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Tiny Baby, Heavy Baby, Dark Baby

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TINY BABY, HEAVY BABY, DARK BABY

Marlee Yost-Wolff

In the first few pages of Learning to be White, the author, Thandeka, describes various subjects' first memories of encountering difference. In each of the examples, a well-meaning, naïve, white child realizes there's some intangible difference between them and their black peers. The child's role model consciously or subconsciously upholds this social reality, cementing the uneasy feeling into the child's emotional memory. The child doesn't understand what the difference is but realizes it's untouchable, unspeakable, uncomfortable. The moment passes, and the white child's life continues in a seemingly similar course as before, but in reality, the white child's whole world has changed. The white child now has a racial identity, a way of perceiving themselves and their place in the world in comparison to the Other.

I remember we were in the cereal aisle. I was sitting snug, mashed between boxes of mac and cheese and canned peas. My babysitter Laura had strategically built the cart around me. Try as I might, I couldn't climb out.

"They're your airbags, in case we crash," she said, as I suspiciously eyed a bag of clementines hugging my right knee. "Be nice to them."

Whenever Laura turned her back to me, I spread my arms wide. If she parked me close enough to the shelf, I could reach from my food nest, grab something, and bury it in the cart. So far, however, I had been unsuccessful. Somehow Laura always flipped around right as I was in the snatching process. Her ponytail flashed first, yellow curls flying, followed by her square chin, and then her eyes swept widely from my perched knees and outstretched hands to the leaning cart. Once, while across the aisle, she dropped a whole loaf of bread at the sight of my hands slowly working on sliding a precarious peanut butter to its demise. I laughed and laughed and laughed as she chased the roll-away peanut butter jar down the aisle, through the maze of skirted legs. It was funny, and besides, Breathless Laura hardly scolded me. "You're the devil," she said, "little miss Queen of the Terrible, Terrible Twos," but her eyes smiled.

The cereal aisle was crowded too. Laura squeezed us through the jagged distribution of customers and carts, parking me by the Cheerios, and set off in search of Raisin Bran or Fiber One or something of the like. Meanwhile, I strained my arms toward the Lucky Charms. I could almost reach them . . . I peered around. Laura was still preoccupied with one price or another, so I consulted my dolls.

Tiny Baby, Heavy Baby, and Dark Baby each had their own seat in the cart. Tiny Baby was small enough to sit with her legs barely dangling off the can of tomato soup Laura would likely make for an early supper, before my mom returned home and Laura had to leave. Tiny Baby loved tomato soup. When we ate, Laura slopped soup in a tiny bowl for her too. These dinners were special. I liked to celebrate by throwing Tiny Baby high enough to touch the ceiling, which always made Laura laugh.

Heavy Baby was the opposite of Tiny Baby, in both size and taste. Her head was the heaviest thing I had ever lifted, and she sat on carrots, not because she liked eating them (no one on planet Earth except Laura likes eating carrots, Heavy Baby says), but because she was just as tall and just as heavy as they were. Every time Laura and I went grocery shopping, Laura helped me measure Heavy Baby against the carrots to see if the carrots had gained any weight or not.

Dark Baby, however, had the best seating position of all. She resided on the chocolate chips, of course, because she had chocolate chip skin and an unbearable sweet-tooth. Whenever Laura made cookies, Dark Baby and I would campout by the oven, wishing the dough to rise, our anticipation devouring the room. We knew that eventually, Laura would wander along and pop open the oven-door, unveiling a thick chocolate scent, but sometimes we waited, lonely, all afternoon.

Today, Dark Baby and I were tired of waiting; we wanted the Lucky Charms. I hoisted Dark Baby up by her feet while she stretched towards the cereal, the tips of her fingers tipping the box ever so slightly until both box and baby crashed to the floor.

"DARK BABY!"

Laura looked up. I watched her mouth rearrange itself in an O, like it usually did when I decided to play a grocery store game.

"Oh no oh . . ." Laura mumbled as she lurched to pick up Dark Baby.

I held my arms open, mouth in a grin. "Whoops, Dark Baby jumped out!"

"She didn't jump out. She can't move because she's a doll. It's not funny." Laura hastily dangled Dark Baby by her arm over the cart. My eyes flowed from Dark Baby to Laura's face, expectantly. I was sure it would change soon enough, her furrowed eyebrows separating, stiff jaw dissolving into a forced frown that would, in a matter of seconds, transform into a full-fledged laugh. But when she bent down to pick up the smooshed Lucky Charms, I heard a sigh.

"You really can't use that name anymore," she whispered, rising and pressing her face up close to mine. It was bright red. I had never seen her face that color before.

"What name?"

"Her name," Laura said, shrugging her shoulder towards Dark Baby.

Was there something wrong with Dark Baby's name?

Was there something wrong with Dark Baby?

"I'm so sorry," Laura said to a woman across the aisle. Her voice quivered now.

Why would Laura apologize?

Was there something wrong with Laura?

The woman had skin like Dark Baby's.

Why did that woman look like Dark Baby?

Was there something wrong with that woman?

"Kids—they don't understand anything," Laura explained, gesturing wildly with her eyebrows.

Was there something wrong with me?

Tiny Baby, Heavy Baby, Dark Baby

Marlee Yost-Wolff

The cart whipped around the corner. I felt the promising breeze of the frozen pizza aisle. Breathless Laura left in search of pepperoni, and I closed my eyes, listening for the comforting tap-tap-tap of Laura's thinking nails working on the refrigerator door and awaiting the satisfying plop of the frozen pizza behind my right shoulder. But when Laura returned without a pizza or a word, I suddenly knew: together, Dark Baby and I had done something terribly, terribly wrong.

We wheeled away. I turned around and stared as the pizza aisle waned. It seemed to be waving goodbye, offering up one last deep, cold shudder.

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