

No She Didn't!

The Harlem Bowl was one of the community's most popular hangouts. The bowling alley occupied two floors of a large commercial building and was always packed. There were several large, flat-screen, televisions around to keep people entertained while they waited for their chance to bowl.

There was a huge game room to keep youngsters occupied while parents enjoyed a break from their asses. The bar served excellent mixed drinks and beer that was always fresh and cold. However, it was the fact that The Harlem Bowl's kitchen dished out some of the tastiest buffalo wings to be found in Manhattan that Fatima and Marisol patronized the place regularly with their boyfriends.

The two couples were engaged in a heated contest. The losing team had to spring for all bowling expenses. Fatima was still upset about her earlier encounter that day with Jamaal and the bowling pins were paying for it. She glared hard at her victims before she side stepped to the right and then rapidly approached the lane with her twelve-pound ball. Fatima slung the graphite sphere with all her might. It angrily rolled in a straight path and collided with the lead pin.

"Baby, you need to be pissed off more often when we bowl!" Andre said after watching his girl throw yet another strike. It was her fifth of the match.

"I'm more annoyed having to carry your butt in this game," Fatima said as she waited for her ball to return. She had just bowled her tenth frame and had another coming.

"Show those pins a little mercy?" Marisol's boyfriend, Raphael, said.

Marisol met her beau at The Sports Expertise store on Bleeker Street during a sale on all exercise apparel. She was holding a pair of loose fit capris to her abdomen for Fatima's appraisal when a handsome Latino brother walked between them and gave his endorsement for the clothing item in Fatima's stead. Marisol was impressed with how bold and cute Raphael Oliveira was. The two exchanged numbers.

Their romance began with a thorny start. For a first date, Raphael had invited Marisol to dine with him one morning at a local café. The breakfast had been good and the conversation had been pleasant. Then the bill arrived. Checking his pockets, Raphael discovered he'd left his wallet home.

He reluctantly informed his date. Marisol was about to pay for her share of the meal and cuss Raphael's sorry ass out, when he dialed his brother and plumbing business partner, Zachary, on his cell phone. Raphael explained his situation and pleaded with his brother to bring some cash.

Embarrassed, Raphael ordered more coffee as he waited for his brother to arrive. Chatting to kill time, they found that they were born three days apart. Marisol interpreted their mutual horoscope as a good omen (and the fact that he had figured out a way to pay for their meal) and decided to keep dating him.

Raphael was growing uncomfortable as he mentally added up the evening's possible expenditures. This was only the first game and the group usually bowled at least four matches. Fatima's angry ass was going to break him.

"I can't believe Nikki fucked that hood rat!" Fatima grumbled as she picked up her ball from the return belt. She assaulted her pins again. It was another strike.

"We need more beer!" Andre said with a smirk.

"We'll win the next game, Raphael," Marisol said softly.

"I hope so," Raphael answered as he pulled out his wallet and made his way to the snack bar.

Marisol's turn was next. She promptly threw two gutter balls to end the match and then sat down next to Fatima.

"That was some game, girl."

"Thanks," Fatima sighed. She was in no mood to celebrate the highest score she'd ever bowled.

"Still upset?"

"Nikki knew better. I told her a long time ago to use condoms if she became sexually active."

"Imagine the number of girls here who never got advice on birth control at all."

"No thanks, I'm already depressed."

"That's why I need you to speak at this youth conference, Fatima. I can still get you on the program."

"You want Fatima to speak, in front of a crowd?" Andre chuckled. "Good luck with that one."

"I'll do it," Fatima said softly.

Andre was stunned into silence.

"You *will*?" Marisol asked.

“Yeah, I’ll do it...”

The ancient auditorium of W.E.B. Dubois High School seated twelve hundred students on its wooden bleachers. The place was over halfway full with teenagers who had ventured out on a cold Saturday morning for a special assembly. At the front of the auditorium, over the stage, a huge colorful banner read: First Annual Harlem Youth Conference. The majority of the audience, which was comprised mostly of Black and Latino girls, had turned up due to the promise of extra credit for attending the school sponsored event. There were also many students present who had shown up to get information about the numerous pitfalls adolescents face growing up in New York City and how to avoid them.

