

LIKE A KNIFE

A short drama by
Michelle Tyrene Johnson

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

GLORIA OYA DECIMA, a black woman.

BELLA, a black teenage girl.

BEAU, a white teenage boy.

BLAZE, a teenage girl of color. She doesn't have to be black.

PLACE AND TIME

In a classroom.

At a time that is no time at all and all of time.

(A classroom. Three teens, BELLA, BEAU and BLAZE, are sitting and/or standing at school desks talking intently with each other as DECIMA enters. They abruptly and obediently stop as she enters the room and stands at the head of the classroom.)

DECIMA: I hope all this talking means you have chosen.

(A beat of silence.)

Well? Has a cat gotten each of your tongues?

BLAZE: Oh no, no! In fact I was thinking of choosing cat.

DECIMA: Hmmmm. An interesting decision. Domestic or wild?

BLAZE: Domestic. I think. You mean a housecat?

(Beau tries to hide a snicker.)

DECIMA: I see, Beau, that you are amused by Blaze's choice. What have you decided upon?

BLAZE: Actually Miss Decima, I haven't decided yet. I was just thinking about picking cat. But maybe instead of a house cat, being a mountain cat would be better.

DECIMA: Oh. I see.

BLAZE: But I could go with a house cat if you think that's better. Or maybe a neighborhood cat. Maybe...

DECIMA: This isn't about pleasing me.

BEAU: See, I told her a cat was a dumb idea. They don't really have nine lives.

DECIMA: There are no dumb ideas. So what is yours?

BEAU: I'm...I'm still thinking. Maybe a breeze?

DECIMA: And you're teasing Blaze when you still are indecisive. Bella, you're being mighty quiet over there. Come to a decision yet?

BELLA: Why do we have to decide? I mean you're...well, you're in charge.

DECIMA: You are the last one I expected to hand over your agency to another. Even to me. What's wrong?

BELLA: What if we make the wrong decisions?

DECIMA: (*A beat.*) I clearly have failed you all.

BLAZE: No, Miss Decima! How can you say that?

DECIMA: Because at the moment of deciding your next great destiny you are saying things like "dumb idea" or "wrong decision." Those words or comments have never been articulated by me, yet on your decision day that is what is flooding your process.

BEAU: It's just that we've never picked for ourselves before. This is hard.

DECIMA: You are right. When you were baby beings, I decided for you because you couldn't decide for yourselves. But I know my creations. I knew, for example, that Beau would be a great blade. And you were. Right up until it was time for another being to take over the knife's existence.

BEAU: But I hurt people. Caused pain. People bled because of me. One woman even died from my cut. I know it was an accident, but—

DECIMA: That was because you existed before tetanus shots and medical solutions were discovered. You did what a knife was designed to do. All of you always did. Beau, you forget that you peeled fruit and cut food to feed a village. That was your primary purpose. (*Beat.*) So, is that why you want to be a breeze this time?

BEAU: I guess I want to be something...something that can't be turned into something else. You know?

DECIMA: Of course I know. You want to be soft. And gentle. And free. Do you know what kind of breeze, or do you want me to help you decide?

BEAU: Off of water, I guess.

DECIMA: Now you know the only rule I have.

ALL: The devil doesn't delight in details, but Gloria Oya Decima does.

DECIMA: *(To Beau:)* So what kind of breeze do you want to be?

BEAU: I was thinking one off the ocean.

DECIMA: Any particular ocean?

BEAU: I was thinking of a place where there used to be a lot of harm. I know we don't undo the past.

DECIMA: You're thinking of off the Atlantic? Where there was slave trade? Please, tell me.

BEAU: That's a dumb idea too.

DECIMA: There are no dumb ideas. Just ideas that need to be sheltered by purpose. That's all.

BEAU: Really?

DECIMA: Yes. So I think an ocean breeze off of West Africa is a fine idea.

BEAU: I've done a little research on where.

DECIMA: Of course you have. I created your very essence. And I've seen you grow. So just tell me. Where?

BEAU: I was thinking off the coast of Senegal. Near the House of Slaves. It's a museum now, you know, to let people know about the horrors of –

DECIMA: I know, Beau, I know. That's a beautiful choice. And so it is.

