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The Intertwining in the Museum

by LaToya Pickett

Through a world full of soft music, hundreds of paintings, and many faceless people, I didn't expect to be noticed. Yet, after being in the museum for a few minutes, I felt the unnerving eye of a stranger upon me. I turned to see a flamboyant, Hershey-colored man looking at me.

"Excuse me," he said. "I don't mean any harm, but—" He stopped and took a brief pause as he squinted his eyes, "What *is* you?"

"Come again?" I said with a confused look on my face.

It never fails: I am always asked *that* question. Somehow though, through the enticement of the paintings and the soft thumps of the music, I thought I, with pale skin, gray eyes, wide nose, and a halo of frizzy brown curls, could blend in.

"I mean I know you're not white, but I'm not sure if you're black," he says, standing next to me as we study a painting of two nameless figures looking back at us, as if we were on canvas.

As I look around, I catch my reflection off a mirror and for a moment I felt the grievances of the eight-year old girl who did not understand why people picked on her. As a child, I could not understand the complexity of my skin color and hair texture. While some little black girls wished for light skin and long hair, I prayed *every* night for the opposite. When you have too much melanin for whites, and not enough melanin for blacks, it takes a toll on your soul.

But I'm older now. Between college, my first love, and continuing to establish and reestablish my identity, I realized I was not to blame for the corrupt standard of beauty and Blackness that cursed this culture years ago.

Though I am older and wiser, I still crave acceptance from someone whose struggles parallel mine. I am still saddened by the fact that I never had a group of true friends. Just when I think I have made lifelong friends, something always goes wrong.

Coming back to the present, I responded to him, "I'm just as black as you. Now what and who *is* you?" I said like the little comment didn't catch me off guard.

"I am you," he said extending his hand. "My name is Jayden. Nice to meet you."

"Jayden, how can one be so rude, so quickly?" I said sarcastically.

"When I feel a connection to someone I try to act on it," he said pleasantly. "And since you're not male, tall, dark, or handsome, I'll settle for a friendship. Are you going to tell me your name?"

"Ava," I said, laughing at his humor.

"Well Ava," he continued, the conversation taking on the rhythm of old friends. "I am about to go and get some coffee with some of my girlfriends, wanna come?" Jayden asked.

"Yeah, let's go." *Why not*, I thought. He seems fun.

We finished our tour of the art museum, the music and the paintings becoming faint background noise as Jayden and I talked and laughed as if we'd known each other for years. He briefly mentions his Southern upbringing, and though he laughed through it, I felt a familiar pain. Instantly I felt an attraction and connection. I wanted to know him and his struggles.

I realized how good-looking Jayden was. He was well-kept: tall, clean-shaven hair and face, smooth skin, beautiful smile, and wearing an orange cardigan reminiscent of fall. For a moment, I almost forgot he liked what I liked.

We left the museum and talked our way towards a cute coffee shop a few blocks away. As we walked inside Chew, the rich smell of the various coffees instantly reminded me of home.

My parents have a weekend tradition of making breakfast and the smell of coffee always filled the house as if it was freshly brewed.

When we walked in, I spotted a couple sitting at a table looking as if they were having the time of their lives. They both stopped what they were doing as we approached the table.

“Greetings,” Jayden said to them. “I want you all to meet Ava.”

The two smiled, a smile that was inviting and welcoming.

“Hey girl! My name is Ryan,” the girl said. She extended her hand and I noticed a tattoo on her forearm, something written in Arabic. She was brown-skinned with a curly afro she styled with cool Ray-Ban glasses. I didn’t see any traces of make-up on her face, only lip balm. She was gorgeous in an effortless way, naturally beautiful, with looks reminiscent of a Black movie star.

“Now Jayden,” the man started, looking me up and down with a smirk. “I told you about rescuing these strays from the street.”

I frowned. Just as I was about to get defensive, though, the man stood up and gave me the warmest hug I’ve ever gotten.

“But any friends of yours, is always a friend of mine. My name is Richard, but you can call me Ole.”

“Why Ole?” I said, smelling a warm woodsy scent on his denim shirt while I hugged him. He had brownish sandy hair and freckles with a NYU crew neck on.

