

Jabari Kwesi

*Harlem's Own*

Being thirteen feels real different from being twelve, and I don't like it very much, if I'm being completely honest. My name is Kid: Kay-eye-dee, starting with a capital Kay. Well, actually, my name is Kalonji Douglas, but I plan on going by Kid until I turn twenty for a couple of reasons. For one, you can't be no grown negro man calling yourself Kid even if you've been called that since you were young. It just doesn't sound right. For two, the difference between nineteen and twenty is way bigger than the difference between twelve and thirteen, and the difference between twelve and thirteen is already so big that it seems to me that something crazy has to happen to really show that you're a grown negro man now. It's real interesting to me the way that different people act at different years. How many years you have is how you're treated, in some weird way, but it's cool at the same time.

Probably my least favorite part about getting older is that it's a lot harder to not know things. When you're ten, eleven, maybe even twelve, nobody expects you to know about the number of jobless negroes or the fact that the ceiling in apartment 4B over on East Prospect is about to fall in on itself and kill everyone living there while they're sleep. You're just meant to go to school and say Yes Ma'am! to your teachers and work real hard on your assignments so you could get a gold star, then take that star up to Old Lady Garcia on ninetysixth and fifth where the hood meets the barrio and exchange it for the ice cones covered in sweet molasses that melt in your mouth, and let her call you *mijo* and say how proud she is of you and smile and nod. I'm cool with all that, so when the grown folks are smoking after a meal and talking about all these things together, nobody looks my way and expects for me to have something to say about it, even though I know all about it because Miss Wallace with her thirteen children can't keep her

lips closed shut when they should be. It's all just so Terrible! she would say, but because she's from down in the Carolinas where everything is slower and all their food is covered with thick syrups, her tongue is still too heavy to say it properly and her Rs would bleed into her Bs so it sounds all like Turrrible.

I liked being a real kid because people will tell you things you're not supposed to hear and expect you not to know what it means, or to forget it right after. Miss Rockwell, the one who lives down the hall to the left and let us stay with her when our ceiling was leaking, always said that Harlem was a big community full of negroes who hated to mind their own business. She was a real large woman, but Ike and I had agreed not to say anything about it either to her or behind her back because we thought she might throw something nasty in our stew if she found out, and so we used to sit in her kitchen with her and be quiet and watch as she swayed her hips and clicked her tongue and complained about every single thing in Harlem, from the leaky ceilings to the gossipy housewives.

Ike is my brother, and he's fresh off turning twentytwo. He's not built much like Pops at all, enough to make me wonder sometimes if Pops was given the wrong baby and he just decided to raise him as his own so he didn't feel bad. Ike is a real small cat, but you can't ever say that to his face even when you're arguing bad because he's the type of small that gets angry whenever somebody says it out loud. He'll get real quiet and still, almost like he's thinking about it like it's the first time he's ever heard it, and then half speak half cry real fast until he's red in the face about how he's perfectly normal sized and you're just big and you don't realize it, and you don't really have any choice but to sit there and nod and listen to him even though everybody knows that no fully grown negro man should be that size unless he's sweet or actually a woman. Unless

you're somebody like Darryl Wallace, the third oldest of Miss Wallace's children and definitely the meanest. Darryl Wallace would listen to everything Ike had to say and then make a big show of looking down on Ike's head the way Missus Turner looks over her glasses, because even though he wasn't *that* much bigger than him he was six years younger, and being bigger than somebody six years older than you must mean you don't got to care about what they're talking about. Then he'd turn his head, even if it wasn't anybody else around to look at, and laugh like he had just heard the funniest joke on this side of the country. I think that's the real reason why Ike stopped kicking it with the boys on the corner when he turned twenty. When you're a kid, you always have the option of throwing hands if somebody disrespects you to your face; Ike never did it, but at least he could always stand strong and not say anything and people would know he was thinking about it. But as a grown negro man you don't really get that choice unless you're also willing to throw hands with whoever comes out to see who's beating on their son or brother or nephew or whatever. You just got to grin and shake it off, but I knew Ike well enough to know he wasn't good at that. Ike isn't really good with people at all if I'm keeping it honest.

