

ENTERTAINING GUESTS

by M. K. Young

I don't know what I expected when I walked into the Haveland's house that Christmas morning. Some kind of mansion, I guess, which it sort of was. Least to me. They seemed to think it was normal, even apologizing for it, like in the car on the way from Detroit to Bloomfield Hills, Mr. Haveland was all, "I hope you'll feel comfortable at our home," and stuff like that. Or Bobby—the son just my age—telling me it wasn't the greatest house in the neighborhood. It was like they were trying to set me up for something, afraid I'd be disappointed it wasn't better.

To me, their house looked fine. I don't mean "fine" the way white folks say it, where they just mean it's okay. I mean fine the way we say it, dragging out the "i," like you tell your girl she looks fine when she's gone and put on her face and done her hair up right. Or when your brother has a fine ride, all tricked out with chrome tail pipes and custom rims. Fine means some effort has been made, and you're showing that effort some respect.

The Havelands had done some serious effort on their house. Even outside, they had this huge pine tree full of lights, and two deer next to it, the light-up kind that move their heads. The neighbors had deer too, like they were living in the middle of the country,

instead of a house-house-house kind of place, where they all look mostly the same and everyone has a little bit of grass.

Mrs. Haveland came right out to meet us, soon as the car pulled into the garage. She didn't have a jacket or anything. I don't know how she stood the cold, her being as thin and pale as a heroin junkie. She smiled real big and called, "Come in, come in," and, "It's so nice to meet you Jamal," like I was some kind of grown-up friend to her, instead of this kid she was sponsoring for the holiday.

Getting rid of us for Christmas was something they did at the group home. They found families to take each of us. Real nice families, is what my friend Curtis said. Last year one family gave him a basketball and a calendar and warm socks. I didn't tell him that last Christmas I got a lot more than that. 'Course, last Christmas I was still living with my Granny. The people who run the group home, they have to spend Christmas with their own families. Thanksgiving was bad enough, with all those long faces dishing up the turkey loaf and canned green beans.

The Havelands seemed happy I was there, and that was good enough for me. I grabbed my bag and followed Mr. Haveland through the door. Inside was full of food smells. Not a nasty stink like the cafeteria at school, or the church basement potluck. This was like on that TV commercial when they're making cookies, and that pudgy girl takes a bite, and she smiles at her mama, and her mama smiles back, and you just know it smells like a kitchen is supposed to smell. The Haveland's kitchen was like that.

"Come on, Jamal. I'll show you where to put your bag," Bobby said. "We don't have a guest room or anything like that, but I have bunk beds."

Bobby took me upstairs and showed me where his room was. It was big, like I expected. Bunk beds on one side, dresser and bookshelf and desk on the other. In the endless floor of the middle sat a real telescope, pointed out the window.

“I hope you don’t mind the bottom bunk,” Bobby said. “I always sleep on the top.”

“That’s all right. I sleep on the bottom at home.” Curtis slept above me. Kept me safe.

“Oh, you have bunk beds at the orphanage, too?”

“Uh-huh.” I didn’t tell Bobby how much I hated that word. I wasn’t about to give him the ammunition. Curtis liked to play with it, pulling it out. He could make one word be like a whole sentence. Oooorrrphanage. “We the poorest little orphans in the oooorrrphanage.” I was not an orphan. I had a mama, somewhere. Nobody quite knew where, that’s all.

A computer keyboard sat on the desk, but the seventeen-inch monitor sat on top of the dresser. I asked Bobby how come.

“I’ll show you.” He turned it on and pushed some buttons. Next thing, there’s CNN on the screen. Bobby climbed up into his bunk. “I have a cable modem. That means streaming video. My parents think I’m doing homework, but I can lie in bed and watch television.”

I thought about what would happen if I tried that at the home. Anyone who got caught skipping homework may as well kiss all his privileges goodbye. Not like we had a decent computer like Bobby’s anyhow. We had one sorry machine for all eight of us.

