[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** The Daily Show correspondent, Dulcé Sloan, and writer Josh Johnson are best friends who rarely agree on anything. In the new podcast called Hold Up with Dulcé Sloan and Josh Johnson, they turn their hilarious, unpredictable and legendary office banter into a war of words about topics big and small. Mostly small from texting versus calling, to club bangers versus conscious rap and everything in between. Listen to Hold Up with Dulcé Sloan and Josh Johnson from the Daily Show every Thursday on iHeartRadio app, Apple Podcast or wherever you get your podcasts.

[upbeat music]

Okay, so high school, and my favorite sci-fi fantasy author, Piers Anthony, has just come out with a new *Xanth* book. The librarian, she whispered to me on the down low exactly when she's going to put it on the shelf and I'm there. Seconds before Todd Shoap, too bad Todd Shoap. I snatch it up, race home, top speed on my bicycle. Stop at the 7-Eleven to get a bag of Better Made Red Hot barbecue potato chips and a bottle of Faygo Redpop, I'm straight.

I get home, coming through the back door, quiet, quiet, quiet. I don't want any trouble. Down the back stairs. Got my book. Got my chips. Got my soda pop, flop down on the couch. I opened the crisp, never-touched pages, breathe the scent of brand-new book, and prepare to enter a dream world of magic.

[door opens] "Boy, what you wasting time with?" [scoffs] My father coming out the restroom. "No, I'm just- just going to read." "A book? That's ain't no book. There's just some old trash. You need to read the Bible." [mumbles] "What you say?" "Nothing. Nothing." "Put that trash down. Go clean up the garage." [groans] "What? What? You got some you're trying to say?" I got plenty to say, but I know not to say it." [groans] "That's what I thought. Better not give me no back talk."

[upbeat music]

Well, I cowarded out then. I did. I have a few words now, because today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present, Back Talk. My name is Glynn Washington. Understand, back talk is the very best talk of all. Well, you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

We begin in 1994. MJ Fièvre is a teenage bookworm, living in the hillsides of Port au Prince, Haiti. MJ lives a real-life story from real lifetime and place that references domestic abuse and gun violence. Another trade embargo on in the country, meaning rolling blackouts and gas shortages. But it also means that school's out for the time being, which gives young MJ plenty of time to hole up in a room with their favorite activity. Snap Judgment.

**MJ Fièvre:** When I was 13, I was always reading. Reading was this way of seeing how other people lived, but also what my life could be. I remember being particularly attracted to this one character named [unintelligible [00:04:20] she was a superhero without supernatural powers. And she was just a kid doing what kids do in addition to solving mysteries. And I think that's what I wanted. Those characters live their lives and went after what they wanted, no matter what was happening in their environment.

One day, I was reading the newspaper, I found this ad for a program in the Dominican Republic. It was a one-year program for people who were interested in the medical profession, but they were recruiting people of my age. You come to this medical school and you get to stay on campus. You get to meet doctors, you get to visit the hospital. I think, "Oh, my God, being admitted meant that I could leave Haiti and go to the Dominican Republic. I would be on campus, I would wake up every day with a purpose. This is an answer to my prayers."

So after I told my sister, Patricia, about the ad, we started calling. I would call, she would call just to help me. It might have been two weeks where we tried to call and call. And finally, they did pick up the phone. They gave me a time, a place, date, and the name of the person that I'm supposed to see. The name of the guy was Gabriel. I told my mom, because I was hoping, "Well, she's going to take me there. We're going to get information." And my mom said, "Absolutely not. You're a minor. You're not going to go to a foreign country on your own." I tried my dad. He was a very controlling father, but he really valued learning. So, I figured, "Well, maybe he will see it as this great opportunity, something that no one else is doing." But he was not happy at all that I was even considering it. His point was that I wouldn't be safe there because they didn't like Haitians in the Dominican Republic. Since I was going to be isolated from my family, there would be no one to protect me.

He also questioned the validity of the program. He's like, "Well, I've never heard someone going to the Dominican Republic to become a doctor." I could understand some of his concerns, but that didn't stop me from wanting to go. My parents were not going to change their minds. So, I decided, "Well, if they're not going to let me go willingly, I'm just going to run away." I told my sister I was going to leave. And she's like, "Why are you still pursuing this?" I'm like, "Because I have to." I was kind of irritated that she didn't see how urgent it was for me to leave. She couldn't see that I had almost reached my breaking point. And that mentally, I was worried that I couldn't take it anymore.

