

excerpt from “Leaving Women”

When Tommy was alive. When he could speak clearly without spit gathering in a big drip at his chin. He’d kiss Dee’s nose and warn her bout it. Not to waste her time undoing the blessing. “Just love the big damn thing. Love it big and wide as that, and love them lips the same. Never mind no one else got a nose big as you. Never mind you on’t see many people with lips that size. Shit, lips that big make it so you got to have big things to say. Make sure you give em the words they worth.”

He said Dee’s skin, black as it was, black as patent leather shoes and the night sky, was the color of God. No matter that at seven she was coming up on five feet and not particularly slim in the first place. That her eyes were a bland brown with stout/spare lashes sticking out their lids. Or that her voice, even after steamed milk, was coarse and not what you’d want a young girl’s to be. He looked at her like she was a wonder. He listened to her with both his old man eyes fixed on her face and watched for the clever words leaked and sometimes chucked from her split plum mouth. She reminded him of Buella Brown, living three apartments over. With Buella he’d made plenty of love, and a baby she never bothered to tell him about. With Buella he felt real, real good and real, real bad all at once.

Dee’s mother Trecie was bright yellow/damn near white. She wasn’t taller than anything. And she obsessed as much as Tommy about Dee’s skin, voice, nose, mouth, hair, *existence*. Except her thoughts changed the girl by degrees you could count.

“Your eyes is the most REGular, tired brown I ever seen.” (Hers were some kinda green.) Or, “Your teeth so crooked I can’t see how ya talk straight.” Or if she was being funny, “Them nostrils is big as nickels...bitch, you stealing my air from me!”

If Tommy heard, he’d interrupt.

“Quit goddamn talking to Dee like that. It ain’t good for her heart the way you ride her all the time.”

To which Trecie’d say, “I ain’t riding her...I ain’t riding her. I’m only saying what I see. What you think the world gon do wit her? Black as she is? I’m setting her up.”

“You ain’t responsible for what come out the world mouth. You responsible for what come out your own. I been telling you that for years now. You look at that child and see a big black man you laid down with, and ended up hating...and that ain’t her fault.”

“What the hell that trifling nigger got to do with this?”

“He got everything to do with everything. Anytime you call Dee’s name, you calling his too.”

“And whose name *you* calling, Tom? Only reason you love Dee so is cause she black as that goddamned Buella.”

The conversation’d have to stop then. Since their past loves would have reared their big black heads/scared them some.

And when Tommy left for a slow, painful (useless) walk or to sit a spell on the patio (humming, remembering), and just the two of them sat together at the kitchen table, eating fish or maybe folding clothes, the words would be like, “What? You black heifa. You ran and told Tommy I was getting on you again?” And land hard—each a little disaster—and break apart Dee’s childish head.

“No ma’am. I ain’t told him nothing.” Was always the answer and always true.

“Then what he in my face for? Talking bout let up off you? What? You don’t think you black? You don’t think your nose bigger than most? You can’t see them big ass *daring* lips just as clear as I do? You is what you is.”

So Dee’d enter the dance. Which meant taking her momma’s lumps and getting more crooked and more tiny inside. She’d hang her head from a neck Trecie’d call “kettle black,” and her gold drop earrings (a Tommy gift) would dangled from her lobes. The fattest bait for her momma’s hateful tongue.

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Now Tommy, handsome as he was, was barely the shade of an almond. Trecie might not’ve qualified for a color at all—she was so fair the trail left by her veins could be traced cross her forehead. A child of theirs MIGHT’ve been a peanut color, might’ve managed a sycamore-brown, but the two most certainly could not have produced a stunning, gospel blackness. And Dee, tortured by all her “flaws” and stewing in her youth, was no fool. Dee read two/three chapter books in a day. She was a slick witch with numbers—they curtsied in her hands and became supple/soft slits of easy.

The sideways talk she got from the folks in her complex couldn’t help. “Who your daddy?” And “Chile, AIN’T *no* way...” Between those comments and her own genius, she was moved. She was six when she began her search through the family photographs. For someone black like her. For that same brave nose. For a yes Lord! bottom lip.

In the apartment’s hall closet, beneath this and that and that and this, four shoeboxes (short as Trecie was, you’d think she’d yearn from more than a kitten heel), collected the woman’s side of the family’s memories. The man’s side were laid dead flat in had to be a dozen, maybe more, yes even more, albums. In all, the photos dated back six generations.

And of those pictures (hundreds of them), not one person's mouth resembled a plum split. Not one nose yawned free below the eyes. Even the deepest/brownest relative, "Aunt Jessie" read the caption. Even she qualified only as bistre. She certainly wasn't creation black.

Deidre was eight years old when she asked where she came from. No question she should've gone to Tommy with it. But he'd done too good of a job building her up. Of making her see herself as she did. To come to him with these thoughts of *Why am I tall and y'all short?* And, *How is it my skin is three/four shades past either one of y'alls?* would put him in a mood. He'd double up on the compliments and good deeds. And goddamn it, she needed answers. Not convincing.

Because Trecie insisted on being called by her given name and no other, Dee couldn't put any sugar in her greeting. All she could say was, "Trecie?" And then, "Where exactly am I from?"

The woman stopped mid-fold—it was Sunday and they were burdened with all the laundry in the world.

"You'sa smart black bitch," she said. And her see-through eyes watered, not from hurt or shock, not cause she was tender, but because she was small, standing, off-white rage.

"I ain't seen your black ass daddy since before you came crawling out my pussy. Now pass me that towel."

Dee ignored her. She ran straight to Tommy, so she could look at and smell new him—consider who he was now that she KNEW he didn't belong to her. But by then, he was mute, had lost all of his voice, except in lucky moments, and sat like six feet of nothing, hardly breathing. Dee found him propped up a leather swivel chair in the apartment's back room, turned toward the

window so that he could be warmed by the sun—a straw man, with buttons for eyes and cross stitches for a beautiful mouth.

“You coulda told me you wasn’t mine!”

But Tommy couldn’t even dress or feed himself. He stared into the air with dank eyes that refused to blink. Dee’s words slipped past his ears all the way down his bent body, over his bowl-shaped knees, and gathered in a puddle at his dying feet. He heard her and smelled her and saw her all the same, but had not the faculty to lift even a crooked pinky finger to protest.