

BLUE MARBLE

“Sissy, get out of the bathroom.”

“In a minute.”

“You’ve been in there for an hour.”

“Go downstairs and use the front bathroom, Pearl.”

“No, Momma, I got a right to use this bathroom.”

“And I have the right to smack sense into both of you. Now, come on down here. Lord, every morning the same mess.”

Sissy gets everything. Don’t think I don’t love my big sister. We have a lot of fun together most of the time, but I just get tired of her getting all the attention. Believe me, she gets more than her fair share from Momma, Nana, Mr. P, all her teachers and every boy, man, and some girls in the neighborhood. Every morning I wait to get into the bathroom because she’s got to take a bath, every morning, leaving me to take a “bitch bath”, as my nana calls it, which I’m not allowed to repeat out loud. I get 10 minutes or less to wash my face, my armpits, my “ginny” and my butt, before I can get to the room we share. Of course, by that time Sissy is dressed in pink, yellow or some other color that suits her ivory soap skin. She whips by me so fast she dries up any wet spot I forgot to dab, then she movie star walks down the steps. Anyway, I’m just waiting for the tide to turn in my favor. I know it is going to happen and I got a feeling it’s going be real soon. Sissy’s gone boy crazy and *that* crazy is going to get her in a bunch of trouble.

I might be eleven years old, but I know I have more sense than Sissy at sixteen. That’s why my mother always hugs me and says, “You’re my smart baby”, even though I hate the way she says it, with a pride pity tone. I used to be my daddy’s favorite until he died in Afghanistan in 2011, right before he was

to come home. When he was alive, I got all his attention. I miss him so much and I hope when I finish growing up there are no more wars or if there are, robots can fight them. Robots won't mind if they're blown to bits. They'll just get put them back together and turn them into something else, something useful like Addict Helper Braces for people like Mr. P who can't stand up straight and bust their heads on the sidewalk when they're nodding out from heroin or some other drug.

Mr. P. calls Sissy, Milk and Honey with a whistle that is more breath than sound passing through his yellow snaggletooth grin. He calls me black beauty, always as an add-on that makes me tighten my lips over my two long buck teeth because I know I look like a horse. I don't mind the black beauty. I can't help that I am as dark as the inside dimple in a prune nor that I am the direct opposite of Sissy. That's just the way it is. We have different fathers and we came to this world in different ways. Momma was in love with Sissy's father. She told us she smelled him coming a mile away and how she just loved to sit and look at him because he was so pretty. She keeps his picture inside the top drawer in her dresser in her bedroom. His name was Roper and he is where Sissy got her color. He had a pencil thin jet-black mustache and silky black hair just like Sissy. Nana says he was so pretty he could have been a girl. He died in Iraq when Momma was pregnant with Sissy. Three years after she was born, momma married my father, Lieutenant Samuel Kingston Matthews. Nana says there was no finer man than my father, tall, strapping, with the heart of a lion. Nana once whispered to me she loved him more than Roper, then said beauty fades, but good character last forever. I think she told me these things, so I would wear my color, my brains and my good character with pride. I do.

Don't know why Momma would choose to marry two soldiers, but I asked her not to marry anymore. Maybe she thought it would keep her safe or maybe the pickings for good black men, who "walk right and talk right", as my Nana says, in Baltimore is slim to none. Momma says it's hard to find a good man period, but it's real hard to find one that hasn't been to jail, on drugs, alcoholic or so damaged from his own growing up that he's not fit for man nor beast. Momma says it's like going to the store

after a sale and everything has been picked over. Nana tried to get my mother to move down south, where Nana is from, Savannah, Georgia. Nana says she still owns property there, but Momma says, "Hell no", then turned to us and said, "excuse my language and don't you repeat it." Sissy repeats it and worse all the time when Momma and Nana aren't around. She is always a different person around everybody, but me. I know her true colors.

Sissy's wearing her favorite color, Carolina blue. The dress hugs her waist as if someone were walking behind and pinching it tight. Her hair is in a ponytail that sways like the hem of her dress, as we rush home from school to get movie money before Momma leaves for work. Of course, we wouldn't be rushing if Sissy hadn't stayed afterschool for a cheerleading meeting. Who stays late on a Friday? Not to mention, cheerleading is an insane waste of time. All body, no brains.

