

He's flashing that lopsided grin. Chest puffed, head cocked to the side. Imitating a pimp's stroll, dangling a butcher knife from his right hand and tracking my steps through the Upper East Side penthouse. "Y'all got four bathrooms in this joint, and one of 'em got a bidet in it!" I exclaim. "Ain't this a look-how-far-we-done-come moment?"

"Girl, don't you take nuthin' out of our house!" Gerald says, drawing the knife higher and completely cutting the fool. He lets out a big fat laugh, then, "What can I get you to drink?" He slices some lemons, pours me a glass of wine.

I am welcomed on this evening of kicking back with the Stone-Boyds. Here, a person cannot help but reveal his innermost parts. Gerald's conversation veers toward story, craft, the news. He dishes advice on moving up, or an unsolicited chastisement about lingering in a lower-level gig. Blacks folks can't afford to tarry, he says—with humor and profanities—to young Connie on this night.

Mostly, though, there is food and drink and laughter. There is Gerald talking smack about how good he is at bid whist and, though he loses, how no one will trump him. When we guests prepare to leave, Gerald hugs me: "Come over more often. Robin really needs family in New York."

In crisis, a family, whatever its iteration, shows up in the flesh. Family administers presence. Gerald barely indulges this expectation in his last days. When Tom, Gerald's longtime friend, insists on visiting him in the hospital, I drive Tom, who also is seriously ailing, from Brooklyn to Memorial Sloan-Kettering in Manhattan. Resigned to a seat outside the guarded door of the wing where Gerald is being treated, I read scripture, waiting for Tom to finish. Suddenly, Robin opens the door. "Gerald wants to see you," she says. I stand up, glad that he grants me this.

I reach Gerald, who is so very lean now. He can barely lift his head. I kneel in front of his wheelchair. He locks his eyes on mine. "What's up, Black?" I ask, grinning. He smiles that smile. "Girl," he says, chuckling, "You are so crazy." -- *Katti Gray*