

HOW ARE YOU CALLED?

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*How Are You Called?*

### CHARACTERS

NAIJA            a Nigerian-American girl of 12  
FATHER         a Nigerian man of 40  
ANCESTOR      an ageless Nigerian woman  
EAR             a beauty  
MOSQUITO      a scrawny little thing

### SYNOPSIS

Naija wants to communicate with her ancestor, but she doesn't even know her name.

**I.**

*(NAIJA enters and turns on drumming music. She then spends some time trying to tie a Nigerian gele headwrap, but eventually gives up and puts the wrap down. She listens to the music and begins to chant hesitantly.)*

NAIJA

Aaaaa...  
 oooooo...  
 eh-eh ya yo  
 Aaaaa oooooo  
 eh-eh ya yo...  
 Aaaaa oooooo eh-eh ya yo  
 Aaaaa oooooo eh-eh ya yo

*(She continues to chant while beginning to dance. She is tentative and uncertain in her movements until she gives up. She turns off the music.)*

**II.**

NAIJA

I-yay<sup>1</sup>? I-yay!  
 Hello?  
 Hello?  
 I need to talk to you.  
 I-yay!  
 No, that's not right. What's the word? It's... it's... Cooyah<sup>2</sup>! I think that's how you say it.  
 Cooyah?  
 Cooyah?

*(She sighs.)*

I-yay?  
 How are you called?  
 What was your name?  
 What did it mean?  
 And what about the one before you? And the one before her?  
 And the one before her? And the one?

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<sup>1</sup> Mother. (actually spelled iyè)

<sup>2</sup> Hello. (actually spelled koyo)

Daddy should have told me those things.  
He should have made the book your picture and the story  
your name.

**III.**

*(Lights rise on FATHER. FATHER speaks with a  
Nigerian accent.)*

FATHER

Okay now my daughter. It is time for bed. But first, I will  
tell you a story.

*(NAIJA sits eagerly as a very small child.)*

Once upon a time, Ear

*(EAR enters.)*

Once upon a time, Ear was so very beautiful that Mosquito

*(MOSQUITO enters.)*

Once upon a time, Ear was so very beautiful that Mosquito  
fell in love her. So Mosquito said to her,

MOSQUITO

My dearest Ear, will you be my bride?

FATHER

Now back then, Ear could see. And she saw that Mosquito was  
a scrawny little thing. His body was wasting away. So Ear  
replied,

EAR

I cannot marry you. You look as if you are about to die.

MOSQUITO

But you are so very beautiful.

EAR

I know. Goodbye.

FATHER

Embarrassed and heartbroken, Mosquito flew away.

*(MOSQUITO exits.)*

FATHER

But Mosquito didn't die the next, the next, or even the  
next day. So whenever he passes Ear, Mosquito reminds her,

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*(MOSQUITO sneaks up on ear and whispers.)*

MOSQUITO

I'm still alive to this very day.

*(Lights fade on MOSQUITO and EAR as NAIJA experiences a moment of excitement that's followed by sadness as FATHER freezes. MOSQUITO and EAR exit.)*

NAIJA

I didn't know I should have stopped him.  
I should have said, "No, no not that one.  
Tell me one about your mother. My grandmother. And the one  
before her. And the one before her. And the one.  
Tell me who they were.  
Tell me their names.  
And what did they mean?"

*(NAIJA shakes FATHER.)*

FATHER

Okay, okay, my daughter.  
*(He takes out a picture.)*  
This is my mother. Your grandmother. And her name was...

NAIJA

Tell it to me again?

FATHER

This is my mother. Your grandmother. And her name was...

NAIJA

Again?

FATHER

This is my mother. Your grandmother. And her name was...

NAIJA

Again?

*(A moment of sadness. FATHER freezes.)*

**IV.**

NAIJA

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But he never made the book your picture and the story your name.

And I'm too old to be tucked in and told "once upon a times" about you now.

I could ask him now. But he would just yell about it being my fault. The not knowing.

The not knowing is always my fault somehow.

FATHER

What do you mean what was my mother's name? Do you not know? How do you not know? Why do you not know?

*(NAIJA stands. FATHER freezes and lights on him fade.)*

**v.**

NAIJA

All I know is that even after the body wastes away to bone, like Mosquito, the spirit always stays.

It just has to be called.

So.

*(NAIJA turns the drumming music back on. She begins to chant and dance with more certainty and force than before.)*

Aaaaa oooooo eh-eh ya yo

*(Eventually she stops caring about getting it right or wrong and allows the spirit to take her until she cries out in desperation.)*

NAIJA

E-YAY! E-YAAAY! E-YAAAAAY!

*(ANCESTOR enters and NAIJA senses her presence.)*

Hello?

I mean... coo-yah?

ANCESTOR

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Coo-yah.

NAIJA

Coo-yah.  
E-yay?

ANCESTOR

Ih-yeh.

NAIJA

Ih-yeh.

Ih-yeh.

How are you called?

Tell me the story of your name.

*(ANCESTOR whispers into NAIJA's ear. She smiles.)*

And the one before you?

*(ANCESTOR whispers into NAIJA's ear. She smiles.)*

And the one before her?

*(ANCESTOR whispers into NAIJA's ear. She smiles.)*

And the one before her?

*(ANCESTOR whispers into NAIJA's ear. She smiles.)*

And the one before her?

*(ANCESTOR whispers into NAIJA's ear. She smiles.)*

And the one?

*(ANCESTOR whispers into NAIJA's ear. NAIJA smiles widely.)*

END OF PLAY