

Loved by many

“Mama, can you wash me in chlorine?”

The question was asked in the Dutch spoken in our parental home. We spoke Dutch but it might just as easily have been English, Spanish or our local Papiamentu.

Anguished question from my brother’s past / didn’t learn about until much later, when I’d finally, oh-so-reluctantly begun to face up to the darker sides of a heretofore pretended untroubled childhood. I suppose I was so shocked to hear the question explained that I failed to ask for a frame of reference. I knew it must have been in the orange or the subsequent yellow house we’d lived in on Bonaire, for by the time we’d moved to the white house – next to the primary school where my mother had taught both of us and had been a substitute headmaster – he’d grown too old for such questions.

To my shame I was also too afraid – I assume – to inquire what precise event had brought on his urgent plea. The result was piercing enough. It had made my little brother brusquely, devastatingly aware that some people in the world thought there was a ‘problem’ with his milk chocolate shade and he therefore suddenly, instantaneously, if-at-all-possible-pretty-please no longer desired to wear it.

All – as some would choose to see it – is not so well with my brother now, although my determinedly positive, carefully holistically groomed outlook forbids me to go anywhere near that notion. Instead I doggedly opt to keep believing that ‘Everything’s Gonna Be Alright’, like Bob Marley used to. I am acutely aware of the going getting rougher for my brother since the

day he asked that heartrending question. As I have also been conscious for a while now of the impact having me as a sister has had on him.

I applaud him. For still being here. For still trying to make a go of it, even in his own way. Even for the challenged path he has chosen and the black sheep he would appear to be. I'd peel back the years for him, for all times life caused him to be wrenched away from one security net after another: relocating him from his friends and the goat hunting in the 'mondi' bush of Bonaire; to the makeshift network he was able to painstakingly craft on Aruba and then The bountiful and well-regulated, but-sometimes-also-cold-and-cruel Netherlands; not to mention the lukewarm nest of our parents' matrimony also finally giving way.

I award him passing grades for moving past the ill-placed Arian high school counselor small-mindedly advising a host of peer students not to hang out with him, because 'he was no good', instead of the man earning his guilders blowing some sense into the impressionable thirteen year old. I'd build him a castle for surviving the streets he resorted to at what seemed the worst of it all, unsuspecting as we were that the worst was yet to come.

All that has saved our relationship in so far as that can be spoken of, is the love we have always instinctively felt for each other, echoing into the current era from the best times of our past. I am profoundly, inexpressibly grateful that these have been forever linked to a shared experience.

I remember you, from Sesame Street and the Muppet Show, the pair of eyes next to mine. I remember the excitement in the air and the collective disappointment when the local soap we

all watched together – usually a Venezuelan or Brazilian ‘novela’ – ended on one of those daily cliffhangers the genre is so skilled at creating. I remember the dust under our feet and on our skin as I played baseball or soccer with you in the yard, even though I’d rather be inside, reading. The rare treat of *The Spy who Loved Me*, viewed with the elderly Salomons’ couple at their villa near the beach and the breeze in their palm tree filled garden, with plenty of snacks and the promise of bright futures, even while we weren’t contemplating these in the carefree enjoyment of our innocence. I remember you in beguiling Disney World. And I remember you, hovering over my sickbed when I had the measles, not realizing that you would be next.

All that is must be. This I siphon solace off. Our childhood memories were meant to be, including briefly having our own room in our very own house, constructed by our parents in the hills of Bonaire, with that glorious view of the island and the surrounding deep blue, until the contractor’s ill-management in combination with my father’s fateful, all-consuming back problems and our parents increasing marital issues caused us to have to leave this mirage behind, the exterior of which had never reached the painting stage, a haunting memory in concrete of what could have been.

‘History will absolve me’, Fidel Castro once declared. And in spite of all ‘el comandante’ has made my husband and his countrymen endure, I commend him for the expression. And as even the purpose of this revolutionary leader is partly evident in the virtuosity my husband now enjoys, following an education and introduction into a world that he – a country boy – would not so easily have been made privy to in a capitalist country, I can certainly although somewhat wryly attest to the value of our private familial challenges. However cliché, we have

all come out the stronger, our parents, myself and even my brother, although he still remains halfway in the valley and his sun has yet to truly rise.

I won't point a finger at my parents, as I have in weaker moments, nor do I hope will my brother, one day. Not for any feelings, thoughts, utterings or actions. They are culpable only of doing the best that they could. A breakthrough phrase provoking tears in a session with my first and best mentor: 'I am doing the best that I can'. Lord knows oceans of parents in waves of generations have tried and failed, for better or worse, to keep their offspring on the more traveled road.

I've come to terms with my brother's long physical absences from our lives as society has him make amends time and again. I've resigned myself to the most recent *apparent* (see how I try to whitewash things?) recidivism, even while he seemed so *close*; things looked to be going so well or at least we tried to convince ourselves of this, in the same manner perhaps as we put a ribbon around our childhood; wanting, *needing* it to be so at least for the sake of his son.

I've come to terms with the stark contrast between us, which has been thrown in his face ill-advisedly by some in their weakest, most human moments: "Why can't you be more like your sister." If I tell myself I may not have been there on at least one occasion to hear it with my own ears, this would belie the multilayered truth stored snugly in my memory shelves. Then again I was too young to grasp any deeper portent, so the phrase would've slipped by me, only to reveal itself in my maturity; as another presumed sting to my brother's sense of self-worth, like the question that kicked off this account.

