

Chapter 4

After that day with the puzzle when Miles was two years old, he never stopped talking. He'd tell me exactly what he wanted, "No banana momma, blueberries. I want blueberries." He'd tell me what he observed, "That lady has a big butt." He'd tell me how he felt, "Dada gone, I sad." Miles said this every time Nate disappeared into the basement. It made me sad too.

I'd always heard that girls were more verbal than boys; that boys talked as they got older, but even then, not very much. Miles, however, didn't fit this pattern. None of us ever seemed to fit any kind of traditional pattern, though, so I shouldn't have been surprised. I treasured Miles' chatter and eager voice. When I was away from home on a work trip or stuck in a late-night meeting, I begged Nate to have Miles call my phone and leave me voice messages. I never admitted to anyone how I saved every one of those messages, and listened to them over the years whenever I felt sad or mad. Even fifteen years later, Miles' baby voice cooing *Mama, where are you?* had the power to sooth my aching heart.

But Miles didn't just talk to me. He talked to strangers as well, men, women, children, adults, anyone who would engage him in conversation. Miles and I went to the corner Starbucks most Saturday mornings and spent a good hour there lounging in

the oversized chairs, drinking coffee and orange juice and stuffing ourselves with muffins and croissants. If I got up to get a napkin or straw Miles would turn to whoever was closest and, whether they were alone or with a companion, ask them a question. “Do you drink coffee?” was his favorite, because it generally drew a laugh, but he’d also ask strangers if they were a mommy or a daddy, or if they drove a car. Not everyone responded to him kindly. Whether the other patrons didn’t like being interrupted, didn’t know how to talk to children, or just didn’t have the time, many responded to Miles in curt, short sentences. For the most part, however, Miles was unfazed. It made me nervous all this reaching out that he did – I was an introvert by nature, and I’d never understood the value of small talk with strangers – but Miles relished these interactions, no matter how abbreviated they were. He was like a flickering flame, reaching out in all directions, seeking the current of oxygen that sustained his warmth. I would have expected most people to want to warm themselves by his adorable heat, but every once in a while he approached a stranger who didn’t just lean back, but jumped away as if singed.

“Who told you it’s ok to talk to strangers?”

Miles had apparently said something to an elderly woman with grey hair and buttoned up Burberry coat. I was still at the condiments counter, watching the interaction out of the corner of my eye, unaware of where it was headed or the negative tone it had already taken.

“Where’s your mother?” The woman craned her neck and looked over Miles’ head, scanning the seating area of the café. I was certain she wasn’t trying to find someone who looked like me.

As I approached the two of them, I overheard the lady, bending forward towards my son, whisper, “Little nigger children shouldn’t be left alone in here, unattended.”

“Excuse me?” I practically yelled. The woman looked up, startled. Neighboring customers glanced our way. Miles seemed confused, his head tilted to the side. It dawned on me that my son had no idea what had just happened, or what kind of woman this was. I ran through my options – make a scene, but have my

young, impressionable child see it and likely be affected by it, ignore what had just happened and smile and pretend the world was a safe place, even though it wasn't, try to talk to this woman like a reasonable person, though reason was never of importance in situations like this. I had a strong urge to slap this woman across the face, but my hands were filled with napkins and sugar packets and were shaking besides. I recalled my mother, who for years had funneled her frustrations and disappointments with the world into the red, blue, and yellow blankets she'd knit and donate to hospitals, loving care worked into every stitch.

I carefully placed the items in my hands onto our table and turned to the elderly woman. She was staring at me, her eyes wide and alert. I took a breath, but before I could say a word she grabbed her handbag, stood with a grunt, and strode out the door.

I sighed and sat shakily down.

"Why was she upset?" Miles asked.

I unwrapped Miles' muffin and handed it to him. He stuffed it into his mouth with both hands, not bothered in the least by the mess he was making.

"Not everyone is a good person," I finally said, smiling at him.

Miles nodded while continuing to eat with abandon. When he was done he looked at me, and I gave him my croissant as well.

"Why don't you just talk to me today?" I said.

"Ok," Miles replied, the happy light shining in his eyes again. I slumped in the chair then, feeling like I had dodged some sort of bullet. I made a mental note to research how, and when, to talk to a child about racism. And I kicked myself for not having done it sooner.

That evening when Nate returned home I told him what had happened. He'd been looking through the growing pile of mail on our kitchen counter and he paused, white envelope in hand, blue jacket still zipped up to the neck as if he might turn and leave again at any moment. "Are you really surprised?" he asked.