

Chapter 13

'Homey,' I learned, was everyone's favorite way to reference Miles at school, but 'brotha' and 'bro' were in use as well. Miles started coming home repeating the nicknames in a ridiculous Black patois, which I hated, but tried not to show. He started listening to hip-hop and funk and asking me to change the radio station in the car if the Jonas Brothers or Taylor Swift came on. One day, Miles switched his school email avatar from a nondescript letter "M" to an up-close selfie of his growling, grimacing face. He looked the image of a stereotypical thug.

I hoped that our uniqueness in the neighborhood was appreciated. I wanted to believe that Miles' growing embrace of his Blackness was valued even by the other parents. Didn't rich white people talk about the importance of diversity all the time? Didn't they say they wanted their children to have a wide array of friends, with a wide array of perspectives? I sometimes suspected this was a talking point more than a truth, but I pushed such doubts aside. If diversity and integration were true values, actual effort would be made to include us, even as our differences increasingly stood out. More often than not, however, the opposite happened.

By fifth grade I learned that there were events around the neighborhood that we were often left out of. There was a run for

charity that a mother in the neighborhood organized, but somehow, we never got the email. There was a youth book club that formed, where boys from Miles class would get together and read and act out the Dog Man books, but we were only told about them after they ended. I did learn at a PTO meeting that there were finishing classes in the neighborhood, evening get togethers with white gloves and formal suits where small boys waltzed with equally small girls dolled up in gowns and tiaras. I laughed out loud when I'd heard this, but it was true, and also, the registration deadline had passed.

Some of it, I suspected, was that we were just late to the neighborhood. Young mothers bonded over their young children in kindergarten, and if you moved into a district even just a few years into elementary school, you were irredeemably late to the party. Phone numbers had already been exchanged. Important friendships had already gelled. But I couldn't help thinking that our treatment was more than that. It seemed as if we were regularly rebuffed at events and from places around town.

When Miles turned ten I noticed that a few of his teeth had turned inward and that he needed braces to correct them. I called the local orthodontist that all the mothers in the neighborhood recommended. Jodi had assured me, in fact, that this was a great practice with a doctor that had already treated two of her older children. On the morning of Miles' appointment I took a half day off work, and we first went to a pancake restaurant for breakfast. I wanted Miles to enjoy a few more carefree meals before his mouth turned, for a number of months, into a hardwired battleground.

It was a chilly, overcast morning when we left the house, and either because of the weather or because it was the middle of the week, the restaurant had few customers that day. We ordered eggs and pancakes and played our old game of *Which Do You Prefer*.

"Basketball or football?" I asked.

"Basketball," Miles said without hesitation. "Cars or boats?" he asked me.

"Cars," I replied. "Cupcakes or ice cream?" I asked, forcing my son to choose between his two favorite desserts. It

was an impossible choice and Miles frowned for a moment. “I can’t choose!” he finally yelled, and we both devolved into laughter.

We were still smiling when we arrived at the orthodontist’s office half an hour later, but the receptionist behind the desk lost her smile when we walked in. She glanced first at me, then at Miles, then at me again. With a pinched face she told us to wait, abruptly closing the sliding glass partition between us. I didn’t know if we should sit down, or continue to stand where we were. My son ambled over to the seating area, nodding to a friend from his class, and turned on his tablet. A number of minutes later the glass partition slid back open and the aggrieved receptionist asked if I’d brought my papers with me.

“Yes,” I replied confidently. I was always well organized. My husband had always been mystified at how I could find ten-year old dishwasher warranties, or notes from important events made years before. With a smile I handed over Miles’, and my own for good measure, insurance cards to the receptionist.

“Not these,” she said, pushing them away as if they carried disease. “Your guardian papers.”

“My what?”

“Your guar-di-an papers,” she repeated, as if I were dumb.

“No,” I shook my head. “This is the orthodontist’s office, right?” I looked around at the dental decorations on the wall, the plastic over-sized molar on the desk holding a set of identical white pens. “We have an appointment. At eleven. With Dr. Nagler.”

The woman didn’t respond.

“For an evaluation,” I added, this time as if she were dumb.

“Yes, well, we can’t see the boy unless you can provide papers from his mother, or other guardian of the state, that says we can treat him.”

My mouth opened, and then shut. “I’m sorry,” I finally said, “but I don’t know what you’re asking. That is my son,” I said, pointing to Miles. He looked up, and waved. “I am his

mother. We are here for his first appointment.” My voice edged higher and I saw, out of the corner of my eye, that the other patients in the waiting area were starting to watch the scene unfold, including Miles’ friend Josh.

