

HEADS OF THE COLORED PEOPLE

Stories

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37INK

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ATRIA

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

FOR IVEREN AND ISAIAH

HEADS OF THE ~~GOOD~~ PEOPLE: FOUR FANCY SKETCHES, TWO CHALK OUTLINES, AND NO APOLOGY

Riley wore blue contact lenses and bleached his hair—which he worked with gel and a blow-dryer and a flatiron some mornings into Sonic the Hedgehog spikes so stiff you could prick your finger on them, and sometimes into a wispy side-swooped bob with long bangs—and he was black. But this wasn't any kind of self-hatred thing. He'd read *The Bluest Eye* and *Invisible Man* in school and even picked up *Disgruntled* at a book fair, and yes, they were good and there was some resonance in those books for him, but this story isn't about race or "the shame of being alive" or any of those things. He was not self-hating; he was even listening to Drake—though you could make it Fetty Wap if his appreciation for trap music changes something for you, because all that's relevant here is that he wasn't against the music of "his people" or anything like that—as he walked down Figueroa with his earbuds pushed in just far enough so as not feel itchy.

Riley was wearing the wispy swooped version of his bangs and listening to Drake or Fetty, and he was black with blue contacts and bleached-blond hair. And, yes, there are black people who

have both of those things naturally, without the use of artificial accouterments, so we can move past the whole phenotypically this or biologically that discussion to the meat of things. And if there is something meta in this narrator's consciousness and self-consciousness or this overindulgent aside, it isn't meta for the sake of being meta; this narrator's consciousness is just letting you know about said consciousness up front, like a raised black fist, to get the close reading out the way and make space for Riley, who was the kind of black man for whom blue eyes and blond hair were not natural. He was the kind of black that warranted—or invited without solicitation—comparisons to drinks from Starbucks or lyrics from “Lady Marmalade” or chocolate bars, with nuts.

You would think with his blue contacts and unnaturally blond hair set against dark chocolate mocha-choca-latte-yaya skin—and yes, there is some judgment in the use of “you”—that Riley would date white or Asian women exclusively, or perhaps that he liked men. But you'd be wrong on all counts, as Riley was straight, and he dated widely among black women, and he was neither in denial, nor on the down-low, nor, like John Mayer, equal opportunity and United Colors of Benetton in life but as separate as the fingers of the hand in sex, nor like Frederick Douglass or many others working on black rights in public and going home to a white wife (and there is no judgment against Douglass here, just facts for the sake of descriptive clarity). Riley liked black women, both their blackness and womanness and the overlap between those constructs; nor was Riley queerphobic or the type of man to utter “no homo” in uncomfortable situations, because Riley was comfortable enough, if “enough” expresses a sort of educated awareness. There is so much awareness in these two paragraphs that I have hardly made space for Riley, who in addition to black

women liked cosplay—dressing up as characters from his favorite books and movies—and *Dr. Who* and *Rurouni Kenshin* and the Comic-Love convention, and especially *Death Note*, his favorite manga and anime series. And though that day he was dressed as Tamaki Suoh (per his girlfriend's request), in a skinny periwinkle suit with a skinny black tie, his appearance gave him the flexibility to on other occasions dress as Kise Ryouta or Naruto, or, if he was feeling especially bold, Super Saiyan.

So it was bothersome, then, to Riley/Tamaki as he walked toward the Los Angeles Convention Center, when Brother Man at the corner of Figueroa and Fifteenth—not to be confused with the Original Bruh Man, whose actual origins or current whereabouts are unknown, but Bruh Man's gradated type, this particular yet stock Bruh Man, Brother Man—accosted Riley after he brushed away the pamphlet Brother Man was trying to hand him and put his hand on Riley's shoulder and ventured to violate Riley's personal space even further by using that large hand with cigarette-stained fingernails to turn Riley toward him. I am saying Brother Man stopped Riley on the street, singled him out in front of people dressed, respectively, as Princess Mononoke, Storm, Daleks, Cybermen, and Neil deGrasse Tyson (both in blackface and in their own black faces), put his hands on him, and forced him to look into Brother Man's own face with the familiarity of a friend yet, contextually, with the violence of a stranger.

On any other day Riley might have acknowledged that he was wrong to walk past Brother Man's initial “Howyoudoin,” which he pretended not to hear on account of the Fetty. On this day, however, Riley felt that since he was inhabiting the character of Tamaki, his decision to ignore Brother Man was just right, an exercise in method acting.

Riley was more than surprised—and did not need to borrow Tamaki's affectations to feel slighted—that Brother Man had touched him, and by that point, even though he might have been just the kind of buyer for what Brother Man was selling, his pride wouldn't let him concede.