The din of talking, shouting, and laughing reverberated throughout the building. The five invited speakers who made up the panel, and the symposium’s lone moderator, Marisol Aquino, sat onstage. They were seated behind a set of folding tables draped in the school’s colors of red, black, and green. Fatima’s nervousness was mounting as she sat and faced the crowd. It was a week ago that she had agreed to participate in the event. Now she wished to high heaven she could opt out of it.

The first guest to lecture was one of New York City’s finest, Detective Alfred Crawley. A bald, short, spectacled fifty-three-year-old white man with a thick neck, barrel-chest, and muscular arms. Fatima wondered if the mustached lawman used illegal substances to enhance his physique. Detective Crawley got things cracking when he walked up to the lectern and told a lame joke about criminalizing all high school cafeteria food. Not one person laughed.

The cop wisely proceeded to discuss the problem of gang activity in New York City. Crawley sounded like a robot with his monotonous croaky voice. A wave of restlessness soon swept through the auditorium. Individual conversations started up as the detective warned that gangs were now recruiting younger men and women to join their violent, criminal enterprises. Fatima’s mind wandered as well, and she contemplated what type of vegetable to make for dinner that evening.

The detective’s speech dragged on for thirty agonizing minutes. Crawley wrapped up his tedious talk by warning students not to adhere to that asinine “Don’t Snitch” code of the streets. He assured them that there was nothing wrong with people informing the police of criminal activity.

After giving out a toll-free number for reporting suspected gang activity, Detective Crawley wished his audience well and sat down next to Marisol. (The officer had no clue the majority of applause that came from the audience was for him shutting the fuck up.)

Fatima was next at bat. She nervously shuffled the note cards she held while Marisol gave her a warm introduction. The last thing she wanted to do was give a damn speech. The second to last thing she wanted to do was give a boring ass speech like the one Crawley delivered.

Fatima scanned the navy blue pantsuit she wore for a fifth time since walking into the auditorium. Everything was still impeccable. She then glanced at the black pair of pumps she'd purchased while surfing online one sleepless night. They still went perfectly with her outfit.

“And now, ladies and gentleman, I'd like to introduce to you, my dear friend, Ms. Fatima Richardson!” Marisol announced. “Let's give her a big welcome to W.E.B. Dubois!”

The students obediently offered a decent reception. Fatima stood up and slowly approached the lectern.

“Kick some ass,” Marisol whispered as she passed Fatima and returned to her seat. Fatima cleared her throat and gazed at the back of the building as she had been trained to do in her Speech 101 class in college. (She'd barely passed the course.)

“Good morning, folks.”

Fatima received a half-hearted response from the audience. She knew then that her speech was not going to be a cakewalk. She sighed once before looking at her note cards and beginning her spiel.

“Working at the Department of Human Resources, I frequently encounter the problems many young people face today. This is because—”

Detective Crawley suddenly sneezed loudly behind her. Fatima stopped in her tracks. She quietly tucked her note cards away in the pocket of her blazer.

“To uh, be perfectly honest with you guys, I originally declined to speak at this event. But a current crisis involving a teenager close to me led me to change my mind.”

Some of the students in the audience perked up when they heard Fatima mention teen drama.

“A young lady I know, who's planning to go to college next year, told me recently that she's pregnant.”

At this point, all cell phones were put away and all idle chatter ceased. The audience was all ears.

“So now, this young lady’s future is in jeopardy. And the really sad part of it all is that the father of her unborn child is nothing more than a chain-snatching, drug-dealing, hood rat.”

Fatima heard giggles from the crowd. She was not amused.

“This ain’t funny! Not in the least! A smart, promising, teenager made a stupid decision and got herself knocked-up by some wanna-be thug!”

The laughter died down. This inspired Fatima.

“I especially want to talk to you young ladies here this morning, because you’re the ones who get the short end of the stick if an unplanned pregnancy occurs. To the young men here today, I hope you guys accept my apologies should I offend you with what I’m about to say. But, if the shoe fits you, wear it.”

Something miraculous then transpired. The majority of young people inside that auditorium actually wanted to hear what the short, dreadlocked lady onstage had to say.

“What’s going on with you young ladies today is absolute madness. Instead of dealing with a young man who has a good head on his shoulders and is trying to do something positive with his life, many of you’d rather have a thug! You want someone who hangs out on the corner all day with one hand around his genitals, and the other around a malt liquor bottle!”

