

excerpt from “What Was Pretty Shows Its Bones”

That morning was original because it was their first, but also because Dottie was new to Hamilton Middle, where Ms. Mary Winston was principal and smart-mouthed. Principal and smart-mouthed and diamond-shaped—her hips, naturally, but her breasts made so by any of the hundreds of pointy bras bought, sometimes in bulk, but mostly one pretty set of diamond titties at a time. The hips and breasts could be sanded to curves, though, and she’d still have the diamonds hanging from her ears and those bounced against her wrists, the ones hogging up half her hands—one for every finger, except the ring; buttressed like it was, so as not to confuse anyone who might want to dress it himself, but also to let him know it ought to be peanutish to persuade her.

Ms. Mary Winston was principal, smart-mouthed, diamond-shaped, a great and unapologetic lover of wigs the color cranberry, native to Buffalo, and pro-Black child. Which meant she ordered her school in such a way that her standards were, well, unaffordable.

Dottie walked onto Ms. Mary Winston’s swept (with a hand-tied corn broom) playground for the first time with her pigtails neat as a row of crayons, naïve as an apple, in a dress not necessarily cute, but better.

Preena caught a look at her out the corner of her eye and hated her own short, awful life—her dress, of course (flimsy and sagging and helpless, but worst of all—from the year before); her hair (“You call that hair? I thought that was a church basket on top your head. I thought maybe you was taking donations for a press and curl?”); her old ornery nana Kate, so full with evil her fingers bent with the energy of holding it; and her father Bo Millicent, who thought her a gnat, not a girl. She hated her breakfast (unbuttered toast); the color orange, since she was on a roll and might as well. The net of scabs uglying up her knees, keeping her from bleeding out. Her missing bottom tooth, lost, in part to a Lemonhead, and completely to a sucker punch. Jesus Christ, who paid her such sweet attention when she prayed but then turned deaf-mute if ever she called His name in public. She hated every facet of her existence. Every corner. The underneath

of it and the concept of it. Its disobedience and indistinctness. Its clinginess (she couldn't get it off her for nothing!) and its danger. Its gall. But her beautiful, useless, newly dead mother? Oh, she hated her most.

And then, because pain must profit, her eyes landed on the shoes, betrayed her, and bled wild.

Here she hadn't cried at Evora's funeral. Or when her grandmother tried crushing her neck with a collard colored blouse, just three days later (she'd set the kitchen on fire and'd never forget the color or creativity of the noose). And yet here she was with a face damp as the morning. She hadn't whined for any one of her father's, "You ain't mine...I keep telling you that" speeches, when he gathered his hands in a gang of knuckles and pleaded with her to quit calling him. But now her shoulders heaved.

She'd begged for those shoes the entire summer and was never answered is why. For their bright silver buckles—big glorious buckles that must've jiggled like pocket change if you danced in them; and rubber soles, so if you had the feeling, you could run in them. If you had to catch a girl by the snatch on her head and whoop her, you could do it. They were built for that.

"Your mother's check ain't come...we need groceries...the lights bout to be cut off...*the shoes ain't even cute...*" Kate had given all the excuses in her head, and when she'd grown tired of dodging, she'd been ignorant.

"Nana...are you eva *eva* gon get me them shoes?"

But Kate kept on humming "We Are the World"/soaking her gripping feet, like she did any '83 summer evening. It was like the feet knew the old lady wouldn't be redeemed (Kate was hell-bound, no question) and were permanently prepared to fight the drop.

Preena got right up on her grandmother in apparent ecstasy over the bubbles shrouding her nervous feet, put her own foot flat to the veined ceiling to show the woman a healthy rip in the shoe's sole.

"See?"

And while she hobbled there on a stick leg and ashy knee, Kate hummed on. No question or pretty please voice would move her.

Preena was never more sincere.

“That check you getting and keeping so snug in your titty? That’s my check. *My* momma died and that money’s for *me*. It ain’t for you to be playing Bingo with or for your old lady surgeries or for you to be buying things for Pop’s store neither!”

Kate’s toes contracted into a stiffer grip and her arms joined them for a mean duet. She pinched her face so tight it looked like a great raisin. Within a stock of moles and lines and wrinkles the eyes of an eagle sat. Craving a bite of head.

“Well, if that’s how you feel, take the motherfucking check and get going somewhere! Get lost! Go find that trifling nigger you call Daddy but won’t answer to his name. Worry his fool ass about your stupid ass shoes. Girl.”

So, Preena had no choice then. She’d have to throw a fit against Dottie’s head, and nose and chin if there was time—Ms. Mary Winston did not tolerate much beyond breathing or reading. She’d be running like she was on fire the moment Preena arranged her fingers. Only Bobby Lampkin had that same itch.

At least Preena knew her daddy. Bobby Lampkin, almost busting out her dress (poor seams, poor thread), might’ve been the child of a dozen men. At least Preena’s mother had heaven to cross, and wasn’t round the corner on coke/could come get her if she pleased. Preena’s daddy’s voice hummed around her ears every morning, bothered her like a bee. She couldn’t send it away if she wanted to. All Bobby had was what she told herself.

Just as Bobby approached Dottie with her fist slung back, arm tight as a chicken wing, ready to punch the new girl in either eye, Preena ran up like a superhero and grabbed her elbow.

“Bobby, your old fat tail always bothering somebody. Go on somewhere. Get you a fish fry or a tub of ice cream fore homeroom start. I know you hungry.”

“And I know you cold. That dress thin as my kitchen curtain.”

“*My? My? My* ain’t a word ever had a home in your mouth, Bobby. You on’t own your drawers. I’m very sure Ms. Mary Winston gave you a old pair of hers to wear. Maybe you shoulda asked her for a girdle, Bobby. You spilling out that dress and we don’t *hardly* have the hands to catch you!”

Bobby girl didn’t have a quarter chance. She left, but only after she’d said a pile of curse words and was satisfied it appeared she was leaving on her own and not because Preena’s woman tongue had licked her.

Somehow, Dottie made her way over to the playground gate. Preena had to look here and there and here to find her. Her school things were scattered at her patent leather feet like Christmas. She wore disappointment plain as her better dress.

Preena jogged over for a thank you, or to scratch the itch Bobby interrupted, one. But the way Dottie said, “I appreciate ya” drained her clean of anger. Dottie did nothing more than pepper the air with this spice-smelling laugh that made Preena say, “Evora?” and offer her a bundle of pencils—with fat, bright erasers hugging all their heads—if she wanted.

And the best kinda pencils were nice, but the fact remained that if Dottie was going to make it at Hamilton Middle with Ms. Mary Winston for principal, mean and diamond-shaped as she was, with all those ghetto children keen on keeping track—of who wore what, of who said this, of everything and nothing at all—she needed to learn a few things. Quick.

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