We turn into the alley behind our house to cut our time and see Mr. P zipping up his pants from pissing in the yard of one of four vacant houses on our block.

"Hey, pretty girl," he says with filthy hands, filthier jeans and even filthier thoughts.

We keep on walking.

"Come on Sissy. I just want to give you something beautiful, just like you."

"What Mr. P? You find something in those piss bushes?" I say.

"No. I been had this in my pocket waiting for Sissy to walk by."

One thing about Sissy that will turn her head is the word, beautiful. Shoes, clothes, cars and boys, just put the word beautiful in front of it and she will stop on a dime. She walks over to him. In his outstretched hand, I see a small round shiny blue something. As we get closer, I see it's a marble, not a tiny one, not a huge one, but something in the middle. Swirls of all kinds of colors are inside of it. The sun hits it, creating a prism across Mr. P's hand.

“A marble?” I blurt out, going into hysterics.

“It’s worth a lot of money. I swear,” Mr. P says with the s sounding like a hiss.

“If, it is why you got it?”

“Never mind all that. It’s for Milk and Honey anyway.”

“No that’s okay. You hold onto it for me. I’ll get it another day. I got to get home

“Please take it. I held onto it just for you.”

“Somebody fooled you into thinking you won the lottery with that little thing, Mr. P?” I keep laughing.

“Ugh,” says Sissy, who surprises me, when she fishes in her bag for a tissue, then takes the marble from Mr. P. Sometimes, she amazes me. This was one of those times. I know she has a soft spot for Mr. P. She feels sorry for him, she says, but I think it’s just because he is all the time calling her beautiful. She thanks Mr. P and as soon as we turn she stuffs the marble in the zippered pocket of her dress.

As we approach our backyard, a helicopter flies overhead blocking out Jimmie B’s trap music, that he’s always blasting from his car. A loudspeaker, like the voice of God from heaven, blares a message about a missing girl, age 15, named Mercedes. It gives description of the girl and what she’d been wearing when last seen. Sissy and I both say at the same time, we don’t know a Mercedes before unlocking and dashing through the backdoor.

Sissy and I get enough money from Momma for movie tickets, two sodas and a big bag of popcorn. When she leaves, Nana gives us extra money for candy and for a taxi to and from the movie theater. I barely have my school clothes off when Sissy sits on my bed and tells me Dwayne, her latest

crush, that no one at home knows about but me, is meeting us at the movies. She sighs, and I sigh for two different reasons. One, Sissy is in love, again. I don't have enough fingers or toes to count how many boys she's been in love with since Junior High School. Two, I sit on my bed, the same bed Sissy used to sit on and tell me bedtime stories when I was a kid, before we became "frenemies". Sometimes I miss that big sister who paid more attention to me than anyone else.

. Sissy says she isn't changing because *Dwayne* loves her in her blue dress and wants her to keep it on at the movies. I snap out of my sentimental moment and decide to taunt her.

"I think I'll stay home, Sissy.

"What? You can't stay home. If you don't go, I can't go."

"Well, I don't want to sit next to you and Dwayne while you fool around with each other."

"Come on, Pearl. I'll give you my money for the movies. Dwayne is paying for me and you, food too. Please."

"Okay, here's the deal. For one week, I use the bathroom first and you can hand over the movie money right now."

We both got in the taxi smiling, for different reasons, of course. I won, and she was going to meet Dwayne.

Okay, as far as boys go, I have to say Dwayne is good looking. His yearbook picture, which Sissy fawns over all the time, reminds me of the picture of Sissy's dad, but with less slick hair and a touch more color to his skin. It irritates me even more that he's not only on the football team, but on the honor roll.

We stand near the entrance of Landmark Harbor East Theater when he walks in. His confident stride is long just like his legs and his shoulders are wide. He sees us and smiles. When he kisses Sissy on her cheek, I watch Sissy shudder and blush. I pledge, to myself, never to do this, if I ever have a boyfriend.

“Hi Pearl, he says with a million-dollar smile.

