

LOVE
IS A
REVOLUTION

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3 THINGS I WANT TO DO THIS SUMMER

1. Find a new hairstyle. According to Grandma, hair is a Black girl's crown. The thicker and longer the better, so I definitely won't cut it. But I like to experiment: perm it, dye it, weave it, wig it. This summer, I want to do something I haven't done before. Maybe I'll get highlights—chestnut ombré or copper brown. Maybe honey blonde. Subtle of course, just enough to add texture and depth.
2. Find time to spend with Imani, my cousin-sister-friend. We have a plan to hang out with our best friend, Sadie, and binge-watch everything on Netflix that we've been putting off because of too much schoolwork. We have a long, long list,

but it's not all senseless entertainment. There are a few documentaries on there too—music docu-series about some of our favorite singers—but still, it's informative and educational. So our brains will be learning something.

3. (And this is the most important) Find love.

And I want to find love because I want someone's hand to hold as we roam Harlem's summer streets. I want to find love because I am tired of being the fifth wheel with Imani and Asher, who act like they're married, and Sadie and Jackson, who swear they're not a couple but are always (no, really, *always*) together. It's the last week of June and the first weekend of summer break. We're just months away from being seniors, and I have only had one boyfriend—if I can even call him that. He moved to Philly after just one month of us making it official. And I know New York and Philly aren't oceans apart, but they're not around the corner either. We both thought it was too much of a distance for us to make it work. And I want to find love because now I don't have a date for winter formal, or the prom.

And I want to find love because . . . who doesn't? Who doesn't want someone to laugh with even when something

is corny and only funny if you know the inside joke? Who doesn't want someone to call at night and talk about tiny things like *what are you doing?* and *want to get something to eat?* And big things like *what's the one thing you want to do before you die?* and *what are you afraid of?* and *who do you want to be in the world?*

I want that.

But right now, it's not about what I want. Right now it's all about Imani, my cousin-sister-friend. It's her birthday, and I promised we could do whatever she wants. And of all the things Imani could want for her birthday, she jumps up off her bed and says, "Nala, do you want to come with me to the talent show tonight?"

What I really want to say is *absolutely not*. First of all, it's raining. All of Harlem is drenched and somber. It would be one thing if it was just regular rain. But no. This is hot New York summer rain. This is a steamy downpour that just makes the air even more muggy and humid. What am I going to do with my hair tonight?

But a promise is a promise, so I get dressed and agree to venture out in this hotter-than-a-sauna storm because I'd do anything for Imani, my cousin-sister-friend, who shares her mom and dad with me. I've been living here since I was thirteen, when I got into a fight with Mom and I stormed out to spend the night at Aunt Ebony's and I've

been living here ever since. I'm seventeen now. Six months younger than Imani, and she never lets me forget it, as if being six months older than me really counts. There is no mistaking that we are family.

Whenever we go to Jamaica to visit our relatives, people we don't even know come up to us, saying, "You must be one of the Robertsons." Some people even think we're sisters—we look just like our mommas, who look just like each other. Strong genes, Grandma always says. Imani and I are what Grandma calls big boned. That's in our genes too. Imani always rolls her eyes whenever Grandma uses any other phrase for "fat" except the word "fat." "It's not a bad word unless you use it in a bad way," Imani always says. "I'm fat. It's just a description. It doesn't have to cast negative judgment."

And this is where we differ. I am not down with the Say-It-Loud-I'm-Fat-and-I'm-Proud movement. I don't have low self-esteem or anything, I just don't feel the need to talk about my weight or make statements about it or reclaim a word that was never mine in the first place.

I sit on Imani's bed. "So tell me what's going to happen tonight."

"A talent show," she says. Imani dabs her wrists with an oil she bought from a street vendor on 125th. I can hardly smell it, it's so soft. Then she pulls her chunky braids up in

a ponytail. Sadie did her hair two days ago so it still has that I-just-got-my-hair-done look.

“What’s the prize?” I ask.

“I don’t know. A trophy, maybe. Or a certificate. I can’t remember. But who wins isn’t important,” Imani says.

“Easy for you to say. Tell that to the performers.”

“Well, what I mean is, it’s a talent show to raise money and awareness. It will be promoting Inspire Harlem and raising money for our activism programs,” she says. “So it’s more about the gathering and being together and raising money than someone winning a prize.”

I try really hard not to roll my eyes. “So, this is how you want to spend your birthday? At an Inspire Harlem talent show?”

“Don’t start with me, Nala. You asked me what I want to do and this is what I want to do. We’re going to Harlem Shake afterward. Does that make it better for you?”

“It’s not about me. It’s about what you want,” I say. I mostly mean it.

“It’s never about what I want,” Imani mumbles.

She thinks I didn’t hear her, but I did. I definitely did. “What is that supposed to mean?” I ask.

