

## **Nicknames**

Yo Elijah Muhammad number 4,

Nicknames have always been a big part of my life. I was always given a bunch of them when I was younger. My teachers always made rhythmic or fun ones for me that put a bit of groove into my foot and a smile in my heart. The cream of the crop was Tony Liu with a new pair of shoes and Tony Liu from Kalamazoo. When I'd walk into a class with Mr. Powell or Mr. J, I would be serenaded with their powerful and silly voices. Looking back at it, I am always thankful for them trying to make class fun for everyone.

On another note, there were two Tonys in my grade. I was always given Tony Liu which made me feel nice as the other Tony only got Krawly or Kralavec. There I realized that sometimes nicknames weren't the best thing in the world. Nonetheless, it inspired me to give nicknames to others as they came to me. Bad or good, the stuff I used caught on.

My first victim was the Egg. To a certain extent, I found that people around me were changing during high school. The people I hung out with started to break apart as they were introduced to the idea of a girlfriend. As my freshman year passed by, my friend group of 20 started to have less and less time together as girls started to take the guys' time. Hating the idea of change, I started to abhor the idea of people leaving and having their own life. I had just finally started to hang out with people frequently after being quite isolated during my early years, which is a story for another time. To a certain extent, I was seething with fear of loss so I unconsciously started to focus my emotions on a focal point. It was my friend's girlfriend Leonard.

One day the group was hanging out during lunchtime. It was in the Izzo Mariucci Center where the cafeteria was attached to the gym. It was a square floor with two walls of windows

with a waffle of black support beams behind the glass. Through the windows, you could see the red brick exterior and gray concrete sidewalks neatly patterned around the building. Inside were sharp hexagonal tables large enough to sit ten to twelve people if we squished together. On the other end of the windows that reflected the polished floor tiles of breccia, were the concession stand with a metal curtain, lifting room entrance, and multiple display cases filled with merch and trophies. This was a place of pride, steel, and rock-like strength. This room is a testament to my city's name Iron Mountain. This was the perfect place for me to strike.

We often had to stitch tables together to make sure that no one was left out of the group. This made me an audience that I could work with. When everyone was in place and the time was right, when hot lunch people and cold lunch people converged, I took my stance. My muscles tensed, my brows were furrowed, my chest puffed with air, and I pointed at her with my forearm slightly raised above my bicep. I stared down at the sight of my hand which is the space between my unfurled index and collapsed thumb. I shouted, "Egg!"

My nicknames stick. I have only branded one person with what I would call a curse. The others I find myself giving with a different feeling. You learn a lot of things as you live throughout your life. The way I give nicknames has changed over the years. Sometimes I go back to my previous methods. For example, I name some people how I think they look. I think John looks like a Paul, Jonathan looks like a Thomas, and how Nathan... whoops I mean Reed looks like a Nathan. The one thing I will never go back on and use is the feeling of hate I had. Well, all I can say is that the Egg is cooked.

## **Mr. Duval**

Hey Stevie,

You know how everyone has a story with Mr. Duval? Some call him Coach, a saint, or their favorite substitute teacher. Stories about him would bubble up like a spring whenever people would talk about school. He was a pillar of the community. I'd hear my friends being touched by his words quite often. They'd each have a vivid memory of a phrase or two that he had said to them. For McCarthy, she remembered that he told her that she was a smart kid when she was downtrodden. For a guy named Dobs, when he was about to be sent to the office for misbehavior, Mr. Duval stopped the teacher and said, "Don't send him to the office. He's just a good kid having a bad day." A few years later when Dobs saw Mr. Duval again, he said, "See, I knew you'd turn out great."

Besides individual interactions, you'd see him do wonders in the classroom. He never demanded respect from students nor did he need to ever punish someone, besides when he put a kid in a headlock that one time. No students ever tried to disrespect him. Even the clowns would stop honking in front of him. Often you'd hear him say, "Seeing you kids makes me comfortable about the future of America," giving us hope and encouragement. It was what he did best. Sometimes through deep stories of his life, jokes, or movies, he would always try to propel us some way or another. I've never forgotten the lessons he has taught me.