None of that mattered to me, because Ike was the smartest negro I'd ever known, small or big or whatever. Ike had a whole drawer of gold stars that he'd gotten when he was in school before I was old enough to get there, enough for damn near every day he went. He never took them up to old lady Garcia because he said that sweet food made you smaller, just stored them in his drawer, and I remember I used to look through the drawer every day when he was at school and imagine it getting so full that it would explode. More importantly, Ike was smart enough to talk himself out of anything. The President himself could come down to Harlem and say Ike, you're under arrest for being a smart colored man! and Ike would be able to talk to him so sweet

that not only would the President himself be arrested, but Ike would become the new President right there. Ike would agree with Miss Rockwell, say things like The negroes of Harlem don't know how to fight for what they need as a community, and Miss Rockwell would nod and smile politely the way all the grown folk do when Ike got to talking about his educated stuff.

To me, Harlem is less like a community and more like a real big stew. You've got the potatoes and the carrots and the broth and the meat, and all the flavors mix together and make something cool, and if you try real hard while you're eating it you can taste all the flavors by themselves and it will show you just how much there is to it. I've been outside for as long as I can remember, even before school: I've never been much into books like Ike, on account of me not really being able to trust anything that I can't see with my own two eyes, and so I've always wanted to *see* Harlem instead of just *hearing* about it. I've seen everything too; I've seen the twentythree and twentyfour year old dope fiends out on onethirtythird where everyone says not to go but I don't listen because it's no reason to be scared on black people, I've seen the oldheads out by the soup kitchen in Sugar Hill, banging on trash cans to the tune of the old negro spirituals, and I've seen the moneyed up black folk out in Central Harlem, playing pool and smoking fat sticks and talking about all that moneyed up black folk stuff that I'd pretend to understand because it made me feel cool.

I've also seen the other parts of Harlem, the parts that grown folk are used to by this point but will act like they're not supposed to tell you about because they think you'll be scared or something. I've seen the real big groups of people yelling about jobs and policemen and stomping around looking all angry, I've seen the ladies that look about thirtythree but missing all their teeth like they're sixtythree, talking all sweet to the moneyed up black folk and sometimes

going with them in their moneyed up cars. But I don't say anything about any of this when I see it, because it's not my business and I know better than to get involved in things that aren't my business. I know Harlem isn't perfect, but it's all I've ever known, and it's good enough for me.

Being thirteen feels like being a fake kid. You're not grown enough yet to talk about grown people things forreal, but for some reason you're expected to know about a whole bunch of things that didn't matter just a year ago. That wasn't much a problem for me, on account of it being my specialty to know things when I probably wasn't supposed to; the hard part was that you were expected to have an opinion about these things too. The way *Missus* Turner taught us at school, an opinion is something that can't ever be right or wrong, it can just be yours. I really liked that the first time I heard it, on account of not many things truly being mines and mines only; most of my clothes and toys had belonged to Ike before me, and I knew they would belong to someone younger the moment they needed them more than I did. I don't usually like many things *Missus* Turner says, because her temper gets nasty and she's quick to make it hard for you to get a gold star if you forget to put extra emphasis on the *sus* part at the end of *Missus*. She's real proud of the fact that she's married and wants everybody to know it and also be proud of it all the time, even though old Mister Turner himself couldn't really care less about her and spends most his time down by the Harlem River Drive hollering at any lady passing him by. But I liked it when she told us about opinions. Even still it sounded like a lot of responsibility to have something that was yours and only yours and couldn't be right or wrong and you could make them up whenever you wanted.

Pops must have learned about opinions differently, because to him, there were Right opinions, and very wrong opinions. When I first became thirteen, he started to ask me questions

like he had never asked before; sort of like *Missus* Turner, except I knew better than to ask for a gold star because Pops didn't believe in black people getting handouts. He would ask me about a bunch of names and peoples that I didn't really know about, like Elijah Muhammed and Malik L-something, but he'd also ask me about names and peoples that *everybody* knew about, like Dr. King and Malcolm X and the War. Opinions with him were like tests in school, on account of him getting real mad if my opinion wasn't one that he liked, and he would tell me to open my eyes and see what's really going on.

Pops is fortyfive, just at the tip of officially being an old head, and is a big man, with hard eyes and a bunch of hair on his face but not very much on his head; real big, the type of big that makes white folks cross the street when they see him, if they even got the guts to be crossing streets in Harlem at all. Not large, in the manner of old Mister Johnson who lives all the way by Botanical Gardens on Southern Boulevard and has the most impressive collection of upper elbow fat I've ever seen, but *big*, like that Sergio Olivia cat up in Chicago that Tommy Bunches down at the Bodega said would be able to move the whole of Manhattan if he tried hard enough. I don't put very much faith behind what Tommy Bunches says, on account of him regularly being wrong about the week's forecast (and most everything else he decides to speak on), but I *have* seen pictures of Sergio Olivia on the cover of the Times and he looks the type of big to *definitely* make whitey think twice about calling him anything but mister.