A murmur swept through the girls in the crowd. The boys in the audience remained silent.

“These are the knuckleheads you girls are having babies for! You’re dropping out of school! You’re throwing away your future! And... while you’re shoving a baby stroller around, worrying about finding money to buy infant formula, Pookie is laying up with his side chick!”

Another murmur swept through the girls in the crowd. The boys still remained silent.

“Can any of you young ladies here tell me what’s so attractive about a young man walking around with his pants hanging down off his butt?”

The crowd’s laughter at Fatima’s question emboldened her. She stepped from behind the lectern and imitated waddling across the stage pulling up imaginary trousers. The females went berserk.

“You girls laugh now, but evidently you all must think prison fashion is cool.”

The laughter in the audience died down.

“Yeah, that stupidity comes from prison, where you’re not allowed to wear belts. While we’re on that subject, any of you out there notice all the guys coming back from prison with their hair in cornrows? Now, I don’t know exactly how they do it upstate, but here in Harlem, most people get their hair in cornrows by sitting between someone else’s thighs.”

Whispers of agreement swept through the girls in the audience. The boys in attendance were not feeling Fatima at all.

“And these are the same guys some of you are having unprotected sex with!”

Marisol was amazed as she watched her friend step from the lectern again and walk to the edge of the stage.

“Any of you ladies here think I’m lying about all this?”

“No!” a lone female voice yelled.

“That’s funny,” Fatima continued. “I could have sworn I only heard one person answer! You girls think I’m making this stuff up?”

“No!”

“Am I right about it?!”

“Yeah!”

The roaring responses further energized Fatima. Her adrenaline surged as she was finally able to express in public, some of the anger she felt, watching her people piss their lives away because of poor choices. Fatima cleared her throat and then a faint smile grew across her face.

“You girls wanna know how we can stop this madness?”

“Yeah!”

“You girls wanna know how we can end this lunacy?”

“Yeah!”

“It’s easy! Just say no! If your little boyfriend, or whoever he’s supposed to be, wants to have sex... don’t do it!”

The girls in the audience were hysterical. The boys in the audience began to grumble.

“However ladies, if you are gonna sleep with someone... and I know some of you are doing it already, use protection! You guys can get condoms for free!”

Onstage, behind Fatima, other members of the panel squirmed in alarm at her suggestion. Even Marisol grew uneasy. Teachers seated in the audience were worried as well.

“AIDS and HIV are real, ladies! An unplanned pregnancy can ruin your future! I don’t care how much your boyfriend says he wants to feel the real you? Make him use protection! Listen, if he won’t get it? He don’t hit it!”

Pandemonium ensued. Over two hundred female students jumped to their feet with loud applause and laughter. Back onstage, Marisol choked on the bottle of water she was sipping. Meanwhile, Fatima Richardson was in the zone.

“And it wouldn’t hurt you girls to deal with a guy who has a future, okay? If he love you so much, make him prove it by getting a job! Make him prove it by going to school! Better yet, tell him to do both!”

The girls’ laughter reverberated throughout the crowd. The sounds of deep voices booing were also heard.

“What can a broke, dumb, man do for you?”

“Nothing!” Dozens of girls answered.

Fatima cupped her right hand behind her ear in dramatic fashion.

“My hearing’s bad! What was that answer?”

“Nothing!”

“Exactly! Ladies, if he ain’t doing nothing with his life... fuck him!”

All who attended the Harlem Youth Conference that day would remember the giant gasp that came from the audience.

“No, she didn’t!” one of the girls said.

“Yes, she did!” a girl sitting beside her answered.

Fatima panicked at her blunder.

“I meant, don’t fuck him!”

Once more, the audience gasped. The only sound heard after that was some kid’s Lil Wayne ring tone.

Fatima stood paralyzed before the students and faculty. She knew she'd fucked up. She had gotten caught up in her own emotions. Behind her, Marisol sat motionless too, frantically wondering what to do.

Before either woman could decide, seventeen-year-old Shaconda Miller, stood up and began clapping fiercely. Other female students joined her. Within a minute, every young lady inside W.E.B. Dubois High School's auditorium stood and applauded.

"I apologize for the foul language, folks," Fatima said and quickly sat her ass back down.