For my Mr. Duval Moment, I look back at middle school. I went through something kinda weird. To a certain extent I kinda just gave up on all of my dreams and whatnot. I don't really know why I did, but I was satisfied with mediocrity. I thought that it would be pretty easy to land a good job and settle down anywhere. Ngl, all I needed to do was just inherit my parent's restaurant or just get into the trades or somethin'. I wouldn't have ever needed to worry about

anything again besides the type of food I wanted to eat or the next thing that would keep me busy.

At a certain point, I put this mindset deep into my heart. I would walk through B floor past all the tan lockers, the yellow wall adorned with plaques, the remodeled library, and arrive at the end of the hall at Mr. J's room where Lucious, Bangle, and I would just talk about crap during seminar. I'd brag about being happy with my plan to never be exceptional quite often. With a strong glint in my eye and a beat to my step, I would try to sell that lifestyle like a wandering merchant peddling crappy trinkets. The others would always listen, but no one ever told me what I was thinking was stupid or anything. They probably didn't think much of it, to be honest. They were always preoccupied with the latest trends and jokes. Paying attention to each other's lives wasn't the focal point of our time spent together, I suppose. I'd hear more about random celebrities that I didn't care about more than I heard about their lives. At a certain point, I knew a LeafyWasHere more than I knew a Lucious Waxoff.

Back to me, I knew I had a good head on my shoulders. The stable future ahead of me was easier to obtain than anything. I got good grades, followed the rules, and held my breath every time I went to C floor where all the seniors were. For some reason, I was intimidated by them and thought that I probably shouldn't breathe the same air as them. Besides that odd practice that I now realize was utterly cringe, I felt utterly confident in my way of life. To a point where it was second nature to me. I really made it a routine to just tell everybody about my spectacular view of my future. No matter the circumstances, I felt that whatever I said was life-changing for others. I felt like I was spreading good news or whatever.

This thought process made me realize that I have a lot of agency over my life. If I wasn't going to become a big shot in life, I might as well have fun and mess with people. I'd do a lot of

rambunctious stunts all around school finding a new sense of power. I was the definition of haughty. I had no semblance of fear. I had the confidence of a musk ox. I walked the halls with an impact with each step. No one could stop me.

As time passed, I would scour the halls with my deep gaze. On B floor, I would pass the crap-filled lockers, the weird piss-yellow wall with nothing worth looking at, the poorly remodeled library and Oh! At the end of the hall was Mr. Duval, my favorite substitute teacher. A well-lived man who always dressed well in a comfortable dark-colored suit and fall-colored ties. He stood straight with round glasses that accompanied his gentle graying hair. As usual with a great smile on his face, Mr. Duval greeted me. Immediately, I answered him with my sales pitch of a mediocre life. Soon, I saw his smile turning a little solemn. I don't remember the exact details of what he said or did, but I remember a massive feeling of relief, gratitude, and emotion that I can not ever forget.

Mr. Duval pulled me to the side where the dull bronze plaques were. He stared straight into my eyes and stated something on the gist of, "Tony, you are a smart and talented young man. You shouldn't settle for just average. You can do so much in this world." I felt a pat on my shoulder as he walked back into the classroom. The Bronze plaques started to shine a little bit more in my eyes.

### **Knocking Out Old People**

Salutations Ronny,

I heard about how your Mom's ok. Thank God she's not hurt. It is kinda odd that people are getting older, y'know. My dad's elbow ain't ever gonna fully extend and my mom is using

hair dyes nowadays. Soon enough, I'll be peppered in no time as I got a couple strands of white on my head too.

This brings me back to when I accidentally knocked my Grandpa and Grandma down to the ground. I remember one time, I was helping my Grandpa get up from his couch as he had mobility issues from his stroke and whatnot. When I helped him stand straight, I couldn't help but give him a big hug. His name was Pak so I packed it with a lotta love. He lost his footing so we both fell down together hehehe. Everybody was scared at that moment, but he laughed. I miss him.

