

GWEN THOMPkins

Moonward

YOU GOT YOUR SEAT BELT ON? I see state troopers.
Yeah, it's on. What about "Mboya"?

What's that?

That's a name from Africa.

Where in Africa?

I don't know. Maybe Kenya? Mboya's the name of a black man who was on the cover of *Time* magazine when I was a little, little girl. My daddy still reads *Time* every week.

Say it again?

M-BOY-a.

That's a boy's name?

I guess.

Why was he on the cover?

I think he died.

People die every day. That ain't necessarily news. Not *Time* magazine news, anyway. What was he doing when he was alive?

I don't remember. But I like his name.

That sound like a baby's name, not a man. Not a black man, for damn sure. Black men been called "boy" long enough.

"Mboya," don't mean "boy."

Good, because I'm waiting for you to say "Mgirla."

You so stupid!

You want a ice cream cone?

From where?

On the Plank Road.

We not even halfway from New Orleans to Baton Rouge yet, and the sun is already going down. If we ever get off this bridge it'll take another forty minutes to get to the Plank Road. That's too long.

So?

So, what?

Do you want the ice cream or not? It's hot in this truck, even with the windows down. And there are no cones between where we are and where we going. Except for under them big ole pine trees comin' up. You wanna

eat a cone from around there? Lemme tell you—they are not delicious.

Okay, I'll wait. What about "Mandela"?

No.

Why?

Just no.

Why "no"?

Ain't he in jail?

We know people in jail.

Why give a baby an inmate's name?

"Kalaamu"?

How come you coming up with all these Africa-sounding names?
Is *Roots* back on TV?

Boy, stop. I'm just trying to think of something different.

Next thing you gon' say is "Chicken George." That baby gon' be different because it belong to you and it belong to me. You can call him John. Or Toaster. Or Four-Wheel-Drive and he still gon' be the same kid.

That ain't true! Names mean something.

That's why I don't want nobody calling my boy "Chicken George."

Ain't nobody said nothing about "Chicken George"! I just hope this baby can't hear yo' foolishness.

I don't think the baby has ears yet.

Oh, you Ben Casey now?

No, but I never missed a day of class. Clinton High and Southern University will tell you that. Roy Albert Mills, Junior, ain't never missed a day of class. And I took Biology 104, just like you.

Remember Miss Beacham and her moles? She musta had a hundred and four on her face alone.

Polka dots, and no moonbeams. Like when you had chicken pox. But, think about it—what is a mole, exactly?

I thought you never missed class?

Did we cover moles?

I wish Miss Beacham woulda covered hers. Biology coulda been a lot easier to take.

You did all right. But then you still got pregnant.

If you recall, I didn't do it by myself. I was a victim of circumstance.

What circumstance?

That Boone's Farm Strawberry Hill Wine you had in this truck after homecoming.

That's not circumstance, that's wine.

Well, you musta not paid too much attention to Miss Beacham because you told me that I wouldn't get pregnant.

No, I said you "shouldn't" get pregnant. That's different.

Not the kind of different I'm looking for.

What you looking for?

A name for this Boone's Farm baby — and do not say "Strawberry." And, for your information, Roy Albert Mills, Junior, I am looking for a way to tell my parents. It'll go down easier if the baby got a name.

How you figure?

When my brother brought home that calf, Mama didn't want nothing to do with it until he named it "Chester."

Why? Is "Chester" a name in your family?

No, it was just a name. Once something has a name, people accept that it needs to be taken care of. They fall right in love. She fed Chester a bottle three times a day 'til he got real fat.

You want a fat baby?

I want a baby with a name, and I want to live through the experience of telling Mama and Daddy about it. That's what I want. They're gonna ask why we went to New Orleans.

We could tell him the Saints are looking for a new running back.

Not from the post office. The Saints ain't looking for no letter carrier in the 70824 zip code. Besides, you still six credits short of graduating college.

