



# CORA AND BENJI'S GREAT ESCAPE

**BY MARIAMA J. LOCKINGTON**

“I am too old for this mess,” I say under my breath as Mom lines my siblings and me up in front of our minivan in matching, crisp black hoodies that read *Black Is Beautiful* in block lettering with a Black Power fist on the front.

“Cora, please smile. This will only take a second. Then we can get on the road!” Mom yells from the end of the driveway as she places her iPhone tripod in the perfect position in front of us.

“Come on, Coco,” my twelve-year-old twin sisters, Amelia and Freya, whisper at me in unison. “We want to leave. Let’s get this over with.”

“Plus,” Freya continues on her own now, “Sam and

Drew-Drew are not going to be able to keep still much longer.”

Sighing, I look down the line at Sam, my six-year-old brother, and Andrew, who just turned four. Sam is starting to kick up imaginary dirt with his sneakers like it’s his job, and Drew-Drew is swinging his arms side to side and looking wistfully at his abandoned plastic pickup truck a few feet away in the walkway.

I plaster on a smile. “Okay, I’m ready,” I say through gritted teeth. It doesn’t matter that I’m almost sixteen, Mom still thinks I’m her forever baby. She still has me sharing a room with Amelia and Freya, even though I told her I don’t mind moving into her “office” in the basement. But Mom says she needs her “Boss Babe Cave” to be a kid-free zone so she can do all her momfluencer work in peace. I don’t understand why she needs a whole basement just to edit reels of our family and ship out feminist cross-stitch pieces from her small Etsy store, but whatever.

“Oh, you guys just look so cute!” Mom squeals before setting the timer and running over to join us in the shot. She is wearing an identical shirt, except hers says *My Kids Are Black & Beautiful*, sans fist. If Dad were home, she’d have him in one too, standing next to her, and then we’d be complete: “The O’Henry Family—A Salt & Pepper Story.”

If you haven’t guessed already, we—me and my siblings—are the pepper. Each one of us is adopted and Black, and our parents—Lily and James O’Henry from

Madison, Wisconsin—they are the salt.

“Oh, that’s just perfect!” Mom squeals, checking her phone as we all scatter and claim our seats in the minivan. The tension in my shoulders eases up a little as I climb into the passenger seat up front. Dad’s out of town this weekend for work, so that means I get shotgun, Sam and Drew-Drew will be in the middle seats in their boosters, and the twins get the back row. Mom throws her tripod and ring light in the trunk on top of all our bags, and then she hops into the driver’s seat and buckles in.

“Give me just one sec, and then we’re off to Camp Unity!”

“Yay!” Everyone in the car cheers, except me.

“Finally,” I mutter as I watch Mom open Instagram to post our latest family portrait.

“Cora—help me think of some good hashtags.”

“How about, #letsgetontheroad #now.”

Mom purses her thin lips but doesn’t take her eyes off her phone. “Very funny, Cora. I don’t get why you’re so moody these days. You used to love this weekend away.”

I watch Mom type out her caption: “When your family is Black & Beautiful and headed to Camp Unity.” #roadtrip #transracialfamily #momof4 #blackgirlmagic #blackboymagic #mixedfamily #asaltandpepperstory.

“And posted!” she squeals. “All right, fam bam. Let’s blow this Popsicle stand.”

And with that, Mom revs the engine and we are finally on the road.



Camp Unity—“A Black Identity Experience” is a family retreat my family has been participating in ever since I was five years old. From Friday through Monday of MLK weekend, a bunch of families just like ours make our way to a big lakeside conference center just outside Milwaukee to be in community, learn about our Black heritage, and take workshops on antiracism or whatever. Well, it’s really just our white parents that take the intense workshops—us kids, well, we kinda just get to chill until the final night, when there’s a big family celebration, with African drumming, dancing, a raffle, and soul food. It used to be a lot more fun when I was younger—they play a lot of movies for us and have an arts and crafts room, but once you get past the age of like twelve, there’s not much for us to do. In fact, if it wasn’t for Benji, I would have begged Mom to stay home this weekend. Benji (Benjamina to her parents) is my best friend at camp and has been since forever. Benji was adopted as a toddler, like me, and she lives in Chicago with her two moms and a pug named Lolly and is just six months older than me. I only get to see Benji in person once or twice a year, otherwise we stay in touch via text and email, so at least this weekend we get to be bored together.

When we pull into the conference center a couple hours later, it’s midafternoon and the parking lot is full of cars, vans, and SUVs as families spill out of them and head inside to check in. Freya and Amelia immediately spot their

friend Lauren a few cars over and run to envelop her in a hug. I leave Mom in the front seat checking her IG account and get Sam and Drew-Drew out of their seats.

“Grab your bags, boys,” I say, moving to unpack our luggage. “And don’t forget your truck, Drew-Drew.”

“It’s my butt truck!” Drew-Drew says, grabbing his toy.

“That’s not a butt, Drew-Drew.” Sam laughs. “It’s a dump truck.”

“Bump truck!” Drew-Drew tries again, throwing Sam into a fit of giggles.

“Okay, you two. Very funny,” I say, but I also have a big smile on my face.

Freya and Amelia finally extract themselves from their huddle with Lauren and come running back over, asking Mom if they can go down to the gazebo and explore.

“You need to get your bags first!” I say before Mom can chime in. “I’m not carrying all your stuff for you like I did when we left the house. What did you even pack that’s so heavy? It better not be your nail polish collection. That stuff stinks, and you know people have sensitivities.”