One time I was shoveling the snow. I always tell my grandma to go back inside, but she's a strong woman. Someone I have always looked up to. Ain't ever gonna take a day's rest. Always up early making food or workin hard. Anyway, I was staying over at her house and a big storm hit. I went out to the garage to get the snowblower out. Once it was out on the field of snow bout knee deep, I grabbed the chord and revved it back hard like a Beyblade. Didn't notice good ol' grandma was behind me and I gave her a good elbow, eh. Thankfully, I didn't shovel any stuff yet so the snow cushioned her fall, but she went down like a sack of potatoes. I was worried sick, but she started hollering in laughter. I love my Grandma.

### **Bear Witness to My Glory**

Yo Angel,

During my freshman year of college, I lived at a dorm called Stockwell. It used to be an all-women's dorm laid with layers of brick that emanated an air of nobility. With its fortress-like structure, it seemed as if it were guarding a strategic entrance to a valley. There was a large spire

down the middle I call the Well with two long walls jutting out on both sides. Inside the behemoth were cascades of walls adorned with spruce each creating different floral patterns of dark oak leaves and vines. The wood contrasted with the vanilla white drywall and geometric carpeting reminiscent of the colors of Fall. On the ceiling of the common areas were metal chandeliers artisanally forged to give this fortress a wealthy demeanor. On the tip of each end were fleur de lis protecting the lights. What set the mood was a grand lounge furnished with kingly furniture that embraced your body either in high-quality leather or soft velvet and an ebony Steinway piano. In the middle of the lounge is the grand entrance to the spiral staircase of the Well. There, you can see a glass pyramid that tops the building and informs us of the current weather. We soldiers feel minuscule at the bottom of the Well.

At the East wall of the fortress was the boys' wing. It garrisoned around 30 men with amenities such as air conditioning, a public bathroom, showers, and a garbage disposal site overseen by the custodians. There, I was stationed at the very end of the hallway which was conveniently located near the bathroom. Here, the other soldiers were quite quirky. There is an odd man raised in an all-boy's boarding school who would pound at an Armenian soldier's door at 2:00 A.M. moaning every night away. A devout believer, singer, and bodybuilder who was stationed right next to me. He was a great singer as I would hear him sing his prayers waking me up gracefully with the lord every morning. Our commander, the RA who so happened to look like Michael Cera. Moroccan Royalty who was chill for real no cap. An Aryan mercenary from the mountains of Caucasus. A metal guitarist who would boost our morale with sick riffs. Finally, a warrior who was a head taller than me standing at 6'11" 450 pounds of muscle the whole hall would call the Egyptian King. The Egyptian King had shoulders as broad as an eagle's wingspan. His hands could crush any stone. He had a full beard black and sprawling across his

face flooding like the Nile. His kindness could even bring back someone in the clutches of Anubis. Unfortunately, the only downside to him was that he had the stench of an embalmed body.

The hall had a number of problems such as the illusive piss bottler, a drunk break-in and exiting—random guy broke into the dorm and fell out of the window next to my room—the loud angry gamer whose rage shakes the earth, but what takes the cake is the pervasive smell of the Egyptian King. He had a scorching aura around him. Every place that he walked would turn into the desert. You could feel the heat and smell of his skin. Your eyes would water, your nose would burn, and your lungs felt like they were being attacked by locusts as he drew nearer. You'd experience the Pharaoh's Curse as your head would split in pain if you were to arrive near his tomb (room). He truly lived a sublime lifestyle. Everywhere he would go, others would make room for him and leave. The bathrooms were private, the lounge was empty, and the halls were clear in his holy presence.