I planted my bag on the bottom bunk and sat next to it. The bedcover had printed sailboats on it, going in all directions. I thought there must be about three pillows, but when I pulled back the cover, I saw it was only one. Everything in the room was bigger

than it should have been. Even the bedposts were made out of four by fours, instead of the spindly little legs my bed stood on. When Bobby jumped down from his bunk, I quick stood up to make sure I was still taller than him, to make sure I wasn't shrinking too.

Last week, the social worker had come by the home to talk to us about our holiday visits. She said we weren't allowed to be jealous. She acted like we never saw money before, like we'd never seen people with more. I didn't envy Bobby Haveland, though. I just wondered, that's all. I wondered why some families had so much grip. People said it was because they worked harder. I was working my bumper off, letting go of that jealous thing. Guess it didn't count.

"You okay?" Bobby asked. "I mean, if you want to watch TV too, I can move the monitor to my desk."

"No, it's cool," I said. "I got these things. . ." I pulled the gifts out of my bag.

The social worker had taken me shopping at Wal-Mart, to buy Christmas presents for the Havelands. She mostly let me choose them myself, even fronted me a couple bucks when I came up short. Then she made me get an extra gift for Mrs. Haveland. Said it was a hostess gift, whatever that means. She said it was like when company comes over to your house, they bring something. My Granny's friends used to do that, but it was always a pie or a coffee cake or something they made. The social worker advised me to get some perfume. She wanted me to smell the different kinds, but I just grabbed the first one.

"Is there someplace I can put these?" I showed Bobby the presents.

"Yeah, those should probably go under the tree. We'll go ask my mom."

Bobby tried to carry some of the packages, but I told him I'd do it. I balanced them in my arms all the way back to the kitchen. Mrs. Haveland had a lid off a pot, and was stirring something hot. The steam made her yellow hair poof out around her face. With her

startled eyes and bony cheeks, she looked like a newborn chicken. Bobby pecked around her, picking up a cracker here, an olive there, pretty much anything on the counter was fair game. She finally caught him with a mouthful of cheese and told him to quit snacking and go set the table.

“Ah, Mom! It’s Andrew’s turn.”

“Andrew’s taking care of Grandma. You do it.”

“Ah, man!”

It looked like setting the table was a real hardship for Bobby. I decided to help him out as soon as I had a free hand. “Um, Mrs. Haveland? I was wondering where I can put these presents.”

“Oh, honey, call me Kendra. Mrs. Haveland is my mother-in-law.”

I didn’t say a word. There was no way I could call her Kendra. I could feel my Granny’s hand reaching down from heaven and smacking me upside the head if I tried that. But of course Bobby’s mother wouldn’t settle for Mrs. Haveland. There was nothing I could call her at all.

“The tree is right through there.” She pointed with the spoon. “You can put them anywhere near the tree.”

I nodded and backed into the other room. It was a front parlor, the nice room in the front of the house where nobody ever sat. This one had a double-high ceiling and was open to the dining room, where Bobby was setting out plates. Smack in the front window stood a Christmas tree, also double-high. I’d seen trees like that in stores and always wondered what kind of houses they went in. It wasn’t decorated like in the store, though. Angels pushed up against teddy bears and glass balls and paper decorations everywhere.

Two people sat next to the tree. One looked just like Bobby, but a few years older, so I figured him for the brother, Andrew. A wheelchair was pulled up by him, with an old lady in it.

“You must be Jamal,” Andrew said. “Welcome.” He stood up and tried to shake hands with me, like he was an adult or something, instead of maybe sixteen. I couldn’t shake because of the presents.

“You can just put those under there.” He pointed to the tree.

I could see that most of the boxes were already opened. Books, CD’s, sweaters, a cell phone. A pair of skis stood guard in the corner. There were only a few unopened gifts left. I shoved mine in the back.

“This is my grandmother,” Andrew said, pointing to the old lady. “She doesn’t talk.”

“Like, at all?”