She ignores my question and keeps talking. “I don’t know why you don’t like my Inspire Harlem friends.”

“I like them,” I say. And then I mumble just like she

did, but softer to make sure she doesn't hear me. "They don't like me."

And here is Reason Number Two why I don't want to go: Imani and her Inspire Harlem friends. Inspire Harlem is an organization for Harlem teens that does community service projects and hosts awareness events about various social issues. Imani has been trying to get me to join for the past year. But I don't know, they're a little too . . . well, let's just say I don't think I'm a good fit.

The last Inspire Harlem event I went to was an open mic. The theme was Love Is Love. I thought it would be a night of love poems, sweet and beautiful sentiments about relationships with parents, partners, friends. But no. The first poem was an I-Love-to-Hate-You poem recited by a girl who wrote a poem to her ex-girlfriend. There were poems about loving people even though they aren't worthy of love and poems about how America doesn't love Black people, or Native people, or immigrants, or women.

It was not the Roses-Are-Red-Violets-Are-Blue kind of poems I am used to.

And I should have known it would be that way. All the teens in Inspire Harlem are activists, which sometimes feels like a word that means their opinion is the only one that matters. I guess I just don't know if I could live up to the standards they have.

Just last night, Imani went through the junk drawer in the kitchen and threw out all the plastic straws Uncle Randy has been saving from delivery and takeout. “Isn’t throwing away the unused straws just as bad as if I had used them and then thrown them away?” he asked.

She didn’t have an answer for that.

And now she’s on this I-only-take-five-minute-showers movement, and I’m all for her setting that as her own personal goal, but I like my warm, long showers and I don’t need her shaking her head in disapproval every time I come out of the bathroom.

“All right, I’m going to get ready,” I say. I walk through the passageway that connects our rooms. The alcove has drawers and cabinets on both sides—extra storage and closet space for all our stuff that Aunt Ebony keeps saying we need to go through so we can give away clothes we don’t wear anymore.

As soon as I get in my room, I turn on music. I’ve found a new favorite artist, Blue, a Jamaican singer who mixes reggae and R&B. She’s twenty-one and she’s big, like me—or as Imani would proudly say, *fat*. I’ve been listening to her music nonstop. I have just finished putting my jeans on when Imani barges into my room. “I knocked, but you can’t hear me with that music so loud,” she says. She turns it down just a little. “I mean, I’m a fan too, but really? You’ve had the song on repeat all day.”

“This from the queen of rewatching movies and saying the lines with the characters.”

“Fair,” Imani says. “Absolutely fair.” We laugh, and then she closes my door so she can look at herself in the full-length mirror that hangs on the back. “I need your help. Which shirt should I wear?” Imani asks. Right now she only has on jeans and her bra. In her left hand she is holding a shirt that says, I Am My Ancestors’ Wildest Dreams, and in her right hand, a shirt with a drawing of a closed fist raised and the word Resist under it. Both are black with white lettering.

“That one.” I point to her left hand.

“Thanks.” Imani puts the shirt on and comes over to my dresser to skim through my jewelry. We are always in and out of each other’s rooms borrowing and swapping.

Now I am second-guessing my outfit. My green sundress seems too dressy and doesn’t make any kind of statement. I look through my closet. I only own one graphic tee, and it says I Woke Up Like This. I’m pretty sure this isn’t the shirt to wear around this activist crowd. I change into a black V-neck and jeans. I’ll make it more stylish by adding some necklaces and bracelets. Aunt Liz taught me that accessories are the key to every outfit.

Imani has picked through all my bracelets and chooses the chunky silver one. She looks in the mirror. “You ready?”

“Do I look ready?” I point to my face that has no makeup, to my hair that is still wrapped in a scarf. “I need at least fifteen minutes.” I plug in my flat iron, turn the dial up to the highest heat.

“We don’t have fifteen minutes. Be ready in five.”

“Ten,” I call out. “Beauty takes time.”

“Makeup doesn’t make you beautiful.”

“No, but it enhances it,” I say. I pick up a tube of lipstick and hold it out toward Imani. “This color would look so good on you. You should let me do your makeup one day.”

“Five minutes, Nala. I’ll be downstairs.”

“I can’t do nine steps in five minutes.”

“Nine steps? Are you serious?” Imani’s footsteps echo in the hallway as she runs down the stairs. “You better hurry up.”

“And now it’ll be twelve minutes since you kept talking to me.” I laugh and begin my makeup routine. For me, the key to wearing makeup is making it look like I don’t have any on.

9 STEPS FOR APPLYING MAKEUP

1. Primer. Because I have to make sure the foundation powder goes on smoothly.

2. Eyebrows. I use an eyebrow pencil to define my arch and make my brows full. They're already kind of thick, so I don't need to do too much.