It had long irked Riley that his blackness or the degree of his loyalty to the cause should be suspect because he wore blue contacts and bleached his hair blond and because, on top of all that, his name was also Riley, and not, say, Tyreke. It irked him that he might be mistaken for a self-hating Uncle Tom because he enjoyed cosplay and anime and comic book conventions and because he happened to be feeling the character of a rich Japanese schoolboy a little too much at that very moment.

By the time Brother Man said, "Uppity, gay-looking nigga," Riley had bypassed logic and forgotten that he held none of the privileges of his costume.

There ensued then what Riley, in his costume, might have called fisticuffs, though in everyday life he would have simply said they got to scrappin, right on Figueroa Street.

The people who watched and filmed and circulated the scene from inside one of the lobbies of the convention center said it was just like *Naruto v. Pain*, only with two black guys, so you couldn't tell if either one was the hero.

2.

In truth Brother Man was burly but not violent and rather liked to regard himself as an intellectual in a misleading package. If he could

have made a wish before the end of that day, it would have been that he, too, had worn a costume to soften the effects of his image.

When he put his hand on Riley's shoulder, it was only because he disliked the sight of someone, especially one of his own, turning his back to him without hearing him out. It was also because he needed to promote *Brother's Spawn* and had thus far convinced a meager four passersby to buy a \$4 copy that day, and because Brother Man felt, unapologetically, that black people should stick together and that the blue-eyed, wig-wearing brother in the purple suit should have at least acknowledged him with a nod, if not a handshake or a howyoudoin.

Though in the aftermath, people would call his papers religious tracts, indoctrination materials, and "some kind of gang documents," *Brother's Spawn* was Brother Man's self-published dystopian comic series set at Pasadena City College, where he first learned of Octavia Butler and her work. The comics were hand-drawn with the dimensions of a postcard, though he also hoped to sell broadsides featuring a poem he had written.

Brother Man—aliases Kyle Barker, Cole Brown, Overton Wakefield Jones, Tommy Strawn, and pen name Brother Hotep—was selling the postcard comics illegally (he preferred the term "without official city permits") between a food truck and a juice cart that day. On other days he sold them near the Century City Mall, in Ladera Heights, in Little Ethiopia, and as far as Inglewood.

That day, he banked on the convention center's Comic-Love traffic and the potential readers it might attract, boasting to his girlfriend earlier in the morning that he would probably sell out, "even without one of those official tables in the convention center, watch."

And though he would say he was not usually the type to call Riley a sellout or an Uncle Tom, that day, Brother Man (real

name Richard Simmons, yes, Richard Simmons) could not handle Riley's refusal to acknowledge him or his art. He could find reasons to dismiss the hundred or so people in costumes, some speaking English, some other languages, who shook their hands no at the laminated mock-ups he tried to show them, but he could not abide a black refusal, especially one from a black guy in a Japanese prep-schoolboy costume, the very kind of audience Brother Man hoped to cultivate.

Thus, when he put his hand on Riley's shoulder, he never meant to hit him, and if he could, Brother Man, hereafter Richard, would have imagined that Riley didn't plan to fight him either. And neither man ever would have thought that amateur karate (pronounced in the authentic Japanese accent) would be involved, their arms flailing and legs kicking out in poorly choreographed mortal combat.

3.

On his way to a meeting, Kevan stopped at the SweetArt Bake-shop in Saint Louis to purchase a vegan brownie for himself and a purple cupcake with tiny candy hearts for his daughter Penny, who was with him for the weekend. The whole shop was lined with canvases of varying sizes, painted by the owners and sold from the bakery, which served as a gallery and community meeting space. Tiny vases holding local flowers adorned each table. Kevan wore a black T-shirt that said in white letters, "Eff Your Respectability Politics." He liked the irony of the word "eff" instead of the F-word, but he still debated whether it was better to change "your" to "yo." He wasn't sure if anyone understood the stakes in these decisions or in any of his other art, which he sold

online, from his car, and occasionally from a small suitcase in the barbershop on Washington Avenue.

He had one hour left with Penny before her mother would pick her up so Kevan could meet a potential business partner and pitch an idea that he couldn't shake.

He chose a table in the middle of the nearly empty shop, with yellow-and-green flowers in the vase. "She's a superhero," Penny said, pointing to the largest canvas on the wall adjacent to the bakery case, and inhaling another glob of frosting. The frosting accumulated at the corners of Penny's smile, but her tongue missed those spots each time it swept her mouth.

"She's cute. Daddy can teach you to paint like this," Kevan said, passing Penny a napkin across the table.

Kevan wasn't a vegan, but he supported black business and black art, and regarded SweetArt as a place where his own work might one day be represented. The T-shirt sales provided him a stash of petty cash, but Kevan had sold only three paintings, and that grieved him. He supported his daughter Penny with a court order and a "real job" as a UPS deliveryman, but he "always took care of my responsibilities," even before Penny's mother, whom he alternately called a gold digger, that whore, and my queen, demanded official monthly payments.

