LOLWE

The Giver of Nicknames

Rémy Ngamije

Prelude.

When we were clowns, children, and things - before we sprouted personalities, individual hopes, and collective guilt; before we reconciled all aspects of our conflicting beings - there were four Donovans at our school: Donovan "Donnie Blanco" Mitchell, the rapist; Donovan "Donnie Darko" Manyika, the fastest kid in our phrontistery; the short-lived Donovan Latrell who, hoping to be called Donnie Brasco or DL when he realised there weren't enough Donnies to go around, was called Fatty; and Mr. Donovan, our English teacher - Mr. D for short.

1.

Donnie Blanco was this white kid with colonial money all the way to Diego Çao's arrival in Namibia. His parents had mining interests deeper than Dante's inferno, sat on numerous companies' boards, and owned game farms as big as provinces, panoramic swathes of land with wild sunsets lacking only in the absence of Meryl Streep and Robert Redford to give them their *Out of Africa* romance. Because they paid some of their taxes instead of caching them in Caribbean mulct havens, the Mitchells - Los Blancos - were considered Namibian model citizens. They were allowed to add their billionaire's two cents to any damn topic: Sir Ken Robinson's TED talks; border security and the movement of people, pandemics, and dreams; social media, climate change, or the nutritional requirements of the modern

corporate go-getter. Los Blancos even prescribed parenting methods for raising future moguls. Their money had bestowed upon them prophetic status; I was a nonbeliever. To me, all Blanco's parents had was money - they knew how to play the rigged capitalist game the same way my uncle always made himself the banker whenever we played Monopoly. In everything else, especially in their son, who I still refer to as the rapist to this day because he is, I found them woefully inadequate.

I despised the Blancos because of their privilege. But I especially loathed them for their ability to co-opt my poverty into Donnie Blanco's coverup.

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In addition to his presence at our school - the top one in Namibia - Blanco's parents believed traveling was the best education. Our parents, mostly middle-class folk who stressfully and strenuously financed our stints in private school, believed education was the best education. Unlike Blanco, we were parvenus trying to acclimatise to the rich air of lush lawns, changing rooms with showers (and hot water which flowed unto the world's ending), and a computer lab with more Apples than the Garden of Eden. We weren't collecting passport stamps like the rest of the philatelic travellers with diplomatic passports who made up the rest of the student corps - we were academic workhorses with one job: to keep the test scores high and our parents happy and gloating with their sacrifices. Blanco and his ilk provided the necessary posh veneer which permitted the fees to rise and spike each year like a Six Flags rollercoaster. While we were clocking into and coining out of the lone video game arcade or shuttling between onerous weddings and sweaty funerals in towns so small Google Earth never bothered to give them coordinates, Blanco was hitting up forty countries before he turned fourteen. He'd smelled the hot rubber of the Monaco Grand Prix and posed with Christ The Redeemer. Our English teacher, Mrs. Braithwaite, who gloated over Blanco's globe-trotting essays, always marked down our writings, using her socially distanced red pen to tell us we needed *more traveling in them, broader horizons, higher skies, and a keener sense of adventure.* Basic Bs and discouraging Cs are what you'd get if you hadn't been on a first-class British Airways flight to Amsterdam or Basel. Blanco had A-plussed his way through English because he'd seen the Alps, the Andes, the Rockies, the Hindu Kush, and the Himalayas. We were told

our *compositions barely rose above sleep level*. All we wrote about was the calefaction of days in the North, the sand in the South, and the repetitive stories our *oumas en oupas* told us when we were condemned to stay with them in the long December holidays.