“One day, I’ll tell you,” he said wittily. I can always tell a lot of things about a man by the way he smells. By his scent, I could tell Ole had a story.

After introducing myself, Jayden and I went to place our orders. I had a latte; he, a black with French vanilla.

“How do you like them?” he whispered in my ear as we stood in line.

“I like Ryan, she’s gorgeous. But that Ole or whatever his name is, he’s—” I paused, searching for an inoffensive word. “Interesting,” I finally added.

“Ole has his own way of connecting with people,” Jayden said, picking up his cup from the cashier.

“I figured with the puppy reference.” I said.

Back at the table, the four of us bonded over culture and music.

“So Rihanna has another album coming out?” Ryan said, adjusting the string of her tea.

“That’s what they’re saying,” Jayden chimed in. “Whatever happened to making quality music or least taking your time to make it?”

“All I know is, I am patiently waiting for mother Beyonce, to set another standard of greatness,” Ole said. His choice of words tipped me off to the fact that he and Ryan weren’t a couple, after all.

“Is it greatness?” I said picking up my cup. “Or is she great at stealing other people’s shit?”

Everyone’s eyes grew wide.

“Please don’t push him to go into his full, I-go-harder-for-Beyonce-than-my-own-mama stan mode,” Ryan said laughing.

“I only say this because I question the source of modern music,” I offered. “While I love Beyonce and Rihanna, I question their inspiration. Rihanna has 12 different writers and Beyonce barely scratches the surface of subjects and—”

“But Beyonce is a *real* entertainer,” Ole rudely interrupted, taking a loud sip of the last of his green tea.

I side eyed him with a look of displeasure. “She is definitely becoming one of the best, but she is no Sade.” I smiled smugly.

“SADE!” Everyone blurted.

“I don’t know about Sade but one of my friends who writes for *Vibe* was on the 777 tour and said it was horrible,” Ryan said. “They literally didn’t sleep for seven days and had no time with her!”

“Sade has released two CDs my whole life,” Jayden said, rolling his eyes.

“Get into it though,” I said. “Sade is pure artistry: She is sexy and exotic without being revealing, and dedicated to what it means to be an artist, without being overbearing. She respectfully leaves without a trace and I appreciate that.”

“I like the fact that I don’t know much about Sade’s personal life,” Ryan added.

Jayden nods along vigorously. “I can feel that,” he begins. “I think this culture is too concerned about people and things that have nothing to do with them.”

We continued to talk about music and culture, as the conversation danced around the importance of Mozart, Basquiat, and Haring in black culture. It didn’t feel like we were in *Chew* for thirty minutes, let alone three hours.

“Oh wow!” I exclaimed after a quick glance at my golden Michael Kors watch. “Is it really 5o’clock?”

“Really?” Jayden squealed in response, finally noticing his empty cup of coffee.

“Yeah I think I’m about to go home,” Ole said, pushing away from the table and rising to his feet. “I’ve sat for too long and got a hell of a lot of work to do.”

“Yeah me too,” Ryan said, wrapping her scarf gently around her neck.

“Well I definitely want to keep in touch with you all,” I shyly offered. I’d instantly felt a connection with these strangers, and I wasn’t ready for it to die.

We exchange numbers and promise to keep in touch.

A few days later, my phone buzzed with a text message from Jayden.

“Hey girl! I hope you’re doing well, are you busy on Saturday?”

I smiled widely, happy to see that the connection was mutual.

“*Hey dear! No, I am free!*”

“Let’s go to this paint and wine session Ryan told me about.”

“*Okay sounds fun.*”

A spirit of dread washed over me. *This friendship is too good to be true*, I found myself thinking. Despite my best efforts, I couldn’t escape it. My friendships always seemed to follow a similar trajectory: after a while, the frequent phone calls stop, text messages are sent out of obligation, and the dynamic of the relationship changes. Eventually we walk past each other as awkward strangers. The chill of isolation I felt as a nine year-old stings my face like a new wind.

On Saturday Jayden and I went to the painting party. We painted the sun among clouds on the ocean and drank bottles of wine. It should have been a bore, but with wine, it was amazing. After leaving the session Jayden and I agreed to go to my place to drink and play board games.

“Do you feel the wine?” I asked while driving.

“Yeah...just a little,” Jayden said smiling.