“If you are his mother,” the woman replied with skepticism, “then I need to see some adoption papers.”

“Excuse me?” I asked in disbelief. I narrowed my eyes and tried to stare down my nose at this ignorant receptionist, to indicate to her that I was offended by her suggestion, but she failed to acknowledge my nonverbal accusation and remained quiet, still.

“Unless you can prove you are his mother, we can’t see the boy,” she finally said.

Five minutes later we were back in the car, my son asking me why we were leaving so soon. “Isn’t the doctor going to see me?” he asked. “Do I still get a lollipop?”

“Not today.”

I started backing out of the parking lot. “Why?” Miles asked.

I stopped driving and put the car in park. I turned towards my son and racked my brain for a suitable answer to his valid question. One that was honest, but that at the same time wouldn’t make him feel bad for being him. How did one explain racism to a child? Was he old enough to understand? Did I go back and explain America’s institutional history to him? Or did I just tell him that there were stupid people in this world, and sometimes we ran into them, and when we did, we just had to leave?

“Was it because I’m Black?” Miles’s voice interrupted my thoughts.

I looked directly at my son in the back seat of the car.

“No,” I said. “It was because I’m white.”

Miles nodded, looked out the window, and I told him we could go get a bag of lollipops from the drug store.

A week later I called the orthodontist's office and asked if they queried every new patient for adoption papers, or just the ones that looked like ours. The condescending receptionist claimed that they asked every single new patient for papers to make sure they could legally treat them. As if it were some sort of a common scam for people around St. Louis to steal little Black children and take them to the orthodontist for expensive dental care.

"Bullshit," I said, and hung up on her.

But then I was left with the ordeal of having to find a new orthodontist, one which the neighborhood mothers obviously didn't know to recommend, one that saw little Black boys with little white mothers and didn't have a problem with it.

I loved my son so much. I saw our bond as so obvious, so incontrovertible, so inevitable, that when it was questioned, I was stunned. It took my breath away, every time, like a punch to the gut, and I often needed more than a minute to recover before I could appropriately respond. But what was the appropriate response? At nights, after putting Miles to bed and kissing his forehead and gazing at the perfection of his round, dimpled cheeks, I'd go to the kitchen and make myself a cup of tea, and stew over the day's events and how I should have responded to them. I'd imagine the perfect quip, not too funny, not too light-hearted, just insulting enough to make the ignorant receptionist or cashier or bank teller realize the obnoxiousness of their own behavior. I'd imagine them begging forgiveness, the light of understanding at last dawning in their eyes. I'd imagine my gracious reply then, calm, kind, conciliatory, with just a touch of haughtiness thrown in for good measure.

By the second cup of tea I'd be imagining what it would be like if, instead, whatever insult Miles and I had endured that day just hadn't happened at all. What would it be like if we could sail into the doctor's office, or the bank branch, or the YMCA, and no one, absolutely no single person, assumed anything was wrong, or odd, or even just noteworthy about us? If instead of consternation and side-eye, we got kindness and affection, candies for Miles and winks of maternal understanding for me. Pats on the back and garrulous queries about if Miles was going to grow

up to be a doctor or lawyer, instead of a basketball player or football player, which seemed to be the *only* two occupations *anyone* ever considered for my Black son.

I yearned to smoke a cigarette at such times. Open the back door of my kitchen, stretch my legs into the cool evening air, and stare into the dark sky as I inhaled, and then slowly exhaled, the poisonous tar that had killed my own mother. But that wasn't what responsible mothers did. Responsible mothers took care of themselves, so they could take care of their children. Miles had no one left any longer but me. His birth mother was gone. We never found out who his birth father was. Nate had disappeared, fled to a different house and a different life with a different soon-to-be wife. Miles had no siblings, he had no living or involved grandparents. If I were no longer around to take care of him, who would?

Sometimes my mind pursued an answer to that question, and what it imagined frightened me. I would see myself dying from cancer in my forties like my mother, and as Miles was taken out of my feeble embrace, he was handed over to another mother waiting in the wings, a better mother, one that looked more like him. They had the same roundness of cheek, the same almond-curved eyes, the same caramel brown skin. Miles was taken from my embrace as I lay in the hospital bed and, instead of crying at the loss, he was overcome with joy at the discovery of his new, more appropriate mother. The mother that matched his every need, and that no one ever questioned he belonged with.