There was always the threats and hitting just for mundane, minor things. In the case of my dad, it might be the way he pronounces your name, the way his mouth forms, the expression changes slightly, or a movement with his hand showing that he is getting frustrated. My heart starts beating a little faster. I get goosebumps. It's like a little thing could set him off. One time, he was just mad at one of my sisters because she had been out and she came back maybe 15 minutes after curfew, and he's yelling, threatening to hit her, eventually hitting her. And my other sister just couldn't take it anymore, and jumped off the balcony. And we ended up having to take her to the hospital because she broke her legs. I feared for my life. It might sound like it was kind of on-the-moment decision, but it's something that had been coming.

So, it's the morning of the interview, I'm getting ready. I remember wearing jeans and a t-shirt. I live in the mountains and I'm trying to get to the city. I wanted to be comfortable. First, I check with my dad. He's watching TV in his bedroom. He's too busy watching whatever it is, whatever match he was watching that day. I go downstairs. It was just very quiet because my mom is really the one who brings life to the house. She's at church, I believe, so she's not around.

So, I'm leaving the house. I just had this feeling of being freed. And I realized that it might be the last time that I ever see home. Maybe it wasn't a realistic thought, but that's how it felt. So I know that I have to go to the main road, catch one of those buses, they're going to take me down the mountain, then you have to take a taxi to take you to a specific point. It was a place on Place d'Italie. Whenever there's carnival in Haiti, Place d’Italie was that one place where all the musicians gathered.

[Caribbean music]

So, I'm leaving the side road, so I can get to the main road and flag down a bus. And there's a couple of stalls. There's this man selling cigarettes and candy and other things. I had never smoked in my life before. But I'm like, "Well, I can imagine this new person. She's sophisticated and free, and she's probably going to smoke." And I remember stopping by buying a cigarette and having no idea of how to even light it. Someone had to stop to tell me how to do it. And then, of course, I started coughing. So I had to just flag down a bus and they stop. We're going down the mountains, and there's cars going up and down. Women with bundles on their head, going to the market or coming back from the market. Some people on the bus, they looked at me like I was crazy because I was on my own, I was obviously a kid. And it did make me feel like a superhero. And that's where people really started telling me about what was going on downtown. And they were telling me to be very careful.

[protests, chanting]

Aristide, the president of Haiti, has recently been ousted from the country. People are in the streets every day protesting and they had semiautomatic weapons, singing their rage. But I felt invincible. There's nothing that can happen that's going to be worse than what's going on at home. I just know whatever they ask me to do, I'm ready to do it. So if they say, "Hey, we're leaving today, actually." I'm like, "Okay, I'm in, although I don't have any bags with me."

I'm not thinking about the logistics. I'm just focused on that light at the end of the tunnel. The trip took about two hours. I get to Place d'Italie, and as soon as I leave the taxi, the first thing I see is a barricade. Some tires, wood, and some branches. I have to go through the barricade, get into the crowd. And from there, I have to find a building that I'm looking for. Some guys are standing there, they have rifles. And I remember being asked what I was doing there. And I'm like, "Well, I have to meet with someone in there." And them warning me that whatever happens to me is not their responsibility. Everyone is on their own in there. So, they let me through.

The crowd was huge. I could see people as far as 10, 15 blocks. There's a guy with a loudspeaker, reminding everyone why they are there. A lot of the protests had to do with hunger, with not being able to afford life. People, they're singing. [singing] Which basically means, "I don't kid around when I'm empty bellied." [singing] There was another song about if Aristide, the president, was ever to return, [singing] which basically means, "If Aristide comes back, people would get armed and attack." This is real. I'm not feeling invincible anymore. But I'm going through that huge crowd and trying to make sure that I get to the building. Everyone is sweaty. You can smell Vaseline, you can smell Dax products. There was the green Dax, there was the black Dax. And I remember smelling both of them. The crowd is moving me. It's like I see the building and I'm working toward it. I'm trying to see the building. And before I know it, I'm in front of it.

They told me a building, but it felt like a very private house. There were like a few pieces of furniture in there. People were playing dominoes. Someone was cooking lunch. I asked for Gabriel because that's the name I was given. Someone said, "Let me go check and see where he is." She comes back, and she says, "Oh, well, apparently he's not here. He's out of town. Nobody knows where he is." I did ask about the program and nobody at that table knew. They knew who Gabriel was, but that was it. The interview is not happening.