The worst part is how he'd claim his territory. It would not have been a problem if the Egyptian King's smell were to only be experienced transiently; however, he left his spirit in every object he touched. The patterned carpet turned mushy in funk, the bathrooms became unusable, and his room produced foul aromas. One of his neighbors couldn't take it and was reassigned out of the garrison to Markley. The custodians would send my RA weekly emails explaining about it. Everyone in the hall complained about it, but no one did anything about it. No one had the gall to tell him except for me.

After strategizing for a few weeks (seeing him go out of his room and checking the time), I found out about his schedule and room number quite easily. My first knock was a failure as no one responded, but one dreary night as my fellow soldiers were stationed at the hall (talking), we

saw him walk to his room. That was when I knew my time had come. Everyone fell into formation where a dozen of my men became quiet. They silently supported me as I trekked down the dunes to his room. As I approached, the air became thicker. As if I were walking towards a furnace, my steps grew slower. My heart started pounding and my knees grew weak, but I knew what I had to do. I knocked on his door in rhythms of threes. There was no initial answer. I knocked again. Suddenly, the door opens and I am attacked by a wave of hot air. He had set his room temperature to 80, and the cool air of the hallway exchanged with the musty wet steam from his. I felt pins and needles all over my body as the Pharaoh's Curse had started. I knew I didn't have long. It was like David and Goliath, I was ready to use my sling.

I told him about the issue. He responded quickly and adeptly, insisting that the issue was not of great importance. The awkwardness was palpable. He kept on deflecting and insisting that it must be something else. It forced me to dance around his words dexterously. I avoided slash after slash from his sharp thoughts. After what felt like months of negotiation, I plundered his email and offered actual advice on how to treat it. Ultimately he got the idea. I had an army behind me.

He shut the door kindly and that was when I knew I was free. I had routed the enemy and was allowed to return home from my dangerous conquest. I came back to my soldiers who celebrated and thanked me. Many came out of their rooms to embrace me and give thanks. I felt as if I parted the Red Sea, defeated King Ramses II himself, and freed my people from the clutches of the Egyptian King.

*From that Moment Onward - People Witnessed him Shower.*

## That Time I Chased Someone By Accident

Brother Tom,

No need to feel embarrassed about anything. Stuff happens all the time. Though that reminds me of when I accidentally chased someone in the dead of night. It was a warm day when I went to the first club meeting I've ever been to in College. There was a classmate I met called Em at the time who introduced me to the Video Game Music Club. I play games all the time so I thought why not. So I got to the meeting and they were talking about vertical and horizontal music layering and whatnot. To me, I found that jargon to be interesting, but I ain't ever gonna care about those terms. I fiddle around quite often with my guitar playing the Blues, but the Blues ain't gonna care about theory. Beyond that, the meeting started at 8 but ended at round the latter part of eleven when I walked out of East Hall. I didn't know my way around the place so I got out on the shady back side of East where all the crime and odd buildings were. Pulling out Google Maps, I searched up my dorm and got walking.

While walking I saw that my phone was almost dead and that I had to be resourceful. 7% ain't gonna take me far so I kept it off and tried to memorize the roads I had to go through. While walking, I realized that I was going through a bunch of stoplights and shady streets so I got kinda scared. It was more or less the dark that scared me as I was alone in a strange unfamiliar place as I had just started college. Walking down the sidewalk, I got close to a random guy about a few heads shorter than me. He didn't notice me because I walk absolutely silently despite being a 6'4" 300 pound man of fat and muscle. Thinking to myself, I was happy to see another person at the uninhabited intersections that we were crossing.

At the moment, I was too scared to jaywalk and saw the guy in front of me start going through intersections with great confidence. I wanted to get to my room cause I was tired and

kinda frightened. So as he would walk red lights, I would follow behind him at an accelerated pace as I don't like jaywalking. At that point, my steps became heavier and my breathing became louder. Slowly, he started to realize that there was someone behind him, so he started to speed up. Being the scaredy cat I was, I didn't want to jaywalk or walk alone at night, so I started to trail him. I sped up when he sped up.

