

The Complexion of Love

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It's Friday night, and I'm sleeping over at BK's. Mama and Papa Van Duren are out for the evening, so 14-year-old Betsy's in charge. She bosses everybody in the kitchen, but since she's the big sister, something I don't have, I don't mind her telling me how to make the green salad. I don't have to live with her every day, so we get along fine. She and BK always argue about something, though, like how much butter to put in the mashed potatoes. BK likes a lot of butter and Betsy likes only a little bit. When "Oh! Pretty Woman" comes on KRLA, Becca turns up the radio and she and I dance out of the kitchen, holding hands and swinging each other around the dining room. BK joins us and so does Betsy, as she grabs BK's hand, twirling her around. Peace is restored for a while.

Just as we are about to return to the kitchen, "A Hard Day's Night" comes on, and we move wildly around the kitchen and living room. I notice that when I'm at BK's house, they listen to KRLA, the rock 'n' roll station, where you hear the Beatles and the Beach Boys. When I'm at home or at Marjorie's or at Rhonda's, we listen to KGFJ, the rhythm and blues station, where they play singers you don't hear on KRLA, like James Brown, Jerry Butler, and the Dells. Sometimes they'll play the "Shoop Shoop Song" on KRLA, like now, as we all sing, "Is it in his kiss?"

Back in the kitchen, still singing along to the “Shoop Shoop Song,” I help Becca put butter and chocolate sprinkles on the Wonder bread slices that we cut in half and place on a plate. Now I actually like this strange concoction. As BK finishes the mashed potatoes, trying to smash out the lumps, Betsy keeps a watch on the steak and onions frying slowly on the stove, filling the house with a mouth-watering aroma. The Van Durens eat this meal every night, steak and potatoes, or roast and potatoes on Sunday. At home, Gail and Joey are eating fish sticks and french fries, our Friday-night meal, which I’d prefer, or hamburgers. But I’m glad to spend the night at BK’s, so I overlook the food. Since I don’t care much for steak, I decide to eat only the potatoes and salad. I look forward to dessert when we’ll have green pistachio ice cream.

“Benny! Dinner!” Betsy calls her brother, Benson, who’s in his room.

“Time to sit down, girls,” she tells us, bringing the meat to the table.

Benson comes to the table and says nothing at all as he eats a massive amount of potatoes and bread. I get full just watching him eat and wonder where the food goes. None of it sticks to his body. He must have a tapeworm; that’s what Mama says about us kids. I try to imagine a huge worm inside his body, stealing all the food he swallows.

“Hey, Rennie, want to help me do my hair tonight? I’m dyeing and setting it,” Betsy says.

“Okay,” I say, examining her stringy red hair. “What color this time?”

“Brunette. What you think?” She chews with her mouth open and I want to tell her to chew with her mouth closed, but I don’t say anything.

“Why don’t you just leave it natural? Why must you change it every other day?” BK says, biting a slice of bread.

“Why for? So I’ll have that dirty blond shit you got?” She laughs and adds more potatoes to her plate.

I look at BK, wondering what she’ll say now. When they argue like this, I’m reminded a little of Gail and me, and Rhonda and Juliette, but Rhonda and I could never get away with cursing like Betsy does. I’ve heard her slip and say bad words in front of her parents, and they don’t get alarmed like mine would. They don’t like when Betsy and BK argue, though. I figure that big sisters and little sisters fight a lot. Becca and BK, however, seldom argue, and I decide it’s because they’re close in age.

“At least it’s real, you fat pig.” BK glares at Betsy, holding her fork in a menacing way.

“Enough, you two,” Benson, their older brother says, startling me with the big sound of his voice. I rarely hear him speak. He sounds a bit like his father.

Betsy rolls her eyes at BK and the bickering ceases for now.

Later, I’m in the bathroom with Betsy as she leans over the sink, applying a brown liquid mess to her hair. I stand ready to put a plastic cap over her head when she gives me the word. Meanwhile, BK, Becca, and Benson are in the living room laughing at *The Lucy Show*. After we secure the plastic cap on Betsy’s head, we go to her bedroom, where I sit on the edge of her bed. Betsy sits at the head of the bed with a towel draped around her shoulders. She lights a Camel and turns on her transistor radio.

“You ever try one?” She motions to the cigarette, whose smoke is unpleasant to me. I’ve never, ever considered smoking. Besides, Mama and Daddy would kill me.

