

children churches & daddies

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HELP ME THROUGH

LAURA JOHNSON

I'm reaching out
for your hand.
Please take mine
and lead me through
the wreckage of my life.
Hold me close,
give me strength,
and show me that you care.
I need your love so
don't let go.
For I am weak
and I will fall deeper
down the hole I'm in.
For I hardly have any will left
to go on.
And no light to guide me.

I'VE GOT RHYTHM

BY MARGARET KARMAZIN

I examine my skin in the mirror. The color is slightly on the orange-yellow side, in some places cream. My hair is brown with one skinny blonde streak at the left temple. My eyes are dark brown.

I turn my face to the three-quarter position. Definite pointy nose. Being an amateur anthropologist, I can see some Scottish type genes there - that angular, jutting look. Craggy? Well, I wouldn't go that far but let's just say I do not have soft, rounded features. You'd be hard put to tell what my ethnic background is. Some people say I look French.

Maybe I'm the Universal Woman. Think about this: who is the generic person in this world? There are more females than males, right? Therefore it's a woman. And what would her coloring be? Certainly not blond or redhead. More likely a combination of things - all the South Americans, Chinese, Africans - boiling down to dark hair and eyes and medium skin tone. That's me then. I'm the generic twenty-first century person.

In 1995 I got married to Thomas H. Reardon, "Tommers" for short. He's of German/Irish stock, Catholic background, isn't a church-goer but still lowers his voice when priests are around at weddings and funerals and says "Pardon my French" when he lets slip a swear word in front of one. Tommers is sexy as hell but whenever he does this priest stuff, I get turned off for about a week after. He is the type that would get up in the middle of the night to pick you up if your car broke down even 50 miles away, yet he says "nigger" on occasion. He says no white man would want a woman who has slept with a black man.

You can imagine my problem when I found out my great-grandmother was black. You can picture me sitting silently with the shades drawn, smoking cigarettes and drinking Snapple while I try to figure out what to do. Should I tell Tommers or not? If not, can I live with my stomach being eaten out by mutant butterflies for the rest of my life?

My Aunt Marge and I were cleaning out Grandma Benton's bedroom after she passed away from an intestinal blockage in Delaware Valley Hospital. Grandma Benton was my dad's mother and she'd been living alone in her house

on Culbertson for the past nine years ever since Grandpa contracted Alzheimer's and went to live in that home. He died six years later. You can imagine a house continuously lived in by the same person for fifty years. You can picture the junk buildup. There were the usual old albums full of square black and white photos fastened to disintegrating brown paper pages by stick-on corners. "Who's this black lady?" I asked Marge.

There was a silence long enough to grow old in and then she mumbles, "Um, sit down, Honey. You got a little shock coming."

I avoided everyone I could for a full two weeks. What exactly would happen when Tommers found out he'd been having sexual intercourse for four years with a black woman? Since he imagines a white woman is somehow permanently soiled if she does it with a black guy, wouldn't that also work the other way around? Like, his member would need sterilization of some kind now? On the other hand, the old slave owners certainly did not disdain forcing the slave women to serve their base needs, so does that mean it's not befouling for white men to dip into black women but it is for black men to dip into white women?

You can see I was confused. And so scared I couldn't eat. I lost seven pounds in two weeks and Tommers noticed all right. My flattened stomach raised his libido and he kept sneaking up behind me to rub himself against my backside. But I had to claim I had female problems because when he did find out about my blackness, he might be even more enraged if he knew I'd let him do it to me after I found out what I was.

When Aunt Marge told me, I asked her, "Does Mom know?" and she was ashamed to say she didn't. "Your father decided not to tell her. You know how her daddy was and Barney didn't want to take the chance she might think that way too. Even though she did all that charity stuff, who knew what lurked underneath, deep in her subconscious."

My dad's been dead for two years and he was not here to talk to about this. I thought about him. Reddish brown hair with a slight wave to it, brown eyes, wide shoulders. Pointy nose, though, just like mine. Thin lips. But my mind is working now and yes, I can see it - African DNA in there, just a faint bit. He was a good dancer too - he and mom, they were famous at the local clubs when they were young. And, my God, I'm hot on the dance floor too! I can even hip-hop and I don't know any women who can do that around here. Definitely, I've got rhythm.

