

Chapter 10

*T*he phone rang with no answer from my uncle, so I ended the call and slipped the phone into my back pocket. The evening air was cool and refreshing and I breathed it in. I stared out at the gray horizon beyond the station and wondered what my own mother would do if she were here with me, what she would say to comfort me. She'd always been good at saying the right thing to make me feel better about myself – when a boy I liked didn't like me, or I failed to make a sports team at school – my mother had the perfect quip to make me believe that they were the ones who'd lost out, not me.

When I was nine years old my mother and I had rescued a kitten from the side of the road. He was scared, pressed up into the corner of a cardboard box that had a sign on the front that read: Free Kittens. By the time we stopped to look inside the box, there was only one kitten left, cold and alone, his siblings all taken from him. I had reached my hand inside the box to pet him, and the kitten had scrunched himself even further into the corner, as if through sheer effort he could meld his body into the cardboard. I could still remember the sound of the other cars as they whizzed past us on the road, not pausing to slow down even a little bit.

You'll make a great mom one day, my mother had told me, watching me take care of the tiny kitten once we'd brought him home. At the time, I'd looked at her as if she'd lost her mind, because the blind, half-starved kitten was squirming in my grip so much I couldn't get him to swallow the life-saving milk I held out in a syringe. I was reasonably certain the kitten would die on my watch, and it would all be my fault. But my mother's confidence had calmed me, and the kitten, eventually named Midnight, survived.

It suddenly occurred to me as the wind picked up that I'd adopted Miles to prove my mother right; to put evidence to her conviction that I would be a good mother. Her comment had stuck with me over the years, past her death, through all my failed relationships, after I started trying to have children of my own. Her comment echoed back to me on sleepless nights and through fights with Nate. Even today I can still recall the exact tone of my mother's voice when she'd expressed her confidence in me, the slight tilt of her head. I stared out at the dispiriting horizon past the police station and thanked god she was no longer around to see what we'd become.

"You don't know what it's like to be Black!" Miles had yelled at me at the end of another of our long, drawn-out fights. And he was right, I didn't. But I'd told him that I didn't care, that he still needed to improve his attitude and get serious about school, that he was headed down a bad path. I'd spit the words at him, and at the memory of my fury, I now felt shame.

I took out my phone and tried my uncle's number another time. When there was still no answer I walked over to my car and got inside. I needed to lay down. I'd go back into the waiting area in a minute, but for now, I needed to rest in a place that was warm and familiar.

Evidence of Miles was everywhere in the car; his sunglasses on the dashboard, his favorite basketball on the passenger side floor, an old t-shirt and do-rag left on the seat. I glanced in the back and saw a flaming hot Doritos bag and a large blue Gatorade bottle. Squished into the armrest was the stem of a dandelion Miles had found a few weeks past and blown out the

window like a child. The stem had been forgotten, left behind to grow old and withered.

I turned on the car for a little heat and the radio popped on louder than I'd expected. *Annie are you ok? Are you ok, Annie? Annie, are you ok?* I couldn't breathe. Michael Jackson was my son's favorite artist. It was as if he were speaking to me through the music. We'd played this very song, in fact, at Miles' first birthday party after we'd moved into our new neighborhood. I pushed the car seat back, closed my eyes, and recalled that time long ago.

Things had gone rather quickly, after deciding to move out of the neighborhood with the poor school and relentless bullies. Within a month I'd found a new apartment in a better (read: wealthier) part of town. Half the size of the apartment we'd had before, for double the rent. My commute to work was longer now too, but I told myself it was worth it. We settled in within weeks, bringing with us our wobbly dining room table, our colorful Marvel posters, and our few living plants.

I had been determined to do things right the second time, with the new school district and new neighborhood. I started by baking cookies the weekend after we moved in, putting them in plastic baggies tied with decorative bows and garnished with cards signed by both Miles and I. With my son by my side we walked door to door, handing the cookies out. I'd been told by a Black friend from our old neighborhood that it wouldn't be the worst idea in the world to introduce Miles to our new neighbors before anything bad happened, before someone saw him entering our apartment and called the police because he looked out of place. I made sure we stopped not just at all our neighbor's doors, but at nearby shops, and the local police station as well, handing out cookies and smiling brightly. I didn't tell Miles that we were making sure all his white neighbors knew he belonged in the neighborhood, that he lived here, that he was supposed to be seen walking the sidewalks. I told him merely that it was the neighborly thing to do, to introduce yourselves when you moved into a new home.