“She could before,” Andrew said. “But she had a stroke, and now she can’t. She lives in a nursing home. My dad springs her for holidays.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” Now what? Nobody said anything about a grandmother. The social worker only told me to buy presents for four people. It wasn’t my fault if she didn’t tell me.

“Grandma can’t talk, but she’s still very sharp. She’s been the reigning bridge champion at her nursing home for three years now.”

Grandmother Haveland held up four fingers.

“I’m sorry, four.” Andrew smiled. “Nothing gets by you, Grandma.”

She stared at me for a long time before nodding. Her intense blue eyes looked right at me and I could tell that Grandmother Haveland was going to be trouble.

The old lady pointed to me, then to the chair next to her, asking me to sit.

“Uh, thank you, Mrs. Haveland, but I gotta help Bobby set the table.”

“That’s okay,” Bobby called. “I’m almost done.”

I walked on over there anyway. The table was set up with only one fork at each place, hallelujah. Bobby had put a red napkin next to each plate. “Mind if I do up the napkins a little bit?”

Bobby shrugged. “Go ahead.”

I fluffed the first napkin, deciding what shape I wanted to make. Origami napkins were a daily pastime with my crew. We weren’t allowed to leave the table until everyone was done eating. Enrique was the slowest eater on the planet, so we had a lot of time to kill at the end of meals. These fabric napkins didn’t stand up as well as the paper ones at home, so making a cat or a boat was out of the question. In the end, I made a fan with a little center twist to give it some style. The plates had snowmen on them, and I centered the napkins like a bow-tie under each snowman’s chin.

“Jamal, that’s beautiful!” Mrs. Haveland said. She was starting to bring food out from the kitchen. “Where did you learn that?”

I shrugged. “I think Curtis taught me that one, or maybe Mike. The guys are always making up new ones.”

“Make another one!” she demanded.

I stared at the napkin, not fully sure how all the folds went without Curtis to copy. But I twisted and pulled until somehow a peace crane appeared out of the napkin.

“Adorable,” Mrs. Haveland said. “Andrew, come look at this.”

Andrew stole up behind me. “Cool.”

“I could teach you,” I said.

“Nah, I’ll watch. You do it. What else can you make?”

Now what? I plain forgot how any other shapes were made. And most of the hard ones took two napkins. I moved to the next plate and worked on some more folds. There was absolute silence, everyone watching the play of my black hands on the red napkins. I worked out a simple flower, even if it was lopsided and wouldn’t stand up.

“Never mind,” Mrs. Haveland said. “You can try again later.” She went back into the kitchen and brought out more food. Bobby and Andrew helped, but they wouldn’t let me. Said I was a guest. So I stood there, feeling the fool, while they all chipped in to get it done. Even Mr. Haveland appeared out of nowhere to fill up water glasses and wheel his mother to the table. When I asked where I should sit, they put me right across from Grandmother Haveland. I could feel her eyes on me as I bowed my head for the blessing.

At home, we always said grace before meals. Not at the Havelands. There was this pause, then everyone started filling plates and passing dishes, like some unspoken hint had gone around the room that it was time to start.

I was afraid that all the food—ham, sweet potatoes, mashed potatoes, two vegetables, bread, salad—wouldn’t fit on my plate. I looked around for the macaroni and cheese, but there wasn’t any, so I had some extra room after all. I told Mrs. Haveland how good it was.

“I’m so glad,” she said. “I’ve been cooking all morning.”

She laughed, but I didn’t know why that was funny. My Granny used to cook all day, and then you’d have to hear about it all day. And she wouldn’t be laughing. Nobody ever laughed about the cooking at the group home either. The people there, they seemed to pride themselves on making dinner in a half hour or less. They thought we boys couldn’t taste the difference.

Most of the dinner conversation was supermarket chatter. None of it meant a whole lot. Nobody raised their voice, nobody had it on over anyone. It was the quietest, politest meal I'd ever eaten. They even finished each other's sentences, like it was a rerun they'd seen too many times before.

Then, toward dessert time, is when the interrogation began. They'd been careful up to then, but I ate their food, I owed them something. Once the pie was cut, it was time for the dippin' and dabbin' into my life.