That don't mean nothin'. Southern had winning seasons the whole time I was there. I was part of that. The Saints don't wanna know if you got a lambskin. They wanna know if you can handle a pigskin.

Boy, now you sound like Jesse Jackson. "Not a lambskin, but a pigskin!" The Rainbow Coalition don't supply the NFL draft. Besides, you got hurt.

Broken bones come back stronger. Ain't you heard nothing Miss Beacham said?

I know what she said. Bones come back stronger in the broken places. But all of you ain't broke.

I will be when your daddy sees me.

All the more reason to come up with a name now. How come you were so sure I wouldn't get pregnant?

Because of the moon.

What about the moon?

You supposed to be able to know when a girl is fertile by the phases of the moon.

What phase?

Depends on the girl.

How many girls you got?

An infinite number, apparently, given your moods. You like six different zip codes in one person.

I ain't studyin' you.

But I studied you. And at the dance, I thought you were in the clear. But I forgot 1976 was a leap year. Yep, '76 leaped. And in 1977, we done reaped what we sowed.

What you mean, you studied me?

I studied you. When you were smiling. When you had yo' bottom lip stuck out. What you looked like cheering at the games. When you tugged at your ear, 'cuz you do that when you nervous. When your clothes got tight. When they relaxed. When you let me kiss you. How you shook yo' pom-poms.

I shook 'em different ways for the different cheers.

You know them ain't the pom-poms I'm talkin' 'bout.

Boy, you so crazy. Six years and you still crazy.

So?

So, what?

So, what did you study about me?

Well, I clearly missed a few things, because I didn't know you were looking that hard at me.

You always had your head in a book. What you gonna do now? You wanna finish school?

Yeah, I wanna finish. I wanna get my teaching certificate. But I don't know if Mama and Daddy will pay tuition next fall. They might kick me out.

They ain't gon' kick you out. They gon' blame me.

How you know that?

On account of my dad being in jail. Once that happens, people think the whole family's a criminal operation. Yo' daddy already looks at me like I got the mark of Cain on my face.

Ham.

What ham?

The mark of Ham, fool, not Cain. But that wasn't you fault. You ain't never gonna be yo' daddy and yo' daddy ain't never gonna be you.

But him and me got the same name. And you and me and the moon and this here trip to New Orleans is my fault.

And mine. Look, Roy, they gonna wanna know what our plans are. Plans?

Plans.

Like what kind of plans?

You know what kind of plans, Roy. Roy?

Apryle?

Ain't you gonna turn on your headlights? The sun is gone and we got a long way to go.

I know.

What you thinking?

“Trey.” How 'bout “Trey”?

You mean like a lunch tray??

No, girl. Like T-R-E-Y. That's what they call boys whose daddies are juniors.

Why they call 'em “Trey”?

Trey, like THREE.

That's not how to spell “three” in French.

Thank you, Marie Antoinette. That's why you want a fat baby named Chicken George. You gon' make it eat cake every day.

I don't want a fat baby.

But what if the baby's fat anyway?

Then I gotta shop in the Husky section, I guess. So what would the full name be? “Trey what”?

The official name would be “Roy Albert,” but we'd call him “Trey.” Is that different enough for you?

What would the last name be?

“Mills,” woman!

“Roy Albert Mills the Third.” And what would my name be?

What you think?

I'm just asking.

Yo' name would be Mills too. “Apryle Daphne Mills.”

You telling me, or you asking me?

No, I'm just lookin' at the moon.

At the moon?

Over there. Have you ever seen it that big? That look like a harvest moon come early, like at homecoming. We don't even need headlights.

Is this the time to be looking at the moon?

Is there a better time?
I guess not. It's pretty.
You don't have to look if you don't want to. Open the glove box
and see what's inside.
Roy!
What?
What if it's a girl?
Then I guess we should name her "Altalune."
Alta-who?
"Altalune."
Is that African?
No, that's Latin. It means "over the moon."
Yes.
Did you know that already?
No. I just said "yes."