The year I dubbed Donovan Mitchell as Donnie Blanco, his family had taken a tour of the Spanish-speaking world. They'd passed through South America and finished off in Spain, a country they'd visited for what must've been the sixth time. He went on about the *guapa* girls of Ar-*he*-ntina and Chi-*leh,* the Colombian *culo,* and did a lot of *hombre*-ing and *muchacho*-ing about all the friends he'd made in Me-*hi*-co. He returned from Spain with signed football jerseys from Madrid and Catalonia's top teams - the souvenirs we envied most (we really didn't give a shit about the landscapes in his descriptive essays, which Mrs. Braithwaite insisted on reading aloud) - and kept telling the rest of us untravelled *campesinos* to pronounce Bar-*the*-lona properly. Understandably, we were annoyed by this fucking *pendejo.* I, being a much sought after merchant of humiliating sobriquets, the fast-mouthed comeback kid who could roast the devil over his own coals, was assigned to Blanco's case. I took my duty to follow in Carl Linnaeus's scientific steps, to formalise teenage taxonomy in such a way that class, neighbourhood, physical deformities, or crippling insecurities were easily denoted, quite seriously. If my previous work in getting Naomi "Naai-Homie" Nakwafilu (it was one moment of indiscretion, but one too many), Daniel "Lying Den" Shikongo (that one explains itself), Layla "Refu-G-Unit" Madioka (shame, she wasn't a refugee, but we didn't know anything else about Congolese people), and Gottlieb "Gone-Arears" Hendricks (poor kid was always out of school because of late school fees) to become popular nomenclature - even teachers used Pirra, Peeta, and Blackimon, to differentiate between the Canadian, Namibian, and Ugandan Peters - then Donovan Mitchell would've been an easy case.

Only, it wasn't. Blanco's parents directly or indirectly employed most of ours. And we knew it. We didn't want our mammas being called into HR offices and our families being put on the streets because we'd taken liberties with playground banter. We didn't know if corporate retribution played out that way in the real world, but we didn't want to fuck around with our families' well-beings. I wisely settled on Donnie Blanco. He thought it was because he was white. It wasn't. It was the safest and slyest thing we could call him. Because the Gini

coefficient allowed us to outnumber Blanco ten-to-one, and because we were so mad at this boy who had enough money to insult us in foreign languages, Donnie Blanco stuck.

It was petty but sweet revenge.

You see, for all his money, private tutors, and his mother's unchallenged and unconstitutional tenure on our school's PTFA, Blanco was *el imbécil supremo.* He'd been passed through every grade because his parents signed extravagant fundraiser cheques. Our heavily endowed Catholic school which ran from pre-primary all the way to the twelfth grade, true to form with its finances shadier than a clerical scandal, wasn't immune to Blanco money. After the not-so-small matter of Donnie Blanco forcing himself on Aliyanna, and our school's principal, my mother, his parents, and Aliyanna's agreeing to keep quiet about it, I Sherlocked the web of Mitchellin patronage: there was a correlation between Blanco nearly failing the seventh grade and our library's newly minted computer wing; the spiffy senior chemistry lab equipment capable of testing for a Nobel Prize or two followed his entry into the eighth grade; the patchy, sun-smacked grass on our soccer field gave way to expensive and evergreen astro turf in the ninth grade; and in the tenth, after the rape, Mitchell Education Foundation scholarships were handed out to every overachieving student like communist pamphlets in the Soviet republics. Our first- *and*second-string basketball, hockey, netball, and soccer teams attended once rare out-of-country sports tours to Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Mozambique thanks to the Mitchell sponsorship and PR machines for the rest of his tenure at our school. In class, everyone's test scores were read out in ascending order - to keep us competitive, we were told - but Blanco's tests were placed face-down on his desk, top secret, classified, and way above everyone's pay grade. While the rest of us did our best to earn the grades needed to discourage our parents from looking for cheaper schools, we watched Blanco grade-surf each year. We found some comfort in knowing Donnie Blanco was white as snow, rich like whoa, but dumber than daaayuum.

Only later would the full gravitas of the name I'd given him become apparent and abhorrent. Even now, I wonder if the person who names the monster shares the blame with the one who flips the switch to release the lightning-charged current. I still feel like if I'd been braver and

called him Why Boy (because we couldn't fathom a reason for his existence) or Needle Dick (since he was such a prick) things would've turned out differently.

Maybe not.

It's my experience that money alters destinies forever. Kismet for chaos is for broke people. The rich just send karma back to the kitchen if it comes out under or overcooked.

In the principal's office, I'd explained what had happened after basketball practice to the convocation of parents. I thought I was on the road to being an A-grade whistleblower like Daniel Ellsberg or a conscientious objector with a million dollar-grossing biopic from Steven Spielberg soon to be declared.

I told them what I'd seen: *Donnie Blanco raped Aliyanna in the boys' changing room.*

You'd think SETI, with its satellite ears scanning the sound of silence from the outermost reaches of the solar system, would've detected the hush which descended on the room following my testimony. You'd be wrong. There was no reticence.

Money talks.

–Hmm. Did she try to push him away?

–And was it a firm no or a coy no?

–Are you sure it was my son and not someone else?

–Are you certain? A boy could go to jail here. Do you understand that? You must be absolutely sure.