(Beau pauses before he exits. Blaze gives him a sign of friendly encouragement. He and Bella exchange a knowing look. Beau exits.)

(To Blaze:) At this point of your development, I only ask that you give a little thought to your choice, to have your choice sheltered by purpose. So, why a house cat?

BLAZE: My two other times I was plants. I want to be something living this time.

DECIMA: Plants are living. They grow, and if they aren't taken care of, they shrivel or they wilt. Or sometimes they die.

BLAZE: So you want me to be a plant again?

DECIMA: You are mature enough to decide for yourself. I just don't want you to underestimate your existence. Ever. Even if you choose to be a patch of grass, you matter. You are important. Your existence, no matter how seemingly small, will always mean something.

BLAZE: But so many do great things.

DECIMA: Once, a thousand years ago, when a being was too young to pick for himself, I made him an emperor. As emperor, he commanded wars that saved thousands of lives. But the first time the being got to choose for himself, you know what he picked?

BLAZE: What?

DECIMA: A blanket. A baby blanket that got handed down through the generations to help babies sleep, to soothe their fears. In fact, Jamal is still doing that. So, if you want to be a cat, you go be a glorious house cat. In fact, knock over a few plants while you're at it.

BLAZE: So it's ok? It's really ok?

DECIMA: Personally, I think you would make a better dog. But what do I know? I've only been at this a few hundred millenniums. Go. Be a cat. You've got tons of lifetimes ahead of you to be a schnauzer.

(Blaze throws her arms around Decima.)

BLAZE: Oh thank you!

DECIMA: And so it is.

(Blaze waves at Bella and exits.)

Ok. It's just us right now and clearly something is bothering you. Are you having trouble deciding?

BELLA: May I ask you a question?

DECIMA: When have you ever had to ask me if you could ask me something?

BELLA: Every time I look down, I think, this is the time when humans will get it right.

DECIMA: The devil doesn't delight in details, but Gloria Oya Decima does. So what in particular burdens you?

BELLA: All the people who judge by skin.

DECIMA: Ahhhh. That.

BELLA: They fight over skin. They judge over skin. They kill over skin. Why?

DECIMA: That is a big question. And I'm not surprised at all that it would be you asking it.

BELLA: Why me?

DECIMA: I created you to be a thinker. *(A beat.)* But I also created you with a strong emotional center to go with your brain. There's a reason, Bella, I made you human the two

lifetimes you've had. You could handle it. The intensity. The complexity. The emotions.

BELLA: The contradictions. The inconsistencies. The pain.

DECIMA: The joy. The hope.

BELLA: I hated the hope. That was just a setup for the pain.

DECIMA: Even as a young being, you were always a mature soul who understood the connections.

BELLA: So why racism?

DECIMA: Do you think the creator of the human race would choose for you to hate among yourselves? I do not like seeing my creations fight.

BELLA: But you could stop it.

DECIMA: I can't stop human will. That would undo the very nature of being human.

BELLA: So you're saying people choose racism.

DECIMA: Over and over again.

BELLA: They choose all kinds of bigotries. It's awful.

DECIMA: Yes, they do. Because the nature of being human is like that of being a knife. It cuts, it kills, but it saves, it protects.

BELLA: But I want to stop racism. I want to be the one that tries. To finally be the one that makes people see how we're all connected. That the poorest person in India is connected to the richest person in America. That we really are just one race despite all the hate and all the ways we treat each other like we're separate.

DECIMA: I love how worked up you get about this. We've already had a Gandhi, a Harriet Tubman, a Mandela, an MLK. They made progress. But if you have made a choice in who you

need to be, my job is to make that happen and support your journey. Even when you're not human, I still give you choice.

BELLA: You may not agree when I tell you.

DECIMA: I'm about to birth you to the first existence you have chosen for yourself. Sock it to me!

BELLA: I don't understand.

DECIMA: It's an old expression. Tell me who you want to be this time.

BELLA: I don't want to be a who, I want to be a what.

DECIMA: What is your what?

BELLA: Maybe I should be a global pandemic.

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