“Hi,” I respond.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I wonder what Sissy has said about me as we wait for him to get the tickets. Dwyane buys everything we ask for, popcorn, drinks and for me a box of Mike and Ike’s. They choose our seats, midway in the ascending seat plan. I let them sit down, then sit in a vacant seat in front of them. Like I said, I don’t want their kissing and stuff to interfere with me watching the movie.

Captain America: Civil War is great! The whole theater is clapping, laughing and talking to the screen, all the way to the end of the movie. When the movie is over, Sissy tells me that Dwyane will get a cab for me and she is going to let him take her home. After I remind her of the rule, we come together, and we go home together, she drags me in the bathroom and goes nuts on me. I tell her, I’m not trying to ruin her good time. I’m just playing by the rules set by Momma. She begs me to catch the taxi and to tell Nana, when I get home, that she ran into Marchan and Isla at the movies and went to have a burger with them. She promises she will be home before Momma gets off work at eleven. I look at her, and then think about Dwayne. He seems like a trustworthy guy, kind of sweet really. So, I say yes and Sissy rushes me out of the bathroom and into a cab. My last words to her are, “You better not be late, Sissy”.

Nana is mad when I walk in alone. I give her Sissy’s explanation of her whereabouts and she calms a bit before saying she’s gonna give Sissy a piece of her mind and that she better be home before

momma. I go up to our room, sit on the bed and look out the window. It's almost eight o'clock and the orange blue sky is deepening into a darker color. Soon, it will be night and Sissy better have her behind home. I reach for my cellphone on the nightstand and call her. She doesn't pick up and I leave a message; "Sissy, don't get Nana or me in trouble. Get home before momma or else I'm going to tell all your business".

I see Mr. P. shuffling across the street next to the old abandoned school with weed trees so tall, me and Sissy use to pretend they were palm trees. On breezy nights, before she went boy crazy and we were "besties", we used to tell stories for each broken window. Nana says it's the ghost walking by that catches our imaginations. Sometimes we think Mr. P is a ghost, with his glassy eyes, like the marble he gave Sissy, just duller like smoked glass.

I wake up to Nana tugging me.

"Pearl. It's 11:00 and Sissy's not home yet."

I struggle up and look out of the window and realize it is dark, dark outside. "

"Nana, she said they were only going to get something to eat and she'd be right home."

"Well, she's not and your Momma's gonna be home soon. I'm scared Pearl. They found a dead girl in some alley over on Chester street. They reported it on the news a few minutes ago. Then they talked about all the missing black girls here and in the DC area. I never realized so many were gone. Oh my God, please let Sissy be alright. Please."

Nana sits on Sissy's bed rocking back and forth as she repeatedly asks God for his intervention in between asking me what, exactly, Sissy said. I remember the helicopter blasting the lost girl message and wonder if the dead girl is the same girl. I feel like crying when I wonder if the girl they found had a blue marble in her pocket. Sirens are blaring outside, as if the world were coming to an end. Nana and I

look at each other and start to cry. We cry so hard we don't hear the back door open, nor the quiet footsteps climbing the stairs.

We run to Sissy when she walks into the room. Every part of her jumps, her eyes, her shoulders, when we rush her. She hasn't heard the news and she is sorry she is late, but she couldn't catch a cab. She looks over Nana's shoulder at me and gives me the did you tell eyes. I shake my head no. This is a rhythm we have perfected through the years. We go down stairs to watch the news with Nana, wondering who this poor black girl is. The newscaster is standing near a vacant lot, a few blocks from us speaking in sad tones. The camera pans over the grassy ground with powerful lights beaming down onto it. A multitude of police cars and van, as well as hordes of people. It looks like a scene from Nana's beloved show, Criminal Minds. The reporter reveals that a blue marble was found near the dead girl. She ends with, "This brutally slain youth's body is an indicator of what a nightmare our city is becoming with the number of young bodies piling up at the city's morgue."

We were so into the television that we didn't hear my mother come home.

"God! That Mr. P scared the life out of me. Bugging me about something he gave to Sissy. Lord, he's a mess!"

"Yeah, but he's harmless.," says Nana.

Sissy and I look at each other. She pulls out the blue marble with tissue sticking to it.

"Why you all huddled around the television. Something happen?" asks Momma



Sissy and I scream at the same time.