At certain points, I'd check my phone to see where I was going and found that we were walking in the same direction as I got closer to the dorm. I was elated but realized that we were walking in kinda a zigzag motion. That was fine to me though because I thought he was just taking the shortest routes. I was new, so I trusted him with all my heart.

Soon, I realized that the guy started to jog a bit, getting a little too fast for my liking. At that point, I got frightened thinking that there might have been something behind me so I followed suit. Soon enough we were running on the—brink of sprinting—down the sidewalk together. I thought to myself, man this guy is reliable. I can count on him if there is trouble behind me, so I never looked back again.

Ironically, I saw my dorm in the distance when he started full-on sprinting towards the entrance. What a coincidence, I thought. I didn't want to lose him so I started sprinting and gained traction getting unbelievably close to him—but not too close, ‘cause that is weird. I am a fast individual for my height and weight, so he didn't lose me. Obviously getting kinda tired, he got to the first door, and he whipped it open allowing for me to slip through like a snake. (Man I am amazing). He got to the second door where he got his Mcard out and frantically started swiping to unlock the door. Under what I didn't realize was panic, he couldn't get it unlocked as I got closer and closer to him sweating balls and heaving. At the end, he dropped his Mcard and

he fell to the ground. Trying to break the awkward silence, I said, “Let me try.” I went up to the door and found that my card wasn’t working either. The reader was broken.

Coincidentally a person was walking by and opened the door for us. I went inside and held the door for him, but he just stayed on the ground all sweaty and tired. I didn’t really pay much attention to him thinking that he was weird, so I just went down the spiral staircase to my room and left him hanging.

### **Near Miss**

Hey Jacob!

Remember how my grinder’s blade blew up and took out my glasses? I have had so many near misses in my life. Times when I almost die or do something I really regret. The first one that comes to mind was when I wanted to pull a funny joke I saw on the internet. It went like this: are you from Tennessee because you’re the only ten I don’t see! I thought that was hilarious so I wanted to use it on one of my classmates. What better time to use it than during D.A.R.E. in 7th grade. I went up to a good gal named Jaden and started the joke. At that moment I felt a sublime rush of adrenaline. My blood rushed through my veins, my heart was pulsating, my hair ecstatic, and I felt this insane sensation going through my head. I asked her if she was from Tennessee. She asked, “why?”

All I did was calmly respond with, “Oh, I thought you were from Tennessee.”

## **Bobble Head**

Hey Garcia,

Imagine this: it's fall, 68 degrees, a clear cerulean sky, and not a thought in my mind. I get out of the gym at the Intramural sports building which is a pain to get to on the weekends. The Commuter South bus stops running so I gotta actually spend the 20-minute walk there and back.

Once you get out, you see a good line of houses and three intersections where you have to stay put like a sweet summer child for at least a minute each. On the second intersection shaped as a slanted x, there's a Domino's at the sharp corner and a line of local businesses on the other side: Moon Cafe, Pizza Bob's, a sports barber shop, and a shared building of a knack alcohol joint and a shady barber cave. There is a skinny old dude who works there every day. This reminded me of how each one of those shops had one thing in common. They all looked super old, dirty, and dilapidated. Perfect for those who want a good time though.

Like usual, I walked up to the intersection just for it to turn red. Looking down sourly, I noticed cars started to pull up to the intersection, one of whom had blaring "white girl music." Like a hawk, I immediately rotated my head to stare at the source. All I saw was a "funky white boy" with a Yankee cap and sunglasses. After a small amount of time had passed, he noticed me and started bobbing his head to the music. Like a call and response, I immediately started bobbing with him. We pointed at each other, and he departed when the light turned green. I felt like a dad waving his daughter off on a moving train like those old movies. He was a real one.

## Pinecones

Hey Stinky,

My cousin Aster visited the other day. I gave him a good tour of the campus, but something put me off. I do admit that he has a social gut that can take a few punches, and we mess with people; however, I found that people had been unconditionally rude.

