

Black Than Me

by Darnishia Bolden

I raced home from school today. An empty house awaited my arrival. I knew that it would be. As I turned the key and pushed the front door open my hands quickly caught the tears burning my eyes and streaking my cheeks. I pushed the door forward until it closed and locked then let my books fall carelessly to the floor. I sniffed and wiped at the tears. Still the pain I felt inside could not be erased.

Leaning against the front door for what seemed like a million years hearing their boisterous laughter, I could see before me their faces of ginger tan, chestnut gold, pearly cream, and sunflower beige. Faces twisted in animated laughter as the ring leaders taunted and preyed on my coffee-colored flaw. I peeked out of the window and did not recognize one, no not one, black like me.

"Ooooooh, chile, blacker than me!"

I could hear the spills of laughter choked from their throats like dandelions creeping among lawns and gardens. "Pretty weeds," is what Granny called them. "They don't realize how ugly they really are. They think they are just as pretty as the African Violets, Morning Glories, even the flowers surrounded by thorns stained with the drops of Jesus's blood."

Quietly and still I stood, listening to the jeers that had now become distant whispers. The windows were shut, curtains drawn tight, door closed securely with all of my might. Still, like hunting hounds in the back woods of Tennessee, I hear them call my name: "Carol Lee, oooh, chile blacker than me!"

My Momma's not at home but no good would she be. Her arms would not enfold, encircle, envelope then draw me near to her warm, buxom bosom. Nor would she gently sway and rock me in a firm lap while moaning sweet, melodic tunes. Though sometimes while washing dishes or mopping floors her voice would rise above the busy hum of vacuum cleaners or the fussy motors of lawn mowers. She could stop traffic with her voice, like some women can only do with mere looks that end up fading like summer does in October. Yes, Momma had a sweet, rock-a-bye baby voice. But she could halt a storm in its tracks as her voice ripped through a song searching out sin sick souls in Sunday morning worship service.

No. Momma wouldn't baby me even if I cooed. Occasionally, she'd rub my shoulders, give me a smile with that faint twinkle in her eyes. Time was not her own nor was it really ours to share. She could not afford me the luxury of lazy days in a mother's arms listening to her properly read stories of Prince Charming taking some over worked, unloved, mistreated, overlooked but beautiful little girl to his magic kingdom. Nor would she see it as a necessity at my age.

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All day she scrubbed floors, washed dishes and clothes, made beds and cleaned windows at someone else's home. She'd be there for someone else's kids when they arrived home from school laden with whatever ail little girls and boys who live on the East side of town. Perhaps, if time permitted, read them a fairytale that begins 'once upon a time . . . ' and ends with 'happily ever after.' But she gets paid to do those things.

No Daddy to chase them away from his precious brown eyed girl that people said looked just like him. The child got the biggest eyes and thick, long eyelashes like the edges of a feather. But my, my, my she sho' is black.

"Tee-hee, blacker than me!"

I'd overheard, a long time ago when I wasn't supposed to be listening, that my Daddy disowned me. He'd sworn on the almighty word of the Bible that he could not have fertilized the egg that hatched me. Can you imagine swearing on the words of God! Folks laughed. Momma didn't. She called him wicked, foolish and bound for hell.

I've seen pictures of him. I have seen him distantly, like a cousin. His skin dark as the tar paved road glistening with the signs of hard work and treacherous labor. I can never love him, yet I did not hate him. Sometimes I wonder if Momma had loved him and if she hates him now.

He married a woman with skin as smooth as his voice and whiter than butter-milk. Really. Her black satin hair moves with the wind. Occasionally, Momma and I see her in the grocery store. When we see her, she rolls her eyes at Momma and Momma thrusts her head higher than normal.

Today I should not cry. I should hold my head high like Momma does when things look tough. Hold your head high is my advice and my discipline, are Momma's words. Even when she whips me, I'm not allowed to cry or protest. "Hush! Hush that fuss, ain't nothing wrong with you. Shut up that crying before I give you something to cry about," she speaks sternly from lips drawn into a tight line. Nor am I allowed to hold my head down or look at my shoes. Doing so warrants a quick . . . SLAP! "Hold your head up or you'll get a double chin." SLAP! "Hold your head up or you'll grow a hump in your back. Look at me girl, look in my eyes. I ain't playing with you."

I want to ask: "Why? Why hold my head high?" Is it supposed to make me feel better? Won't it cause my tears to drain back into my head? If it's raining will I drown, thus putting me out of this miserable dark life?

As I raced from the school ground, my head became a burden to hold. With the weight of a dull, throbbing burden, I let it fall down. Actually it dropped on its own to protect me from the leering, snickering faces. So. I ran. With my head down to the ground, I ran as fast as my boney, dark, ashy legs would carry me.

It began during lunch. As I sat, eating somewhat alone, because a boy was seated beside me. I had never seen him in school before today. His chestnut colored skin was smooth. Those eyes he possessed were like a cat's, gray, slanted and staring at me. I didn't speak. He didn't say a word but the cafeteria was all a buzz, whispers and unabashed snickers. He was new at school and it appeared he had not made any friends, yet. I peeked at his wavy curls of chocolate brown hair. His appearance was distinctly different from mine as well as the other kids at school. That didn't matter to me, he'd sat at my table. MY TABLE!

"Hey," I finally mustered the courage, nothing else came to mind.

"Hi," was his reply. "By the way, *hay* is for horses?"

He smiled then proceeded to bite into what looked like a tuna sandwich.

After the initial introduction of 'hellos,' he and I had a steady conversation flowing. We had common interests: we both loved history, hated math, loved baseball, hated kickball and loved Neapolitan ice cream.

