

Fronting It
By
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The two most important times of the day for any nine-year-old boy during the week are lunchtime and hometime. For the boys of Sunnydale home for boys. These times were some of the worst. The food at Sunnydale was so bad it made prison food look good. And when the bell rang out at the end of the school day. The boys had to do their chores.

‘Yes! Ha Haaa!’ Yelled Patrick Bailey, a nine-year-old boy with a mop of red hair and a faceful of freckles shouted, raising his arms in triumph, almost dancing with delight as he did so; having just wrapped his two friends with the paper symbol. The two other boys produced the rock symbol as they played rock, paper, scissors in the toilets at break time. The game was a knock-out session to see who would be the one to take on the dare.

‘Alright! Alright! So you wrapped us. You’re acting like you’ve won a golden ticket and a lifetime supply of chocolate.’ Brandon Fletcher, a mixed-race boy spat with envy.

‘Maybe not,’ Patrick said smugly. ‘But I know I’ve saved myself from a beating, that’s for sure. Patrick said grinning, his green eyes dancing with relief. Brandon said nothing in reply, but if looks could kill, Patrick would have keeled over right there on the spot, with the murderous look Bradon was eyeing him with.

Brandon turned away from Patrick giving his full attention to the third member of the group.

Kyon James was the smallest and thinnest boy of the group, with tired, hollowed-looking eyes. So tired that he neither looked scared nor bothered at what lay in store for him if he had lost the game. He clenched his small fist and raised it lazily to the height which Brandon held his. The two boys began to pump their fists up and down and sang the chant; Brandon’s voice overpowering Kyon's voice, which to Patrick who was watching both boys with great interest just seemed to be moving his lips ...

‘Rock, paper, scissors!’ As the two boys finished the chant both boys kept their fists tightly clenched, displaying the symbol of the rock. The two boys both began the chant again... ‘Rock, paper, scissors!’ As the chant ended Kyon kept his hand balled into a tight-fisted rock. Brandon released his hand into the symbol of paper and wrapped his hand over Kyon’s small fist, a grin spreading across his face until it reached his ears.

‘Oh, man!’ Kyon said barely above a whisper his head slumping and his shoulders sagged as the realisation of what just happened began to sink in.

‘Trust me Ky! It’s not as bad as you may think. Patrick said clamping his arm around Kyon’s small shoulders.

‘Yeah! Brandon chimed in. ‘Anything is possible if you just front it.’

‘What do you mean; Front it? Kyon asked innocently.

‘It means acting brave.’ Brandon replied.

‘That’s right! Patrick said encouragingly, ‘All you have to do is walk up to Cook and look him straight in the eye and say with confidence... ‘I want more.’ Patrick said, giving Kyon’s shoulder another squeeze.

‘That’s fronting it.’ said Brandon.

‘And who knows Cook may be so surprised that he won't just give you another helping, but three times as much.’ Patrick added, grinning.

‘Three times as much.’ Kyon said, his mouth beginning to water.

Brandon looked quizzically at Patrick for a moment, then seeing Kyon look at him.

Brandon recovered and gave a big grin. ‘Three times as much.’ He said enthusiastically holding up three fingers for emphasis.

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Lunchtime, it seemed, had come around much faster than it usually had. One moment Kyon was in the boys' toilets with Patrick and Brandon. Worrying about what he had gotten himself into. Then suddenly it would seem that he missed the hour and a half after break and skipped straight to lunch. The students of Sunnydale sat down on long wooden benches that were set out lengthways. There was a small table at the far end of the hall where a big beefy man stood who was only ever known to the children as Cook. On the table was a gigantic serving bowl of gruel and next to him stood his wife who handed out cups of water.

Behind them on a raised platform sat the headmaster and the rest of the teaching faculty.

Who were tucking into what was known at Sunnydale as ‘Grown up Nosh’. Roast beef, crispy baked potatoes topped off with a side of runner beans, sweet corn, and baby carrots; drizzled in just the right amount of gravy.

