

Oreo Tendencies

By Jeffrey Hunter Jr.

A voice shrieks into my headset so I have to yank it off to rescue my eardrums. Shit. I can still hear screaming on the other end. My controller drops on the bed while I yawn. The only light in the room comes from the TV screen. The console fan spins up.

“Hey squeaker, shut the fuck up and stop screaming, Jesus!”

“Just boot his ass!”

“I muted him.”

“Same.”

awoozy has left the Xbox Live party

The screaming stops. I put the headset back on as players in the game chat chop it up:

“That kid was annoying as fuck.”

“Anyone wanna’ try a different game type after this round?”

I lift off the bed and stare into the game menu. Blue light stresses my eyes. “I’ve probably only got another hour guys. Gotta wake up early for school, unfortunately.”

“Same. How’s the start of freshmen year going, Fee-ji?”

“It’s not too bad, I guess.” I yawn again, spending my last mental currency on scenarios of acceptance because-- “I’m *dreading* tomorrow though, dude.” My foot kicks up and down.

“What happens tomorrow?”

“I have to play basketball.” I sigh.

The game chat members pause—maybe expecting more. They laugh.

“So?”

“I suck ass, dude. I’ve got *no* hand eye coordination whatsoever.” And with everyone watching? I’ve laid low until now.

“Are you trying out for the team?”

“Nah, it’s for PE. Just a couple of lay-ups and stuff, I think,” I say, taming my foot.

Unclench your jaw; drop your shoulders. Airing out thoughts with the game chat helps.

“It’ll probably be fine dude, nothing to stress about.”

“Yeah, you guys are probably right.” I’m overreacting.

“Yeah, I can’t play basketball, either. No point trying unless you a nigga, got hops for real.”

They laugh. Oh.

Should I say it? I grind my jaw. “See, the funny thing I guess is—I am black?” I sigh.

The laughter stops—hard pause.

“Wait—for real?”

“What?” I ask.

“You’re black, Feji?”

“Yeah.” I lean forward. My heartbeat thumps.

“You—don’t really sound black.”

“Ok, well, I am.” I let a laugh slip out. They’re just voices, so am I.

“Nah, no you’re not.”

“Swear.”

“And how you can’t ball? I thought niggas could ball?”

“I’m for real,” I say, “Like, dead ass, bro.”

“But you sound so—I don’t know. I wouldn’t have guessed.”

“How’s black supposed to sound?” My leg twitches up and down. Ima let some slang slip out.

“Like—ya’ know.”

“Aren’t you on XBL in the ‘burbs?”

“Whatever man, I think it’s chill if you’re black.”

If? “Um, ight, well, Ima hit the bed.” I crawl out and reach for the power button.

“I thought you had another hour?”

“I did,” I press the power button.

“What? Feji, c’mo—”

The room dissolves to black. The bedframe creaks as I huddle under the sheets, grip a pillow, and groan into it. Just white gamer bullshit; go to sleep. I fiddle for my phone and earbuds next to me and pull them in. Listening to Otis tonight feels right, some sitting on the dock of the bay. I wedge the only working bud in. My exhaustion washes out with the waves and the starting strings, and I try slipping into sleep, into anywhere but tonight, or tomorrow—I can’t hide behind a mic then.

“Idiots.”

“I really don’t think you should be using those headphones in the car.” Mom’s voice chops into my playlist of anime OP’s. I lean on the car window. On the highway, the cars and lane markers blur. Hopefully today does. School’s coming up.

“Helloo? *Rooks?*” She candidly asks. A highway billboard eclipses the morning sun. She glares my way as its shadow stretches over her eyes.

“Sorry!” I snap the earbuds out. The sun glares through the windshield.

“Everything ok?” She asks.

“Huh?”

“You look tired. Stay up late on that game?” She asks.

“I feel all right.” Actually, I got in bed on time. Falling asleep though—

“Here, I’ll put on some real music.” She reaches near the gear shift for a cd case—keeping it 80s—and hands it to me. She returns to the wheel. “Can you put that in for me?”

I turn over the cover art: A golden mountain range in abstract, a black man beaming bronze eye beams from an open window. *Innervisions*? I slide the disc in. Mom smiles behind the wheel. The sun basks through the windshield and glows over her brown skin, ageless, worrisless. She tunes the audio dial past abrupt chords, searching for a vibe until mellow chords from a Fender Rhodes open, then bass string plucks and a harmony between them. Mom taps her fingers on the wheel to the rhythm. She bops her head as lane markers blur faster, past the speed limit now. Stevie Wonder’s voice blasts through the speakers full of soul.