The social worker had told me I had to be charming and polite. I'd asked Curtis about that. I mean, I knew how to be polite, and get along, but what was charming? Curtis said it was easy. He said to gas them up, to make them feel good. Said a couple of grins would take you far.

So when they asked about life in the group home, I told them how they made us study a lot, and we mostly got nothing but A's. They liked that. "But we have fun, too," I said. Quiet as it's kept, I told them about the time Curtis short-sheeted everyone's bed, including his own, except for Mike's, so Mike got blamed.

"What's short-sheeting?" Bobby wanted to know.

"I'll show you later," Andrew said.

That made them smile, except for Bobby, and I noticed that Grandmother Haveland wasn't smiling either. She turned her high beams on me and gave her head a little shake.

"Then there was the time that Curtis—" Again I saw the shake. It wasn't like some old people who quiver without really noticing it. This was like she was shaking her head no, but only so I could see. I looked around to see if anyone else had noticed, but they were all waiting for me to talk, leaning over the table, eyes wide.

“We went to the State Fair, and they have these rides, like the ferris wheel and the bumper cars, and there’s this haunted house, right? Well, there’s this clown that’s been following us around all day. He has the scary white make-up and the big nose. Curtis keeps telling him to back off, but the clown likes it. He thinks Curtis is just playing.”

I looked at Grandmother Haveland. She looked down at her plate and picked at her pie, like I’d done something disappointing.

“So what happened?” Andrew wanted to know.

“Well, old Curtis, he’s getting mighty flamed at this clown. He grabs catsup from the coney stand and then goes into the haunted house. We tell the clown not to follow him in there, but the clown, he doesn’t want to hear that static. Next thing we know, Curtis comes out the other side, and the clown comes out all red.”

“Weren’t your chaperones angry?” Mr. Haveland asked.

“Curtis swears he tripped. Then he’s like, ‘I only get one field trip a year, don’t make me leave,’ which is a lie because we get field trips all the time. We thought the clown was going to put the scream on him, but Curtis acts all sorry and offers to buy the clown some popcorn out of his own grip. By the time he’s done, the clown is apologizing to him. Let him ride the bumper cars three times for free.”

Mrs. Haveland reached over and patted my hand. “Your friend sounds delightful.”

“He’s crazy,” I said. Then I thought maybe the Havelands would think I meant he was certifiable, instead of just wild. So I told them, “He’s stuck on stupid.”

At that, Grandmother Haveland tipped over her water glass. There was major upheaval, mopping up the table and the old lady. She looked sorry and made some kind of sign in the air, some kind of apology with her hands, but Mr. Haveland told her not to fuss.

Dinner was pretty much over by then, so we went into the front parlor to open gifts.

“The boys opened all of theirs right after breakfast,” Mrs. Haveland said. “But we have a few things under the tree for you.”

I tried to give them my presents first, but they weren't having any of that. They all sat in a circle, checking me out while I undid a package. The first one was from Bobby. The box was too big to be a shoe box, and I couldn't picture what was inside.

“Just rip it,” Bobby said. “That's what I do.”

So did I, when I was a kid, and I couldn't wait to see my crayons or whatever. Ripping the paper was about as mature as playing the yo mama game. Besides, it had been a long time since anyone had gotten me a present, and I wanted to draw it out. I undid the paper and pulled on the end, then I undid the other end and untaped the middle. I could see what it was: a football. I smiled at Bobby. “This is great, man, thanks.” The group home had a little bit of a back yard. I guess we could throw it around back there.

“My turn,” Andrew said. He handed me a flat box.

I unpacked that one just as slow, even though I guessed what it was already. Only a CD came in a box like that, so the only excitement was which one. It turned out to be Usher, who lays down some all-right cuts.

“You don't have that one, do you?” Andrew asked.

I said I didn't, even though I didn't know for sure. We kept all our CD's in the common area, and it was possible that one of the other guys had the disc. “I like this a lot. Thank you.”