The evil butterflies regroup for their agitated dance in my stomach. Tommers has a right to know, doesn't he, since we could have kids? I go get the bottle of Southern Comfort out of the cupboard and pour myself a shot. By

the time my husband comes in the door, I've got a drunk's courage worked up. The words are ready to fly out of my mouth when he says, "Did you hear what those bleedin' heart liberals at the State Capital were doing today?"

Demonstrating to get welfare back the way it was! So I can work my ass off to feed their lazy butts! And they want us to take them seriously. Well, why don't they grow up and take care of themselves!"

By "they" I knew who he meant. My revelation died on my lips. I sucked it back in and licked them.

"And Mike's daughter's going out with one! Next thing she'll be knocked up and Mike'll be stuck with it for the next twenty years!" He paused. "Would you mind getting me a beer?"

I know then I'm going to have to leave. Not that I don't love him and I can lean to the politically conservative side myself, but you can see my choices are limited. You can tell he isn't going to take to my news with outstretched arms.

I don't know how to do it. What should I tell him? That I have a lover, that I "just don't want to be married anymore", what? I don't have the guts to tell him the truth. He doesn't seem to notice my skulking around over the next couple days and generally acting weird, but finally I pack up and leave while he's at work. I leave a note on the kitchen table and go move in with my mom. I figure it's better he thinks I'm cheating on him than that I permanently soiled him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she asks when I show up with my stuff. "I've got bridge club here Wednesday and Cory's coming for a visit this weekend!"

Cory is her new lover, although I'm not supposed to know she actually engages in that kind of activity. The generations are expected to pretend they don't notice what each other are up to in that department. I'm also not supposed to mention he is fifteen years younger than her. Go for it, Mom. I'll stuff earplugs in.

"I, um, have to leave Tommers," I mumble. "It's just not working out."

She looms in my face. "Why? Why the hell not?"

I avoid her eyes. "Um, it's sex, Mom. That's the problem."

That shuts her up. She purses her lips a little, shakes her head slightly,

and dismissively waves her hand. "All right. Use the attic. I'm using your old room for my decoupage."

We don't mention the guestroom since we both have to pretend Cory will be staying in it.

I quietly go crazy over the next few days. Tommers, unfazed by the note, keeps calling and pounding at the front and back doors. Mom has been instructed to ignore him. "You don't have any lover!" he bellows so the whole neighborhood can hear. "I got a detective on you and he didn't find a thing! Now you get out here and talk to me!"

But I just ignore him. The thing is I know I love Tommers, but the knowledge that he would hate me if he knew my true self tends to put a damper on that affectionate feeling.

The butterflies chew on my stomach lining and I turn a page in the book I'm reading by Maya Angelou. After a while he gets tired of yelling and I hear his van start up.

It occurs to me that I might as well go meet some black people since I am one. The only black person I know personally is Terry Pickle who works with me at the courthouse. She's in Deeds and I'm in Passports. "You want to do lunch?" I ask her Monday morning and after giving me a puzzled look, she says yes.

After we order bowls of chowder, I explain my predicament. Besides Aunt Marge, Terry is, at this point, the only person who knows about it. She eyes me with interest, the way a zoologist might look at a rare, interesting flatworm.

"So are you gonna go out with black guys now?" she asks.

That had not occurred to me. "Hmmm," I say. "You think I should?"

She suppresses a guffaw. "Why not? You can have my Kevin. He's a pain-in-the ass, cheating bastard. Want him before I have to kill him?"

I slurp my soup and don't respond. Later I ask her, "So where do you meet black guys?"

"You're gonna get the neighbors talking," she tells me.

"Well, I'll be moving eventually anyway," I say.

I meet Dennis at Terry's a week later. She and her roommate throw a Halloween party and I go as Bathsheba, which is a pretty sexy outfit. A bare midriff looks great while showing off your dance moves.

Dennis is tall, in his late twenties, in jeans and a plain white T-shirt and glasses pushed up on top of his head which, thank God, is not shaved bald like those of most of the men at the party. If you've got hair, I can't for the life of me figure why you'd shave it off.

"What's a white chick doing at this gig?" he asks me looking at my belly then up to my eyes.

I'm thrilled but terrified. Everything I ever read or heard about black men on talk shows and in black women's novels pops to the front of my mind. Hotter in bed than I can imagine but inevitably strays. All of these stories are in my mind as I look at this man.

"Hi," I say, my voice trembly. "I'm no white woman."

"Yeah?" he says. "This interests me. How about we go sit down somewhere and you tell me about it?"