I *Boston Legal'*d my cross-examination.

Yes, Mr. Bla–I mean, Mitchell - she tried to push him off.

It wasn't coy, Mrs. Mitchell - it was pretty robust. (I hate to admit it but I was rather pleased that I knew what coy meant.)

It was Donnie Blanco - sorry, Donovan Michael Earl Mitchell, sir.

I'm telling you the truth, Mrs. Mitchell. It was your son.

Then came a question I couldn't answer.

–What were you doing while all of this was going on?

Everyone leaned forward in their chairs.

–Am I to understand you saw all of this and did nothing?

–You certainly sound like a man of action. Omission or negligence would surely offend or implicate someone like you.

I turned to my mother. She looked at me, frightened by this new line of enquiry from the Blancos who shared a look I couldn't fathom. Mr. Van Rooyen, the principal, slitted his eyes while Aliyanna's parents' eyes scoured my face for any evidence of complicity.

I... err... I...

–Yes?

I didn't do anything, Mrs. Mitchell.

–Really?

(Since then I've equated Mrs. Mitchell's uncrossing and re-crossing of legs - without any Sharon Stone shenanigans - as the quintessential sign of moral indignation and disbelief.)

Err, Mrs. Mitchell, I was, err, too shocked.

–But you're sure the girl was being raped?

Err, yes, sir.

–You don't sound too sure now.

I'm sure, ma'am.

I looked at my mother. Her dotted dress held her gaze in its lap.

–But you didn't do anything.

No, sir. I was too surprised.

–Seems highly improbable to me someone can be aware that such a crime was happening but do nothing about it.

I…I…I'm doing something about it now, ma'am. Mom?

She kept quiet.

I wonder if there's a statute of limitations for shame. I've never forgiven her.

I'd walked into the boy's changing room after being dismissed from practice by our coach. I'd dissented when he prescribed suicides for every missed layup. *(This isn't Remember the Titans, coach. You're not Denzel!)* In one of the showers, Blanco's buttocks peeked over his red shorts (he'd been excused from the team's fitness training for fatigue) as he thrusted into Aliyanna's pulled-up skirt. I, coming across this scene, this after-school activity which made everyone blush in the sexual intercourse module during school hours, had been thoroughly startled.

What the–!

They turned at the sound of my intrusion to me. I pivoted quicker than Michael Jackson on a concert stage and walked out. I went back to the court's bench, shamed (and scared) of being a witness. Ten or fifteen minutes later, Blanco came out of the changing rooms and strutted towards the school's gate. He climbed into the shiny Audi waiting for him. Maybe five minutes later Aliyanna exited the bathrooms, smoothing down her hair, wiping her face. She looked around the basketball court. In the cursory contact of our eyes I understood the difference between an instant and a moment, something Mrs. Braithwaite struggled to explain to us in our literature class: an instant is blinked away, forgotten so quickly it's barely registered, but a moment spills past its temporal occurrence - *a moment has consequences.* Aliyanna walked towards the gate and waited for her parents to pick her up in their significantly less shiny Toyota Corolla.

Only later, as I sat outside the school's gate waiting for my mother, did I realise that a moment can be slowed down, panned around like a three-sixty degree bullet time shot to reveal nanoscopic details you miss in an instance: the biology and physics of penetration had

been explained to us, but what had happened between Blanco and Aliyanna lacked the chemistry of consent.

I recalled his hands wrestling her wrists, her legs looking for purchase on the floor, pelvis trying to push him off, him telling her it was *okay and that they'd agreed.*

I remembered her saying *no, no, no*.

Mr. and Mrs. Blanco were wrong. I had done something: I'd walked to Mr. Van Rooyen's office and barged past his receptionist to report Blanco.

Within the hour, me, my mom, Aliyanna and her parents, and all the Blancos were outside the principal's office. The parents went inside. Aliyanna, Blanco, and I were to be seated apart and wait to adduce our evidence. The gruff and confused receptionist kept muttering about having *a family to attend to even if no one else did and, really, this was above and beyond her duties.* Blanco pressed buttons on his razor-thin flip phone while Aliyanna's knees rubbed against each other with nervous friction. She avoided looking at me.

Aliyanna was called upon first. Blanco and I defiantly stared at each other before he broke the deadlock with a dismissive shrug of his shoulders and returned to his phone. My spine steeled. Blanco was going down.

