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Tracy Price-Thompson

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“Black and Then Blue”

Integrating an elementary school in
Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, New York City, 1968

The steel-colored stairs looked steep and insurmountable from my vantage point. The flat gray paint gave them an institutional look that was popular during that era. Gazing up at the crowd at the top, I bravely began my journey.

Facing the formidable flight of stairs, I was flanked on either side by my parents. Each of them clasped one of my hands within the folds of their own: strong and sure. This single flight of stairs was the bridge to my future. Like trampolines, my parents provided the catapulting momentum that my six-year-old frame required to propel itself upward. Since I was small for my age, my knees nearly met my chin with each lunge.

I glanced into the stoic face of my father and noticed how straight his back was, how high he held his head. Subconsciously, I adjusted my posture and bearing to match his. Turning to my mother, I smiled brightly, my six-year-old teeth all jumbled up in a mouth too small to contain them. My mother smiled back.

The year was 1968. The neighborhood was Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. I was black when I arrived and blue when I left. The crowd milling in front of the doors at the top of the stairs was chanting something. I didn't understand their words, nor did they interest me. It was the world that lay just beyond the doors that attracted me. I was soooo excited! Today was my first day of school! Not that preschool stuff — which Mama said was just glorified day care — this was *real* school, the same kind that my siblings attended. I had finally joined their ranks; I was about to become a bona fide first-grader.

As we reached the top of the stairs, the people parted as if Moses had just parted the Red Sea, creating a narrow passage. They were still chanting as we passed, and I noticed that they were carrying signs with letters and words on them. Part of their chant included numbers. It sounded as if they were counting, “Two, four, six eight . . .” Didn't these grown-ups know that you always being counting with the number one? And what happened to numbers three and five? I wasn't even in first grade yet, and *I* knew better than that.

My parents marched me into the building and into a huge room with a million kids swarming around. Their voices were humming like hornets all around my head, making it hard for me to concentrate. Something was strange, but in the midst of my excitement and the children's noise, I was unable to grasp my feelings and pin them down.

I looked around the room. There was a stage with a red-curtained border, and there were more chairs than I'd ever seen. Mama said they were seats, not chairs, and that this room was called an auditorium.

I looked down at my new green dress with the red apples and yellow sun embroidered on the front. Green was Daddy's favorite color; thus, green was my favorite color. I thought I looked very cute. My

socks were a perfect match for the red apples, and my shoes were shiny buckle-up Mary Janes. They were authentic Buster Browns. You could tell if your shoes were real Buster Browns because, just like I'd seen on television, Buster's dog, Tige, would be inside 'cause that's where he lived.

I didn't have a dog, although I wanted one, and a pony too. Mama said if we had a dog it would definitely have to live in my shoes. There was hardly room enough for the six of us in our apartment.

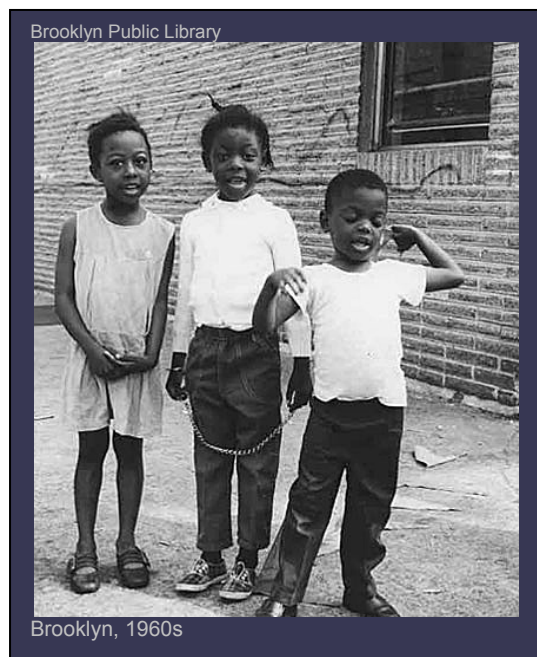
My parents led me through the auditorium to the area where I was supposed to wait for my teacher. When Mama told me to have a seat, I smoothed the back of my dress and held it against my legs before sitting, just as she had shown me. This was to keep your dress from wrinkling up in the back. Wrinkles made you look trifling.

Mama and Daddy prepared to leave me. I could tell they expected me to cry and fall out like those other kids did in the stores downtown, but I didn't. I was a big girl now, a first-grader, and I knew how to behave myself.

We had already had "the talk," my parents and I. The talk in which they told me everything I needed to know about going to school. I was told to be sure and mind my manners, to politely raise my hand if I wanted to answer a question, to pay close attention to the teacher's instructions, and follow all directions the best I could. "Please" and "thank you" were mandatory in our lives at home, so they didn't mention them — politeness went without saying. Mama reminded me to wash my hands after using the bathroom and before eating lunch, and Daddy reminded me to get on the school bus number forty-four at the end of the day.