I've had to come to terms with this other glaring fact of our binding past as sure as I've had to accept the reality of me. For I am also meant to be. All Goody Two-shoes, know-it-all, do-it-all, succeed-at(almost)-all 70 kilograms of me. Tomboy and bookworm in one. I suppose I must be grateful that I did not have any actual transgender issues, and I did not hate being a girl like Katherine Hepburn claimed, but there was a time I was none too happy about it, especially when my red flags first began coming on. Even consolidating my prevailing A-type personality with the B-side that sometimes pops up and all of my own maturing through relatively laborious, recurring cycles of course pales next to my brother's plight, especially when I look at the pictures.

I am two years older, yet – as we grew older – sometimes have felt because of the slight difference and our relative tight-knittedness as kids that it may just as well have been two minutes. But fate would not deny the variance in hue, accentuated by our personalities.

The pictures hurt. In them I am a head taller, but more significantly, I am the lighter skinned one. And although no one would ever mistake me for Arian, my lack of exposure to denigration has allowed my character to bloom unfettered, without the accusation speaking from his hunched shoulders and guiltless eyes. 'Bon Bini!' we say, welcome! When you emerge as tourists out of the arrival gates, but the tragedy of our times dictates that this is not what greets most immigrants as they flee troubled pasts or simply seek to diversify their present and future. And while I was somehow spared, my brother bore his share of bullying, so those shoulders say. But how poorly did our matching Arabian Nights carnival costumes, that spelled partying, foretell how much our courses would divert.

The fading colors hurt, in another set of pictures, even when your playful nature shines through the funny faces you made, when you were in that naughty mood in which we were unable to seduce you to a single normal pose. Even though I know it was not all gloom and doom, far from it; they hurt like the illusion in concrete we left standing on that hill on Bonaire. They remind me of the last traces of my own descent dissolving from my face, for in this climate I've gone nearly completely white. While nothing hints at my Arawak origin anymore, and only my *derrière* – should you care to look at it – would give a clue as to my black heritage, the unforgiving chocolate almost hasn't budged towards the fulfillment of my brother's childhood wish. Even his *name* is more exotic than mine. Here also my parents are blameless, desiring only to name him 'loved by many'. Viewed from the present, the name is laden with irony, as if there were some mad, cosmic conspiracy.

My brother doesn't rebel to rebel, his is a somewhat imposed rebellion, but a – now self-sustaining – rebellion nevertheless. While I don't please to please, anything other than abiding by the rules sits very awry with me. Even breaking from the hold of a salary into earning my own keep, one project at a time, still feels like a merely condoned occupation.

The skin thing is a biologically logical one and it is so in many mixed families with roots painted white, red and black, such as ours. And in an ideal world or at least within the most broad-minded communities, such multiplicity of pigmentation is celebrated as much as and is simply part of the wondrously rich palette nature offers us. A rainbow so entralls us because of the beautiful tones flowing magically, one into the other. Why should we want to wash it with chlorine?

Insight hurts. Of how far my path has taken me from his and of how this also apparently must be. While neither of us can be said to have had a regular lifestyle, my passage has led along valuable learning curves in employment, sweet avenues of accomplishment in writing and music and the unexpected, blessed discovery of true love. This – on top of that, incredibly – in overall good health and accompanied by comforting and insightful, physical and otherwise guidance. And while I am continuously indescribably grateful, also for the enlightenment that helps to smooth over the occasional twinge of guilt, I cannot help but deeply desire for my brother to also have a taste of the *other side*; the delights I know this life also bears.

‘My heart bleeds for you, my beloved brethren’. Corny, but true. So, in many of my older poems, when I used this word he was first implied. So – I know – both my tried father and mother must feel in those primal moments when the reality of our son and brother drifts up again from under the carpet we carefully tuck it to be able to carry on. But to each his own, my brethren. As I once said to my father, we cannot be expected to bear another’s burden alongside our own. All we can do is be the best us that we can be, standing firm so we can catch another should he or she require it. So I have found a space to safeguard all the tests I must bear witness to and offer support with in this lifetime: my mother’s, my father’s, my husband’s, my nephew’s and my brother’s. And, while one’s network expands and certain distant family ties are rekindled, the list grows.

As to my brother, the only thing I have not yet come to terms with is the measure of time. Oh, I’ve gathered full-well from the heap of inspirational material I have consumed that this is not in my hands and that his learning could extend beyond this life. Yet from my simpleminded mortality on this plane I dare pray for sooner deliverance.

I cannot apologize for those who wronged you, my brother. Being a worshipper of peace and harmony, I would also not avenge you the way you perhaps would desire and in my heart I feel you might deserve, for greater wrongs in the world have been forgiven, forgotten or simply laid aside. I deeply deplore all adversity you've had to see and the seclusion to which you condemned yourself to see it in. I lament even more so any unintended and unnecessary suffering you've felt at the hand of my existence.

All I can believe in is your strength. That you have been wrought sturdy enough, as we are all supposed to, to haul your own backpack. All I can hope is that I live to see you raise your head in defiance of all that has gone before and show them, show them all; but for the sake of your one, own, precious and worthy life. All I can do in the meantime is try to shine hardest as I can, for both of us, in the hopes of pulling you along and permanently out of the shadows.

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