He was called in as Aliyanna walked out. The two of us sat opposite each other, avoiding all the moments our eyes would make. The recently vacuumed carpet, with its circular whorls of fibres sucked against their grain, seemed a point of interest for her.

I went in last.

–You said you heard my son saying they'd agreed to do "it". Is that correct?

Err, yes, Mrs. Mitchell, but I'm not sure what they agreed to do.

–It certainly wouldn't be the first time teenagers have regretted their choices halfway through something.

I understand, Mr. Mitchell. But she said no.

Mr. Van Rooyen inhaled in what seemed like a business-like manner and thanked me for my asseveration. I waited outside as Aliyanna and Blanco were called back in. With night slipping under evening's covers, the receptionist grumbled some more. The door opened twice, once when the boxy printer and copier churned out a sheaf of documents the principal collected quickly before returning to his office, and the second time, when Aliyanna's family walked out, followed by my mother, the Blancos, and Mr. Van Rooyen.

Everyone, except the receptionist had a moment.

Mr. Van Rooyen broke the pall by saying he was glad *that bit of confusion was ironed out hehehe these things happen you know with all of these teenagers together hihihi bound to happen hahaha yes always bound to happen hohoho.*

Aliyanna's parents nodded to everyone, her head remained bowed. Blanco stood with his boredom weighed on one leg, the other foot-tapped his impatience. Mr. and Mrs. Blanco shook everyone's hand. When it came to me, Blanco's father squeezed my hand too hard while his mother, whose hand was soft, said it was wonderful to hear of my academic, cultural, and sporting talents from the principal.

–He's a fine boy.

My mother looked from Mrs. Mitchell to me and concurred.

–By the way, I'm sure it's just playground nonsense, but why do you call Donovan "Donnie Blanco"?

(I've never heard anyone physically use air quotes with their voice while their hands remained crossed in front of them, Cartier carats counting the seconds.)

It's just a nickname, Mrs. Mitchell.

–Hmm. Of course.

The principal ahem-ed and said such tomfoolery would surely stop and ahem-ed some more as he ushered all of us out, into the parking lot, and into our cars. Aliyanna's family drove away first, out towards the flat suburbs of flattened incomes where we were also bound. The Blancos made for the hills.

On our way home, I asked my mother what had happened.

–It's been sorted.

She kept her eyes on the road.

What does that mean, Mom?

–It means it's been dealt with.

A whetted tone sliced through her voice, signalling that *something* was *res judicata* - decided, settled, and final, certainly not something she wanted to discuss with her sixteen-year-old. The only time she used her silencing voice on me was when I asked about my father: *Your father is just that, your father. Not my husband and not a parent. There isn't much I can say about him.*I could never get more out of her. Whoever he was, wherever he was, whatever he did - all of these were secrets my mother held firmly within herself.

Dealt with how?

–There's no need to bring this up again.

She didn't look at me. She said it to the road in front of us, driving us away from a past she didn't want discussed again.

Bring what up? That Blanco's a rapist?

–I don't want you saying such things in public. Is that clear? I said it's been sorted.

Mom.

–Listen, you have to understand that I work for these people. They've offered to pay your fees. And hers.

Mom!

–Yes?

She said no.

My mother turned to me. In the instant between her engaging the indicator to turn right her mask slipped for a moment. I saw Aliyanna in her face. I saw my father's absence.

–I know.

2.

Before Donovan Mitchell became *un archivo en blanco,* Donovan Manyika joined our school in the ninth grade. He immediately became the top student on our competitive campus. He was Zimbabwean and everything Blanco wasn't: smart, quiet, and the poverty scholarship kid financed by the Mitchell Education Foundation. Manyika knew every African country's capital city, currency, and lingua franca, excelling at everything on the sports field and in the classroom. He Tenzing Norgayed our school's reputation to the top of every maths and science olympiad, general knowledge quiz, and running the home stretch of the relay in athletics meetings, making up for everyone else's lost time, dishing out disappointment and embarrassment to all he passed en route to the finish line. Whenever Manyika's name was announced at our annual prize-giving ceremony everyone applauded loudly. His success was our success, and given how hard he had it nobody envied his achievements. The price of his brilliance was unrelenting hardship - he single-handedly looked after his three brothers and two sisters (also MEF scholars) who were then making their way through primary school, filling in their older brother's footsteps and collecting every bronze, silver, and gold star in the teacher's cupboards. Even though Manyika had our collective respect, I called him Donnie Darko to let him know gravity was a bitch and affected all men equally.