Freya and Amelia roll their eyes at me.

“Don’t roll your—” I start.

“Girls,” Mom chides as she steps out of the driver’s seat. “Grab your own bags, please. Let’s all get checked in and find our room assignments. You can see your friends at the opening session.”

Amelia and Freya scowl.

My pocket buzzes, and I pull out my phone.

**Benji:** You here yet? My moms are irritating me already. Also—are there more families wearing kente cloth patterns this year or is that just me?

I snort, and quickly snap a picture of my hoodie. Then I type: Just got here. And I can't speak to the African prints, but this is what my mom had us wear this weekend.

**Benji:** Cora . . . what on this green earth.

**Me:** It was for her Instagram. I'm taking this off as soon as we get to our rooms.

**Benji:** You better. I can't be seen with you in that.

**Me:** Shut up. See you soon. I'll text after we check in.

**Benji:** 🙄

It takes forever to check in, not because it's a super complicated process, but because Mom won't stop talking with other parents, and then Drew-Drew has to use the potty and Sam needs a snack, and by the time this all gets sorted out and we make our way to our dorm-style rooms (one for Mom and the boys, one for me and the twins next door), it's time for the welcome session.

Meet in the auditorium? Save me a seat, I type to Benji as I throw my duffle on the bed closest to the window.

**Benji:** Yep, got you one. Back row.

I grin and shimmy out of my *Black Is Beautiful* sweatshirt. I replace it with a chunky marigold cardigan; then, in front of the full-length closet mirror, I inspect my fit.

I'm wearing high-waisted, gray-washed boyfriend jeans, my black Doc Martens, and under my cardigan a tight, black-and-white-striped tank top. My hair falls around my shoulders in a series of tight box braids, with teal and purple braided into them. It's the first style my mom let me choose on my own, and she didn't insist on trying to do it herself. I love it. I've been keeping my edges meticulous and even using a toothbrush on them like other Black girls on YouTube do. When I see myself with this hair, instead of the messy twist-out Mom used to try to help me style, I feel like a literal queen, a goddess. I hope Benji likes it too. Benji, who has an open adoption, sees her first mom and cousins every few weeks or so. One of the things they make sure to hook her up with are the most immaculate hairstyles. Every time I see Benji, she's rocking a new do—like Goddess braids with gold beads in them, perfectly sectioned out Bantu knots, or a braided headband crown—and for once I'm gonna be just as cool as she is.

“Okay, Cora, we get it. Your hair is amazing. You look like fricken Beyoncé,” Amelia chimes in now as she and Freya come out from the bathroom, where they've no doubt been trying to find a spot to stash their smelly nail polish supply.

“It is amazing,” Freya chimes in with no sarcasm. “I wish Mom would let us get braids like that.” She looks longingly at me and then pats her two Afro puffs.

“She might let you if you keep asking,” I say. “You just

have to be persistent. Wear her down.”

“No way,” Amelia says. “Mom’s feelings would be too hurt. You know how much she loves to do our hair in new natural styles. It’s like half of her content on IG.”

“Yeah, but it’s *your* hair. Not hers,” I nudge gently. Ever since they were born, Mom has had their faces all over her social media, doing all kinds of photo shoots and tutorials with them in matching clothes. Then, when the twins were four and I was seven, she took one class with KidStyles in Chicago—an organization that helps white parents learn how to do their Black kids’ hair—and immediately decided she was an expert. The twins have always had it worse than me, but this year I finally got sick of it. I told Mom that I didn’t want to be in any more of her hair-styling videos. I wanted to go to a salon to get mine done. I think it hurt her feelings, but I still don’t get why. She doesn’t let us play with her hair, she gets to have hers dyed and layered professionally every few months, so why can’t I? In the end, she and Dad gave in.

“That’s what I said,” Freya mumbles. “It’s my hair. Plus, we’re too old for some of the hairstyles she puts us in anyway.”

Amelia gives her a sharp look and then grabs her by the hand. “Come on, let’s go. We’re going to be late for the opening.”

“Conversation to be continued, I guess.” I sigh, grabbing my lanyard, my phone, a tube of cherry ChapStick, and the



key to our room. Then I follow the twins down the hallway and out into the cold January air.

In the auditorium, I find Benji right where she said she'd be. I take the auditorium steps two at a time, toward Benji, who is rocking an amazing, curly mohawk with the sides braided up. She's got small gold hoops in each ear and is wearing a lavender jumpsuit, rainbow Doc Martens, and her signature clear cat-eye glasses.

"Cora!" she says, jumping up to hug me. "Excuse me, your hair is fire. When did this happen?"

I hug her back, hard. Benji is my safe place. Her arms remind me to loosen my shoulders all the way, to breathe, to relax. Remind me that I can be myself.

"You like?" I say, flipping my braids over my shoulder dramatically.

"I like a lot. Might have to copy you," Benji says, nodding.

I grin so wide it hurts and then plop down next to her.

The lights dim as if on cue, and Ms. Jade and Ms. Alice—the codirectors of Camp Unity—make their way onstage. Ms. Jade is a tall, stylish Black woman from Zimbabwe, with a massive, sparkling Afro. She is a sociology professor at Northwestern and is in charge of all the camp's workshops and educational programs. Ms. Alice is an average-size white woman with short brown hair. She has a collection of homemade sweaters for every season and holiday, and today she's wearing a black-and-white sweater