

The Ballad of Julius TreyShawn Washington

Spotlight centerstage on young man in late teens, early 20s, JULIUS. He's wearing a wife-beater, sweatpants, fresh Jordans, and a doo-rag. The stage is dark otherwise. Julius has an air of casual caution.

JULIUS

What's poppin, people. My name's Julius Treyshawn Washington and I'm 19 years old. I hail from up around Topeka, Kansas, but I come out to New Orleans this fall cuz my auntie say she'd pay me to do some work on her house. She say I could come out during fall on account of I'm finally finished with school. I went ahead and went to summer school and finished my credits up to get my diploma but personally, I don't see how it's really gonna help me in the future, to tell the truth. All the white boys get the best jobs anyways. They just waitin' for a homie to get caught slippin: My grandmama's disappointed I ain't goin' to college but I told her I don't think college is for everybody anyways.

Anyhow, I ain't even hardly started on the house when Katrina hit. But it wadn't the hurricane that did most of the damage, it was the flood that came afterward when the levees broke. My auntie say we'd be alright in the house until the storm passed. She said she'd been through time and again in dat house and she ain't think her truck coulda made it half a mile out the town no way. I knowed that truck was tighter than that but I went ahead and let Auntie tell herself she needed to stay.

Anyway, oh, let's see, my favorite movies is Scarface, Barber Shop, and Juice, starrin' the homie, Tupac. My favorites rappers are Pac, of course, urn, Jadakiss, and anything by Mobb Deep. My favorite honeydips got ta be Vivica Fox, Stacey Dash, and Jennifer Lopez. Jennifer Lopez is a future baby momma fuh sho! I'm just playin', I'm not tryin' to have no baby mommas at my age. But if I did and it was Jennifer Lopez, that would be kinda tight.

As Julius relates next paragraph, lights slowly come up around him. It looks like a modern-day Hooverville. People have stacked up boxes, suitcases, and tarp-like material to make little encampments. Some people are surrounded by possessions, like a fortress. Others have a sleeping bag and a pillow. A woman, T AsHA, pregnant, late 20s, early 30s, lays by herself against a nearby wall, propped up by two pillows and clothes. She looks miserable.

JULIUS (cont')

Anyways, I was walkin' around for two days before I made my way to the Superdome. I didn't know the area and I didn't think that that's where people was gonna head to, but they did. By the time a homie got there, musta been 10,000 people up in there. But they wasn't spread out in the bleachers or nothing, everybody was down on the field, like they got drafted or something. They got drafted, alright. They got drafted into hell. They was alot of kids, a lot of old folks -basically people that couldn't help theyself. I thought the government was supposed to protect people like this in times like this, but Katrina opened a homie's eyes up to a lot of things.

TASHA

Excuse me?

JULIUS

What's poppin.

TASHA

Could I ask a favor from you?

JULIUS

Sure, miss. How can I help a young lady such as yourself?

TASHA .

Could you reach on top of that locker and hand me that quilt up there? It's been there for awhile, I don't think anybody's using it.

JULIUS

Sure.

Reaches up and retrieves dirty, oily, smelly comforter from on top of a locker.

TASHA

Thanks. What's your name?

JULIUS

My name's Julius TreyShawn Washington. I hail from up around Topeka, Kansas.

TASHA

I'm Tasha. I spent my whole life in the 9th Ward. Except for four blissful years in Manhattan.

JULIUS

You was a stock broker or something?

TASHA

A dancer. I went to the High School of Performing Arts.

Julius doesn't react:'

TASHA

You know, like from *Fame*?

Blank stare.

TASHA -(singing)

I wanna live forev

JULIUS

(pointing to comforter) You don't got nothin' better than this?

TASHA

Had.

JULIUS

Had til what?

TASHA

Forget it.

JULIUS

Had till what?

TASHA

Forget it. Thank you for the hand, Julius. It was nice meeting you.

JULIUS

Did something happen to your stuff?

TASHA

Listen, I know how young men get. If I tell you, you just gonna wanna go somewhere and get in somebody's face to try to show what kinda man you is, but I'm telling you now, you don't have to do that. I am not trying to get anybody hurt.

