

Fiction

The Bearded Queen

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EDITORS' NOTE: This extract is Chapter One of M. Nourbese Philip's work-in-progress, "Queen Hat," a Young Adult novel.

"IT WAS REAL, John!"

"Real! How can a dream be real, Omar?"

A stubborn look came over Omar's face: "I tell you it *was* real! There was a Queen. A Queen with a funny name. Hat, Hatsh, Hatss, Hat. Queen Hat! That was her name and she wore a beard."

The glass of milk he was drinking hid John's smile. He was glad Omar couldn't tell he was doing his best not to laugh. He drank slowly to make sure he could control his laughter. When he was done he put down the empty glass and looked at his little brother with great tenderness. He was a mass of earnestness, stubbornness and hope. Hope that his older brother would believe him.

Earlier that morning he had woken up Omar:

"C,mon, Omar, it's time to get up! You'll be late for school."

"I don't want to get up, I don't want to go to school today . . . or any other day."

"Omar, you've got to get up!"

Omar rolled over, groaned and opened one dark brown, sleepy eye and looked up at his older brother standing over his bed.

"If you don't, I'll tickle you." John grinned and began flexing his fingers, as if to carry out his threat.

"All right, all right, I'm getting up. Can't you see." Omar rolled himself slowly out of his bunk-bed.

"You'd better hurry or we'll be late for school." With those words John gave him a gentle push out the door. Omar ran down the hall to the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind him. Soon there were sounds from behind the closed door—

"Hai! huh! Zap!—Thock! Hai!" Single handedly Omar was karate-chopping his way through his morning shower. A few minutes later, wrapped in a large white towel, he was back in the bedroom he shared with his brother.

"That was quick work! Was anyone left alive?" John asked. Omar didn't answer. He began to dress while muttering to himself.

"What are you muttering about?"

"Nothing."

"C'mon, out with it."

There was a long silence.

"All right," John said, "don't tell me about it, but don't come running to me when you've got problems. Hurry up or we'll be late for school."

John was halfway down the stairs with his basketball when Omar shouted:

"Wait up! I'll tell you, but promise not to tease me."

"Cross my heart and all that jazz." As he said this John leapt down the remaining six stairs to the bottom, where he made a fancy turn, while throwing up the basketball and twirling it on his forefinger.

Omar's face lit up in admiration as he watched his older brother. In his eyes John could do everything he, Omar, wanted to but couldn't. He wanted to be tall and lanky like John, not short and somewhat chubby. More than anything else he wanted to be fifteen, because at fifteen adults believed you. At seven they always thought you were telling stories. Omar also wanted to be a rapper like John was; if he were fifteen, he felt, he could rap a lot better than he did now. What Omar didn't know was that he had the most beautiful smile that ever lit up a little boy's face.

"Can I do that, John? Can I?" Omar pleaded, running down the stairs and falling down the last three.

"Not so fast, my little man. You're not old enough." John looked down at Omar and laughed. He sometimes teased his

brother in a good-natured way, but was also very protective of him. If some kid at school were trying to beat up on Omar, as had happened on a few occasions, John always made sure that Omar didn't get hurt. Two fancy dribbles around Omar and John was in the kitchen. It was all Omar could do to keep up with him.

"So—my man, you were going to tell me something."

"Oh it was just a stupid dream I had, and I want a chance with the basketball. A stubborn look had come over Omar's face by this time, and John saw his brown eyes were quickly filling with tears.

"All right, all right, have a go, but hurry up so we can have breakfast." John filled up their cereal bowls—Snap Crackle and Pop for Omar and Corn Flakes for him. Their mother left for work long before they got up, but she always put out their bowls and cups for them. While he poured the milk John kept one eye on Omar as he tried his best to twirl the basketball on his forefinger. Whenever he threw up the ball it would fall on his head hitting him on the nose or eye. It was all John could do to keep from laughing.

John clapped his hands. "All right team, that's enough practice for this morning. Time to eat." Omar smiled and put down the ball without a fuss. He liked it when John pretended he was coaching him.

John shook his head gently and gave a small chuckle.

"Queen Hat, eh! What a name for a Queen. You're sure it wasn't Queen Shoe now?"

Omar wriggled in his chair and couldn't resist smiling at the joke. Encouraged by this, John continued.

"And you say she wore a beard, eh! Did she have a moustache too?" This time he had gone too far.

"You're just making fun of me, John, but you'll see. I'll be going there again tonight, because my friend Nefu said she was coming back for me, and we are going to have a lot of adventures. So there! And I hate your lousy basketball. It sucks." Omar flung himself from his chair onto the floor sobbing.

"C'mon chum, c'mon! I was only kidding. Let's dry those tears and get our coats." Omar let himself be comforted. He wished his

mother were there, but John was a good second best, especially now that he had hoisted him on his shoulders.

"Who's this Nefu anyway? A girl with a beard too?" John spun him around making him laugh.

"Stop it John!" yelled Omar. "You're just stupid! Nefu is Queen Hat's daughter and she's the same age as me. She came for me last night and she said she was going to come for me again. Tonight. That's why I didn't want to get up. We were having such a good time."

"Where did you go?" John lifted him off his shoulders and went to get their coats.

"Oh, we went to this place called Egypt. That's where Nefu lives."

"Egypt! Do you know how far away that is? You've been reading too many comic books and looking at too much TV.

By this time the two boys were out of the house and dribbling their way to school, with Omar trailing John as quickly as his legs would let him. John was in the middle of a difficult turn when a yell from Omar brought him to a sudden stop. He felt his heart stop beating. He was afraid to turn around. Was Omar hurt? He should have been looking out for him. Slowly he looked around, and there was Omar jumping up and down in one spot, his round, brown face glowing with delight.

"I've got it! I've got it!"

"You've got what? You nuts or something? You scared me half to death."

"Her name, stupid! Her name!"

"Whose name, for chrissake?"

"The Queen! You know Queen Hat. Her name is Hat-shep-sut. I've got it, I've got it!" He began doing a dance around John yelling, "Hat-shep-sut! Hat-shep-sut! Hat-shep-sut!" He finally dropped to the sidewalk and rolled around laughing.

"Omar, cut it out and get up! We'll be late for school."

"Don't you see, John," Omar said, his face all screwed up and earnest, "I *remembered* it. Now you *must* believe me."

"Yes, I believe you. But I think I prefer Queen Hat, and we better run for it or we'll be late. The last one there is a bearded Queen." With those words John took off with his easy loping

strides but slow enough to give Omar, with his short legs, a chance to catch up with him. They just made it to Humewood, Omar's school, as the first bell was ringing. "See you after school, Omar. Keep out of trouble. C'mon gimme five!" They slapped hands—

"Up high—" John said raising his right hand above Omar who jumped up and slapped it.

"Down low—" replied Omar dropping his right hand and moving it away quickly, "Too slow!" he yelled and ran off, leaving John laughing and shaking his head at him.