Donnie Darko stole my title: Onion Marks.

When I arrived in the third grade, I didn't make friends easily. I couldn't speak English, Afrikaans, or German. I was shunned. The first couple of weeks were hellish. No Kinyarwanda, no Swahili, not even a smattering of French - in each class I was surrounded by incomprehensible noise. I was a tropical orchid in welwitschia country. Slowly, and with much laughing from the other children at my pronunciation, my larynx picked up some of the common tongues. The only period I enjoyed was physical education. The other kids might

not have understood my words, but they knew exactly what my body said whenever we lined up for races:

–I'm too fast for you. (Bang!)

–You can't catch me. (Five metres!)

–I can let you catch up now. (20 metres!)

–I can let you gain a yard. (45 metres!)

–I can even let you think you're going to win this. (60 metres!)

–But I'm just too fast for you. (Finish line!)

I earned their respect because children, like most people, are drawn to visceral elemental forces like earth, wind, water, fire, strength, beauty, violence, and kindness. They admire and fear speed.

My speed made friends slowly and enemies much quicker.

From the first moment I crossed the finish line in first place I felt Blanco's hate on my heels in second place. Thus far, he'd been the fastest third-grader around. After me, he was another obsolete white boy. I didn't fully understand what I'd snatched away from Blanco until it was taken away from me by Darko. Being Onion Marks made you top dog of the *ludus,* a reputation recorded in the ledgers of the school's history. The fastest runners in each grade were awarded silver onion-shaped pins which sparkled on blazers, letting ordinary *plebeians* know they weren't governed by the normal laws of the *Pax Slowmana.* You bragged like few others could. *No need to cry, man – it's just Onion Marks, bro.* With Blanco's head already struggling to stick with the pace of third grade maths and reading, I stole the sense of selfhood he'd made for himself with his feet. He became slow in more ways than one.

There's no honour amongst thieves, and this is how the story of black-on-black crime goes: you're the sigh of speed at local and regional level, unable to compete at nationals because you aren't a citizen. You focus on destroying the track at provincial meetings, letting everyone else who goes on to represent their country at international competitions know the

immigration laws granted them an unfair head start. At the hundred-metre dash in the ninth-grade you and Blanco stretch in the fast fourth and fifth lanes, eyeing each other. His new running spikes claw the track's surface; your worn-out ones pinch your toes. You take your starting position and inhale once, twice, three times. A vision of yourself crossing the finish line in thunderous glory jumps the gun ahead of you. All you've got to do now is chase your dream down the track. Your name is chanted in the stands.

Onion Marks!

Get set...

His name is Donovan Eloterius Manyika.

He runs barefoot.

All you know about him thus far is that he's the new kid. His heels wink up and down as he sprints in the eighth lane, with you straining to catch him. You're rugged from the sprint and breathless with disappointment.

You watch as Manyika has his skinny arm lifted in the air.

"*ONION MARKS!*"

You catch Blanco's eye.

A moment.

Only one of you has lost the race: he's still Donovan Mitchell. Donnie Blanco. Rich. Slower than you.

But you aren't Onion Marks anymore, the title that made you untouchable.

You're just a second-place shit-talker.

Blanco smiles at you.

Fatty insisted on being called African-American instead of black. He got faux-mad when we called Namibian Coloureds *Coloured*. He couldn't accept things were different on the continent, that whatever black people called themselves in Chicago, Oakland, or Detroit was none of our stick, but here, at home, *in the motherland* - which is what he called it - we had the right to discriminate and differentiate between ourselves as we saw fit. There were blacks, whites, Afrikaners, Coloureds, Basters, Indians, Chinese, Asians, and foreigners (basically, Zimbabweans and Angolans). No amount of Martin Luther Kinging us into disinterested boredom would make us judge people by the content of their hidden and undisclosed characters when the colour of their skins made it quite clear who they were and weren't.

I shouldn't have called him Fatty. But I only realised this later after he committed suicide.

We didn't know casual hazing was a leading cause of death in American teenagers. We assumed a return to Africa would bequeath him a thick skin; a hide so tough it couldn't be penetrated by our tick bites of bad humour.

–Hey, Fatty, your country needs to leave the Middle East the way you need to leave vetkoeks the fuck alone.

–Yeah, Fatty, we know - you're African American in the Useless of A, and maybe that's a badge of honour where you come from, but around here you're just American.