I go out with him. First we concentrate on the city but eventually get tired of that and meet for lunch at a local steak house and then the story is all over town and Tommers stops pounding on the door. My mother brings up the subject at dinner. We're having hamburgers and baked beans, Cory's favorite foods.

"What's this I hear that you're going out with Negroes?" She spreads Grey Poupon thickly on her burger.

"Negroes?" I say. "I don't believe I've heard that term ever actually spoken aloud."

"Don't try to sidetrack me with bullshit," she says. "What's going on?"

"Dennis is an insurance salesman. He has a degree from Penn State. He's a lay minister. His hobby is writing letters to the Editor."

Cory, a thirty-five year old crane operator, speaks up through a mouthful of beans. "What your mother wants to know is why you're dating a black dude."

I decide to be straight with her. I too am tired of bullshit. "Look, Mom, there's something you might want to know. I am part black."

She sprays pieces of hamburger all over the table, then laughs so hard she has to run to the kitchen for water. It takes her a full ten minutes to get herself under control and even then her face keeps jerking while she talks. "Part black did you say? And how would that be possible, Dawn?"

When I explain she loses the smirky smile. There is a very long moment of silence while Cory tries to act nonchalant and spoons more beans onto his plate. Then she says, "Um, Dawn. Maybe there's something you might want to know."

I wait.

She starts pulling at her rings, which she only does when extremely uncomfortable. "Cory, would you mind terribly taking your plate out onto the porch? Dawn and I need to talk here."

He obeys without a word and as soon as the door clicks shut, she speaks.

"Dawn, things were not always so peachy between your father and me. He had a pretty bad gambling habit and there were a couple of times he and I went our separate ways. This was early in our marriage - later he straightened out. Anyway, one of those times, I got involved with another man. Dawn, I should've told you this before. Barney Benton wasn't really your dad, honey. So if he had black blood, well, it doesn't affect you in the least."

Now it's me who's temporarily speechless. I need a glass of water from the kitchen. When I get back, I say, "Okay, so who was my father?"

Mom pauses, swallows and says, "Peter Raintree that owns the hardware store next to Eckerd's Pharmacy."

"What?" I say. "You mean that old guy with the white hair? The one with the finger missing?"

"Yes, Dawn. He lost that finger years ago when he worked for a butcher, before he opened the store. What's that got to do with anything?"

I feel indignant. "Well, does he know I'm his daughter for crying out loud?"

She looks down at the table. "No, he doesn't. I never told him. He went back to his wife and I didn't want to upset the apple cart."

"Did Dad know he wasn't my father?"

"If he did, he never said a word. He was a good man when he got over the gambling thing."

I need a drink. My mother must have read my mind. "It's in the cabinet over the microwave," she says and I go and bring back a bottle of Tawny Port.

"So are you mad that Dad was part black?"

She makes a little snort and shakes her head. "Hell no. Who gives a damn? We're all probably a mix of things we don't know about."

Suddenly, I am interested in Peter Raintree. "So what's the ethnic background of my real father?"

Mom's eyes sparkle. "Well, now that you ask, I believe he is one fourth Cheyenne. Told me his Indian grandmother came to this area sometime in the 1890s when she married his schoolteacher granddad who had lived in Ohio for a while. Peter was a bit older than me."

Holy shit! I am part Indian? I fall deep into thought. This opens a whole new panorama for me. My God, I'd better get on the stick and research my heritage! Maybe I am naturally a shaman or something. Or is my nature that of a warrior or medicine woman? Must look into it.

I explain to Dennis that I am Native American instead and he laughs. We go out a few more times but there isn't much sizzle. He's a bit of a company man and preaches once a month for a church up in Lancaster. Rather straight-laced. I'm on a way different spiritual path. And now, of course, I may want to do a Vision Quest.

Tommers shows up suddenly one night at the door, catching me off guard. I agree to talk to him. "I want you to tell me what's going on," he says in a surly tone. "The detective tells me you've started up with a-

I butt in. "If you say 'nigger', I'll never speak to you again." And I mean it.

"Why are you doing this, Dawn?"

I tell him why. Then I tell him about Peter Raintree. He's silent for some time, then says, "Let me get this straight. You left me because you thought you were part black?"

"Well, yes."

"Why would you do that?"

Does he not see himself? Doesn't he have any idea what he talks like?

"Tommers," I say in exasperation, "you hate black people!"

He looks surprised. "I do not," he says. "I'm friends with Peter Greer down at the plant - we eat lunch together every day. I know all his problems and he knows mine. My supervisor's black and I don't hate him."