"My superhero name is gonna be"—Penny paused to pull back the wrapper and expose the last quarter of the cupcake, its frosting smooshed and all the candy hearts gone—"my name's gonna be Purple. Purple Penny Powers. I will make things purple like this," Penny said, zapping something with her arm.

"Purple Penny Powers." Kevan pretended this was cuter than it was. "Wow."

He was trying not to think about a joke he had seen earlier in

the day, trying not to remember the sight of two dead bodies that had appeared casually in his news feed, trying to rehearse instead his pitch for the realization of something he had read in a book that he found in a used bookstore.

The Afric-American Picture Gallery was a series of written sketches by William Wilson, under the pen name Ethiop and following the form of similar sketches—which Kevan found with more research—by James McCune Smith in *The Heads of the Colored People* and Jane Rustic (a.k.a. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, a black abolitionist poet and suffragist). Kevan wanted to commission painters, including mostly himself, to create a full exhibit of heads of the colored people, now and then, to take the written, literary work and render it visually. The idea intrigued him, the heads talking to him like the books in Equiano—though he didn't know that reference yet.

In Kevan's collection, there would be, as in Ethiop's original, Phyllis Wheatley, Nat Turner, and a doctor, but he would update his favorite sketch, "Picture 26," of the "colored youth" who was "surrounded by abject wretchedness" to reflect a sort of current abjection. To these he would add a superhero for Penny and a collage of the black men (and women, he would concede, with some coaxing later from Paris Larkin) who had been killed by police and other brutalities.

"Now what's your name going to be?" Penny's voice seemed especially shrill at the moment.

"I don't know." Kevan was still thinking about the bodies and the grainy video of the two men arguing and the way one of the men had held out his hand when the police officer entered the scene; it was clear that the man wasn't holding a gun or a knife, but something soft, like paper.

"Daddy, your name," Penny demanded.

"I don't know," Kevan repeated, and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind: "Bruh Man."

"Bruh Man?" Penny jutted her head back. "What does he do?"

"He paints, and whatever he wishes, he can paint it and make it happen." Kevan made Penny lick a napkin so he could wipe the leftover icing from her face. "And he can make bad things un-happen, if he paints them right."

"That's gonna be my power, too," Penny said, pulling away from his grooming and hesitating in the way of five-year-olds, "but I'm just gonna think and make it happen or un-happen."

He wished briefly that things were so simple and then began to outline something on a napkin.

Paris Larkin was meeting Riley at the convention center after two shifts at her part-time job for Dark Shadows Hollywood Cemetery Tours. Her official job description said, "Tour Narrator: Vocal talent. Must be able to memorize stories and stand for long periods of time on moving bus while engaging audiences." I ain't saying she a gravedigger, Riley liked to begin when he introduced her as his girlfriend, but really, she digs graves, like, loves them. It was one of the things that had attracted him to her when they first met, her dark cheeriness and her nonjudgmental approach to his lifestyle. And his soft-landing punch lines were one of the things Paris liked about him, and his interesting face, and the way he wasn't at all who she expected him to be.

When he took his contact lenses out at night and tied his hair down with a durag, Riley looked just as comfortable and kind

as when he dressed up and hung out at his favorite comic café in Pasadena, drinking boba tea and playing chess with kids from Caltech, where he studied engineering and was one of a handful of black students on campus.

If Paris could have a superpower, it would be to make herself visible, because even though she stood at the front of the bus with a microphone, pointing out alleged sightings of Marilyn Monroe to hungry tourists with camera phones and fake Gucci sunglasses, she wasn't the main attraction, and she preferred to narrate the tours with reverence instead of theatrics, to fade into the background and let the spirits speak for themselves. With Riley she could be seen, since they got a decent amount of attention when they were together and especially when they dressed up. Certain cosplay purists (read: racists) did not always approve of Paris's or Riley's respective costume choices or the idea of black people dressed as nonblack characters. Paris had come to anticipate and almost enjoy the surge of anxiety that came with entering these spaces, had felt her flight-or-fight instinct the closest thing to being fully alive. And the ghost tours, too, made her think that by comparison, she was at least more alive than the bodies that filled those holes.

That day was not her day off, so she took the Metro and two buses to meet Riley at the convention after work, after showering and changing into her long silver wig and meticulously sewn necromancer dress, her dark skin contrasting with the purple-and-white pinstripes of the dress, the gray armor on her arms and legs elevating her mood. She had debated dressing as Haruhi Fujioka, the counterpart to Riley's costume from *Ouran High School Host Club*, but her choice of Eucliwood Hellscythe created a bigger impact, she thought. Though she kept her blue contacts down and focused on her sketchbook, her

eyelids, adorned with heavy black-and-white shadow, warned other transit passengers to dare her, that day.