Pops talks big too. He's not one of them big for no reason negroes with a small voice that don't match, so you have to look twice every time they talk because surely it's no way that little sound came from such a big man. No, when Pops has something to say he says it like the whole world has to hear it; his voice is real deep and powerful and comes from inside him and

everywhere at once, so it feels like it's a bunch of people talking to you whenever he says anything. Pops does something called propaganda, which means he makes art for colored folk. Sometimes he draws, sometimes he paints, sometimes he cuts out little pictures from papers and magazines and newspapers and puts all the little pictures together until they make one big picture of something else, but it always has something to do with colored folk. You can hear Pops' voice in his art, almost. The loud colors and big shapes and pictures in his paintings are drawn just the way he talks: real rich and strong and talking at you and with you at the same time. Sometimes he'll make art of people that I know, like Marcus Garvey or Malcolm X, and sometimes he'll make art of people I don't know, and sometimes he'll make art of things that aren't even people, more like big groups of circles and squares that all bleed together to make something that's real black. When I was younger and he was home often he'd let me sit with him while Ike was at school, and he'd talk in his big voice about how the revolution was coming and every self-respecting black man or woman had to play their part. I didn't know much about what he was talking about, but watching him work and listening to him at the same time was like hearing his voice twice, both from his lips and from his pictures, which was a real powerful feeling. It made me feel safe, like nothing else was loud enough to sound over his voice two times, and as long as I could sit with him while he was working everything would be okay.

When you put it all out like that I don't really blame the white folk for acting the way they do around Pops. It's not too many big negroes like him around in Harlem right now on account of most all of them being picked for the War, but Pops was safe on account of being shot when he was younger and messing up his foot real nice to the point where he still can't walk in a straight line; I guess the military folk didn't want him walking into one of their own gunshots, on

account of that being a waste of good bullets. Sometimes I wonder how different things would be if Pops was smaller and skinny and bitchmade like Missus Jones' husband, the Uncle Tom ass nigga who always said he would call the police on us if we took another flower out his welcome basket even though I don't know a single person from here to the Brooklyn bridge who would want one of his oil-stained, cabbage stinking flowers that were way too blue to be actual flowers anyway. Maybe if Pops' voice didn't reach from Harlem to Babylon and he didn't speak for every black person when he said something simple, maybe it wouldn't be so many broke negroes counting on him to organize riots and protests, and he'd be able to be home more often and maybe we could do things like shoot hoops and count nickels and not talk about what revolutionary did what for the culture and what it means to be a strong colored man in this war; I don't see any war, I just see Harlem.

Maybe I'm tripping though, I'm not good with all that family stuff.

Right before he finished school, Ike had stole a real fat book that looked fresh and new and moneyed up, not like the old books we usually got. The title said Traveler's Green Book (International Edition 1967) in big fat letters, even though the cover was blue, and underneath it there was a picture of a good looking negro lady in a dress with the words For Vacation Without Aggravation! Inside the book was a list of places that whoever wrote it said were safe for black people to go and be black people without being scared of white people doing something about it. Whoever wrote the book must have been some type of super oldhead to know so much, because there were more places written down than I've ever seen. It was a bunch of places that I knew, like New York and California and Chicago, and then there were names that I had never seen in my life, like Barbados and Norway and Scotland, places that sounded like they were so different

from Harlem it wouldn't even be fair to put them side by side. Ike and I used to make a game of reading it when Pops would be gone for days at a time, going through the addresses in New York and talking about all the places that he could be, doing his important propaganda business and making things better for black people. Ike stopped playing the game when Pops would be gone for real long times, and I'd start reading through the book by myself while he read books about all the famous black people in history. I'm real good with addresses on account of that, even for places I've never been before. I want to be able to know where Pops is even if he's in Brooklyn or Queens, so I could list out to you every bar and pool house and lounge from here to the edge of the city.

I miss Pops a lot, but I know he's out doing real important things for black people. Ike calls it a war; he stopped calling it a revolution when Brother Malcolm died. I don't really see it the same way, but maybe that's just a thirteen years thing. I don't really like being thirteen though. Maybe fourteen is better.

In order to appreciate my character, it is imperative to understand that I am *not* short or small or anything of the sort. The average height of a fully grown black man is fivefootseveninches, give or take, according to Encyclopedia Britannica 1966 Volume Antarah. I am fivefootfiveinches, so giving a little bit and taking a little bit, I stand at a perfectly respectable stature and anybody that says otherwise is wrong. Darryl Wallace is wrong, and Tiny Wallace is especially wrong and doesn't deserve a true revolutionary black man like me anyway.

