The Taboo

“Do you know what happens in the jungle?” the Grandfather asked.

Little Kendi shook his head as he fluffed his pillow and laid his head down.

“Too many children have gone into the jungle and not enough have come out because in the jungle, lives the Taboo. He’s a monsterous cat-like creature with black and blonde stripes. He moves like the wind and strikes like lightning. He tears up children and eats them with his bare teeth. Promise me that you will never go into the jungle,” said the Grandfather.

Little Kendi was shaking under his little sheet of fabric. He nodded slowly, wide eyes. Tonight, he would be dreaming about the Taboo.

“Good,” the Grandfather said and then he left little Kendi to dream his worst nightmares.

Outside little Kendi’s room awaited his parents, Kiki and John. They were not pleased with the Grandfather’s performance and they had been waiting to pounce on him and the way he encroached on their family.

“How could you tell him that story? He’s going to spend the rest of the night crying in terror,” Kiki said.

“Even little boys must learn the dangers of this world, and there are things worse than Taboos.” the Grandfather said.

John rolled his eyes. It reminded the Grandfather of the way Kendi rolled his eyes when he didn’t get his way.

“Those old stories are outdated,” John said, “the jungle poses less harm than those stories do.”

“These stories,” the Grandfather said pointing to his open palm, “are what my father told me and what his father told him. I am ashamed that you do not tell your son these stories. It is our tradition.”

“Maybe the traditions need to change. The world is different now Father. Can’t you see that?” Kiki exclaimed.

The Grandfather walked off to his bed. They would not listen to him, not like they used to. They used to tremble at his knee just as Kendi does. They used to know that he would protect them and teach them the right. Now they are all grown up and think they know everything. They say it is a different world but Grandfather disagrees. He’s seen too much of the world to know how differences are only similarities under a new name. If he could, he would tell them his stories, but they no longer listen. And so they will not gain his knowledge.

The next morning Kendi was wailing at the top of his lungs. He had tripped and smacked his head against the wall. Kiki had cradled him and cuddled him but he would not stop crying. John had tried to bargain with him, offering him candy and food to be quiet. Finally, Grandfather sat directly in front of Kendi and stared him in the eyes. In a stern voice he said, “Kendi.”

Kendi slowly stopped crying, as if Grandfather had put a spell on him.

“Does it still hurt?” Grandfather asked.

Kendi shook his head.

“You’re just fine. Stop whining and go play. Your friends are waiting for you.” Grandfather said.

Kendi nodded and skittered away outside to go play with his friends.

Kendi’s friends were older than Kendi was but they still liked him regardless. Though they thought Kendi was a scaredy-cat, he made up for it in kindness. When Zane forgot his lunch, Kendi had shared his. When Jubal hurt his knee, Kendi went with him to get it cleaned up. When Ian got mad, Kendi kicked a ball around with him till he calmed down. Kendi always had a smile and that was something the older boys enjoyed.

“Today we’re going to go check out a pond in the jungle!” Ian said, “Come on!”

Kendi shook his head.

“Awe, what now? You scared?” Ian said.

“The Taboo.” Kendi said.

The boys laughed.

“Not that old tale,” Ian said. “My mom said the jungle is safe and that there’s no such thing as a Taboo. It’s just stuff people make up to try to control others.”

“But I promised Grandfather…” Kendi said.

Ian said, “If you don’t come with us now then we’re not going to invite you to come with us ever again.”

“I’ll go ask if I can go.” Kendi said and he ran inside. Grandfather wasn’t around but Kendi found his father busying himself with house chores.

“My friends want to go into the jungle. Can I go?” Kendi asked.

“Of course. Have a good time.” John said.

“But it’s not safe.” Kendi said.

John put his hand on his son’s shoulder. He said, “The jungle is safe. You don’t need to worry. I want you to have a good time.”

“So it's ok to go?” Kendi said.

“Of course.” John said and Kendi ran outside.

“My father said I could go.” Kendi said, and then the boys ran off to go play in the forest.

As soon as they reached the trees Kendi started to shake.

“Don’t be a scaredy-cat” they boys teased. Kendi tried not to be scared. He wanted to be brave so he kept repeating to himself over and over that the jungle was safe. The other boys were laughing and exploring all the roots and plants. Kendi thought he saw a flash of black and blonde stripes. He repeated to himself that the jungle was safe. The other boys pointed at a small animal in a tree. The animal ran away and the tree shook. Kendi thought he saw killer-eyes peeking out from the branches. He repeated to himself that the jungle was safe.

Soon, the boys made it to the pond. Zane had been to the pond many times before but this was Ian and Jubal’s first time. The three boys jumped in and splashed around. Kendi wanted to go home, even if the jungle was safe.

Then Kendi saw something lying on a rock. It looked like it had black and blonde stripes. He pointed it out to the others and they all went over to it. Ian was the first to get closest to it.

“It’s dead.” He announced, “Looks like a cat!”

The rest of the gang approached.

Lying on the rock was the tattered and mangled remains of a cat-like creature with black and blonde stripes. It’s body had been ripped open and it’s inner guts, which had been exposed to the air, had not yet started to collect flies.

The other boys were fascinated and wanted to play with the dead cat. Not Kendi. Kendi announced that he was going to go home.

As he was leaving, Kendi heard the other boys talking behind him.

“It’s fresh wounds! Look at the blood!”

“What kind of creature can do this?”

“OH MY--”

Kendi looked over his shoulder and saw a different creature, a monster with huge sharp teeth and claws. It was bigger than any Taboo Kendi had dreamt up and it was attacking Ian. Kendi ran. Zane and Jubal soon came running beside Kendi. They outran him and made it out of the jungle first, since they were bigger. They screamed for help and men came running. Kendi ran home. Kiki, John and Grandfather were waiting outside. Kiki knelt down with arms outstretched for Kendi. Kendi ran to Grandfather and held his legs.

“I’m sorry!” Kendi cried, “I broke my promise. I broke my promise.”

The Grandfather picked up Kendi and held him tight.

“I’ll protect you,” He said. “I’ll protect you.”