

You know, like, when you don't know why you're friends with this dude cause he gets on your case and you definitely know he's crushing on you cause you're like, probably the prettiest, nicest, funniest girl he's ever seen in his life? There's this guy, Brent, who got all up in my biz constantly without me even asking him anything. "Are you okay Jen?" "Don't cross the street Jen, it's dangerous!" "I can help you out with math if you need it, Jen!" Bruh, I ain't, like, 2 years old, chill. Brent hung around our group all the time and I didn't say a word to him cause I knew he was sketch. But there was this one time... he actually did something pretty sick.

Monday, I had just got outta class, where Mr. Marc yelled at me for packing up my bag, like, 2 seconds before the bell had rung, so on top of it being Monday I was pissed as hell. I walked out to the front of our school at the bike racks, where me and my friend, Stacy, always met up to bike home. Stacy took forever to show up, and I know she should've only taken, like, 25 seconds to show up cause I know she has Ms. Katz who's right by the bike racks. Stacy's red, frizzy hair was bouncing up and down as her chubby legs were trotting over to me. She pushed her glasses up and was like, "Sorry Jen! I had to talk to Ms. Katz about something that was wrong with my grade." I was like, "Yeah, yeah. Let's just get going. Wanna go to Mike's?" She said yeah. Mike's is a coffee shop that's close to my house so I like going there after school all the time to work on homework and stuff.

We were about to leave when we both heard our names get called. Stacy and I looked at each other and rolled our eyes. We turned our heads to see Brent jogging over with his backpack on one shoulder. Brent is not someone who's what I would say, like... good looking...? I know that sounds mean but it's kinda true. His black eyebrows are a little thicker than other guys, he obviously doesn't pay attention to his hair in the morning since it's, like, pointing in every single

direction, and he could probably lose a little weight, to be honest. He *might* be cute if gets his braces off, but that's, like, it.

He asked us where we're going and like an idiot Stacy told him we're going to Mike's. His eyes lit up like he just found out Christmas came early this year and was like "Cool! I'll come!" Acting like he can just decide he wants to come with us whenever he wants. I didn't say anything cause I was too tired to even handle.

We start biking to Mike's. I hate biking, like, more than I hate life itself. You have to wear a helmet, sometimes you have to keep your mouth open and let your lip hang out like an idiot so you can breath outta your mouth, you feel like crap cause your parents gave you DNA that, like, makes you drenched in sweat from head to toe, literally. Dumb as hell. I can't wait till I get my license next year cause Imma be rippin it at 60mph with the AC on full blast right past my school.

Anyway. We get to Mike's and I wipe the sweat off my brow and above my lip. Lemme just say right now that Mike's is one of the most chill places on earth. The lighting is low and the air is warm enough to make you wanna, like, sit there in endless warmth. They have regular tables but they also got these booths in the back of the shop that have the most comfortable cushions. The workers are also super chill, they'll take song requests to play in the cafe sometimes. I go there to do homework but I mostly end up wanting to just take a nap.

We walked into a warm buzz of chatter in the cafe. A bunch of people were in the seats near the front. I saw a girl wearing a ton of makeup and brand-name clothing with a bunch of other girls. I have beef with her cause I stopped being friends with her a while back (and cause I

heard she was spreading rumors about me) so I looked down and tip-toed with Stacy to the back of the shop, while Brent stood up straight as a pencil trying to find out who I'm avoiding.

We eventually get settled in, and Stacy's like, "Did you go to Ken's party last weekend? I couldn't make it cause I had practice." Stacy played tennis, and if I remember right, she's hella good. Might be the only thing she's good at, actually.

"Pretty lit. Everybody passed out around 2 or 3." I wasn't lying. I may hate Ken cause he was a dick in middle school, but he knows how to have a party, and who to invite.

She goes, "Dang, wish I could have made it."

I was sitting there thinking I was actually kinda glad she wasn't there cause she's been hanging around me for weeks now and it's been, like, a little overwhelming. Stacy had her own friend group of people she knew from tennis, but she was kicked out cause there were rumors spread about her about God knows what, I dunno cause I wasn't really listening but she was really upset about it and her face got all red and we were in the middle of lunch getting a bunch of looks so I was like "aight I gotta go to class, feel better."

Anyway, as me and Stacy were talking about this party, Brent had his laptop out probably doing his homework, but he, like, glances up at us every 5 seconds.

Naturally, I'm like "Ya got something to say, Brent? I'm all ears!"

He smiled at me all weird and he goes "No I just think it's funny."

"What?"

"How much sleep are you getting? Like, each night."

"Why the hell do you wanna know that?"

“Well you said you stayed up pretty late, and my doctor said that high schoolers should get about 8 to 9 hours of sleep every night.”

Stacy and I slowly turn to look at each other and our faces cave in looking at each other like “W-T-F is this kid saying?”

Just as we’re about to turn to Brent and ask him who the hell gets 9 hours of sleep every goddamn night, the girl I had just seen a few minutes before comes to our table with her group. She put her hands on her hips and leaned to one side and gave a fake ass sigh and all her friends started snickering.

She’s like, “How’s it going Jen? Having fun with your little boyfriend here?” She nodded to Brent who looked back and forth at us like he just got in trouble or something.

I’m like, “Don’t you got better crap to do Teri? The hell you even doing here?”

She gasped, then she turns to her friends and goes “Looks like she won’t deny it... I always knew she was a loser.”