JULIUS

Who took it?

TASHA

If I tell you, will you promise not to be a hero?

JULIUS

Scout's honor.

TASHA

I knew I'd be on my own when I first got pregnant. I figure the Lord will look after me as He pleases.

Julius sits waiting.

TASHA

Grrr. I saw that man (points over to humongous MAN, 40s, with wild hair and beard, wearing full brown fur coat) take my grandma's fur coat this morning when I was coming back from the bathroom. I knew I shoulda took it with me, but I thought I could leave it for a moment. Most of the time we get somebody

JULIUS

Oh, nuh-uh. That ain't right. And it's chilly tonight, too?

Starts to go over to the man.

TASHA

You said you wasn't gonna do nothin'!

JULIUS

Girl, do I look like a boy scout to you?

Julius walks over to the man and taps him on his shoulder.

MAN

WHAT THE HELL YOU WANT?!

Julius speaks for a few minutes. We only see the back of Julius' head as he points back to Tasha every once in awhile. The man all of a sudden gets an apologetic look on his face, takes off the fur, and hands it to Julius. Tasha is stunned. The man tries to give Julius more gifts, but Julius demures. He walks over and drapes the coat over Tasha.

TASHA

Wha ...How. ..What did you say to him, Julius? That man is crazy. This morning I heard him talking to R. Kelly.

JULIUS

Nah, dat's da homie right there. He just don't like people talking to

him loud. Dat's why he be wearing them earmuffs and why he wanted the coat.

TASHA

Is he gonna make some more earmuffs?

JULIUS

He said the noise gets at him from allover .

TASHA .

So. ..so how did you get it back?

JULIUS

I told him you was the Virgin Mary.

TASHA

The Virgin . . . ?

JULIUS

He got one of dem fan's with Mary on it, so I told him you were her, and you needed your coat back to keep the Baby Jesus warm.

Tasha looks over at the man and he crosses himself with sign of the Trinity.

MAN

Shut up, R, ain't nobody in the closet!

TASHA

That's a nice trick. I hope it won't make a difference that I ain't no--

JULIUS

Shh. Quiet. I don't need to know your business. As far as me and da homie over there's concerned, you got the Lord Jesus in your belly there, just stayin' warm till Judgment Day.

TASHA

Hope it's later rather than sooner. You heard anything about when they gonna get us outta here?

Julius

Nah, I ain't hear nothin'.

TASHA

Alright, well, it can't be too long. I'll see you tomorrow, I'm gonna get some sleep. Thanks again for the coat.

JULIUS

Don't even mention it.

Tasha starts to put her head down and Julius starts to walk away.

TASHA

Are you gonna be around here in the morning?

JULIUS

Oh, most definitely. I was gonna set up . . . right over here. (He gestures to nearby clearing)

TASHA

I got two pillows. You want one?

JULIUS

That would be tight.

She gives it to him, smiles, and puts her head down.

Lights.

JULIUS

When the waters first started to rise, me and auntie was just clownin', like how we always do. She was pretending she had one of them big old buckets and was bailin' out the basement, like we was on a lifeboat.

Spot comes up over Julius, sitting in his new space.

JULIUS (CONT')

But then, outta, like, nowhere, it was like *blam*, and we was for real trying to bail out the basement, and it wasn't doin' no good. That's when we knew somethin' wadn't right. By the end of the day, we got to the only dry land that was left. The roof of the house.

The cry of a little girl, ROSA, rises up.

ROSA

Stop, give it back!

Lights up to reveal Rosa, a little girl with golden earrings, surrounded by six other kids, THE LERNER CHILDREN, five boys and one girl ranging from about 5 to 14, who are throwing a doll around, keeping it out of Rosa's reach. The children are all dressed in hand-me-downs – they were having hard times before the storm. Julius walks over and tries to get the doll from one of the kids but he just throws it to his brother, and they all laugh. Pretty soon Julius is in the same position Rosa was in, and the kids are all cracking up. One of the kids in particular is meaner than the others. He is laughing louder, taunting Julius, and chastising other kids who are tiring of the game. After a minute or so, Julius pulls out a chocolate bar. Soon, all activity ceases. He makes a grand gesture that the bar is theirs, and hands it to the mean kid. The kid's eyes widen with the new power, but when his brothers and sister start to move in on him, he gets protective – and stingy. Soon the whole clan is fighting over who gets the candy, and the doll is dropped and forgotten. Julius walks over and hands the doll to Rosa, who is thankful.