–For shizzy. Around here you're just another Fatty From The Block. Keep quiet.

Fatty had arrived at our school in the middle of the eleventh grade, taking Aliyanna's vacant seat in our classes. The previous year, Aliyanna's parents had decided to move her to another school, not as good, but far away from the scandal they feared might've erupted if she stayed on. They needn't have worried because my mother had promised me everything had been worked out by the adults, everyone was happy with the solution, and everyone, Aliyanna included, thought it was for the best she transfer to another school. My fees had been paid up until the end of the twelfth year of my school career. Our fridge at home filled with food from Spar instead of Shoprite. My mom bought herself a new car and copped me the freshest AND1 kicks. Maybe, I thought, skipping onto the basketball court and shimmy-shaking to applause from the rest of the team, it really was for the best. I was still young. Guilt clung to

me as briefly as my Axe body spray - I was sweating hormones all the time, erupting into young adulthood, and revelling in my status as the tormenter of the uncool and unpopular.

–Now lookahere, Fatty, I've got a philosophical question: if a Big Mac disappeared from a restaurant plate in Atlanta but you weren't in the country, did you eat it?

Besides losing Aliyanna, our old English teacher, Mrs. Braithwaite, had decided to move back to England for fish and chips and to avoid *the crime in this country I swear to god this whole continent has gone to the dogs I should have moved when Zimbabwe happened.* (Back home, she found tikka chicken to be the new national meal because how about them Indians?) Mrs. Braithwaite was an okay English teacher: heavy-handed with the Dickens; oblivious to the fact English wasn't many people's first, second, or third language; decided the range of your linguistic ability based on the first essay of the year regardless of subsequent improvement; and reluctantly conceded Darko wrote better essays than Blanco even if the former hadn't been to the Taj Mahal or the Sidney Opera House. When she told us she was leaving, I hoped our workhouse days were over. Fatty hoped we'd get an American teacher - a viable hope since part of our school's success was having a roster of teachers whose diversity was only rivalled by the UN General Assembly. We didn't have an American, though, so Fatty, with his fanatical belief that whatever came out of the US was better - even though we knew this to be untrue since we had him as proof - hoped we'd get some Frank McCourt-esque English teacher.

–Fatty, as the abdominous fifty-second state in the United Slaves of America, and the preeminent nigga on all things emancipatory, dietary, and otherwise, do you think our new English teacher will prescribe Huckleberry Finn as our course reader?

Huckleberry Finn was prescribed. But our teacher wasn't American; Mr. Donovan was from Liberia - or "Little USA" as Mr. Chikoti, our Malawian physics teacher called it in one of our classes, chuckling at his own little joke. "Okay, now Fat - Latrell - please calculate the force needed to..."

As Mr. Donovan read out roll call in his first class his eyebrows lifted.

–Three Donovans in one class?

Donnie Blanco, Donnie Darko, and Fatty.

Mr. Donovan fixed me with a disinterested look which said he'd met a thousand versions of me before.

–Right.

He finished ticking names off the register, acquainting them with their corresponding raised hands and faces.

Here.

Present, sir.

Yo!

He put the list down.

–Okay. Let's begin with some housekeeping rules. First, if you're a clown and you believe your job is to make us laugh with foolish shenanigans then by all means, feel free to leave this classroom. I don't like clowns. I think they're a waste of good makeup and an unnecessary source of fear. If you're a child, and you think you need more maturing I suggest you go home and take that issue up with your parents. I don't know how to deal with children. My classroom isn't a day-care for spoiled children.

We all sat up, hushed, curious. This was a peculiar introductory soliloquy. Mr. Donovan looked at me directly.

–And if you consider yourself to be a thing, incapable of being respectful towards me, yourself, or your fellow classmates then beware: things exist to be used, once their utility has been expired they're put in the bin. If it's your high duty and supreme destiny to be used and binned please save me the trouble of crumpling you and tossing you into the wastepaper basket.

Mr. Donovan and I stared at each other, both of us seeing who'd blink uncle.

I looked away, seething, vowing to find some way to crush this man who embarrassed me in front of the whole classroom.

–Good. So we'll only have, let's see, Mitchell, Manyika, and Latrell, and all the other government names on this list. You can call me Mr. D for short if you want. But that's it. Does anyone see a problem with this arrangement?

No one did.

–And you, the giver of nicknames, any problem?

No. No, problem, sir.