3. Foundation. It took me a while to find the perfect match for my dark skin, but about a month ago Aunt Liz took me makeup shopping and we did a color-matching test, so now I know the perfect shade to use.

4. Blush. Yes, I wear blush. A warm brown blush so my face doesn't look so flat.

5. Eye shadow. Less is more. I do use color, but on a day like today, I'm keeping it simple.

6. Eyeliner. I use a felt tip. It goes on easier and doesn't smudge like pencil. I'm going for that evening smoky eye—it'll elevate this outfit I'm wearing.

7. Mascara. I'm not a fan of wearing so much mascara that it looks like spiders are crawling out of my eyes, but I do lay it on thick so I can have full, fluttering lashes.

8. Lipstick/Lip gloss. Sometimes I wear both, depending on the color and texture. Tonight, I'm doing lipstick. Even though it's gray outside, I'm going with a bright berry color for summer.

9. Look at myself in the mirror. I just sit and stare for one whole minute. Take in this beauty that everyone else will be seeing, make sure everything is just right.

And that's it. My face is complete.

Next, I touch up my hair with my flat iron, making sure my edges are straight. Since it's raining so hard, I pull it up in a sloppy-on-purpose ponytail, and as promised, twelve minutes have passed and I'm ready to go.

Just as I am pulling the plug out of the socket, Imani calls out to me. "Nala, we're going to be late! Come on."

"Coming." I grab my umbrella.

When I get downstairs, Imani is in the kitchen at the sink filling her metal water bottle. Uncle Randy and Aunt Ebony are here cooking together, and the way they have this kitchen smelling with sweet plantains and curry chicken makes me want to stay and eat dinner.

"Save some for me," I say. I kiss Aunt Ebony on her cheek.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll be eating this chicken for the next few days. I’m making enough to last. Too hot to keep turning this stove on. Plus, I’m on summer vacation too, so that should mean I get a break from cooking.” Aunt Ebony says this even though we all know she’ll be back in the kitchen tomorrow cooking up something delicious and taking a plate over to Grandma. She is the oldest of Grandma’s daughters. Her and Uncle Randy married in their last year of college. So even though they have been married for a long time, they are younger than the parents of a lot of my friends. Aunt Ebony teaches at an elementary school just a few blocks down the street, so it’s summer break for her too.

Aunt Liz is two years younger and lives in a condo on 116th. She’s a personal stylist and has a lot of famous clients. Aunt Liz is always, always dressed like she’s going to be in a photo shoot. Even her pajamas are photo worthy.

And then there’s my mom. She’s the youngest, the only one who has a job and not a career. She’s worked at clothing stores, restaurants, offices. They were all born in Spanish Town, the parish of St. Catherine, and moved to New York in their teens when Grandpa decided that the States would give his children a better life. Grandma says he was a man whose dreams wouldn’t let him sleep. She’d wake up in the middle of the night, and he’d be at the

kitchen table working on a job application or writing out goals for the family.

Grandpa loved living in New York, but his heart was in Spanish Town. He went back to Jamaica at least twice a year. Grandma has tried to keep the tradition. We all go once a year, usually for Christmas since that's when Aunt Ebony is off from work. When we go, we stay in Kingston because that's where most of the family lives now.

Before Imani and I leave we have to go through our goodbye routine with Aunt Ebony and Uncle Randy: Where are you going? Who else is going to be there? When will you be back?

We leave and on our way to the library, I tell Imani, "We should have invited Sadie."

"Oh, she'll be there. She's a member of Inspire Harlem now."

"She is?" I ask.

"Yeah, I finally convinced her to join."

Sadie is in Inspire Harlem now. Why didn't I know this?

Because we are running late, Imani is speed walking, which is hard to do in pouring-down rain. The puddles are splashing, and I am drenched. We don't say much to each other on the way to the library. Mostly because we are walking fast and are out of breath, but also because I can't

stop thinking about Sadie joining Inspire Harlem. Sadie usually agrees with me about Imani and her woke friends. The two of us tease Imani all the time, calling her Angela Davis Jr., and when we really want to get under her skin, we respond with “Yes, ma’am” when she’s being bossy or nagging us about throwing something in the trash that should be recycled.

Maybe it’s petty to be thinking like this, but I really don’t want to go to this talent show tonight. Normally when I go to an Inspire Harlem event, Sadie and I sit together. We whisper our commentary to each other about everything that’s happening. We nudge each other whenever someone says a corny Save-the-World mantra or cliché. We clear our throats as a signal that it’s time to leave. There’s always been a *we*—me and Sadie—at these events, with our own inside jokes. Me and Sadie telling Imani that the issues she cares about are serious but not *that* serious. Imani is my cousin-sister-friend, and Sadie is my best friend.

They are my *we*.

But now that Sadie has joined Inspire Harlem, who will I have?