Luckily, it turned out to be a rather fun excursion. Together Miles and I discovered where the other boys Miles' age

lived, and he made a couple of new friends. We also met the police chief who solidly shook Miles' hand and welcomed him to the neighborhood. And after hours of traipsing around the streets, we had a feel for the layout of the place, including the distance it took to get to the nearest playground with a swing set.

A few weeks later, I signed up as a parent volunteer in the school library, and took sick days at work to attend PTO meetings. I walked the halls of my son's new school, throwing out broad smiles to everyone I encountered, making my presence known as much as possible so the other teachers and staff would be aware that Miles had a mother who was involved and paying attention.

But in addition, I soon found that I had a secondary motive: I discovered that I was enjoying making new friends myself. I was now in a neighborhood where I, at least, fit in, and where the neighbors around me did and talked about things that were familiar. We watched the same Netflix shows, read the same books, could relate similar experiences from college and childhood. Our conversations flowed with an effortless I'd forgotten existed between strangers with a common upbringing. I sometimes missed the novelty of our old neighborhood, the unique foods and smells and unfamiliar languages, but more often than not, I simply felt at ease. While I didn't live in a big house like most of our new neighbors, I did share an unspoken tapestry of experience that made *my* adjustment into our new neighborhood, at least, easy.

It also, unfortunately, lulled me. The first time I was asked by a mother at Miles' school if I had any real children too, I was nonplussed. Miles was clearly confused as well. We glanced at each other with raised eyebrows while I simply repeated to the woman that Miles, here, was my son. Another mother, after volunteering with me for two hours during Miles' class Christmas party, asked me afterwards if I'd breastfed Miles when he was a baby. I looked at her, trying to fathom where the question was coming from, but she smiled back steadily, not batting an eye. I figured that she was either trying to subtly deduce the color of Miles' birth father, or, that she was doing one of those competitive mother things where you one-up the other mothers around you with how many good-parenting boxes you can check, including

the difficulty of breastfeeding. I decided to assume the latter, and that this woman was trying so hard to portray acceptance of us, that she was willing to pretend not to see color at all. She was determined to treat us like she would any of the other families in the classroom, including by asking us the same questions she would anyone else, however inane they sounded. At least the majority of the people in our new neighborhood were *trying* to be accepting, even if they hadn't had much practice with it, and certainly weren't very good at it.

Miles made friends in his new school. One of the other mothers would text me and tell me her child was headed to the playground, and Miles would happily agree to join them. I was too nervous at first to let my son leave the apartment and walk to the playground by himself – he was getting older and more responsible and certainly knew *how* to get there by himself, as did the other boys, but I feared the image he portrayed, of a Black boy alone in a white neighborhood – so I continued to walk with him.

Miles joined the soccer team that first year, and then the basketball team, and then the flag football team, sports not offered at his previous school. I bought every team photo when they came out and proudly posted them on our refrigerator door, even though Miles stuck out in the pictures as the only brown kid in an all-white lineup, the single black kernel in an otherwise smooth cob of yellow-white corn.

I bought children's books on Martin Luther King Jr., Langston Hughes, Nat Turner, and W.E.B. DuBois, which Miles and I read together snuggled up in bed. I had heard how Barack Obama's mother had done the same thing with her son, waking Barack up at five in the morning before school even started, to make sure he got a regular dose of Black heritage. Miles put up with the extra readings, though he didn't always much like them.

The first Black figure Miles took a real interest in turned out to be Michael Jackson. I should have known the musician would be a strong draw for my son. A skinny talented personality who was Black, but also part white in some nebulous, hard-to-define manner. The first time Miles saw a video of Michael Jackson online, he watched it over and over and over again. Then he found another one and watched that one on a loop. Michael

Jackson had a posse of brothers, which Miles had always wished he could have, Michael Jackson was a great dancer, something Miles loved to do, and of course, Michael Jackson was from the relatively recent past, not from some dusty long-ago time that most of the historical figures I introduced him to were from, and that seemed to have no pertinent relevance to my then seven-year-old son.