“The track is Living for the City.” She smirks.

I’ve never heard this one. The car speakers splash our commute with the golden sun rays; every percussive beat is a rush—a pulse, my pulse. I’m weightless and away in the sound as the music speaks in the space between us, a silent conversation, an empathic one. I scroll through my phone to add it.

“It’s a good pick to your classics playlist,” Mom says. “Got a lot packed in it about black struggle, but it’s uplifting too, like a kind of musical solidarity.”

The car slows to a cruise on the highway. The roundabout exit’s coming; we’re almost there. The safe space of the track fades before the hook. My leg shakes in the passenger seat to

my heartbeat, drowning out the sonic fantasy—a throwback to last night—on my own in the dark. What happens if I don't fit my skin again? The car turns on the roundabout.

“Just tired?” Mom asks reaches out and holds my hand. We ride through a neighborhood block, school crossing signs flashing caution. We're close.

“Mhm.” I mumble.

“You sure everything else is good? Something going on at school?” Mom asks.

The car brakes. I face the windshield by me. The high school driveway stretches down the width of the street and just across, the wasteland of social anxiety, a flat, red-bricked building spanning the entire width of the street.

Can I explain a lack of blackness—a lack of me in that mold? The loneliness after the ridicule? “I don't think so?”

Chatter pours through my silent ear bud as I stumble into the Cafeteria. The chaos blends with brass ambience from Christian Scott's *Stretch Music* in my other ear; the jazzy horns herald my arrival. I strut in to the scene: dim sunlight through the cafeteria windows, pastel floor, a scent of burnt seafood simmering into the cream-colored walls. A spread of tables seats each clique.

Suddenly, I feel something—sticking under my Nikes after every other step. I look down and flip my shoe over. Is that—chewed gum? I look up. Classmates at the closest tables watch me like an invader—and they haven't even given me Oreo status, yet.

I shuffle by, staring at blazing sunlight to avoid eye contact. Where's my people?

“Rooks!”

The voice comes from under the windows. Johnathan and Benji wave from a table underneath. Cool. I pull out my earbuds and walk over.

“What’s up, Rooks? You good?” Johnathan asks. He has deep bags under his eyes again.

I pull up a seat. Do I look bad? “Nothing, man. I’m just waiting for PE, tired.”

“You’re tired, I’m exhausted,” Benji says.

“What happened to you guys last night?” I ask.

“I was busting my ass on that pre-cal homework!” Benji yells and taps the table with every syllable. “You’d think that if Mr. Solorio spent as much time teaching as his homework took, we’d actually learn something, but no!”

“Damn, Benji you’re getting loud.” Luke walks up in his bright red Pumas. He takes a seat.

“Damn, Luke! Those shoes look nice!” Benji’s voice carries past the table.

“Easy, Benji, easy.” Johnathan says. We face the cafeteria. The football crew has three combined tables. Their crimson letterman jackets huddle together, and they have blackness across the spectrum: fros, braids, dreads, clean high fades, lean bodies, swole bodies, all colors of black skin. A few of their crew glance over; I suddenly realize Benji and I are the only ones at our table.

“My bad, my bad, I apologize,” Benji says.

“What’s up, Rooks? You look down.” Luke gives me dap.

“I was up playing Xbox Live last night with some assholes,” I groan. “And I’m stressing because I’ve got PE after this.”

“How come we didn’t get an invite?” Benji asks.

“For XBL?” I ask.

“Yeah!” Everyone chimes in.

“It was like midnight,” I say. “I figured you guys were asleep.”

“Nah, I stayed up watching anime for a while,” Johnathan says.

“Oh! Guys, guess what?!” Benji’s voice and arms leap. “I actually just started *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* a few days ago.”

“Oh snap!” Luke says. He leans back.

“For real?” Johnathan leans on the table.

“How far are you?” I ask.

“Well, I just got to the part—”

“Hey! Whatcha guys talkin’ ‘bout?”, a suave voice calls.

