

Chapter 6

At least in the beginning Miles himself didn't much notice, or understand, incidents like what happened at the Starbucks. That started to change, however, when he entered preschool. I enrolled him in an academy near the bank where I worked, which was convenient for me, but I realized too late, not the best choice for my son. There were few other Black children at the preschool, and so Miles stood out, a chocolate brown swan in a bevy of bustling white feathers. And at four years old, the children were not shy about pointing out the difference. Two blond haired, blue eyed girls that looked to be sisters were particularly fascinated by Miles' skin and hair, and took to chasing him around the playground begging him to let them give him a bath. It wasn't malicious, I am pretty sure the girls honestly thought that Miles' skin was dark because it was dirty, and they didn't know any better because their parents had never talked to them about race.

A bigger problem was that none of the teachers seemed concerned. I discovered the dynamic with the other children when I went to pick Miles up early one afternoon, having gotten out of a work meeting ahead of schedule. I showed up to find Miles in a corner of the play area, building a city of wooden blocks all by himself. He was such a social child that this surprised me; I'd

been sure I'd find him surrounded by at least two, three other kids. I'd pictured him laughing with friends, babbling incessantly as he always did at home. But Miles was by himself, not talking to anyone at all.

That's when I saw the sisters approach my son. They ran towards him laughing and squealing, waving small white towels in the air, and at their approach Miles bolted to the far corner of the room. I wondered at first if there might be some sort of flirtation going on, maybe a game whose rules I didn't comprehend, until I noticed that Miles was determined to stay hidden behind a wide plastic kitchen ensemble.

"Miles?" I called out, walking over to where my son crouched. "Sweetie? What's going on?"

My son jumped into my arms and gave me a hug much bigger than I'd been expecting. After a moment he peeked over his shoulder, looking to see if anyone had come up behind him.

"I saw you playing," I said. "Are those girls your friends?"

Miles shook his head, still uncharacteristically quiet.

"Tell momma what happened."

On the way home my son told me how the kids sometimes called him dirty. "Am I dirty?" he asked.

"Of course not," I snapped, my anger at the situation misdirected. I took a deep breath. "Did you tell your teacher, Miss M, about this?"

Miles nodded and looked out the window.

"Why do they call me black? I'm not black anyway," he said, "I'm brown."

I tried to explain that he was Black, but that it wasn't exactly about color, but about skin tone. But this only confused and upset Miles more, and admittedly, the more I talked about it the less sense it made. I was swimming in a murky swamp of definitional confusion with no notion of how to extricate myself. Miles insisted that if the other kids just understood that he wasn't actually black but *brown*, then everything would be fine.

I stopped talking, but my failure to agree with Miles made him angry.

"Why do I have to go there anyway?" he pouted.

“Because mommy and daddy have to work.”

“I wish you didn’t.”

“Me too.”

“Then don’t.”

“We have to, baby. We have to.”

I knew I needed to address the situation at his preschool, but more than that, I needed to figure out how to make Miles proud to be Black. I wanted him to love his skin tone, not try to redefine it or explain it away as something he thought more palatable to others. How could I make my son embrace Black pride, when he had no example to go by?

* * *

The next day I cleared my morning schedule and took my son to preschool. When I parked in a non-temporary spot in the parking lot, as opposed to the usual fifteen minute drop off lane, my son noticed.

“Don’t worry baby,” I told him, “I’m just going to talk to Miss M for a minute.”

The school was bustling by the time we got there at 8am. Children were playing in frenzied groups around drawing tables, Lego stands, and colorful buckets of balls and toys. The place was vibrant and alive; a sensory feast for the eyes and ears.

It took a few minutes for Miles’ teacher to find the time to speak with me, but eventually she drew me to a small, adult sized table in a corner and we sat down.

“How can I help you,” she asked, a hint of annoyance in her voice.

I shifted in my seat, then explained the situation, watching as her eyes drifted off to the side or over my shoulder. I wondered if she was even listening to me, as she was adding nothing to the conversation. Finally, she replied with the trite excuse that the children were just playing, that this wasn’t about race, and that I shouldn’t be making such a big deal over it. If I made light of it, I was told, Miles would too.

“Miles is such a sensitive boy,” Miss M added, looking to me with a sly smile as if I’d agree with this shifting of the blame. “You can’t give in to that.” Everything would be fine, she seemed to imply, if I just didn’t give in to his feelings.

My heart raced, and I could feel myself getting ready to ask Miss M if she actually cared about these children at all, when she surprised me with another question.

“What’s his history, by the way?”

I stared at her. There wasn’t a hint of embarrassment or hesitation in her manner.

“His history?” I pretended to have no idea what she was suggesting. Even close friends tended to ask me this question about Miles’ origin with a bit more delicacy.

“Yes. Was he drug exposed? Because he’s having trouble cutting with a pair of scissors. It’s keeping him back from making crafts with the other children. We just want to know.”

I was completely unprepared for this pivot in the conversation. My mind was still focused on the reason I’d come in this morning in the first place, I wasn’t ready to talk about something else. Besides, I sensed some sort of accusation in the woman’s voice, and she was really starting to piss me off.

I took a deep breath and squeezed my hands together under the table. I knew that knowing my son’s past would make little difference in helping him in the present, so I said nothing. I just stared at Miss M and shrugged, refusing to confirm or deny her preconceptions. I refused to give her the satisfaction of pigeonholing my son, and I enjoyed watching her growing annoyance at my continued silence.

The meeting ended in a draw. Miss M assured me she’d watch the girls, but I knew that she wouldn’t. I assured her that I’d practice using scissors with Miles at home, but we both knew I wouldn’t. I never had to. I found out soon afterwards that Miles was simply left-handed. Miss M had been trying to make him cut with a pair of scissors that were made for ‘normal,’ right-handed children, and he was having difficulty because he was left-handed. Unfortunately, by the time this was figured out my son had lost interest in arts and crafts of any kind. He’d been reprimanded by the preschool teachers enough at that point that he thought he

couldn't do it, wasn't any good at it, and though I'd encourage him and buy him stacks of coloring books and pastel-colored paper, he'd just shake his head and turn away from anything having to do with glue or scissors.

This was just one episode, of many, that as I got older and more experienced I wished I'd handled differently. Looking back on it nights when I couldn't sleep – after I'd fought with Miles yet again as he grew older and bigger and angrier - I'd think back and wish I'd had the presence of mind and grace of spirit to ask Miss M, in a calm but straight-forward manner, “Why would you assume that he was drug exposed? Because he's Black?” If I'd asked that quick-to-judge woman such a point-blank question, what, I often wondered, would she have said? And would it have made any difference for my son anyway?