The boys of Sunnydale were so overworked that there was a mouth-to-bowl policy, at lunch and dinner times. As soon as they received their bowl of gruel and the headmaster had led them in blessing it. They bowed their heads again and shovelled the gruel down their throats as fast as they could. Today was no exception, except for in the case of Brandon and Patrick who sat opposite Kyon. Their food was almost untouched as they watched Kyon take little mouthfuls, he dipped the edge of his spoon into his bowl gathering up the tiniest amount of the watery porridge and putting it into his mouth, acting as though he was savouring every bite.

Brandon leaned forward. ‘The faster you eat what you have in the bowl the quicker it will be over with.’ Brandon advised him.

‘Yeah!’ Patrick added his eyes dancing with mischievous excitement. ‘It’s like a band-aid.’ Don’t think about how much it will hurt, just rip the damn thing off as quickly as possible.’ Kyon began to shovel the gruel down and suddenly in no time at all the bowl was scraped clean.

Kyon turned his head in the direction of the serving table, where he saw Cook and his wife watching over the students. Even from where he sat he could make out the cane that laid upon the serving table, within Cook’s reach to be offered to any boy that did something he wasn’t meant to. Kyon knew that there was no escaping his fate. He had a date with Destiny. And destiny was the cane. He knew it and those two so-called ‘friends’ sitting in front of him knew it. But they were right about one thing... The faster did the dare and asked for more to eat.

The quicker the dare would be over with... And who knew? Patrick may be right. Cook might be so shocked at a child asking for more that he might just give it to him.

Kyon placed his spoon in his bowl and slowly rose from the bench. He stepped over the bench into the walkway and picked up his bowl and Kyon took his first steps towards the serving table with confidence; remembering what Brandon and Patrick had told him. However, as he walked on, he spied the headmaster and the rest of the teaching staff as they sat on the platform eating. Kyon’s mouth began to water as he watched them tucking into their lunch. Kyon wiped the drool from his mouth. His belly let out a rumble in unfair protest at the injustice and as he walked on he silently told himself he was doing the right thing. As Kyon got close to the table, the thought of doing the right thing slowly evaporated as he locked eyes with Cook. Cook’s eyes began to shrink into little slits of confusion as he saw the little boy approach the serving table. Kyon’s eyes began to widen in fear.

‘Is there a problem?’ Cook asked evenly as Kyon approached.

‘Well- Em-’ Kyon mumbled with fright, trying to find the words.

‘Speak up boy! This must be very important for you to get up out of your seat and approach

me when you know you shouldn’t.’ Kyon stood there for a long moment wondering whether he should just turn and bolt it back down the walkway to his seat. But then his belly let out another rumble of protest and he thought of what Brandon and Patrick had told him about fronting it. And his chances of three helpings, the stuff may have tasted bad but if you ate it quickly at least you seemed full for a little while. The possibility of three helpings was just too tempting for what always seemed like an empty stomach to resist. So taking the advice of his two friends Kyon began his front it.

‘Well actually Mr Cook sir, there is...’

Cook looked at his wife, whose scroll was just as confused as her husband's, and then went back to Kyon.

‘Well, you see the thing is, I ain’t expecting no rice and peas like my mum used to cook me before she died and went to heaven leaving me.’ Kyon said weakly, I don’t even want what they got up there.’ Kyon said, jabbing a bony finger in the direction to where the headmaster and the rest of the staff sat eating their delicious roast dinner. Well, I do but I ain’t expecting it. But, well I would like some more of this stuff!’ Kyon said more to the floor than to Cook as he hung his head and held out his bowl with both hands.

‘MORE!’ Cook roared and Kyon’s headshot back up to look at Cook. Suddenly the only thing that could be heard in the entire hall was the sound of Kyon’s spoon rattling in the bowl as his whole body began to shake.

Before Cook could say anything else; he turned as he heard the scraping of wood against wood to see the headmaster rising from his seat.

‘Do my ears deceive me or am I right, in thinking I heard you, asking for more?’ The tall thin man asked evenly as he looked down upon the little boy. Kyon turned around in search of his friends and then back to Cook and tilted his head back as far as it would go so he could see the headmaster.