"But you make all those cracks all the time. And what did you say about Kathy Miller?"

He looks sheepish. "Oh, you mean about white guys not wanting to-"

"Yeah," I say. "That."

He shuffles his feet. "Yeah, well, that's just talk. It's the way I was brought up. Everyone talked like that."

"Talk that can hurt big time," I say.

"I didn't think about it that way," he says.

He looks up then and I see his big blue eyes that could melt a glacier down to a puddle in five minutes and I forgive him. But I'm not through testing him. "I'm one-eighth Cheyenne," I tell him.

He laughs soft and sexy. "Yeah? Well, Pocahontas, you coming back home with me or what?"

I don't know if I am going back. For the present, we are dating. Tommers watches his mouth in front of me, but I don't know what he says when he's with his friends. I'm not sure I want to know.

Last month I attended a pow-wow. And I spend a lot of time in the hardware store, secretly observing my father.

CRITIQUE

(INSPIRED BY A SWEET POEM
ON THE INTERNET)

CHARLOTTE KELLISON
DELUZIAN AOL.COM

I feel the pulse of that poem,
but I can't hear the heartbeat.

But beware of my criticism...

I have ripped my heart out from my chest
holding it out,
offering it,
thumping,
quivering spasms
slimy with blood.
Its cords and connections
squeaking and slurping against each other.
The hot stench squelching breath.

Discovering:
the real heart inspires aversion.

I am learning to accept the discomfort.
I cannot but accept
the hand raised like a shield,
the wince,
the rapid exit without comment.

Ten paces past the metal slam of the auditorium doors
giddy as children,
loud groans,
shudders,
bursts of laughter into the cold fresh air.

EVENTUALLY

MICHAEL KESHIGIAN
EKIMMK AOL.COM

staring from the moon
in a dream
I saw people of earth
meandering aimlessly

from minute cavities
following burrows
to dutiful destination
and back again

some faster
some carrying more
others prostrate to fantasy
but above each hill

hovered ghosts of intentions
not resting
but preparing singular openings
where well meaning will be placed

PIZZA

BEN MITCHELL

BMITCHELL LANMARKCOLLEGE.ORG

In front of the pizza shop,
the street is wet and reflects the scattered
lights and I smoke with the group
that stands there. The man next to me
is balding and his beard is gray.
He tells me he lives in an apartment
and doesn't have to stack wood
or put plastic on windows
because the apartment has people who do all that.
He says he feels he's wasted his life,
that he graduated from Syracuse and played the 'cello.
He paints houses to pay his rent
and says he's scared. "I'm terrified"
he tells me,
"I forgot to do anything with my life." Ron,
who owns the pizza shop,
works from nine to nine each day except Monday.
I ask him how he is as I pay for my pizza.
He says he's good. He goes to work.
He works. He goes home and watches television.
He asks if I remember the name of some girl
who used to come and order pizza.
I don't recall her name but it was something
musical — something that sounded Italian.
The kind of thing you say a thousand times.
I think it started with an A.

HIDDEN FACE..

ROBERT MICHAEL O HEARN
RMOHRN AOL.COM

Where do you even begin
to connect the dots
the empty between points
like unmade beds
that'll begin to picture
the composite face,
minus trial and error
without any trace of empathy
or guilty party apology
that'll reconstruct on blackboards
of empty schoolhouses,
the lines between faltering points
on an unsketched face.

MY MOM THE CONQUERER

JASON PETTUS

You came and visited me in Chicago about a year ago. Without dad. And I was terrified. You see, the only other time you've visited up here, you were scared shitless. I convinced you and dad to leave the car at the hotel one evening and come to my house on the el. And you just went on and on about how scary the whole experience was and how you didn't feel safe until you found a policeman in the tunnel, and not just a regular policeman but one of those Chicago ones dressed all in black with the leather motorcycle jacket, and how you and dad followed him all the way down the underground hallway to your train. I thought this was how your week with me was going to be. I had to work the whole week you were here, and I was deathly afraid that you were going to sequester yourself in my apartment all week and not get to see or do anything.

But I gave you a street map and a transit map and I made sure that we took the el together on the first day from my house to the loop so that you'd know how to make the trip. And you know what? You became quite the urban adventurer. Each night when I would come home, you would tell me tales of riding the el by yourself to the museum, or to the Magnificent Mile to do some window shopping, or over to the Lincoln Park Zoo.