Mama kissed me and told me she loved me, and Daddy kissed me, echoing Mama's love, and told me to have a good day. I wondered why they looked more nervous than I felt. And then they were gone.

Finding myself in the midst of strangers, I looked at my shoes and then at my fingernails and then at my shoes again. Finally I got up my courage and looked all around me. No one was watching me — all the kids were oblivious to my presence — which gave me a chance to safely study them.



None of the kids that I played with in my neighborhood even remotely resembled *these* kids. *Nobody* here looked like me.

I felt funny again, but I didn't know why. As I studied them, a few kids began to look back at me. Their eyes were question marks — not unfriendly, but not friendly either. It was almost as if, after their initial gaze, I became invisible. Nobody came over to talk to me, and I began to slide downward in my seat, making myself even smaller than I already was.

Chancing a peek toward the front of the auditorium, I nearly jumped out of my skin. There, seated in the third row but turned around and looking at me, was a boy whose eyes mirrored mine. He wasn't just any ol' boy; he too had been reduced to being an invisible person. Becoming visible again, at least to one another, we stared into each other's faces, as happy as could be to see familiar features.

Although we couldn't adequately verbalize it, we'd both instinctively known that we looked like two kernels of golden yellow corn sticking out in a can full of bright green peas.

As if in slow motion and by a preconceived mutual agreement, we rose from our respective seats and made a beeline toward each other. Dodging and maneuvering through the visible children, we, the

invisible, were magnetically drawn together. When we reached each other we stood mutely looking, eyes and hearts taking in each other's nappy hair, thick lips and dark chocolate skin.

"Hi, I'm David," he finally said.

I replied, as I'd been taught, "Nice to meet you, David. I'm Tracy."

We found two seats together and tried to make our corny selves resemble peas. By the time our first-grade teacher came to collect her thirty-two students, it was apparent that there would be only David and me who shared the bond of invisibility.

For the entire first week, my parents drove me to school. Each morning my father, who stood only five feet, two inches in his shoes, clutched one of my hands, squared his strong shoulders, braced his broad back, and, along with Mama, marched me resolutely through the chanting crowd of adults at the top of the stairs. It was a long car ride to Bensonhurst, but, as an eagle protects his nest, Daddy's single-minded determination for me to get a good education was paramount.

During the second week, I was allowed to ride the school bus both to and from school. Mama stopped grilling me about my every experience, and I began to settle into the rhythm of first grade.

Imagine the look on my parents' faces when, during dinner on the second day of my third week of school, their baby girl said she wanted to recite a poem she'd learned in school. I had everyone's attention. Even my brother, whose attraction to food was phenomenal, put his fork down to hear me out. I cleared my throat, eager to impress, hoping I wouldn't make a mistake, and began in a sweet, clear voice:

*Niggers and flies,
I do despise;
The more I see niggers,
The more I like flies!*

My brother, Bland, twelve years old, began to snicker in glee. I was happy that he liked my poem, and I flashed him a smile.

Daddy's fork jumped out of his hand and he arched his back, nearly dislodging himself from his chair at the head of the table. His mouth was working, but nothing came out except a small piece of lettuce, and white salad dressing was on his lips. I wanted to tell him to please use his napkin and wipe his mouth the way he'd taught me, but his body shook and jerked in what Mama called an epileptic fit.

I thought poor Daddy would choke to death, and so did my sister Michelle. She ran over and began to punch him vigorously on his back, the same way she punched me when Mama wasn't looking.

Mama, ignoring Daddy's choking spasms, my brother's snickering, and my oldest sister's elbows on the table, stared at me as if I'd just slapped my grandma. Her eyes narrowed into slits — just like an alley cat — a sure sign that I was in trouble. I'd been so careful to memorize the poem exactly right, and they acted as if somebody had died.

"Where the heck did you learn something like that?" Mama demanded.

Daddy was not sitting still, but making short whooping sounds that put me in mind of a sick pigeon. There were tears in his eyes as he gave a powerful, final cough, and took a sip of his drink.

Just then, I saw Michelle cock her arm back and swing it all the way down to Mississippi, come back up through Tennessee, cover the entire state of Kentucky, cut clear across West Virginia, and finally land in New York. Her fist hit Daddy's back with a solid whump.

The force rocked Daddy's torso forward, and red Kool Aid went flying out of his mouth and across the table, soaking my plate. He coughed and sputtered for air. Daddy looked oxygen-deprived. Michelle looked satisfied.

"Put your head between your knees, Daddy!" my brother suggested happily.

Mama was still burning holes in me with her eyes, waiting for an answer.

“In school,” I replied in a timid whisper. Mama was no joke when her eyes got all little and slanted like that. My sister once said that whenever Mama’s eyes shrunk down at you like that you could best believe that you were about to “catch hell.”

I wasn’t sure how you caught hell if you were still alive, but I wasn’t trying to find out either. Hell was for sinners, and I was a good girl.