Now that this has been established, my name is Ike Douglas, the year is 1967, and I reside in East Harlem with my brother and father. My brother is about fivefootteninches, a good bit above the average height of a thirteen year old black child. His name is Kid, and I love him very much despite the fact that he does not yet recognize the importance of our struggle. I don't know what his attention is on at the moment, but he isn't as focused on his schoolwork as I'd like. My father is near sixfoottwoinches, very much above the average height for a fully grown negro man. He's the prototype of a successful revolutionary black man, and the most influential figure in my life by far. He's the one who taught me the value of knowledge, that a well-read black man is the single most powerful figure in the world we live in. I don't know where I would be without his guidance.

The problem with standing at a height that is regularly confused as short is that it is much harder to be taken seriously. I was never a fit with the boys on the corner, I always knew that. The difference between a Negro and a black man is in attitude, and that has always been what seperated me from the masses. While they were content with throwing cards and shooting hoops, I looked to Harlem and saw a people oppressed. Why are the conditions we live in so terrible? Why do we have so little, and pretend to be satisfied? What is it going to take for us to band

together? They never truly heard me though. Or maybe they did, and chose not to listen. *What do I care for the opinion of my contemporaries or of future generations? I have done my duty; I approve of myself; that suffices me.* Jean-Jacques Dessalines, fivefeetseveninches. Those who do not acknowledge my power will see it in turn, either behind me on the battlefield or from above as I speak their eulogy.

Because make no mistake, we are at war. *Freedom is not something that one people can bestow on another as a gift; they claim it as their own and none can keep it from them.* Kwame Nkrumah, fivefeetseveninches. We are at war for what is ours, and those that do not realize this are casualties. The revolution has no need for those without the will to realize that we are fighting just as much as those in Vietnam.

I was never built well enough to be one of the Mau-Mau child soldiers, walking the streets in formation with their crisp uniforms. When I was a boy, I'd watch from the broken plaster of my room as they conducted drills, chanting spirituals and slapping the ground with the tails of their rifles. I loved the power in their movements, the awe in the eyes of those who watched. I knew I would never be them. Even still, my role in this fight has been set. Behind every army is its commander, ripe with the fruits of intellectual labor. *Without education, you will not go anywhere in this world.* Malcolm X, sixfeetthreeinches. I've been prepared for this since I was young, read through all the histories: the works of John Mbiti and James George and all the heroes of our race, the revolutionary heroes who have fought for colored people since they recognized it was their duty. While the other children played outside, content with our struggles, I was working. Reading. Becoming someone capable of leading the charge the same way Malcolm X did.

Father sees his role too, the same way I do. He's stepped into it since the passing of Brother Malcolm, fully acknowledged the ideals of the black revolution. His art now stands for the people, a message to ideals and values. He's working out in Richmond with the Black Liberation Army as their Minister of Culture, an offshoot of the Black Panther movement on the west coast of the country. From what I've read, it's a counter to the Black Vanguard spreading through Sacramento and Oakland, a movement spearheaded by Brother Jackson before his passing. I've highlighted his whereabouts in the Negro Traveler's Green Book based on the little bit that he's told me; Sometimes when Kid isn't using it, I'll skim through it and think about places he could be in Virginia, write down what restaurants and hotels I could see him staying in.

Kid is on his own way: I see it in his eyes, that he sees what is happening for what it really is. I'm not worried about his development; he's always been far better with people than me. They never shunned him for his size the way that I was mocked, and he took advantage of the social options he had at his disposal. I'd say he knows Harlem better than I do in some ways - the spirit of the city is in him, and he's connected to it in turn, to all of its elements and the people that he's seen. I really do love him, and I'm almost sorry that he had to be born into this war; everything that I do, I do for him and the children like him that aren't given the opportunity to enjoy life as it should be.

I can't afford to wait on Kid anymore, not like this. *I've been patient, but where I'm concerned patience has its limits. Take it too far, and it's cowardice.* George Jackson, fivefooteleveninches. When my time comes, I'm ready, just like Pops. The people of Harlem have grown restless and are just beginning to see the depths to which they are disadvantaged: the riots have grown more frequent since the passing of brother Malcolm, and the peaceful platitudes

of sheep like King aren't enough to soothe them anymore. True conflict is coming, and when it does, I'll be at the head to meet it.