When we pulled into my apartment it took us a few extra seconds to get up the stairs. We were buzzed.

“Okay I have Monopoly, Scrabble, checkers, and word play,” I said as we entered the apartment.

“Let play Scrabble,” Jayden said. I bolted for the refrigerator and the red wine I’d stashed inside.

“Okay, let me put on some Sade,” I said.

Jayden laughed. “Here you go.”

“Hey you can never go wrong with Sade and wine!” I smiled as he chuckled.

As Sade’s greatest hits softly played in the background, the game intensified with each round and every glass.

Suddenly I heard the violin of the song, *Pearls*, comes on. Something about that song makes me extremely sentimental. I think about my mother’s love and how she tried to protect me from the vicious world. To keep myself from re-digging the hole of self-pity, I decided I wanted to understand Jayden more. From the countless glasses of wine and Sade singing, I felt an urge to know his struggles and understand why we connect.

There is a woman in Somalia

“What is you?” I uttered, giving him a serious look.

Scraping for pearls on the roadside

“What?” He said confused.

There's a force stronger than nature

“What makes you, you?” I asked with a stronger voice. “You said we are one, so what is your story?”

Keeps her will alive

Jayden looks away into space. For a moment I thought he was spacing out.

This is how she's dying

“Well...” he said, barely opening his mouth.

She's dying to survive

For a person who has been nothing but vibrant and upbeat, I felt everything he was saying way before he said it.

I would like to be that brave

“They hurt me pretty bad,” he finally said.

She cries to the heaven above

“What did they do?” I asked, hurting through his hurt.

There is a stone in my heart

“They kicked me out of the house at 14 because I’m gay.” The words hung in the air for a moment.

She lives a life she didn't choose

“But why?” I managed to say. I couldn’t my parents imagine being that cruel—if it wasn’t for their love and guidance, I wouldn’t have survived my demons.

And it hurts like brand-new shoes

“They were too holy for a flamboyant gay son,” he said emotionless. “My grandmother took me in. And God bless her heart, she was too old to see after me, but she did the best she could.”

Hurts like brand-new shoes

By now he had tears in his eyes, and I saw the fourteen year-old boy who was just getting his first taste of life. Just when he thought he knew his place, his parents did the unthinkable. He said one day his father walked into his room and simply told him it was time to leave. There was

no fighting, no commotion. He simply left.

There is a woman in Somalia

The sun gives her no mercy

“I didn’t know where I was going,” Jayden said. “So I decided to go to my grandmother’s house, and she raised me until she died when I was 18.”

The same sky we lay under

Burns her to the bone

“But she raised a man—a strong one,” he said, voice both resolute and cracking. “In the 4 years I stayed with her, she taught me compassion and forgiveness towards my parents even if we didn’t talk. I no longer feel hate towards them. It took her and a few therapists to get me to that point.”

Long as afternoon shadows

It's gonna take her to get home

“What makes you, you?” He said.

Each grain carefully wrapped up

Pearls for her little girl

He asked me that question with so much compassion. Since he was so willing to tell his story, I knew instantly that I could trust him with my life. So I told him. I told him how since I started school when I was 4, I was tortured because I had a white father and a black mother. Kids tormented me because my parents went against the grain of what *America thought* a family was supposed to look like. I even told him how close I was to committing suicide in junior high when I went looking for the family’s gun until my older brother walked in on me.

Hallelujah

Hallelujah

She cries to the heaven above

There is a stone in my heart

She lives in a world she didn't choose

And it hurts like brand-new shoes

Hurts like brand-new shoes

By the time the last few second of *Pearls* faded away, the game was over and we were both laying against the cold floor, crying our eyes out. Though my eyes were red and my nose was running, I felt refreshed.

I felt, for once, finally, that someone truly understood me. At that point, we had only knew each other briefly. Sometimes, though, God intertwines people just to show his mercy. Through Jayden, I'd found mine.

After that night, our interaction changed. We formed a bond that included daily text messages and witty tweets to each on Twitter. Jayden and I hung out every weekend.

One day, years later from the first time I saw Jayden in the art museum, I asked him why he spoke to me.

“Out of all those people in that museum, why did you speak to me?” I asked him.

He said “Because our souls intertwine.”