They walk over to Tasha, where everybody introduces themselves to one another.

TASHA

Where's your mama, baby?

ROSA

She over there in, um, section 7B, by the blue seats. She say the water made her sick. She say there was diseases in it. Now all she want to do is sleep.

A heavy-set woman, MRS. LERNER, and a teenage girl, TRINIQUE, enter stage right. Their dress is similar to the children's. Mrs. Lerner is carrying a baby in one hand and the chocolate bar in the other.

MRS. LERNER
Excuse me?

JULIUS
What's poppin'?

MRS. LERNER
Are you the young gentlemen that gave my kids this candy?

JULIUS
Oh. Yes, ma'am, I—

MRS. LERNER
Unh-unh. Well excuse me but we are not your charity case. I do not see social services tattooed on your forehead. Boy is you crazy givin' candy to little kids with all this craziness goin' on? You might be able to say one thing about my children is that dey so many of them sometimes it's hard to keep an eye on 'em all at once, but do not think that gives you any kinda right or privilege to talk to them without talking to me first. I am their momma, Mrs. Lucy-Pearl Henrietta Lerner, wife of Reverend Jeremiah P. Lerner of The Savior's First Episcopal Church of Brownsville Parish, God rest his soul, and my children did not survive this insanity to be having some man givin' them candy and some mess. Just who might you be?

JULIUS

Oh, my name's Julius TreyShawn Washington, ma'am. I hail from up around Topeka, Kansas. I didn't mean no disrespect Mrs. Lerner, you know, I was just trying to help out this little girl right here. Her name is Rosa.

ROSA

Your little boys are very very mean. They took my dolly and they called me names and all I did was ask them if they wanted to play!

MRS. LERNER

They did, did they? Just a minute, baby. Jay-QUAN! An-TOINE! Ra-SHAUN! Sha-KELL! Mon-TELL! Paco-BELL! and Britney! You better get your behinds over here.

All the children appear, and they hide behind their momma, alternately sticking their heads out like charmed snakes.

MRS. LERNER

Were you boys mean to this little girl here this mornin'?

ALL

Yes, momma.

MRS. LERNER

And what the HELL has gotten into you?

The mean kid from earlier speaks.

SHAKELL

She was teasin us, momma, tryin' to show off all of her new stuff.

ROSA

I was not trying to tease you, I just wanted to play.

MRS. LERNER

Shakell, baby, you can't think that just because some people got more money than other people than that means they always tryin' to make

fun of you, baby. (to Julius) I don't know why kids always have to make such big deals over these little —

JAYQUAN
Hey, a bird!

All kids, including Rosa, look over to the direction of where he's pointing, and in about a second, they are all off, laughing and playing and having fun together.

MRS. LERNER
— things. Oh, well, at least they doin' something to occupy the time. Either of y'all hear about when they gonna get us outta here?

Both shake heads.

MRS. LERNER
They gonna leave us here, you mark my words. Look around. What do you see? Nothing but black faces. You think they gonna send the army in here? Mark my words. If the reporters don't come, the buses ain't comin.

JULIUS
Oh, I don't know Mrs. Lerner, that don't seem right to me.

MRS. LERNER
It ain't about right. It's about what is. I hope you right, though. At least them children can have fun anywhere. Where did they get to?
Excuse me. Britney, get away from that filthy bird!

Mrs. Lerner and Trinique exit stage left. Julius looks over at Tasha, who was visibly affected by Mrs. Lerner's words.

JULIUS
You need another pillow or somethin'?

TASHA

I'm fine.

JULIUS

You don't need to pay no attention to none of what Mrs. Lerner's talkin' about. They can't just leave us out here. People got families.