If there's one thing Mr. D got wrong in that classroom it was to make it a safe haven for Fatty. While I might have been stripped of my power during our nigger-infested readings of *Huck Finn* Fatty's life was a misery before and after the bell rang. He was Fatty from the moment he stepped out of his father's Mercedes-Benz in the morning until he was fetched in the afternoon. That one hour with Mr. D was the only time Donovan Latrell was addressed with dignity.

You know what?

I plead the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, and every other amendment under the sun for everything we said to Fatty. We didn't know any other way to be. We were masters of all things group-y: group-think, group-speech, group-walk, group-slouch, group-exclusion. If I thought something the hive vibrated with the same idea and if we were unconscious about Fatty's depression then I sure as heck wasn't woke to whatever he felt and how it affected him.

He shot himself one Friday evening. His younger sister found him in his bedroom.

When we were told the news on Monday morning in our register period, we all looked at Fatty's empty desk in the front desk, wondering if we were implicated in his death as accessories to cruelty. There were no jokes that day. No wisecracks. No roasting in recesses. Group-recrimination pushed us apart to our individual thoughts and actions, fracturing and sundering us to our own paths and ways of being.

When the card of condolences was passed around our classroom, I alone had no message to write. I just signed my name and passed it on.

Our English classroom was especially grave. Mr. D had liked Fatty - he read a very convincing Jim and had scathing opinions about Huck Finn and people who distanced themselves from wrongs by claiming refuge in groups. (Honestly, when I think about it all, Fatty was subtexting us the whole time.) Mr. D didn't teach that day. He seemed deflated. He put us in groups of three and sent us to the library to research *King Lear* which was our next set work for literature. I was with, yep, Blanco and Darko.

In the library, the three of us didn't talk to each other. Blanco and I had never shared space so closely since that day in the principal's office. He quit the basketball team which meant I didn't have to in order to avoid him. With him not being the Pinky to my Brain in our hateful duo, we never had to wonder what we'd be doing every night: I'd do my best to complete my homework and he'd continue snacking on the world. In this way we'd coexisted - him with his friends, and me with mine. The only time I had to deal with Blanco was when he handed me the baton after running the back stretch in the relay so I could round the corner and give it to Darko, our unbeaten Onion Marks, who then blitzed the shame stretch and brought us the gold. Besides our collaborative efforts to share the podium with Darko, Blanco and I had no other interaction. I'd been cautioned by my mother not to upset him or do anything which disturbed the bedrock of our newfound easy living. To dispense with any need to talk to him, I mumbled my willingness to look up succession controversies in England. Darko said he'd look into mental illnesses. Blanco chose what I deemed to be the easiest topic on the list Mr. D had given us: costumes and dresses of the Elizabethan era.

–Should be easy to wrap myself around that.

What can I say? We were foolish clowns in the circus of life, our teenage-hood was a ringmaster who whipped us through hoops and hopes. In another year we'd have to choose what we would be for the rest of our lives even though in the preceding seventeen we had no idea what anything was about. I interpreted Blanco's words as a slight against me, as an accusation for my part in Fatty's suicide. My stomach boiled. My words bristled. I easily

substituted the weight of Donovan Latrell's suicide for the tangible, assailable mass presented by Donovan Mitchell.

Or easy for you to get under, Blanco. You know, with you being a rapist and all.

—What are you talking about?

We were petulant children. We needed to be raised. For many of us that wasn't happening at home, so we discovered ourselves in the wildness of our wit, our ids served our egos, shielding us with reflexive name-calling and character assassinations which we considered to be part of our basic programming. Later, of course, these things would be knocked out of us. We'd learn about ourselves, about each other, about other people.

But not yet.

I looked at Blanco, desperate to hurt him, to let him know that I knew he wasn't blameless and could never be.

Aliyanna.

Blanco's eyes narrowed.

—What about her?

We were still away from being people. We were things.

We moved through the world, guided by our own utility.

What we didn't respect, we binned.

She said no.

Darko was confused. His eyes ping-ponged between us as we swatted the onus of guilt between each other.

Blanco laughed loudly.

The whole library looked up at us. We were shushed by the librarian.

Blanco took his time dialling down his volume.

He leaned in conspiratorially.

–*So did Fatty.*

Rémy Ngamije is a Rwandan-born Namibian writer and photographer. He is the editor-in-chief of *Doek!*, Namibia's first literary magazine. His debut novel *The Eternal Audience of One* is forthcoming from Scout Press(S&S).