I took you into neighborhoods that even some of my friends won't go — Uptown, Logan Square. You walked down Lawrence Avenue, head held high, ignoring all the homeless people just like I told you to, talking excitedly about meeting my friend Steve's new gay lover. You dug the scene. You had something positive to say about every single thing I took you to. Even the crappy open mic in Wicker Park. And by the end of the week when I put you back on the plane, you had had a much better time than I think either of us ever expected.

I guess it's kind of silly to be proud of a parent. Being proud is something your parents are supposed to feel towards YOU. But man, I was so proud of you that week, mom. I was so proud of the fact that you were so courageous and empowered. It's a scary thing to do in Chicago — even I had a really hard time doing it when I first moved here. But you made it seem effortless. I'm really proud of you.

DOWN HILL

TOM RACINE

CABANABOYIO YAHOO.COM

1.

Things started to go bad
for us fast.

It started when she looked up
and shouted, "The phone's out!"
"What?"

"The damn phone is out! They cut me
off 'cause I didn't pay."

"It was probably the storm," I said.

"No. I know GTE, they're assholes!"

"Did you get a warning?"

"No! Here's the bill. See, due June 15th."

"Yeah, but you owe \$250!"

"So what, back in Phoenix, I owed that
much in a month!"

I looked at it, and the monthly amount was about \$60 bucks.

"It was probably the storm," I said quietly.

2.

"No, goddamn it, it's the FBI!"

"What?"

"The goddamn FBI. They're bugging me—
ever since I came back from Europe penniless.
They do that, ya know?"

"Oh?"

"Yeah, see." She brings out a savings-book or something,
Payments that are late to the IRS—see!"

"Oh," I say, and look back at the computer screen. I was trying
to get a poem off onto a floppy disk, but the fucking
floppy drive was damaged, so the floppies were getting chewed up.

"Do you have another floppy?" I asked.

"No!"

3.

The next day she called me, "They want \$150!"

"Who?"

"The bank, that's who, they returned 5 checks and charged me \$30 each. And I have to pay the phone company. It was that damn clutch letting go."

"Maybe you should go see the bank."

"I'm tired of paying for everything.

I'm tired of this city, I'm moving out—it's the goddamn Gulf, that's what it is—something about the ions in the ocean. I should be in Phoenix in the desert, I do better there—

that's what it is; besides, everyone's going to Cuba."

"Call me later, honey,
we'll straighten this out,
and then talk about love."

"I don't care about that." she said.

"What?"

"I don't care about love!"

I sure wish I got that poem
out of her computer.

A SHORT HISTORY OF TOOL MAKING

I.B. RAD

Early in our natural history,
tools were distinct from people; yet,
as farming communities swelled
their leaders grew ever more supreme
and began to consider coworkers
as merely another form of tool,
much as we now think of computers.
This relationship between ruler and tool persisted,
even as a more productive order, capitalism,
was waxing ascendant.
Eventually, factories and corporations evolved
in which the latest set of lords,
the owners and managers,
felt no more obligation
to their flesh and blood tools
- also referred to as “workers” or “cogs” -
than to their metal machinery.
As a result, like robots in a sci-fi novel,
the worker-tools rebelled,
protesting, often futilely, they were not tools
but truly, that like their rulers,
they too were human.
And so, these worker-tools unionized
and, in the ultimate case,
were organized into a Soviet Union.
In this Marxist utopia
party theorists proclaimed
that, as all productive citizens were equal,
worker-tools no longer existed.
But right off the assembly line,

the Soviet revolutionary canon
produced sanctimonious tyrants
and it soon became obvious
that the laboring masses
were living in a tools paradise.
As time went by, this Soviet Union
grew inordinately bureaucratic
and consequently, less efficient
than its capitalist rivals;
accordingly, with a push in the right direction,
the Soviet masters stumbled on capitalism.
And so, with capitalism triumphant
and rapidly converging
with modern information technology,
a revolutionary new millennium
of tool making began.
While many workers became “white collar”
or toiled in service industries;
in a real sense, the ensuing class of rulers
grew international in scope,
enriching and ruining economies
by market/currency speculation
without the least concern for workers,
much like a lofty bomber crew
that never stews over who’s below.
And so, with the parallel diminution of unions,
the world regained its former ruler-tool relationship.
Thus, our history ends;
happily, on a positive note
with a savvy economic order
throttling down the information highway
like an elegantly tooled vehicle,
its soundly ground engine cogs
meshing quietly underneath.

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