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GOOD HAIR, LOVE, COLOR and the AMERICAN DREAM (an excerpt)

“Mom, why do I have to be this color?” my daughter asked. I was stunned. My heart dropped.

“What do you mean?” I asked as I looked up from my book. I was concentrating on the difficult Middle English of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* for one of my graduate classes.

“Why do I have to have darker skin?” Maya’s ten year old face was expectant, as if I could supply all the answers. I was not ready for this question. She had just started 5th grade at a new school. The students were mostly white but I had noticed some diversity. I wondered if the other kids had teased her, but I was too afraid to ask.

“Your skin color is wonderful. What do you think all those girls on the beach are trying to get every summer?” I paused. I did have *this* answer, “They are trying to get a tan so that they will look like *you*.” My mind was racing. How was I supposed to deal with this? All of the anxieties about helping my daughter feel good about her body came rushing to my brain. I pushed those worries aside; I spoke in a matter of fact way.

“You know before you were born, I wished that you would look a certain way... and you came out exactly the way I wanted.”

She gave me a huge hug. I breathed a sigh of relief. Crisis averted. I had said exactly what she had needed to hear. This wasn’t just a half-truth that a parent must offer their child like the murmuring at night that nothing will hurt her. I really did have a desire for my child to look a specific way even before the ultrasound determined her gender.

I cried later when I told this story to my sister. Perhaps I was fooling myself, but I didn’t think that this issue would come up until my daughter was a teenager in the midst of identity angst. My daughter is biracial; I am white and her father is African-American. Her father’s family is from New Orleans and he is light-skinned. Maya could definitely “pass.” She looks like Disney’s Snow White

with her black hair and dark eyes. Except that in Maya's case, her milky skin has a spoonful of coffee. Her complexion is what is commonly called café au lait. Her hair is like mine, some natural curl to add waviness and frizz. Because she has "white" hair, she will never need to get it relaxed. Don Imus will never call her "nàppy-headed." It makes a difference that Maya has "good hair." It means that she will be welcomed more readily by the majority white culture. It means that I didn't have to learn how to "do hair." For unfortunately, U.S. culture (both Blacks and whites) still demands that a person choose an identity based on their physical appearance.

I first felt Black hair in tenth grade as I sat on the lap of Jonathan Wallace. There was a sub in computer class and she evidently thought that it was appropriate for a young girl to sit on a boy's lap in the classroom. I reached up and ran my hand over his head. His hair was cut in a 90s fade (modeled after the actors Kid N' Play in "House Party") and it felt surprisingly different than I had expected. I had thought that it would have been prickly or harsh. In reality, it was soft and springy. I remember the texture. It was tight curls that had substance when my palm passed over them. I stroked his wonderful hair; it was the most sensual thing that I had experienced as a sixteen-year-old.

I was amazed that Jonathan knew I existed. All of my teenage crushes were one-sided, so I had never had a boyfriend. The attention from Jonathan was the first male attention that I had received. I first noticed him in English class. He and I were chosen to act out the short story, "Hearts and Hands" by O. Henry. It was the teacher's plan to engage the class in better understanding the story's plot. I was the lady and he was the Marshall. At the beginning of the story, he had to take my hand. I had never held a boy's hand before. Caught up in my character and mesmerized by the attention from the class as audience, I was infatuated. To my surprise and delight, Jonathan was just as infatuated with me. He pursued me with a straightforwardness that displayed his comfort with his own body and identity. We talked on the phone and joked between classes.

One day in the hallway, I ran into him after play practice. He was just getting done with football practice. He scooped me up in his arms and paraded me up and down the hallway. I was mortified. My pulse raced. I fought between demanding that I be put down like a schoolmarm and wanting to continue to clutch his muscular upper arm

and squeal girlishly. However, I did have one thought that is clearest and is most dreadful. I do not like to admit this, but as I stared up at his face, I thought, please don't kiss me. It was not because I was embarrassed in public. It was not that I was saving myself for a significant relationship because of religious convictions. I did not want my first kiss to be from an African-American.

How is it that I loved touching his hair, laughing with him, etc... but had this racist thought without even realizing it? If you had asked me if I thought anything was wrong with people of different skin colors I would have said emphatically, "Of course not!" I had read *To Kill a Mockingbird*. I watched "The Cosby Show." It is difficult to forgive my ignorance. The problem stems from not being able to pin point where this racist thought occurred. I must have breathed in racism along with the rural, small town Michigan air. I cannot recall my parents or immediate family using racial slurs. I also cannot remember witnessing any people acting racist. But there is no denying what I thought in his arms that day.

Our would-be relationship did not last. I was too scared to go on a date with him for fear that my parents would find out. I can't recall them ever forbidding me from dating someone from another race; perhaps in a white majority community they didn't think the subject would ever be an issue. I felt queasy when I considered telling them that he was African-American. I could not imagine even casually stating "Oh by the way, Jonathan is Black." I wasn't even brave enough just to have him show up at the house and let them deal with the surprise, shock, horror (real or imagined). In the end, it didn't matter. When the school year was over, he moved away. It seems that we were doomed from all sides.

"Does my hair look messed up?" my boyfriend Alexander asked me. I tried to determine the state of his head. I could discern no difference from how his hair looked on any other occasion.

I tried honesty. "I can't tell." I said apologetically.

He looked at me in disgust. "Black hair can get messed up too."

At this time, I did not realize an African-American man's short hair could look more or less groomed, like any other type of hair. I learned though. The diversity training that started in tenth grade continued at Concordia College in Ann Arbor, MI. Growing up in a Lutheran congregation, I decided that I would like to pursue my higher education at a small Lutheran college. I was interested in drama here also. I was chosen to play the part of the Virgin Mary in the annual Christmas pageant. My Joseph approached me in the library before practices had even begun. Alexander Whitfield wanted to check out who would play his betrothed. He was a senior and I was an unknown freshmen. I was sitting in the library reading "Vogue" and "Cosmopolitan" in between classes when he introduced himself. This is what I wrote in my journal dated

November 23, 1992:

Today, at 12 or so I had the most fascinating conversation with someone I've had in a long time.

I am definitely intrigued. I want to know more. I felt very comfortable around him. Yes he's tall, dark and handsome—well, not handsome but certainly good-looking. His name is Alex and he's an African American. Which presents a question: How does he feel about dating a white young woman? After all I have no problems with dating people of other races as my experience with Jon suggests.

Evidently I had forgotten the difficulties that I faced when I had liked Jonathan. I forgot that I could not tell my parents that Jon was African-American. I also conveniently forgot that Jonathan and I did not actually go out on a date. How is that I did not remember about being so reluctant to kiss him?

I resolved some of these issues through my relationship with Alexander. The library interview must have intrigued him as well, for the next Sunday he asked me out on a date. I determined that I liked him. I thought he was funny and attractive. After a few dates, I had no qualms about kissing him. In fact, I was the one who initiated the first kiss. There was no question about kissing this African-American man. I don't know if I would have felt differently if I hadn't had already kissed a few Caucasians. I want to believe that as an older and wiser person it wouldn't have mattered anymore. The point is we enjoyed each other's company; we were inseparable.

(an excerpt)

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