TASHA

I wasn't takin' it seriously till she said what she said about all the black faces. I hadn't even noticed because it looks just like my neighborhood but . . . this isn't my neighborhood. We should have people from all over New Orleans in here.

JULIUS

People got families.

TASHA

Why do you always say where you're from?

JULIUS

What?

TASHA

When you introduce yourself, you always say your full name and where you're from. I don't see many people that show that much pride in who they are.

JULIUS

Oh that? I guess I git that from my auntie. She always told me to represent my family and my home, cuz them's the only two things can't nobody ever take away from you. So . . . that made sense to me.

TASHA

You're really a nice guy, Julius.

Rosa comes running on from stage left.

ROSA

Tasha, can you take me to the bathroom? I'm big enough to go by myself, but I keep seein' all these men hanging around the door. I'm not scared *totally* scared, but I am a little.

TASHA

Sure, baby. (to Julius) I got to go too, actually. It's funny. Before the flood I was going every ½ hour but I guess the whole situation has thrown off my clock.

They leave, and Julius, starts to straighten up his area, but he seems real preoccupied. His movements slow down, almost to a crawl, and he is virtually motionless by the time Rosa and Tasha get back, about one minute later. Tasha looks disgusted and frustrated, Rosa looks anxious. Tasha starts looking around their area.

JULIUS

Y'all back already?

TASHA

We're not going in there. We will find a bottle or a dark corner or something. (getting pissed) I don't know why black people always have to mess everything up!

JULIUS

Come on now, Tasha. Why it gotta be about black people?

TASHA

You know what? Don't even talk to me until you've – nevermind. Just don't talk to me.

JULIUS

Hold up now.

Julius starts to exit the same way they came from.

TASHA

Julius, don't waste your time. This is something even you can't do anything about.

JULIUS

Y'all wait here. You ain't goin' in no bottle.

He's out. He exits stage right and Tasha and Rosa walk off stage left. Julius walks back on from stage left and, when he gets to stage right, is thrown back by the stench coming from offstage. He looks around the stage for a bucket, takes a deep breath and walks off stage right. Tasha and Rosa walk back on far upstage left. A few seconds later, Julius walks back on with what seems to be a full load, and dumps it out downstage left. He then goes back and a second later comes back and repeats the action. He keeps this up as Tasha combs Rosa's hair (who continually is shaking her legs) and the lights slowly fade. As they come back up, Julius is gone.

TASHA

That's it, come on, Rosa.

Just then, Julius comes back on with a bucketful, and wipes his brow.

JULIUS

Ta-SHA!

TASHA

Who was – was that Julius?

Tasha and Rosa walk off upstage left and enter again downstage left as Julius is dumping out last bucket.

JULIUS

G'on ahead.

Tasha walks tentatively with her nose turned up, but, smelling nothing, continues on with Rosa trailing. A wide ecstatic smile hits

her lips as she gets closer. She rushes in, then rushes back out and gives Julius a big kiss, then rushes in again.

Lights.

Lights come up on Julius and Tasha walking onstage carrying sleeping bags.

TASHA

It was a good idea to sleep outside last night, get outta that environment.

JULIUS

Yeah, it was a nice night, too.

TASHA

That's the one thing I missed about New Orleans when I was in New York. Being able to see the stars.

JULIUS

So what brought you back down here from New York City?

TASHA

I had to get out of New York. There was too much goin' on. When times get tight and you gotta make tough decisions, that city puts a lot of temptation in front of you.

JULIUS

I ain't never been no place that big before.

TASHA

You ain't missin' nothin'. I made too many bad choices, got caught up doin' stuff I know I shouldn't been doin'. But you make excuses, you know? You tell yourself you ain't changed from who you always was.

JULIUS

You seem like a for real female to me Tasha, God's truth.

TASHA

You shoulda seen some of the places . . . But I told myself it was still dancin', so it was alright.

Long pause.

JULIUS

My auntie always say sometimes what you got to do don't always reflect what's in your heart. But that's what God can see, you know? And that's what the people who care about you can see.

TASHA

Who is this aunt you always talk about? What happened to her?

