

Chapter 9

*O*f course, my uncle would want to know what had happened. But where to begin? We hadn't spoken in years, and he didn't know much about the details of Miles' childhood, not about the reasons for Nate leaving, not about the solitary years afterwards, not about the troubles we'd had trying to find a neighborhood where we fit in as an inter-racial, single mother, adopted son family. Did the trouble start with kindergarten? When I tried to enroll Miles in a school that was both academically strong and reasonably diverse? I'd had no idea, at first, how rare that combination was.

Just before Miles turned five, I'd dutifully gone to the elementary school near our new apartment for an open house for enrolling parents. I'd felt heavy with the sadness of Nate's absence for such a milestone, but as I grabbed my favorite black skirt and fitted blue blouse from the closet, I'd also felt I could handle it. I bolstered my confidence by also wearing the button rose earrings my grandmother had given me just before she died. They were delicate looking, with thin red-gold swirls, and my grandmother had told me she'd worn them at her very first job interview, and at every interview after that until she'd landed a bookkeeping job. They were slow acting, she had told me, but they always came through in the end.

I'd entered the school with a number of other mothers (and one father), and sat down in the library for an informative talk about everything the school had to offer. As the assistant principal droned on, I reached over from my seat and pulled a book from the child-sized bookshelf next to me. I turned the pages and was surprised to find many of them torn, the last few missing. During the head principal's turn at the lectern, the bulb on the projector went out and everyone laughed as a joke was made about the importance of improvisation.

Next, we were given a tour of the classrooms. Square spaces with square desks, few windows, and no computers. I raised my hand to ask where the computers were, and was told that the four working machines were reserved for individual check-out. Four working computers? For the entire school?

The combined art/music room was in the basement. The cafeteria next to it, offering a lingering fetid odor, had a linoleum floor that stuck to the bottom of everyone's shoes. Outside, the small playground was filled with dilapidated, rough metal equipment that looked many years too old. For the first time, I began to doubt my choice of neighborhood.

I'd convinced myself since we'd moved in a couple of months earlier that where we lived was a great neighborhood for Miles and I. We didn't live in the so-called "best" part of town, where the wealthier people lived, but we lived in a good part of town, and what I meant by that was not just the affordable rents and the nearby expressway arteries, but the mix of people from so many different walks of life who'd also chosen to settle there. Miles didn't have to feel like the only Black kid on the block, and where we lived there weren't just Black families and white families, but immigrant families from all over the world, and even a few inter-racial families that looked vaguely like ours. It was all very cosmopolitan.

But what I'd convinced myself was cosmopolitan, I had to admit while touring the local elementary school, could also just be called poor. We now lived in a poor neighborhood, with poor resources, and the local schools reflected it.

I worried over it for the next few weeks as the school year approached, but in the end, decided to stay put. We'd give the

local public school a try. I'd done further research and come to realize that there was no ideal school for my son anywhere, in all of St. Louis. A school that was both highly rated academically *and* majority Black simply did not exist, and it was my ignorance to have thought that there would be one, and I just had to find it. After hours of investigation into the educational system in America, I eventually understood that I had to choose between a strong school academically, *or*, a majority Black school where Miles wouldn't feel out of place, but I couldn't have both. Deciding which one was better for my son was a next to impossible task.

At the time, I talked it over with Tiffany. I found out that she had gone through the exact same agonizing decision herself only a few years before. In the end, she'd decided to move to a nearly all white part of town; she'd chosen academics over diversity.

"But why?" I asked.

"You know Sayid's going to be a lawyer or doctor, right?"

"Sure," I laughed out loud, "of course."

"Well if he's going to be a famous surgeon, first and foremost," she said confidently, "he needs a good education. Like, top of the line."

"Uh-huh."

"He can get his Black culture from us, at home, from my mother especially – she's never gonna let him forget who he is."

"No, no she most definitely is not."

"Besides," Tiffany continued, "being surrounded by whites all day is actually a good thing. If Sayid's going to be a top doctor or lawyer, he may as well learn how to navigate a world with mostly white colleagues early. If he's going to need to figure out how to be the token Black in a room, he may as well do it when he's young."

Tiffany's argument was sound, but depressing, as I couldn't make the same choice. If I stuck Miles in an all-white school, he'd also come home to an all-white family, and how out-of-place would that make him feel? He might think he didn't fit in, anywhere.

I'd always loved school, I'd been an A student, had enjoyed impressing my teachers and learning new things. It broke my heart to think that Miles might feel out of place at school, and not want to be there. It was a difficult decision but I decided, in the end, that I wanted my son to feel comfortable in the world without me, I wanted him to *like* going to school, and so I chose diversity over academics, unlike Tiffany. Besides, I told myself, like Tiffany I could add the missing element when he came home. I could bring the extra academics that were missing at school to Miles' home life. I pictured us doing loads of homework together every night at the kitchen table, like my own mother and I had done. What I couldn't automatically add to Miles' life, was color. So for us, the best decision was to stay where we were and support the local school. I'd just have to make the extra effort at home to make sure Miles was on top of what he needed to learn.