I twist around. Jerome walks to our table with his letterman sleeves rolled up, flexing his swole forearms. He has a bounce to his step that makes him glide in his J’s. Benji’s loud ass brought him here in the middle of a niche anime talk, Oreo shit. Abort the convo. Quick, think. “We was just talking about—”

“Anime, we were just talking about anime.” Benji crosses his arms. He stares at Jerome.

I scratch the back of my head on instinct. Damn it Benji.

Jerome arches an eyebrow. “Oh, cool—uh, you mind if I sit right quick?” Jerome asks.

His voice cruises around syllables, a flow I can’t match. Confidently black. Last night, I sounded different.

“Sure,” Johnathan gives the green light.

“Preciate it.” Jerome reclines against the back of his chair. “So, Rooks, you ready for that basketball unit in PE?”

“Eh.” Good, play it cool. Fit your skin.

“Oh, so you didn’t do yo fitness journal?” Jerome asks.

“Oh, well, I got that done, but it’s only with notes about my diet,” I say. Please don’t ask for it.

“Shoot, that’s better than what I’ve got, you know what I’m sayin’? Ain’t got time to write everything on the back of ery box I get food from.” Jerome laughs as he reclines in his chair. He looks over at Benji again., and Benji scowls back. Damnit Benji. Jerome grin is cocky, like he can’t contain his laughter. I watch him glance back at the football table for a split second. “So, y’all be watchin anime, huh?”

“Yeah,” Benji says. Everyone at the table just nods. Don’t geek out, don’t geek out.

Jerome nods his head with us. I can see his eyes dart back and forth to the football table. He keeps looking back at his team. They probably already think we’re Oreos. We’ll be the joke for weeks if Benji keeps slipping, and I’m real-tired of getting racially looked down on.

Quick, break the tension. “So wassup, Jerome?”

“Right, right, I just meant to ask, is it all right if I borrow that journal?” Jerome asks.

Seriously? How hard is it to write down the shit you eat? “Do you need it?”

“Yeah, I got caught up watchin’, uh—anime.” Jerome smiles.

“Uh, yeah, sure thing. Here.” Dick. I hand off the black spiral notebook. “Just be sure to get it back to me when we’re in the locker room.”

“Preciate ya, forreal.” Jerome pats me on the shoulder. He takes off and heads back to the football table. Players huddle around him and pull out journals.

“Seriously?” Benji says.

“I know.” I can’t get caught without the journal when coach checks for it. Should I take it back—in front of the whole football crew? Fuck no. I’ll look like an asshole. I’ll get it back later. How much time is there left in lunch—until PE?

“What is it that’s going on in PE again?” Johnathan asks.

“It’s this stupid basketball unit.” I just don’t get why we have to do sports we can’t do. It’s so stupid.

“But you don’t ball,” Luke speaks my thoughts.

“I know, it’s stupid. I suck ass.”

“It’s all right, Rooks, you’ve just got some Oreo tendencies, that’s all. Basketball isn’t your thing,” Luke says. Benji looks away.

“Yeah, I know.” I want to curl my hands so tight until my fists burn red from the undertones in my skin. Luke’s right: I don’t have Jerome’s confidence or the voice—but I’m not white, so what’s black enough? If I can ball, in front of everyone, will the pressure stop for the next three years?

I watch the crew. Luke and Johnathan already start eating again, but Benji—our eyes meet.

The lunch bell rings. PE’s next.

Fuck it, I’m out of here. “Peace, guys.” I leap from my seat with my backpack and march out of the cafeteria. I jam my earbuds in. I’ve got to go. If I can do this, I can rest easy. My blackness is on the line.

“Hey, whatchu listening to?”

Oh shit--I bump the back of my head on the mini-lockers behind me. I look up. Jerome's six-pack hovers over me as he slips his gym t-shirt on. He reaches for my left ear bud, plugs it in, and waits. He doesn't know. Do I have time to change the song?

"Nothing's playing." Jerome looks at me, sincerely confused.

There's no time. "Only one of my earbuds works," I say as I hand him the working one. The earbud nearly slips out of my sweaty palm. I study Jerome for his reaction. He sits beside me and watches the wall, or wherever the music is taking him.

"What is this?" Jerome laughs and looks back at me with a sly grin.

"It's—'Walk,' by the Foo Fighters," I murmur. I glance around the locker room. No one hears that.

"This what you get hype to?" Jerome asks.

"Uh, sure." I shrug. My anxiety laughs it off.