“You, um, have a CD player, right?”

“Sure.”

Bobby turned to Andrew and high-fived him.

“Down, boys,” Mr. Haveland said. “It’s not a competition.” He handed me more boxes: the usual parent stuff, gloves and socks.

“Oh, Mom!” Bobby said when he saw them. “You always get us gloves.”

“Hush,” Mrs. Haveland said.

I tried the gloves on. They felt warm. A lot warmer than the raggedy pair I had now. My heart was doing the squeeze on me, because I didn’t know what to say. They bought me the same thing they bought their own sons. These were stand-up people.

Then it was my turn. I looked at the pitiful little pile left under the tree. I didn’t know the right thing to do. I wanted to start with Bobby, since he gave me a gift first, but I could feel my Granny’s hand again. I was supposed to start with Mrs. Haveland. So in the end, I kind of gave them all out at once. I guessed exactly right for Bobby. He liked the computer game, and Andrew seemed okay with the sunglasses. I gave Mrs. Haveland a fancy cake plate. She ohhed and ahned over it, and so did Mr. Haveland with the shot glasses. They had golfers on them. His was the hardest present to buy, but the golfer glasses looked like a dad present.

I held back on the perfume, feeling shaky. All through the gift exchange, Grandmother Haveland had been staring at me with her spooky blue eyes.

“Um, Jamal? There’s one more gift under the tree,” Mrs. Haveland said.

“It’s for. . . .” I picked up the little box. “You.” I put it on Grandmother Haveland’s lap.

Grandmother Haveland smiled, a big grin showing those fake old lady teeth—too straight and too white. She ripped off the paper like a little kid. As soon as she saw what it was, she tore the box open and sprayed some on. Too much.

The scent filled the room, and I instantly knew I did wrong. This perfume smelled way too good. This perfume was a mink in heat. This perfume was a hot piece of tail, slamming twice before she even went to work.

Grandmother Haveland closed her eyes and breathed in deep. Then she wheeled her chair over to me. She reached out one of her hands, all spotty and veiny, and took my hand in hers. Her eyes wrinkled up at the corners as she leaned so far forward that I thought she'd fall out of the chair. I could see the bad weight shooting out of the Haveland's eyes and landing on my head. What did an old woman need perfume for?

"Oh, Grandma!" Bobby sang out. "You're going to be the man-killer of the nursing home."

It was so much what we all were thinking that everyone stared at Bobby.

Grandmother Haveland thrust her chin out at Bobby to say "So?"

I couldn't help it. I laughed. So Grandmother Haveland wanted to smell good, maybe a little bit like a hot mama. Maybe take some of that old lady smell off her. What was the harm?

Things kind of broke up after that. Mrs. Haveland declared that she wasn't going to touch a single dish for the rest of the day. "I'll keep mother company until she's ready for her nap," she said, and put her feet up. I never heard of a woman letting her kitchen go like that, but Mrs. Haveland was the shot-caller. Andrew and his father did the dishes. I bust suds with the best of them, but they wouldn't let me help.

Bobby and I went upstairs to try out his new game. It was a decent game, one of those 007 ones, that I found in the clearance bin. While Bobby installed it, I looked through his telescope. It was only four o'clock, wouldn't be dark for another hour, but he

said I could try it out anyway. I couldn't see anything except the neighbor's houses. I spied on their windows for a bit, but I never saw anything happen.

"It doesn't work!" Bobby yelled.

I jumped back to see him glaring at the computer monitor.

"This game you bought doesn't work! Man, I really wanted to play it today." He picked up the package and gave it a shake. "Didn't this thing come with directions?"

"I'll find them." I backed out of the room. Stupid cheap clearance junk. Not a big stretch to make it my fault. Maybe the directions were still under the tree with the wrapping paper and boxes. I hustled downstairs to the front parlor.

The only lights were from the tree, burning through the gathering darkness. Grandmother Haveland sat next to the window. I looked for someone else, wondering who was watching her, but she was all alone. Before I could slow my roll, she spotted me.