It turned out to be the wrong decision. A single working parent can not rescue a child from the effects of a failing school district. I was not superhuman, I didn't have superhuman reserves of time or energy, and I needed a school that worked with me, instead of mostly against me. When I had questions about Miles's homework and what he was supposed to be learning, the teachers didn't return my calls. When I made inquiries as to whether there were extra resources to help Miles with math, his most difficult subject, I was told that the district had no money for extra resources, unlike the schools where my colleagues from the bank sent their children. If Miles was failing, we were entirely on our own. The school administrators seemed more annoyed, than grateful, that I cared about my son's performance at all. By second grade Miles's teachers had given up on him, and relegated him to the back of the classroom, where they could more easily ignore him and his energetic outbursts.

But what was perhaps worse, and certainly more unexpected, was how my son was treated by the other children. After witnessing me pick him up from after-care one day, the children at Miles' school started calling him orphan-boy. I found out when my son asked me during dinner one evening what an orphan was.

“Did you say *orphan*?”

“Or-fen,” Miles said with emphasis, distaste in his expression.

“Is that on your vocabulary list this week?” I asked with wonder, putting my fork down to think about how to define the word. It wasn’t the first time the school had put a difficult, obscure word on his vocabulary list. I charitably assumed there was some phonetic reason for it, like learning it helped his verbal motor skills, or some such thing.

“Orphan’s an old word, really,” I expounded. “You don’t hear it much anymore. One of my favorite authors used to write about orphans, Charles Dickens, he was a British author who wrote more than a hundred years ago. But I’m getting off topic,” I laughed, swallowing the remainder of my wine. I wondered if it might not be a bad idea to read *Oliver Twist* as our next book together before bed. “An orphan is a child who has lost both of his or her parents,” I continued. “In the old days, such children would go to live in a special home, called an orphanage.” As I talked I sensed the dangerous territory I was entering. “But we don’t have orphanages anymore. They’re a thing of the past.”

“How does someone lose both their parents?” Miles asked, not looking at me.

“Well, to be honest, it can happen for a number of reasons. A car accident, sickness, maybe the mother dies in childbirth and the father another way...” I found myself rambling on about frightening things that could kill people, not sure how to re-orient the conversation.

“Am I an orphan?” Miles asked when I finally stopped talking.

For a moment, the world stood still. I heard the ticking of the clock in the kitchen, felt the sweat prick underneath my arms, saw the wetness edge Miles’ eyes.

I shook my head and gathered my son into my arms.

“No,” I told him, “you are most definitely *not* an orphan. I am your mother. And you have a father, even if he isn’t around right now.” I wanted to kick Nate all over again for leaving us, for leaving Miles vulnerable to these thoughts of abandonment. “Why would you think you were an orphan?”

Miles told me then about the boys at school who assumed that his “real” parents were gone, because I couldn’t be his “real” mother. I was white and he was Black and we didn’t match and that meant something was wrong, most definitely not right.

I kissed Miles on the top of his head and brushed away his tears. I was his mother, I assured him, and that was never going to change. Ever. Those boys just didn’t know what they were talking about.

We sat together in silence for a bit, then I quietly asked, “Do you want to talk about Sharelle?” Sharelle was Miles’ birth mother. I brought her up whenever I could. I didn’t want Miles to ever think he couldn’t ask me about her; I didn’t want him to ever assume his past was something we couldn’t talk about, or worse, something to be ashamed of.

But Miles shook his head. “What if you leave too?” he asked instead.

It took every ounce of effort I had in me not to cry at that moment along with Miles. But I needed to portray strength. Miles couldn’t see me sad or weak or confused about this. I had to reassure him in no uncertain terms that I was never going to leave him.

I looked my son in the eye and told him that he was the most important thing in my world and that I would never, ever leave him. I then told him that he needed to correct those boys; he needed to tell them that he was not an orphan. I retold Miles all the stories from his past that he loved to hear, about how he had peed on me the first time I changed his diaper in the hospital, about the time he drew all over the kitchen walls with red and blue crayon, about how he used to dance around the living room in nothing but a Tupperware bowl on his head and a diaper on his behind. He laughed a little then, and snuggled deeper into my arms. He asked if he could sleep with me that night in the big bed – a treat I usually said no to – and I hugged him and said, of course.

The next afternoon, the bullies at the school punched my son in the face when he let his guard down and told them about the Tupperware bowl, and I had to rush from work to pick him up from the nurse’s office. Safe in our apartment I held Miles close,

kissed his bruises, and changed the band-aid on his chin. I had no good explanation to give him for what had happened. But I vowed that day to find us a new apartment, in an entirely different neighborhood. At the time I had hoped it would be enough to turn our fortunes around. At the time, I thought I was protecting him.

Ten years later, standing outside a police station, I wondered if it had ever been possible to protect my Black son. I was searching for a moment when our fortunes had diverged, when some event had happened to lead us down this darkened road we now seemed to be on. But increasingly, I had the feeling that there was no singular event that starkly divided our path from a sunny and innocent stroll, into a dark and divergent woods. History had laid this trail down before us, and like babes, we were blindly walking down it