“No,” I vigorously shake my head. “I don’t like smoke.” I wonder how Mama and Papa Van Duren tolerate her smoking in front of them. I’m glad Mama doesn’t know that Betsy smokes. She’d consider Betsy a bad example and wouldn’t allow me to visit.

“Oh. Don’t know what you’re missing.” She laughs. Then she gives me a serious look.

“What you think of colored guys with white girls?”

I’m startled by the question since I’ve never talked about boys to anyone and have never thought about colored boys with white girls, whatever that means. I’m just an eight-year-old kid while Betsy is a teenager, six years older than BK and me.

“I don’t know,” I stammer, feeling embarrassed but not sure why.

“Well, there’s this colored guy in my class, real cute, and I wouldn’t mind dating him. His name’s Jack, and he’s real dark with the prettiest smile, real white teeth. Then there’s Frankie, this Mexican guy, who’s dark, too, like your color. I also like him. I like ‘em brown, like you.”

“Oh,” I nod my head, not knowing what else to say as the room gets increasingly smoky and I feel as if I’m going to choke. She cranks the window open, propping herself against it and blowing the smoke away from me. Looking at the clock on the dresser, she says, “About ten more minutes.”

This isn’t the first time I’ve spent time in Betsy’s room. I like being here, where her pretty white porcelain dolls, dressed in frilly costumes, stand on a bookshelf along with whatnots and several copies of *True Confessions*. I’ve never liked dolls much because they don’t ever look like colored babies, but these fit in Betsy’s room. Her room is painted pink like mine, but mine is pastel, and her bed is full of stuffed

animals. I have a few bears, but she has so many of them, different colors and sizes. She even gave me one, a nice little tan one that now sits on my bed.

She has a Beatles poster hanging over her bed. I look up at it and her eyes follow mine.

“Which one is your favorite?”

“That one,” I say pointing to Paul.

She smiles. “Yeah, he’s a cute one, all right. Let’s go get this gunk out of my hair.”

While she leans over the bathtub, I wash and rinse her hair, which I like doing. Her slick, thin hair feels so different from my coarse, thick curls. Then we go back to her bedroom, where we set her dripping-wet short hair with large blue plastic rollers. BK comes in and flops down on the bed next to me. Betsy sits on the floor between my legs. She rolls the front and sides, and I roll the back.

“Hey, kid,” Betsy says to BK.

“Hey.”

“What you think of this shade, you guys?”

“It’s okay,” BK says, sounding nice.

“Yes, it’s okay,” I echo her. And it really is okay. I like it better than the red, which looked phony to me.

“Guess which Beatle Renny likes, BK.”

“I already know. She has a crush on Paul. I like Ringo myself.”

“Ugh,” I say. “He’s so goofy-looking with that nose.” I laugh along with Betsy.

“Depends on what you like,” BK says, laughing, sounding too grown up.

“Would you date a white guy, Renny?” Betsy asks this, but I can’t see her face since her back is turned to me. “Would you be Paul’s girlfriend if you had the chance?”

“I’m too young to date.” I feel uncomfortable talking about dating boys. What does it mean anyway? Now I wish I’d never told them that I like Paul the most.

“Yeah, but what if you weren’t?” BK props herself up on one elbow and looks me dead in my face. “Would you date a white boy?”

I shrug my shoulders. I’m glad I have a good reason not to look at her. I keep my head down as I continue to roll Betsy’s hair.

“I wouldn’t date a colored boy. It’s not right. You should stick with your own kind. That’s what Benny says.”

I don’t say anything, and I don’t look at BK, even after what she says makes my stomach cave in. Suddenly I’m so angry, I want to slap her. *I’m colored*, I want to say. *What’s the difference between me and a colored boy?* Why won’t my words ever come

out when I'm angry? It's like screaming without sound, like in my dream. Now I no longer like Benson. Now I wonder if he rarely talks to me because I'm colored.

"Well, Benson is wrong. People are people, and I do what I want," Betsy says.

I nod in agreement, glad that Betsy doesn't listen to her older brother.

BK shrugs her shoulders and doesn't reply. She watches me roll the last piece of Betsy's hair and grabs my arm as soon as I'm finished.

"Come on, Renny. Let's go to my room now. You came to visit me, not Betsy. I've got the sleeping bags ready so we can camp out. Where should we go? Should we stay inside or go outside with Tommy?" Tommy is the tortoise and I decide that I don't want to be outside with any tortoise.

Betsy thanks me as I leave her room. I smile at her but feel disheartened and want to go home; I stay, though, as planned. What would I say to Mama when she asks me why I've come home? She doesn't mention color, so how would I express the sadness I feel when someone talks bad about the colored? And what's the big difference between colored and white anyway? I don't see it, and I haven't heard anyone explain it.