"Hey, Jamal," she said.

I wouldn't have been more surprised if one of the lawn deer had started singing Jingle Bells. Andrew said his grandmother couldn't talk, and the old lady hadn't said anything all day. There was some kind of dead cat on the line, but I couldn't figure out what.

"You can talk?" I asked.

"Of course I can talk. I just choose not to."

This was beyond freaky. Old lady doesn't talk, except to me. I started thinking maybe I was a miracle worker. Maybe she was so bothered by a black child under the same roof, sitting at the same table with her, giving her some slutty perfume, that she had to overcome her medical problems to give me a piece of her mind.

She pointed out an empty chair next to her. I walked into the room, but sat on the sofa, as far from her as I could. Who knows, maybe she could walk, too. “Where is everybody at?” I asked.

Grandmother Haveland did a shrug. “I pretended to be asleep until Kendra left me alone. I believe my son has stepped out for a cigarette.”

I wrinkled my face at her. “There’s stores open today?”

“He hasn’t gone out to buy cigarettes, my dear. He’s gone out to smoke one. He’s not allowed to smoke in the house.”

I sat back in my chair, amazed. A man couldn’t smoke in his own house? “Are you playing with me?”

“I’m serious,” Grandmother Haveland said. “I bet you can’t wait to tell your friend Curtis that one.”

“Sure, you’re right.”

Grandmother Haveland nodded. “You seem very fond of him. But I need to give you some advice. Don’t brag about Curtis so much.”

I checked out the floor. “I needed funny stories and I don’t ever do crazy like Curtis.”

“Stories are fine, but next year, they’ll want the real thing. If you don’t watch out, they’ll want Curtis instead of you.”

I felt my shoulders slump. No, they wouldn’t do that. The Havelands weren’t like that. They gave me gloves.

“The oragami was nice,” Grandmother Haveland said.

“It’s about all I got.”

“Then get better at it, my dear. The Havelands love entertaining guests.”

“You mean. . .”

“I used to be the one with the stories, the jokes, anything for a laugh. I took children’s joke books out of the library so I’d always have a new one for my grandsons. I watched Comedy Central on TV looking for material. I was the life of the party. Some years back, I had a little stroke, and talking became difficult. That was the dreariest Christmas on record for my little audience. The next year, they started sponsoring orphans for the holiday. You’re the third in as many years.” She looked out the window, where the light-up deer turned their heads from side to side. “I used to be the Christmas entertainment. Now you are.”

I wondered if Grandmother Haveland was all right in the head. Maybe she was one of those Alzheimer’s people. She could be. But she acted as sensible as I was. “Isn’t it hard, not talking to your own family?”

“Not at all. It’s a huge weight off.”

I crossed my arms in front of me. My own Granny only gave me the silent treatment when she was fuming mad at me. She’d never do it out of spite. Or for fun. I wondered how much of a burden the Havelands could be.

“Ohh, it’s getting chilly in here,” Grandmother Haveland said. “Would you bring me that afghan, dear?”

I fetched her the blanket from the back of the couch and helped her spread it on her lap.

“You are a very nice young man,” she said.

I sat down next to her. “Thank you, Mrs. Haveland.”

“What would you be doing today, if you were back at the group home?”

I shrugged. “Not much. Reading books, looking at TV, hanging out.”

“The same thing I’d be doing,” she said with a sad sigh at the end. I felt her mood take a flying leap into me, and all of a sudden, I was rippin’ homesick.

“South Park is on at nine o’clock,” she said.

I stared at her, wide-eyed. “You do not watch South Park.”

Grandmother Haveland nodded. “Every week. The women on my floor think I’m nuts.”

“You’re not nuts.”

“You know, I’m an orphan too.”

“Yeah.” I smiled. “Yeah, I guess you would be, at that.”

Grandmother Haveland leaned over and took my hand. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Together we looked out the window, where the light-up deer on the lawn shook their heads back and forth, back and forth, putting the hush on everything we had to say.

THE END