On the first day he got here, we were walking down the street when he asked a random guy if they had heard of a Montgomery guy. The group just kinda brushed him off rudely. I do admit that I had lost control at that initially. I turned around, pointed at them, and yelled, “Forget about them. They are a bunch of losers!” After that, I did a 180 and called Aster over with a wave of my hand. After the interaction, I told him about the goose jacket people. I can’t stand when there is injustice or wrong. Though Ann Arbor is straight-laced, he got a lot of responses like that more than usual. At the museums, concerts, and wherever we went. At a certain point, he started to feel as if the people around him were judging him harshly. I didn’t have any excuses or ways to console him.

The situation that took the cake was when Aster, McD, and I were walking through Dana, the environmental building. We were messing around a bit. I took them to my favorite study spot on the fourth floor where I wanted to show them the sun roof. On each end were odd offices with no way to know if they were being used. I popped my head in both only to be met with confused glares and laughter. It was actually a nice experience. We went out of the lounge and Aster used a Sanitizer dispenser that probably hadn’t been used for a millennia. The spout had rock-hard-crusted material that made the sanitizer shotgun onto the wall. The stream had so much pressure that the highest point the liquid hit was about two feet above the spout.

Finally, I guided them to a display case that I wanted to show off. Since I am allergic to pine nuts, one of my favorite things was to show the pinecone collection. As we walked down the hall with inside voices, some kid walked up to us and quickly slammed the door of a classroom about thirty feet from us. It was unexpected so I started giggling. I looked at Aster and McD and we all started giggling uncontrollably. Each time I would look up at the other, I would giggle harder. For about a minute, we were trying to catch our breaths, just for me to start another chain reaction. It was just too funny and I couldn't contain myself. It was 6:00 in the afternoon, and we just finished eating. There was no way I expected some kid in a stupid plant club to do that. We weren't even being loud or loitering.

A moment after we stopped giggling, Some kid opened the door. We were dead quiet and she contorted her brows to ask, "Are you going to stop?" She put her hand on the doorknob in an overhand grip as if she were finishing a full-body pull-up, something along those lines. At first, I was confused so I tried to be respectful. I responded, "Yeah."

She opened her eyes wide as if she was trying to intimidate three tall guys all about two or three times her weight and snarked, "Can you leave?"

We were planning on leaving anyway so I quickly responded, "Yes." She opened the door wider, took a step towards us, and stated, "Can I watch you actively leave?"

I said, "No."

## **The Space Between the Fork is Meant For Kindness**

Buona Sera G,

A lot of times I find myself being the wide receiver of kindness. Good things happen. Sometimes infants smile at me, sometimes people give me stuff, and other times it is a really small act that gives me bountiful amounts of joy. The other day I was eating at a plain dining hall. It was my daily monotonous routine during the morning before class on a Thursday. One of the long days of class where I would have to wait around five hours of class to eat if I missed breakfast. I was tired that day and sat down near the trash cans so that I didn't have to move around too much. I had my signature sparkling water with a hint of pink lemonade and a tower of eggs that rivaled the Empire State Building. There was no sign of salt, pepper, or sauce—bulking season struggles. While I was digging in, I seemed to drop my fork on the ground. I thought to myself, "Eh, I don't really mind using my hands. I washed my hands like usual today." I continued digging in. As more yellow mushy pearls of yolk entered my mouth, I noticed a little nudge to my left. A random guy got me a new fork and left without a word.

Plain eggs usually make the strongest-willed bodybuilders shudder in disgust and fear. To me, they tasted pretty great that day.

## **Letter to a Young Man**

Bawoni Kid,

I still haven't come up with a nickname for you yet. You've seen everything I tried with the letters so far, but I am stumped. It ain't coming naturally I s'pose. But you know what? I am just a Young Man. You are a Young Man. We are all Young Men. We are always learning and we find ourselves lost at times. It is fine because us guys always find a way out. Some are faster than

others like Tony Hawk. There is no other fella like him. Anyways, I'd like you to learn from my experiences. Keep your eyes out for more letters. Mistakes or Glory, it really is fun.