before sleep, I ask myself, *Why did I let it happen?* School is about learning one moment, then suddenly it changes. In the past, if I got teased, I would have shut it down. I felt my thoughts would never betray me and give in to teasing. I liked that I was a fighter; I fought. Later, I learned each battle has its own obstacles.

Relay races are being held in the schoolyard, and I decide running will mend my Achilles heel. One race is still vivid for me. A 100-yard dash. Omar. No, May-may is my competition. A blue first-place ribbon is the prize, but winning is the true victory.

I don't know when I will get another chance to assert myself. I try to see myself crossing the finish line. Beating her is doable. Cheers will match my excitement. I picture it as we line up on the white spray paint. No one wants it more. I'll bring up this victory whenever she tries to play me. Now I know it didn't matter.

Mommy hits me sometime later. Inside our two-bedroom apartment. In between her long work hours and my need for better clothes. (A black pair of Pop's hand-me-down jeans bothered me so much I buried them in my closet.) "Can we go clothes shopping?" I say. My creepy-crawler-earned dollars can layaway a pair of brand-named jeans.

She says, "No." But I don't know why we can't. I don't hear the whispers of layoffs that turn true. Nor see the requests for child support that go unanswered. But now I snap. I have on South Pole clothes. The labels are hidden but the truth hurts. My South Pole clothes didn't allow me to escape teasing. And so I wear my only name-brand outfit often until it's obvious.

I look at Mommy, clench my fist and raise it. "No, you're not my father." Her words are not soft or shy, they're unforgettable. "Don't you ever raise your fist up at me like you crazy." She may have beat me once before but now it seems epic; it feels that way too.

Later she sends me a few blocks to my father's home. No, Grandma

Arlene's apartment. I might have thought this would be a new beginning to my relationship with Jamel, then realize the outcome is the same. Grandma Arlene becomes a bridge—if I want to know where Jamel is, she is the one to cross paths with. She's his mother and you have the feeling she knows something isn't right about our relationship. She does this through food. A good cook. She knows which meals Jamel won't skip. On a Thanksgiving, when Jamel finally shows up, I'm eager to talk. But he wraps a plate in aluminum foil and says, "Shaun, I have to go. I'll call you." All that's left of him is his loose cigarettes on the table. Newport roos.

Behind our closed door, Mommy has had enough. "I'm your mother. I put a roof over your head." We're right by hung photos of us and a gift I bought her on Mother's Day that reads, "World's Best Mother."

After sports fails, it becomes easier to see teasing goes beyond peers and makes its presence known through my fifth-grade computer teacher. "You're not qualified," he says in the middle of the computer lab while Macho heaves the camcorder over his shoulder. His words follow me home.

Mommy asks about my day. A voice in me says, *Just lie, say it was fine*. Another voice provides the script: "In computer class, I went further in Oregon Trail. None of my data was lost." But I repeat what was said. "The computer teacher said I'm not qualified to hold a camcorder."

She shakes her head.

I stare at her. Shrug my shoulders.

She sometimes comes to my school before work. We won't speak because she is sitting in the main office waiting to talk about my behavior. She's on my side today. She declares she'll get to the bottom of it tomorrow.

The next day in school, Macho can't help but tell me about filming. He doesn't know it rubs me wrong. We head into the computer class, but the computer teacher pulls me to the side. "I spoke to your mother. I didn't mean anything behind my words."

I stand silent. "How about you use the camcorder next time?" I say, "No."

I look around for someone to bear the teasing beside myself. Today not me. But then it's Pop. Now I see what happens when someone I care about gets teased. His vocabulary is vast for a middle-schooler, like the distance between his new Queens home and our friends from Breukelen Projects.

They say, “Pop uses big words.” I stand beside him when they joke. What’s at stake is after-school activities. He has won us over before when an abandoned cottage behind a KFC became our clubhouse. But now he’s earning nicknames: “Professor” and “Brain.” In our circle of friends, the laughter is contagious and before I realize, I’m laughing too. I relish when someone else is being teased. But it’s Pop. I should butt in. At best Pop would know his cousin has his back. Instead, Pop’s face is full of confusion. Have you ever tried to speak up for someone else when you barely find words for yourself? Luckily, the game of jokes becomes a game of softball.

We stand in a makeshift softball field. Trees are bases, benches are foul territory, and over the concrete circle is a home run. It’s about nine of us. Kids who are wearing cleats play for the Latin Soul Little League. Others like myself, we’re wearing what Mommy calls “street clothes.”

Sports again shows its ability to be the great equalizer. “Pop,” DB, one team captain, points. When Pop is picked, we’re halfway through deciding teams. Pop grabs his left-handed glove. He stares at me but decides not to reveal what I would find out later. GQ the jokester is picked by TB, a girl who is also the best player. Anticipation creeps up. *I got Shaun*, floats in my head until the next two are chosen.

It comes down to me or Buck, a Latin Souler who is a year younger. He has sharp fundamentals compared to my raw efforts. I’m crossing my fingers and toes. “Buck,” TB points. Craving how it feels to hit a home run becomes warming the concrete ledge.

The next game, I play. Stepping up to bat is my moment. Choking up on the bat to swing faster than GQ’s impersonation of my mom can get to me. He rotates between underhanded pitches and serenades of “Sweetie.” Two strikes down; I have one swing left. My bat connects with the ball for a long grounder that gets me to first base.

Next to bat is DB. The first pitch, he connects and sends the ball flying across the field. But he refuses to acknowledge its velocity. It doesn’t go over the circle. We’re caught in a double play. But no one is teasing him.

We hit the outfield. TB hits a ball similar in distance to DB’s, which brings everyone on base home. We lose. The sun starts going down, and I’m running home before Mom puts the chain on the door. If only the chain could keep teasing away.