I just had that gut feeling that it was over. It's not like, "Oh, he's not there today, because something happened. I'm never going to meet this Gabriel. This program is just not going to happen. I just need to stop." And I had this feeling where I'm stuck because there's nowhere else to go. I was devastated.

[tense music]

As soon as I leave the premises, I'm just engulfed again by the crowd. It feels even tighter than it was before. People were barely moving. And I feel like I can barely breathe. People are singing, people are yelling, pushing. It's really hot. I'm really thirsty. There's a sense that something was going to happen. I just couldn't put my finger on what it was, the way people are acting around me, maybe a change in the noise. And then, I heard the shooting.

[tense music]

I'm looking for cover. Suddenly, I feel hands on me, on my shoulders, and at some point on my back. I'm thinking that maybe it was the attackers. I realize they're pushing me behind a big trash can that's on the side of the street. Someone is actually grabbing me. And for those few minutes, we were just together lying in the trash. I remember hearing him breathe next to me, maybe feeling his breath. The sky was so, so beautiful still. But here we are, lying in trash.

Finally, the shooting stopped. People start emerging from wherever they were hiding. There's this woman who has been shot in the leg and people are trying to help her. There are other people who get ran over. They're holding parts of their body. And I was able to look at the person who had brought me to safety. I couldn't tell how old he was, but there was something wise about him. I don't know if it was me projecting because he saved me. I guess he was just one of those people who are very stoic, even when things go bad.

The guy asked me if I knew where I was going, if I had people with me that I need to find. Now that dream is gone, where am I going to go? The country is not that small, but it feels very small, because everybody knows everything. There's nowhere in Haiti where you could hide. I would be found. The only place I thought I could go was home. I had to go back home. No matter what was going on at home, that was what was regular, what was normal, and I needed to go back to normalcy. He offered to take me home and I said yes.

I don't remember much talking on our way up the mountains, because all I could do was replay what had happened. I didn't want to even talk about it, even to someone who had been there. It was still daylight when I got home. My mom is on the balcony, and she's taking care of her plants. When she sees me, my mom asked me, "Oh, what happened to you? You're dirty." And I can smell myself. I still smell like trash. I'm sweaty. I'm just so greasy. And I tell her, "I was in the neighborhood and I fell." So she briefly looked at me and she said, "Well, make sure you change as soon as possible." That was it. They didn’t even notice that I was gone. I felt that it was a reflection of what I had been going through the entire time, like I'm hurting on the inside, and many people don't even know this.

I went straight in and washed up. It felt like a failure, but the intensity of the wanting to leave hasn't gone away. I was reading a book titled *The Maid*, and one quote was, "If the end is not happy, then it's not the end." So I'm like, "What am I going to do next?" I had started getting a bag ready. I'm not packing a lot of things, just the basics like toothbrush, a few clothes, deodorant, a picture with me and my sister and a few other things. And I became determined to get the end that I felt the story needed.

[inspiring music]

**Glynn:** The story of MJ Fièvre was far from over. After high school, MJ did end up going to medical school but she realized it wasn't quite her calling. She moved to the United States, where she now works as a full-time writer. You can read more about her childhood in Haiti, and her memoir, *A Sky the Color of Chaos*. She's working on a book series that uplift black women and girls. You check out all that and more at *badassblackgirl.com*. The original score for this piece is by Lalin St. Juste. It was produced by David Exumé.

[upbeat music]

Journeys of the mind, journeys of the spirit, journeys of the heart. Snap Judgment. If you dig it, the best-kept secret because there are plenty more where this came from, hours of amazing journeys on the Snap Judgment podcast available right now for free.

Snap is brought to you by the team that pretends not to hear when you're speaking through the back door. Except for the uber producer Mr. Mark Ristich. He always keeps a trombone handy. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Bo Walsh, Annie Nguyen, and Zahra Noorbakhsh.

And please know that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could figure, "Hey, how hard could poetry be?" And you sit down to write a poem of your own and after banging your head against the computer for three days and three nights in frustration, you decide to leave the page blank as an original poetic statement, as so many undergraduate English students have done before. [chuckles] You're not slick anyway. And you will still, still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*