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# EVER AFTER

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I always felt like the girl nobody wanted. I wasn't the thin one or the tall one. I wasn't the pretty one or the popular one. I wasn't an athlete or one of the cool kids. I didn't have "good" hair. I was the girl who was teased for wearing off-brand shoes, or for having B-cup breasts at ten. I was picked on for being strange, for loving professional wrestling and reading palms, things that seemed odd for a black girl from East Baltimore. I was an outcast, an ugly duckling.

Derrick, the light-skinned boy with the wide nose who sat one row over in our second-grade class, didn't see me that way. In fact, he smiled when he saw me. One day, he needed a pencil and asked to borrow one of mine. Having come from such a large family, I was skeptical about sharing. Lending someone something precious often meant saying goodbye to a cherished possession for good.

“This is a really awesome pencil,” I said as I held the yellow rubber ducky pencil out of his reach. “I don’t know if I can give this to you.” I was confident in my teal-and-black polka dot dress with the giant bow. That morning my mother had crimped my hair and pulled the top portion into a side ponytail, letting the rest hang free. I felt like a 1980s princess.

“Awww, come on. Please. I promise I’ll give it back. And if you let me hold it, I’ll give you two sheets of colored paper,” he said, holding them up for me to see. If two seven-year-old children could flirt, I guess that is what we were doing.

I smiled and agreed to the trade. When I leaned forward out of my chair to hand him the pencil, Derrick’s eyes lit up. His cheeks were rosy with delight, and his skin seemed to glow as he handed me two pieces of colored paper—one sky blue, the other canary yellow.

As I sat down, I thought about all the cool things I could make with the paper: a plane, a puppet. I’d decided on an accordion fan when out of nowhere, a freckle-faced girl whose name I didn’t know came up beside me. Her skin was the color of honey, and her hair was pulled taut into a single ponytail. She wore clear-blue-frame glasses that reminded me of the ocean and made her eyes look like they were on the wrong side of a magnifying glass. She was slightly snaggletoothed—one tooth was chipped, and the other was angled in front of it. She seemed harmless, like someone I would easily call a friend. I opened my mouth to say hello, but before I could speak, she yanked my long black hair until my neck craned back at an awkward angle. She ripped my newly acquired paper from my hand, balled it up, and rammed it

against my right eye, twisting it against my face. It made my skin burn, but I resisted the urge to cry out. Surely, Derrick would see what was happening and rescue me.

Agonizing seconds ticked by like minutes, and then it was over. The chip-toothed girl stopped her assault as suddenly as she had started it. I looked up to see my teacher obliviously writing on the chalkboard as she had done the entire time I had been negotiating with Derrick.

My cheeks were warm as I surveyed the rest of the room. A few classmates snickered and pointed; others were as unaware as my teacher was. When I built up the nerve to peek over in Derrick's direction, my heart sank. I was sure he had seen what had happened, but now his back was toward me. I told myself he was sparing my feelings, that he didn't want me to feel any more embarrassed than I already did. I was grateful—and heartbroken.

When the teacher turned around, I raised my hand, but not to tattle. I knew telling would bring more trouble than help. I asked to go to the girls' bathroom instead. When I got there, I breathed a sigh of relief and held on to the rust-streaked, white porcelain sink to steady myself. Fortunately, I was alone. I twisted the chrome knobs on the sink and splashed the cold water pouring from the dual faucets onto my face. I grabbed a handful of brown paper towels from the dispenser, patted my face dry, and inspected myself in the mirror. Dark skin doesn't bruise easily, and aside from the red streaks in my eye, no one would have known anything had happened. I decided I preferred it that way and hoped nothing similar would happen again.

But it did.

And I never got my pencil back.

Being punched, spit on, and laughed at became a part of my daily routine. I went to middle school with high hopes of anonymity and a fresh start. I quickly learned that preteens could sniff out insecurity as easily as a bloodhound could trace a scent. Girls would pull my hair, snap my bra, or tell me how ugly I was even when I made a concerted effort to be pretty. I fell in line with the boys, with whom I thought I shared more in common anyway. We'd talk pro wrestling and action movies. They'd marvel at my collection of wrestling memorabilia and my love of the *Rocky* franchise. During lunch, we played the card game Tunk and cursed like sailors.

One day our typical conversation about “guy stuff” took a turn I did not see coming. We were sitting in social studies and were supposed to be completing the class-work assignment when Ty stopped and asked the other two boys at our table a question.

“Yo, for real, don't she look like the donkey from Winnie the Pooh? What's his name?”

“Yo, Ty, you so fuckin' dumb. But yeah, she do kind of look like that donkey. Always looking sad and shit, but she can't help it. That's just her face.”

“Igor. That's it. Igor,” Ty said, answering his own question.

“Nah, man. Igor is that old hunchback-looking thing. It's Eeyore. The donkey from Pooh is Eeyore.”

“Nah. It's Igor.”

