

Chapter 1: Sumthin'

The first Thursday in April, 1968 unfolded without any indication that the world was about to turn inside out.

I awoke as usual, silenced the alarm clock next to my bed and scrambled to my feet, still half-dreaming. Jerked my bedclothes into some kind of order. Mumbled a greeting to Mom, washed, brushed, yanked on my clothes and shoes. Combed the knots from my hair and tried to coax the five-textured frizz into a single direction. Gulped down the Cream-o-Wheat breakfast, kissed Mom, bopped my little brother Greg lightly on the forehead for luck, then ran up the hill to grab my friend Dawn for the trek to another day of eighth grade at Meany Middle School.

We were quite a contrast. Dawn was golden, tall, willowy, and stylish with trendy coiffed hairstyles, a mischievous sense of humor behind her winning smile, and an easy grace in response to male attention. I was pale, short, round and awkward with wild dark hair, uneasy with my rapidly-changing body, and tongue-tied around boys. Classmates sometimes compared us to the comic strip characters "Mutt and Jeff."

As on any other school day, we joined the multi-colored mass of student bodies as we rushed to our lockers, then parted ways to make it to our homerooms before the first bell. Morning classes were generic: teachers threw information at us, hoping something would stick, while we pondered the mysteries and distractions of the hormones flooding our bodies. Nature mocked us with the first signs of a Seattle spring outside the streaked classroom windows, daring us not to daydream about sweeter things than math, science, and history. I stared into space, Otis Redding's new hit, "Sittin' on the Dock of the Bay," dominating my thirteen-year-old brain, relegating the teachers' voices to background static.

A perfectly unremarkable day.

Lunch was generic cafeteria food doled out by Black and Brown women with watchful eyes and patient smiles. After lunch, I made my normal mid-day visit to the girls' bathroom where, after taking care of business, I washed my hands and glanced briefly at my reflection. I saw three chic Black girls—ninth graders who were infinitely cooler and more sophisticated—crowd around me at the mirror. We'd fallen into this periodic ritual without knowing each others' names or backgrounds.

Their attention normally focused on my hair and tips for improving my style options. But today, the tallest one opened with the question that hovered in the background of my life. Sometimes I even managed to forget that the juxtaposition of my skin, hair, and features caused an itch in some people's brains that cried out to be scratched. It was a query that shouldn't have surprised me, but still managed to catch me off guard.

"What you mixed with?" she asked, her hand skimming my hair from the crown to the flip that grazed my shoulder.

"BlackandJew—"

"See? I told you she was sumthin,'" a shorter, browner girl said, reaching to gently move my bangs away from my eyes.

It felt like they were petting me. It wasn't uncomfortable; I just never understood what made people want to put their hands in the unruly mass of protein sprouting from my head.

"Oooooooh," breathed the third girl, a chubby beauty who popped her gum with the precision of a metronome. "Do you know what I'd do with all that hair?"

I braced myself for their warning about the ways my hair might damage my personality. Back when I was seven years old, a group of teen girls in our neighborhood had eyeballed me when my friend Celia and I passed them on the way to the corner store. "Hmph, look at her," they said. "She thinks she's so cute with alla that hair. And she's gonna be stuck up when she gets

older, too!” They didn’t seem concerned about Celia, who was also Mixed but browner than me with curlier hair. I couldn’t see what dangers my hair held, but I became anxious to avoid them at all costs.

I spent the rest of that day worried about the teen girls’ predictions. While I wasn’t sure how my hair would cause undesirable behaviors, I decided to take preventive measures. That night, I told Mom that the weight of the hair I’d never had cut in my seven years was giving me headaches. My mother watched sadly as the hairdresser whacked off my butt-length tresses, leaving a messy few inches behind. I flinched at my reflection, hoping that looking like a pitiful waif would vaccinate me from future personality flaws. One thing was clear: While I hadn’t thought I was cute before, there was no danger of that now.

But six years later, this trio of stylishly-coiffed cool girls in our middle-school bathroom mirror seemed unconcerned about my potential personality deficits. They were just eager to help me turn my multi-textured mane into something more fashionable.

“I could show you some boss styles,” the chubby one offered warmly with a dimpled, gap-toothed grin as she teased the crown of her sleek upsweep with a thin comb.

Before I could respond, the bell blared, sending us all rushing out the door.

I forgot about my hair in the struggle to move through the crush of brown, beige, and yellow bodies packing the hallway. I held my books high on my chest to shield my breasts from groping hands while pressing against the wall to keep from getting pulled into the boys’ bathroom where rumor had it that girls yanked inside could be gang-raped. We called it running trains. I fast-walked past the danger zone to Miss Caldwell’s English class, where I plopped into my seat and set my English textbook and Pee Chee folder on the scuffed desk.

As the class filled with students racing to beat the bell, Ms. Super Cool strode to the desk across from mine. I felt like a sweaty, disheveled disaster next to her, so at ease in her glowing (and pimple-free) brown skin, smiling as everyone greeted her with reverence. No wonder she was always named “cutest girl” and “best-dressed” in the eighth-grade popularity polls. Her smooth hair, coordinated skirt-and-sweater sets and stylish penny loafers put my itchy plaid dress, clunky “corrective” shoes and droopy knee socks to shame. She included me in the beam of her perfect smile, and I squeaked a grateful, “Hey,” while betting she didn’t have ninth graders offering to give her makeovers in the girls’ bathroom. She was too nice to dislike and too perfect not to envy.