Jerome laughs and pats me on the back. "You different, huh?"

"Uh—" I stammer.

"Probably why he be so fuckin quiet." A football player in the back of the locker room removes his letterman.

"He just be on his own shit," Jerome declares. He turns away to his locker so I can't read his expression. He calmly shuts his locker in a hushed room; no one talks shit now, not after hearing something so sure, something fitting his aura and skin.

"You coming?" Jerome asks. He hands me back my earbud. The remaining football players shrug and walk upstairs to the gym.

"Oh, yeah, I'll be there in a sec." I pretend to read something on my phone, but I just need to absorb the energy from the guitar riffs a little longer. I want to feel the vibrations in the

chords and sync with them; I'll need the boost. My leg taps to the rhythm of the percussion. I've got to show them up, then they'll see. I can beat the expectations, last night, all of it.

"Bet." Jerome's footsteps echo down the hallway and up the stairs.

Now or never, Rooks. I rise from the bench and walk on. The dim lights guide my way through the basement-level locker room. My Nikes echo across the smooth, concrete floor. Each step feels weighted as my sound travels, and I can feel my heart pumping faster, getting closer to the stairs. Is the music enough? I grasp the brick wall for support as I stop at the base. The light from upstairs casts a spotlight over me. My pulse rushes through my veins, down my legs, and into the static in my toes. I climb the steps and walk into the gym. Everyone's already waiting, sitting on the bright, red bleachers. The waxy, hardwood court causes my Nikes to squeak and nearly slip with every step. Banners of championship sport victories adorn the walls. Handmade posters of the Football players' names and their numbers hang below them; Jerome sits below his with the oversized digits: 23.

"All right, Rooks, finally." Coach Anderson looks down on me. My eyes always jump to his immense arms and towering figure; he could out-buff a professional body builder. He smells like after-shave. "Since everybody here now, we can get started."

The girls sit in a separate clique from the guys. I don't want to look like an outlier. I sit by Jerome to mix in with the rest of the football players; he doesn't budge. I don't think he notices.

"So, we gon' keep today simple. I'm just gon' take up everybody journals at the end. So, we gon' start with the dribbling, then we'll do lay-ups and free-throws. Sound cool? Cool. All right, everybody, grab a ball, and get on the line. Girls in this line, guys over here." Coach

Anderson wheels out a cart of basketballs. We stand in a single file line with everyone facing someone else's back, and orange cones between us. I stand at the end of the line, just in case.

“All right, on the count of the whistle, dribble between the cones, then come back around to the end of the line.” Coach Anderson blows the whistle.

What? Shit, no—fuck. I watch each of the lines start. Jerome dribbles between the cones like he has an invisible tether to the ball. His palm and the ball always coordinate; he never slips up, and his J's glide across the gym floor. He dribbles around, then comes up behind me. I hear his faint breathing. The other players start the cycle. I feel my feet stuttering forward. My hand drops the ball; the ball bounces back. I start dribbling between the cones. The ball keeps slipping to the edge of my palm; my hand just chases it, and I nearly trip over a cone. I clasp onto the ball after it nearly slips from my grip again. Only a few cones left. My hands won't let go of the ball again. I just step between the cones with the ball in my hands.

“Rooks, what is you doin'?” Coach Anderson smacks his forehead and shouts across the gym. I feel the eyes on me. I feel my status slipping, solidifying into a whitewashed Oreo who can't ball. I drop the ball back down for a dribble, but the ball's edge slips from my fingers and rolls towards the girl's line. I just hear laughter as I nearly trip in a rush to grab my ball. One of the girls stops mid-drill to let me catch it. I can feel the eyes. A football player snickers. I run back to the end of the line and try to recapture some composure with heavy breathes. My heart races—just from the drill?

“All right, all right, we gon' do layups next,” Coach Anderson shouts. “On the whistle—” He blows.

Jerome takes off with speed and precision. He jets for the basketball net and lifts off the ground. The ball loops over and teases the rim until it falls through the net. He waits to grab his

ball, then dribbles to the end of the line. Everyone follows, one after the other, no hesitation. I step in front next.

“Here we go,” someone in line murmurs, then chuckles.

I run forward with my eyes on the hoop. The ball stays in my reach as I stride forward. I’m getting closer. I get under the net and let the ball loose—upwards towards the rim—and over my head. I don’t hear the rim.