Her face a mere two inches from my own, Mama asked, “Tracy, who in tarnation taught you that *trash*?” She was so close to me that I smelled the meat loaf on her breath.

It smelled like a whupping.

I explained that during recess we were lined up in size order and, as the teachers weren’t paying close attention, we began to talk among ourselves. I’d overheard the boys behind me reciting poetry. Eager to fit in with my new classmates, I turned around and asked them to teach me that cute poem. It had sounded pretty darn snappy to my innocent ears.

Well, they’d taught me, laughing each time I recited it. Like the apt pupil I was, I quickly got it down pat. I didn’t understand what the big deal was; it was just a poem.

Daddy, recovering from his fit with tears streaming from his eyes, told me that I hadn’t done anything wrong, but he didn’t ever want to hear that poem recited in his house again. Inquisitive by nature, I asked why. He said that is was uncouth to way the word “nigger.” I wanted to ask what a nigger was, but Mama’s eyes had hell in them, so I shut my mouth and went back to my meat loaf.

It was red and cold.

My parents excused themselves from the table without finishing their dinner. Daddy’s eyes read “tomcat” and seemed to promised Michelle that he was going to *deal* with her. Then he and Mama went into their bedroom and closed the door.

My brother, the brainiac, said they were having a “conference” and somebody at my school was going to be “one sorry motor scooter.”

The poem was never again mentioned in my house.

During what was called “the integration of the New York City public school system” in the mid-1960’s and early 1970s, I was what was termed a “bus child.” I was taken out of my predominantly black and Hispanic neighborhood and bused to Bensonhurst, an all-white, mostly Italian, community where blacks like me were one the same level as six-day-old trash.

Although I was born and raised in one of the toughest neighborhoods in Brooklyn, it took Bensonhurst to teach me the meaning of real, unadulterated, straight-up, piss-in-your-pants *fear*. I was eleven years old the first time I felt me life was in imminent danger:

*Beat ’em black and beat ’em blue!
Catch a nigger, why don’t you?
Kick him, cut him, stomp him too!
If he hollers, use your shoe,
I beat one and you can too!*

There were many afternoons when we were chased to the train station by mobs of angry, screaming, violent whites. We’d scurry like cockroaches, our terrified eyes wide open, visualizing our impending demise. Our knees pumped desperately, our chests heaved, and we panted like dogs. Our eyes frantically searched for help that never came.

The white men and boys ran after us, hurling bottles, rocks, sticks, and whatever else, they could get their hands on. Brandishing tire irons, chains, and baseball bats, they were clearly eager to bash our tender black skulls. The school provided no security during our dangerous trek to the train station, and the natives were free to harass us, spit on us, throw bottles, sic dogs on us, and even kill us. Yes, kill us. There were a few unfortunate blacks whose lives were ended by the boys and men of Bensonhurst, Yusef

Hawkins being but one of them. If I had a dollar for every time I was called a nigger as a child in Bensonhurst, I'd be rich.

The negative effects of being removed from my people and my culture and being placed, at a very young age, in a hostile environment soon became evident in my life. I'd walked into that school excited, motivated, full of promise, and proud to be a first-grader. I left Bensonhurst with my lip poked out and my fists balled up.

I developed an invisible antenna, tuned to pick up whatever I perceived to be the slightest trace of racism. Deeply suspicious and defensive, I believed that most white people judged me as inferior, uneducated, and ignorant. This judgment was based merely on my skin color; as a result, I used the same measuring stick when judging them. I became ever-cautious, paranoid, even, and if I perceived that a white person was secretly ridiculing me, I was ready to prove to him or her, with my fists, who was the better person.

I was angry. I saw a redneck lurking around every corner. I became super-sensitive to little things. I took it personally when people made racist or ethnic jokes, and I began to itch for a fight with a white. I could think of no other way to make them respect me and my people other than by brute force. White adults taught their children to be intolerant, violent, and racist, and their children were quick studies.

So was I.

Graduation day at my elementary school in Bensonhurst was a warm afternoon in late June. I still felt like that kernel of corn desperately trying to become a pea. My original blackness was now eclipsed with blue. All decked out in a cap and gown, I sang the words to "Pomp and Circumstance" with my fists balled up — just in case these crazy white folks wanted to *start* something.

When I was twenty-six years old — by then a wife, mother and a soldier — I called Mama and asked her about a fleeting memory I had of a crowd standing at the top of the stairs on my first day of school. I asked her what those people had been doing at the top of the stairs and what had they been saying.

She explained that those supposedly respectable, white collar professional adults had been protesting, exercising their Constitutional rights in the hopes of denying me and my kind ours. The signs they brandished had read, "KEEP OUR SCHOOLS PURE," and "NO NIGGERS ALLOWED." The chant they'd been shouting was, "TWO, FOUR, SIX, EIGHT . . . WE DON'T WANNA IN-TE-GRATE!"