‘Well, I mean why not?’ Kyon replied, fronting it. Suddenly there was an audible gasp from the students followed by complete silence. You may have thought of talking back to a teacher. You may have even spoken of how much you detested them behind their back. But no one had ever talked back to a teacher in front of them, especially not the headmaster. Even Cook's eyes widened in shock, but then suddenly returned to little slits of anger.

‘Then in that case you shall receive more. For a fraction of a second Kyon's face brightened he felt like running back to his two best friends and hi-fiving them for having beat him in the game for the curse of losing had become a blessing...

‘Twenty lashes with the cane should do it.’ Another audible gasp rang out over the hall. Twenty! No one had ever gotten twenty. Five was your average helping of the cane. There had been talk of a student named Ronald Mitchell having once received ten lashes from Cook for the crime of ‘accidentally’ spitballing a teacher. Ronald’s cries from that beating rang out over the school like a fire alarm being set off. Legend has it, it is said that Ronald could not sit down for the rest of the school year and it is also said that he had received the lashings in November. The children could only imagine what double the amount would do to their backsides. Well, all but one. As

Kyon would soon find out. Cook grinned happily, his eyes dancing with delight as he reached out for the cane that was next to him. Then stopped as the headmaster continued.

‘Kyon go back to your seat,’ the headmaster asked as calmly as if he was asking Kyon to do him a favour. ‘I will deal with you later,’ he added. As the headmaster took his seat there was another audible gasp from the students. Never before had the headmaster given a beating to any student. He was after all the master, the boss. Lord of Sunnydale. The beatings he delegated to Cook. Kyon stood there stunned, his mouth hung open, all he heard was white noise as though his ears had been boxed as he saw Cook’s mouth moving.

‘Kyon!’ Cook roared.

‘Huh?’

‘I said why are you still standing there?’

‘Good point.’ Kyon mumbled and then turned on his heel. But he turned so fast that he turned a full one-hundred and eighty degrees and stood there facing Cook again.

‘What are you? Some kind of spinning top? Get back to your seat!’ Cook said thrusting a puggy finger in the direction of the tables where the other children sat. Kyon turned again and began to move in the direction of where his friends sat. However his legs had turned to jelly and he felt as though he was on a treadmill to nowhere. His friends never seeming to get any closer.

Finally, Kyon reached his place at the table. He put his bowl down and then slapped both palms down on the table.

‘Front it you said.’ Kyon raged looking at Brandon and Patrick. “It will be alright.” You said. Brandon and Patrick turned to look at each other in shock, They had never heard Kyon speak like this before. Normally when he spoke, it was so soft you could barely hear him; and that was if he said anything at all. The two boys turned back to face him again as Kyon continued. ‘Don’t worry Cook will be so surprised that he’ll give you three helpings you said. The only thing that you two got me three helpings of was that of the cane. Because if my maths is correct, twenty lashings is three times more than what I normally would have gotten.’ Kyon said angrily.

‘Kyon sit down!’ Cook bellowed and Kyon quickly plunked down into his seat and then shot right back up again clutching his bottom with both hands as he mistook the creaking of the bench for the crack of a cane.

‘What’s wrong with you?’ Patrick asked.

‘Oh nothing,’ Kyon said as he removed his hands from his butt cheeks and then sat down more carefully. Pushing his bowl away from him he rested his elbow on the table and rested his chin in the palm of his hand, looking miserably at the table. Suddenly his head rose and

his eyes began to flicker as though his mind was working overtime. As he looked at Brandon and Patrick his eyes brightened a little as though a light bulb had come on inside his head.

‘Right you two,’ he said, jabbing a finger at Brandon and Patrick. Everybody listen up. Kyon said in a whisper with such clarity and diction that a dozen boys took heed and crammed their necks in his direction.

‘I have come to the conclusion that there’s no way out of this.’ He said looking over the boys that were listening to him, coming to a halt as his eyes landed back on Brandon and Patrick. ‘So everyone, but especially you two, he said pointing his index and middle fingers at the two boys. ‘I need extra padding, hand over your underpants.’

The End!