“All right class, we’re going to review prepositions today. Please open your books,” Ms. Caldwell said, tossing her chin-length brown bob as she pointed towards the sentence she’d diagrammed on the blackboard. Like most every teacher I’d ever had, she was White.

“Who knows what these parts are called?” she asked as my hand shot up.

She nodded. “Terri, will you please come up here and show the class how it should be done?”

I marched to the board, outlining the sentence as I spoke. Ms. Caldwell beamed her approval and motioned me back to my seat. Thanks to being a bookworm, I usually knew the right answers. Returning to my desk, I mused that it was nice to feel like I was good at something.

But my brief moment of joy was interrupted by a rough, warm hand sliding up and down the front of my right shin. “Dang! Quit!” I hissed.

Willie sat in front of me, and he reached back to feel on my legs every chance he got. Our desks were so close together that my knees almost bumped the back of his seat. When Ms. Caldwell wasn’t looking, Willie leered at me over his shoulder.

Since girls weren’t allowed to wear pants to school, my legs were fair

game. I studied the contrast between his dark hand and my pale leg, like ink on paper, telegraphing messages that my changing body wasn't something I could protect.

"Stop!" I said when Miss Caldwell moved to the other side of the classroom.

"You know you like it, girl," he'd whisper. Whenever I tried to tell Ms. Caldwell about Willie's roving hand, shame stole my voice. Sometimes he'd wait after class and walk with me. "Keep those big legs sweet for me, hear?" he'd taunt. Other times he'd snap the back of my new training bra as we passed in the hallways, laughing at my impotent rage.

I sighed, doubting that he'd try that mess with Ms. Super Cool.

Willie wasn't the only one. Some of the other boys at school who hadn't noticed I existed the year before had started appraising my changing body with new interest. Increasingly, their hands shot out to grab handfuls of breasts or booty without warning as they walked past.

That day, I vowed to ask about moving to another desk. At the bell, I jumped up and rushed to the teacher's desk. "Um, Ms. Caldwell? I have something to—"

She looked up and smiled. "Terri! I have exciting news. It took a lot of work, but I got you approved to join my Advanced English class! Isn't that great?" Before I could protest that there was nothing wrong that a seat change wouldn't fix, she explained that I was ahead of the other students and would find the advanced class, with its focus on Shakespeare, more challenging and rewarding.

I was torn—excited to be getting away from Willie's intrusive hands, but not sure about Shakespeare. I knew he was famous, but was he as talented as my favorite authors, Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks? As Ms. Caldwell chattered on, an uncomfortable suspicion gnawed at my mind: Was my skin tone and hair texture the real reason she thought I was "more

advanced” and wanted to promote me? She handed me the class change forms for Mom to sign, and I swallowed my suspicion, reminding myself how happy my mother would be at this news. Between seventh and eighth grade, I’d lost all interest in math, science, and history. English was my only hope.

I thanked Ms. Caldwell again, then rushed to my locker to meet Dawn for the walk home, hoping we could stop at Mr. Wong’s corner store so I could celebrate with some Red Hots candies. As we walked, Dawn chattered about some new “fine as wine” boy in her math class.

We were joined by a short, skinny, Mixed girl with light brown hair I thought of as Green Eyes. As usual, she ignored me and walked next to Dawn. She got on my nerves, always chasing after Dawn like they were tight.

I followed them into Mr. Wong’s store and grabbed my candy, relieved that I had just enough change in my sweater pocket to pay. I stepped outside to wait, savoring the sweet cinnamon candy and wondering about this advanced English class of Miss Caldwell’s.

“Hey girl!”

I looked up to see Willie eyeballing me.

“What?” I snapped.

He laughed, white teeth flashing against dark skin. He’d be cute if he wasn’t so nasty, I thought, popping another sweet-hot candy into my mouth.

His eyes slid down to my legs. “You know what,” he said, moving his gaze up to my breasts.

I stepped back, bumping into Dawn as she and Green Eyes exited the store.

“Hey Willie,” Green Eyes flirted, giving her hips an extra twitch as she passed him. “I didn’t know you were diggin’ on Willie,” she said to me when we’d moved out of his earshot.

I pretended to choke on my Red Hot. “Not my type,” I said. “He’s too—”

“Black?” Green Eyes asked, a sneer edging her words.

“No,” I snapped. “He’s a nasty poot butt, always feelin’ on me. I can’t stand him.”

“Not everybody likes chocolate,” she snickered.

“That’s stupid,” I said, my voice climbing. “He’s straight nasty. That’s all.”

“Sure, sure, that’s what you say,” Green Eyes sing-songed, turning the corner towards her house.

At the next corner, Dawn turned to me, her normally jovial face suddenly serious. “What kind of guy do you want to marry? Black or White?”

My mind raced, trying to decode her sudden riddle. “One who’s not nasty, okay?”

“That doesn’t count. You need to choose,” she insisted, her jaw all tight like she was mad with me.

Dawn’s strange request made me feel like I was being forced to decide between two flavors I’d never even tasted. I was frustrated by her sudden demand--and my inability to form a coherent thought, let alone fix my mouth to give the right answer. Fighting back tears, I shrugged, turned my back and hurried home to bury myself in the poetry of Langston Hughes.