For his birthday party that year Miles asked if we could have a Michael Jackson themed celebration. We were standing in an aisle at Party City, looking at the assortment of Thor, Spiderman, and Superman themed napkins, cups, and invitations, and I could tell that Miles was dissatisfied.

“What about the Hulk?” I asked, picking up a Hulk shaped invitation set. “You like the Hulk.”

Miles shook his head.

“Spiderman?” I tried, pointing to the array of Spiderman paraphernalia. “Or,” I strode over to the other side of the aisle, “Pokemon? I don’t think anyone has had a Pokemon themed party yet this year.”

Miles left me to walk up and down the long aisle, again.

“Ok,” I said, when he returned to where I was standing. “We’ve been here half an hour already. You’ve got to choose.” This was getting to be worse than the toy aisle at Target, which my son could get sucked into for entire afternoons if I let him.

“Where’s the Michael Jackson stuff?” he turned to me and asked, as if it were inconceivable that there *wouldn’t* be Michael Jackson themed party gear at Party City.

“Michael Jackson? Um, well, they probably don’t have anything Michael Jackson themed, baby. He’s from a few years ago,” I tried to explain. “He’s not as popular now.”

Miles’ face drooped and with it my heart.

“Let’s go home,” I said. “We can look for stuff online. Maybe there’s Michael Jackson themed party stuff online.”

But of course, there wasn’t much online either. The best we were able to come up with was a Michael Jackson themed birthday cake, with the singer’s image frosted on top from a photo

I could bring in, and a rhinestone covered glove and microphone ensemble from Amazon.

Miles was excited about the glove and microphone set, however. We'd have a singing contest at the birthday party, he told me, with each kid taking a turn with the glove and mic, singing and dancing to a Michael Jackson tune of their choosing. There would be candy prizes. And of course, the Michael Jackson frosted birthday cake at the end. Miles was happy with it, and I was happy that he was happy.

For days before the party Miles practiced singing various Michael Jackson songs in the mirror. I told him not to practice too much, it wouldn't be fair to the other kids, but he danced his way through every room in the apartment, singing all the Michael Jackson songs he had grown to know by heart.

On the day of the party, Miles' friends arrived eager, loud, and jumping up and down like they couldn't burn their candles down fast enough. When it came time for the singing contest, everyone sat in a semicircle and Miles explained how the mic worked and how everyone could pick whatever Michael Jackson song they wanted. Miles' friends all looked up at him like frogs on a log, blank, blinking expressions on their faces.

"Who's Michael Jackson?" one of them asked.

"Michael Jackson," Miles repeated, as if simply saying the singer's name again would bring awareness. But the blank expressions remained.

"I'm sure they know the tunes," I said hurriedly, "if not who sings them. Let's put them on." I pressed play on *Smooth Criminal* on my iPod, then *Thriller*. The boys smiled and squirmed to *Thriller*, but no one knew any of the words; there was no way anyone could sing or dance along to a karaoke type of Michael Jackson contest.

"How about the Jonas Brothers?" a boy named Hunter suggested, the rest of the boys nodding at the idea. No one but me noticed the disappointment drawn across my son's face at the suggestion.

Over the next couple of months Miles tried to individually bring some of his friends around to the magic of Michael Jackson. During playdates he'd tell them all about Michael Jackson's Neverland ranch, and the cool sunglasses and clothes the singer wore. But loving Michael Jackson was a solitary pursuit in our new neighborhood, and Miles eventually learned to keep the obsession to himself, bringing out his rhinestone glove and mic only when no one else was around. In front of his new friends, Miles learned to stick to singing Jonas Brothers lyrics with the rest of them. My son adjusted to his new neighborhood, while also coming to understand that he was somewhat apart from it. Over the years, almost without my realizing it, the apartness came to dominate the feeling of belonging.