Before I got the chance to slam my hands down on the table and have at it, Brent gets up super fast and yells “JEN IS ONE OF THE GREATEST PEOPLE I’VE EVER MET SO SHUT YOUR TRAP!”

The cafe fell silent, like, almost instantly. Everyone turned their heads toward Brent who was breathing super heavy. Teri looked surprised, but then started laughing with her friends.

It had just become the worst day of my life, right then and there. Why did Brent have to jump in like that? Now everyone is looking at us like we’re messed up.

I took my bag and quickly ran outside and started frantically unlocking my bike. I was done with going to Mike's, I was done with talking to Brent, I didn't even know if I wanted to go to school the next day.

Brent came out of the shop and he's like, "Jen wait up!"

I was like "Shut up I don't wanna talk to you!"

"I'm sorry if I embarrassed you in there, I didn't mean to-"

"Well you did Brent! Thanks a lot!"

I biked off into the street towards my house which was, like, 5 minutes away. Tears started coming to my eyes but I wiped them off quickly. Brent was running after me and kept calling my name. He was getting fairly closer each time I tried to bike faster.

"Jen, I'm sorry!"

"Just leave me alone!"

"Jen, please!"

"Please just go away!"

"JEN-"

"GO AWAY, BRENT!"

"JEN WATCH OUT!"

I didn't notice I had wound up starting to cross an intersection and a car was just starting to cross at the same time. I realized I didn't have time to slow down. I was thinking, like, I'm dead. I'm gone. That's it for me.

Just as that thought came, Brent grabbed a hold of my arm and pulled me back. We both fell on the ground and watched the car pass. We were both panting and looking at what could have just happened. Brent helps me up and we just kinda stand there for a bit.

Then he goes “You okay?”

“Yeah I’m fine.”

We were both silent for a minute.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sorry about that. And everything else.”

“What? I’m the one who should be sorry. I totally embarrassed you in that cafe. I feel like an idiot.”

“Well, you actually, like, said some pretty cool stuff in there.”

He smiled. “Thanks.”

I didn’t really know what to say, so I just said “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

His face lit up. “Yeah! I’ll see you tomorrow!”

I started walking my bike home. I smiled. I guess Brent is, like, not that bad after all.

## Explanation

In this short story, I chose to embody the conversational and adolescent voice that Toni Cade Bambara exhibits in *Gorilla, My Love*. While there were obvious racial implications involved with Bambara's short stories, the things that stood out to me the most were her stories that were written from the perspective of children. They were written using African American slang and run on sentences that showed the narrator's growth. I tried to include these elements by having the story be written in "valley girl" slang which I think highlights Jen's immaturity. Along with structural aspects of Bambara's writing, the tone and character of particular narrators in her stories appealed to me because of their rebellious nature, which is why I chose to implement some of that attitude into Jen.

My short story relates most to Bambara's *Sweet Town*. In *Sweet Town*, the narrator is a 15 year-old girl named Kit who hangs out with two boys, B.J. and Eddie in the summer. She likes B.J. because he is very attractive, but she doesn't like Eddie because he is unattractive. One night B.J. visits Kit at her window with Eddie in the distance and tells her that they're going to run away. Kit doesn't want to go because Eddie is going. She says "I don't know why the hell you want to hang around with that nothing." The boys leave and Kit fantasizes about potential scenarios in which they meet again. What I really wanted to capture from this story was how insensitive Kit was to Eddie, solely because she thinks he is unattractive. Jen initially judges Brent because of the way he looks and she also tries to associate that with his personality. But what *Sweet Town* was missing, for me, was how the character became more accepting. I wanted

that teenage ignorance and insensitivity to be resolved somehow, which is why I had Jen become more accepting of Brent by the end of the story.

Bambara also projected the humorous logical reasoning behind a kid's actions. In her short story, *Hammer Man*, one day the narrator sees a boy, Manny, playing basketball. She knows him because she's beaten him up before and people think he is crazy. She is alone one night and she comes up on a basketball court and sees Manny playing by himself and commentating over his own game: "Being me, I quite naturally walk right up and ask what the hell he's doing playing in the dark, and he looks up and all around like the dark had crept up on him when he wasn't looking." This exact line inspired the attitude for my character in that I wanted her to be fearless. And since I made Jen a teen, I also wanted to make her stuck up. "Naturally, I'm like 'Ya got something to say, Brent? I'm all ears!'" This brings out her conflict of being ignorant and insensitive about others, which I eventually wanted to resolve.

In certain short stories, the narrators often went on long tangents. In the second short story, *Gorilla, My Love*, the narrator is a girl named Hazel who tell a story about how she goes with Baby Jason and Big Brood to a theatre to watch *Gorilla, My Love* expecting a movie about gorillas, but it ended up being a movie about religious topics. They loudly complain in the theatre and stir up the management. Hazel goes to the manager who dismisses her and treats her like she is dumb because she is a child: "When in reality I am the smartest kid P.S. 186 ever had in its whole lifetime and you can ax anybody. Even them teachers don't like me cause I won't sing them Southern songs or back off when they tell me questions are out of order." This little monologue wasn't really important to the story, but it showed her character in that she's tough and sassy. I included little tangents like this like when Jen talked about how she hates biking and

how she felt about Stacy at the time. I felt that these tangents highlighted Jen's fixation on petty things that all teenagers are fixated on and how she needed to move past that to grow up and mature. This is why as the story develops, the narration gets a lot shorter as the narrator gets more focused on what really matters, and she has less judgements to make or things to rant on about.