Their laughter chipped away at the walls that years of being mistreated had helped me build. I thought I had

become impenetrable, but their words reached into my cracks and grabbed hold of what was left of my fragile heart. I didn't want to cry in front of them, so I laughed to make it seem like their words were no big deal. But they hurt.

I pressed the point of my pencil firmly against my page and pretended to complete the class assignment. When the lead tip broke, as I'd hoped it would, I used that as an excuse to walk away from their scrutiny and toward the pencil sharpener on the other side of the room.

*Boom, boom, boom* followed me with each step.

When I stopped walking, they stopped calling out the sound effects. When I resumed, so did they.

*Boom, boom, boom.*

I had been dieting like crazy, drinking my mother's SlimFast, using her ThighMaster, and doing several hundred sit-ups a day. I was down to a size 12, but none of that mattered to them.

I'd go to school, face the ridicule of my peers, and come home for love and comfort. I didn't always find it. On good days, my brothers, sisters, and I loved each other, much like the kids on *The Brady Bunch* or *The Partridge Family*. On bad days, we behaved like real siblings and hurled insults at one another, never paying attention to the harmful effect of hurtful words.

"You talk like a white girl."

"You're fat and need to go on Jenny Craig."

"You're ugly."

"You think you're all that 'cause you go to that white school, but you ain't nothing."

I resisted the insults thrown at me, mostly because I didn't think they were true. I thought I talked like everyone else and that my size was okay, especially since I was taller than most of the other girls. I wasn't beauty pageant pretty, but I didn't think I was ugly. And I was proud to go to one of the better schools in the city that, although it had a handful of white kids, was in fact predominantly black.

After hearing the contrary day in and day out, I started to question what I thought I knew. Maybe I did talk funny, so more and more, I opted for silence. Maybe I was fat. I stopped looking in the mirror. When I summoned the courage to, I scrutinized everything, from my neck to my stomach to my ankles.

Clothes, shoes, jewelry, and accessories became crucial to me, and I let my older sister's friends experiment on my hair so that I could at least look like one of the popular girls. But it didn't matter what I wore or how I styled my hair. I had stopped feeling anything close to pretty. There was nothing special about my school or me. In fact, school felt more and more like a prison, the place I went to be tortured.

I gave up on fitting in and being accepted. I focused my efforts on keeping everything in and everyone out—it was safer that way. I trusted only myself and became an expert at erecting and reinforcing the walls I built with stones cast by rejection. I retreated into myself and became accustomed to the dark places in my mind; being alone, even when in a room full of people, was my solace.

When that was not enough, I lost myself in either schoolwork or books. I did other people's assignments or

wrote their term papers. They thought I was helping them, but really, I was helping me. I got lost in the pages of romance novels that guaranteed me a happy ending where love would save the day. I became obsessed with Stephen King's stories about girls who had been battered and bruised but got revenge. I carried these coping mechanisms with me into high school, and eventually into adulthood, and found something close to happiness in a life that consisted of working multiple jobs, attending school full time, and immersing myself in books.

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I was sitting on my twin bed with a textbook in my lap and Maroon 5 playing in the background when my phone rang. It was my ex-boyfriend, Toby. We hadn't spoken to or seen each other in five months. Curiosity compelled me to answer.

"How you doing?" he asked.

"I'm okay. Didn't expect to hear from you ever again."

"I was thinking about you," he said. "Decided to call to see if you wanted to swing by. You could bring me dinner."

It was Fourth of July, and I didn't drive. Getting a cab from home to where he worked would take forever. Getting back home would be impossible. Besides, as a rule, I never made plans on that day. It was my friend Melanie's birthday. I told him as much.

"You need to leave that girl alone."

"Excuse me?"

"Don't she have a man? Let her be with her man. They don't want you hanging around."

“If she wants to hang out, we will. If she doesn’t, we won’t. Either way, I’m not coming to see you.” I laughed before asking, “How many women did you call before me?”

“And this is why you are alone. You over there overanalyzing and hating on your best friend. Jealous ‘cause she got a man and you don’t. She don’t want to hang with you on her birthday. For damn sure her man don’t.”

I had been on a self-imposed break from anything with a penis since the split from Toby, and this conversation was reminding me of why at twenty-three I had sworn off men indefinitely. I had given up on Prince Charming.

I should have ended the call. Instead, I listened as Toby told me that no man would ever want to be with me, especially not a black man. He told me I was high maintenance, uppity, and delusional. “Even your virgin pussy ain’t worth all that,” he spat out before hanging up.

I was shaken. Toby’s words should not have mattered, but they did. I wanted to prove him wrong, but more than that, I wanted to silence the voices in my head that wondered if his words were true.

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BlackPlanet was a social networking site that catered to black students. My friend Denice used the site to meet men, and, following her lead, I figured I could do the same. I updated my online profile and added new pictures to my account. A steady stream of messages from interested men landed in my inbox. Some were crass and straight to the point (let’s

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