At recess, when his class arrived on the yard accompanying him were two boys, James and Todd. James was pale with hair, eye brows and eye lashes black like coal. If there was a color for a cool breeze in the summer heat, Todd would be that color. His skin was flawless, no signs of adolescent blemishes.

"Hey Carol," greeted my new friend Brandon with a quick wave and snicker at having said "hey." The other two stopped in their tracks and indignantly eyed me.

"You know her?" questioned Todd like he was disgusted at having to ask the question.

"Yeah. We met at lunch today," he spoke so clearly, eloquently for a boy our age. I was impressed.

"Is she your girlfriend?" teased James speaking the word 'girl' as if his voice had become a siren.

Brandon eyed me suspiciously, as if he suddenly saw a stranger standing before him. I lowered my head to the ground and stared at my dusty sneakers. The wind whistled through the trees, I could feel it tugging my plaits even though my hair didn't move, but the white ribbons holding my plaits waved about like a white flag in the midst of a war.

"She ain't my girlfriend," he exclaimed recognizing the trap they'd set for him. "Cause if she were your girlfriend you'd have the cooties," laughed James exposing a mouth full of tightly wired silver.

"Yeah," snickered Todd. "She so black, she blue," he giggled as his left eye began to wander on its own.

James and Brandon howled as I withstood the blows of Todd's thoughtless words. Even though I was taller, they seemed to tower above me like angry red hornets on a hive. I felt myself shrinking lower and sinking closer to the ground. My skin, obeying the command of the sun, began to tingle. As if the sun was on their side, it reached from underneath its golden belly and dashed a ray of light upon my lithe frame. Sweat. "She shinin'!" They taunted in jubilant agreement. "If you had lunch with her, she must be your girl," the unrelenting Todd chimed.

"Naw, man," his voice changed. He spoke as they spoke, his words becoming spicy, and rhythmic like theirs. "She ain't my girlfriend," he snickered. "She blacker than me."

So, I ran with my head held down. I'd have to invent some solace and dreams to overcome such childhood cruelty. Children can be cruel, my Granny told me once. I should have asked who makes them cruel.

I used to feel that childhood lasted for ever. Not that I had a great memory of fantastic things happening to me. Books became my friend and reading was entertainment. By high school, I knew a few people none that I fully trusted. On that day, on the school yard, I promised myself to never drop my guard. And I didn't.

But swans change too.

Sitting at the massive desk watching the little children in the nursery next to my building, the rainbows of faces are acceptable to me. I wonder what frolic exists between the girls and boys who are old enough to know and young enough to be influenced. My secretary, Anita, has informed me that my interviewee has arrived. He is late.

"Thank you, Anita." I reply.

I waited, then checked my appearance before going to the door. My coffee bean colored skin was flawlessly smooth and radiating a perfect glow. Once I began looking back at the girl in the mirror, I was convinced that I was beautiful. I found the mirror inviting, not an enemy after all. Perhaps people saw me as I saw myself. By not defending myself, they didn't feel a need to defend me either. In the mirror, I saw eyes of cinnamon brown, lashes "like the edges of a feather," and lips so full that they were the envy of most women.

My skin did not hold the adolescent memories of faded pimples or dark marks on my face, my arms, my chest, or my back. Smooth. Smooooooth as the top of the freshly polished desk that was now my throne.

I rubbed my full lips together after applying a light coat of lipstick. Some days my black skin was a burden, more so to others than to myself. There were black men who exclaimed: "You a pretty girl to be so dark!" That was their excuse for fearing a woman who shined with the

unashamed dignity and ability to face a good fight (that I had definitely learned).

I opened the door inviting the gentleman into the office to be seated across from me. He smiled exposing even, perfectly white teeth. His grey eyes twinkled. His brown hair was fashionably low. I took his hand into mine and shook it with vigorous confidence.

"How are you today!" I greeted heartily! "Won't you please have a seat?"

His eyes absorbed my appearance from head to toe. Yes, I looked beautiful. Today, I was a breathtaking, statuesque queen. My hair being my crown and glory. The jewels draped lazily around my neck, my wrists and hanging gracefully from my earlobes were my attendants. My smile acted as knight in shining armor. My eyes were the light in my tower. My arms became my home, my castle, my own embrace. The mahogany desk enveloped me like a fortress as Mr. Richardson met my steady gaze.

The Mont Blanc pen magically appeared in my right hand as I assured myself that I could do this interview objectively. Mr. Richardson, Brandon Richardson had once been the tormentor of my soul, the little boy who probably thought he had chased away a dream. A little boy who'd trailed me home one hot Tuesday afternoon, yelling from the top of his lungs to the tip of his tongue: "blacker than me, ooooooh, chile, blacker than me." As his adversaries clucking behind him: "blue jay blue jay she so black she blue jay, blue jay blue jay she so black she blue." I could remember his curls of hair flapping behind him as the sun kissed his skin 'til it was like gold. I had loved him for that but hated his ways.

Apparently he didn't recognize me. Mr. Richardson looked pleased. After all, I'd grown into a lovely black woman and I didn't need a fairytale to get me there.

"Thank you," a deep voice that had probably seduced many women accepted my invitation to be seated.

"What a gorgeous suit," I exclaimed tilting forward just a bit. My suit allowed one to have a peek, just a peek, of cleavage. The dark skin covering my bones didn't stretch easily. He needed to see that. The blacker than me skin withstands all sorts of hardships, whips, cuts, brands, and the likes. There was no stretch marks on my breasts like the one's on my friend Theresa who has skin so light that I questioned her blackness (but then isn't blackness a culture, a style, a dance, a song, a groove, an attitude not color?).

"Yes indeed, a very well cut suit. And the color," I smile. "The color is so rich . . . so smooth . . . so black." I smiled. "... but not blacker than me."