“Ay, yo! What’s that Oreo doin man?!”

I look over my shoulder. The ball falls back to the ground with me. Shit. It must not have reached. One of the players laughs hysterically. I watch my ball bounce away to the girl’s line again.

“It’s ight, Rooks. Just grab your ball and get back in line,” Coach Anderson’s voice booms. The guy’s line explodes with laughter. I jog for the locker room.

“Rooks, Rooks! Where you goin’, man?” Coach Anderson asks.

“I’m just gonna run to the bathroom real-quick.” I hope the embarrassment doesn’t spill from my tone because I’m shaking. Coach Anderson just nods. I hurry down the stairs, down to the bench. I swing my locker open and slam it against another. I reach for my backpack, and then I pull out my phone and my earbuds. I need the right track. I need to breathe. I sit down on the locker room bench. I am black, just not enough. They’re right. They see the Oreo, the misfit, the contradiction. My head feels heavy. I lean in deep as my head drops below my shoulders and I hunch over. I wedge in my earbuds. My right has a myriad of bass guitar, piano interjections, the onset of drums, and the backup singers painting a Motown R&B landscape. My left has a brief interruption of basketball sneaker squeaks from upstairs until hollow air creeps in. Footsteps

linger in the hallway. My empty earbud catches them. They sound closer. Jerome turns around the corner and stands over me again.

“Hey, man, you comin’ back up?” he asks.

Can’t get even a moment of peace. “Yeah, I was just taking a minute,” I say.

He nods. “Whatchu listenin’ to now?” He pulls out my working earbud. I can only hear the void in the other; I can’t read his expression, but he starts bobbing his head. “Stevie Wonder?”

“Oh, yeah,” I stutter. My leg wags. Stop it.

“Which track is this?” Jerome asks. “It sounds good.”

“Living for the City,” I say.

“I like it. Never heard it before, just Superstition and some other stuff,” Jerome says. He takes a seat on the bench next to me. “You know, this the type of music my folks listen to.”

“Same.”

“Got any other stuff like this?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a playlist full of the stuff my mom makes me listen to in the car.” I laugh.

“No way, I thought you just listen to—like, rock stuff.” Jerome keeps listening.

“That’s not all I’ve got,” I say flatly. Of course, that’s all he expects.

“That’s wassup. You oughta send me that playlist bro, I’ve been lookin’ for something new to jam to,” Jerome says.

“Sure.” I nod.

“Also, I heard you guys talking about anime earlier?” Jerome asks.

“Huh?” What anim— “Oh!” Damnit Benji. I grind my teeth as my thoughts scatter into static. I can’t dodge the question. Fuck it, I couldn’t dodge the court upstairs. “That’s Benji. He just, uh, he—just started this show called—*Gurren Lagann*.”

“A what?” Jerome snickers, probably the name.

“It’s this mecha-anime that got directed by the co-founder of Studio Trigger? Pretty dope.”

“Well, I ain’t seen it, but I seen *Fullmetal Alchemist* if you heard of that?”

What? “The original, or brotherhood?” I blink twice, processing.

“Brotherhood.” Jerome smirks.

“Good shit.” I smile. Repress the nerves—*what is happening?*

“Yeah, man. It’s a good-ass show,” Jerome admits. I watch his eyes read me. I’m not sure what to add so I sit in silence. Jerome’s bottom lip protrudes. “What, a nigga can’t like anime?”

“Nah, I just didn’t—nah,” I fumble my words and laugh it off.

“Nah, man,” Jerome laughs. “I just don’t talk about it all too much, but a lot of the team’s seen it.”

“Wait, for real?!”

“Yeah, c’mon, that’s quality shit.”

“True.” True. Maybe— “You know what, let me send you that classics playlist whenever we get done with PE.”

“Bet, sounds good, Rooks,” Jerome says. He taps me on the shoulder and stands up.

“I’mma head back upstairs before coach yells, and, uh, I meant to hand it off to you earlier, but—” Jerome reaches into the locker behind us. He pulls out my fitness journal and places it next to me. “Catch you.” He gives me dap and goes upstairs.

I feel a smile breaking through. I let the song play out as the background singers crescendo and the instruments fade out. The background singers cut off and fade to black. I feel the silence. For a moment, I fit my skin; I feel me. Yeah, bet.