JULIUS

Oh, she gonna be up here before too long.

TASHA

It just seems that you two had a real tight bond. Am I being too nosy?

JULIUS

No, you know. That last night, you know? It was just us two. And the water was, was risin' and . . . we got up to the roof okay, and I just, I just thought . . . my auntie always said that couldn't nuthin' bring her down cuz she was half *olorisa* and half Loosiana swamp gator. She always used to say that. So I din't even think I'd have to be lookin' out for her cuz she done always looked out for me, you know?

So when we was up there you know, I was, I was holdin' on to the chimney, lookin' for a boat or somethin' and, I heard her slip and then I turned around and I saw her fall, but, I swear while I was watchin' it, I couldn't believe it was happenin . . . It's like it was . . . it's like it was a play or something and I was just in the audience . . . and I, I froze, is what I did, you know, just for a few seconds. But by the time I got over to her she was just beyond my reach. And I saw her float away, but she was still fightin' you know, like she was ready

to box with Katrina and New Orleans and whoever else, so. So. I expect to see her up here before too long. Cursin' at somebody or carryin' on.

TASHA

I'm sure you will.

JULIUS

My auntie say don't never live no place where you cain't see the stars. She said they tell you everything you need to know if you read 'em right.

Rosa comes running on.

ROSA

Julius, Julius, you've got to help us! There's a pigeon! He's hurt! His wing's broken. I think. And he keeps flying into the window because he doesn't know how to get out. And anytime any of us gets close, he flies away cuz he's too scared and we don't.

Starting to get emotional.

ROSA

We don't know what to do.

JULIUS

Alright now, Shortie Pork Chop. Hold on right one minute let's see what we can do about that.

Julius goes over and exits with Rosa stage left. Tasha gets up and exits stage left. The Lerner Children enter from Stage right, chasing the sound of fluttering wings. Julius and Rosa come on soon after and they are all soon running on and off stage, in pursuit of the hurt bird. At one point, Julius comes running on from stage left, followed by all seven kids. He holds his hand up.

JULIUS

Alright now, lil shorties. We been chasing this bird around for 20 minutes and it ain't doin' nothin' but tiring us both out. We need a change in strategy. Now the way I see it, that little bird over there is hurt, scared, tired, so what do you think he wants to do more than anything?

MONTEL
Have cereal!

JULIUS
Where he gonna get a bowl and a spoon?

BRITNEY
Go to Disney World!

JULIUS
You know he too small to go on dem rides. You gotta be (holds his hand up) this tall!

ROSA
Sleep! He's tired, so he wants to sleep.

JULIUS
There you go, Shortie Pork Chop. You gonna be one them, uh, what's them people that work with animals?

ROSA
A zoologist!

JULIUS
Whoa! That's not what I was gonna say, but that'll work. So here's what we're gonna do. We gonna put on a little stakeout. The objective is to outlast the bird. Now y'all just follow me. (saluting)
Are we ready to complete our objective?

KIDS
Aye aye, captain!

All of a sudden, they all get stealth, and start to move slo-mo. They get real low, and creep further and further downstage right. At one point, Julius stops, practically lying on his stomach. The kids are arrayed around him, as if he were some sort of Disney World ride.

JULIUS

Okay, right here. Now, we wait.

And they stay frozen like that for a few moments. Slowly the lights fade down. A moment later it comes back up, and one kid is asleep. Another kid nods off, wakes up, and then carries the other kid away. Julius has neither moved nor blinked. Lights fade again. When they come up, there are only four kids. One kid starts to follow a spider, and wanders off. The lights fade, and come back up again, and there are only two kids left, Rosa and Shakell, asleep on Julius' back. He is frozen. We hear the sound of the bird's cooing slowly disappear. Julius tries to move himself forward, only to realize he's weighed down by the kids. He slowly peels them off of him. He sneaks forward, and scoops up the bird. Rosa wakes up to find him taking the bird stage right, and setting it free to the sound of fluttering wings.

ROSA

You did it.

JULIUS

We did it.

He scoops the kids up and carries them offstage.

ROSA

(falling back asleep)

My hero.