Once we're in BK's and Becca's room, I crawl inside one of the sleeping bags and let BK talk as I pretend to listen, but I don't hear a word she says.

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I have a secret boyfriend. He sits near me in my third-grade class. No one knows about him, not even BK. He doesn't know I adore him, not yet. He has a funny last name, Figgins, which reminds me of my favorite cookie, Nabisco's Fig Newtons. What I like most about Calvin is his brown eyes. They're so intense for such a little boy, and when he laughs, they crinkle at the corners just like Daddy's.

I like to watch him and his friends play tetherball as I wait for my turn to play the winner. I'm good, better than most, and better than he. I show off whenever he's around but don't dare play him because I don't want to upset him when I win. He doesn't seem to notice me, though, and I, being a quiet person when I'm not with my friends, don't draw any attention to myself.

Today I see Calvin and his two friends leave the schoolyard to walk home. I wish BK would hurry up so we can walk behind them. She always lollygags, making everyone wait for her. I wait at our usual spot, but I don't see her or Becca anywhere. Rhonda, Juliette, and Marjorie usually leave immediately, so I doubt they're still around.

Taking another quick look around the yard, I decide to leave. Scurrying along Maryland Avenue, I soon catch up with Calvin and his friends. They walk slowly, and at some points along the way they stop to pick up rocks and twigs and use them to torment each other. As I approach them, one of his friends says:

“Hey, look who’s coming!”

Just as I form my lips into a smile to say hi, Calvin says, “Yeah, here comes Sambo!”

“Yeah, little black Sambo. Ugly black Sambo,” he and his friends chant.

His loud words stun me. *Ugly?* My heartbeat quickens and my face grows hot. I halt my steps and stand there, willing my tears not to drop.

No one has ever called me ugly before. I’ve been called blackie, nigger, chocolate bar, and sambo. But not ugly. *Ugly Black Sambo*, they sing and then laugh. I don’t know what sambo means, but I know what ugly means. I don’t want them to call me that. No boy likes an ugly girl. I want Calvin to think I’m cute, and I want to be his girlfriend. Now my sadness turns to anger.

Suddenly, I walk up to him and fling him to the ground; I straddle his chest and begin to bang his head against the cement. His intense eyes become red and wide, but I won’t stop bouncing his head against the pavement. Now I hear Calvin screaming, *Leave me alone, nigger. Leave me alone.* Now I hear his friends pleading. *Stop, stop.* Feeling confused and shocked, I leap up and hurry away.

As I wander home, I wonder what happened. Before I realized it, I had pounced on Calvin with such force—not like when I hit Gail with an occasional sock here or a slap there, to let her know who’s boss. It was as if someone else had attacked him while I watched from the side. But it was me, and I couldn’t stop hurting him.

I don’t realize I’m home until I open the front door and enter the house. I walk into the bathroom and turn on the light. Climbing on top of the closed lid of the toilet seat, I slide unto the edge of the sink and look in the mirror. I still hear their loud snickers. Yet it doesn’t matter what they say. I am not ugly. I may not look like the white girls Calvin smiles at in class. But every day Mama braids my hair and decorates it with pretty ribbons and barrettes. And I wear clean, good clothes and polished shoes just like they do.

I don’t tell anyone that I jumped on Calvin, not BK and certainly not Mama and Daddy. They would be shocked because they’ve never known me to fight. Daddy would make me stay inside, away from BK’s for a week! Mama would tell me that

she didn't raise me to be a juvenile delinquent but to be a nice young lady with a good reputation. I don't say anything to BK because she'll say I should stick with my own kind. I don't want to tell anyone what the boys called me. Usually, hearing those mean words make me feel sad, but hearing Calvin use them along with the word *ugly* hurt me so bad. Now, after what I've done to him, I have no chance of becoming Calvin's girlfriend.

When I return to school on Monday, I'm afraid that Mrs. Jersey is waiting to whisk me away to Mr. Waters's office for *the paddle*. Then Mama and Daddy will find out because Mr. Waters will send me home with a suspension letter. I trudge into the classroom, expecting Mrs. Jersey's unhappy face, but she chirps her usual greeting. Slipping into my seat, I dare to glance over at Calvin. He doesn't look my way, as usual. Mrs. Jersey is speaking to us, but I hear only the Supremes singing inside my head, *Baby, baby, where did our love go? Don't you want me? Don't you want me no more?*