When Paris entertained visitors from out of town, or when she and Riley caught the spirit, she liked to ride the Metrolink from Highland Park to Glendale to visit Michael Jackson's mausoleum, which you couldn't exactly get close to, but which still sent a melancholy shiver through her and her guests. During most of her time on the bus or the Metrolink, Paris drew Riley and many other people—you could call her a sketch artist, though not in any official, paying capacity.

She called her sketchbooks a collection of heads, for she never drew bodies, and anyway, Paris was lighthearted and laughed frequently, showing the gap between her teeth, not nearly as morbid as her job and curated heads make her sound. She called Riley Fuzzy Lumpkins, and he called her Bubbles. She was listening to "Say My Name," attached as she was to all things nineties, even though she was nineteen and had been born after Tupac and Biggie were already dead. That morning, Paris had watched reruns of *Martin* and laughed at a character's plea for a wish sandwich. In the nineties, she felt—and you should fill in for yourself a kind of longing here—something melancholy, plaid, flannel, but not overwrought.

It isn't true, at least not in Paris's case, that you can sense what the future holds. That day, she had jokingly, in an exercise of character acting, avoided pronouncing Riley's name near the word "death" or at the graveyard or while dressed as Eucliwood, lest she kill him. But no psychic, metaphysical force warned her to tell Riley not to go to Comic-Love or to avoid arguments without spoils or to immediately put his hands up when instructed to do so. Nothing told her, still humming "Say My Name" in her best

humming voice, not to walk toward the large crowd of flashing lights, police cars, and costumed and uncostumed bystanders. Her stomach urged her to look away, once she got close enough to be sickened, but she couldn't then.

She didn't feel more alive from the surge of panic in her body or in comparison to Riley on the ground.

Years later, she would regret not drawing the offending officer that day. Since then, she has sketched his face over and over, penciling his name and image in her notebook as a sort of plea, saying it aloud, wishing that she, like Eucliwood, could pronounce the names of those she wanted to die and make it so.

When an artist named Kevan Peterson wrote to her about a project he wanted to finish—really, to finally begin—Paris was glad for her sketches of Riley.

A well-read, self-aware, self-loving black man with blue contact lenses and blond hair and a periwinkle suit was shot down in Los Angeles after a reportedly violent altercation with a well-read street promoter, who was also shot, after police officers answered a complaint. "Who was also shot" here signals the afterthought that was Brother Man, Richard, because he was not the one with the blond hair or blue contacts or in any way exceptional, except for his size and the things he had overcome (too many to name here), and his comic books.

And you should fill in for yourself the details of that shooting as long as the constants (unarmed men, excessive force, another dead body, another dead body) are included in those details. Hum

a few bars of "Say My Name," but in third person plural if that does something for you.

A few more points I should not leave to the imagination: in the chalk drawing on Fifteenth, you can see Riley's leg kicking out like Spike Spiegel and an additional rectangle above the outline of Richard's hand, where he might have held his comic books or a laminated mock-up.

The picture the Associated Press chose came from a Throwback Thursday photo that Riley had posted on social media, a picture of him in a costume from an undergrad party, at which he wore an oversize blue shirt and a bedazzled blue bandana over cornrows. His mother, and girlfriend, Paris, explained repeatedly that he was not dressed as a thug, but as nineties Justin Timberlake.

Brother Man's picture was an old mug shot, accompanied by a story that emphasized a criminal charge from five years ago—for child support nonpayment and tax evasion—and his penchant for false names.

Both men's families would say the pictures didn't say anything, that that's not how anyone who knew them would remember them.

The Neil deGrasse Tysons disagreed over the number of gunshots they heard; the one in blackface said ten, while the one with a brown face called black said thirteen. The autopsies would not conclude, but there might have been marijuana in Riley's or Richard's systems, at some point.

6.

I think a cop shooting is too melodramatic when the story was interesting on its own, and my preoccupation with race is per-

haps overdone, but it was O'Connor, I think, who said—and I say “I think” here more as a device, to affect a sort of nonchalance, when in fact I know she said—everything that rises must converge or something like that (“or something like that” serving as another affected clause). But that makes the ending sound intentional or overdetermined, when it wasn't, though I believe—I know—it was Donika Kelly who said “the way a body makes a road,” or in this case an outline, impression.

How to end such a story, especially one that is this angry, like a big black fist? The voice is off-putting. All the important action happens offscreen; we don't even see the shooting or the actual bodies or the video. Like that one guy in fiction workshop said, meta is so eighties. The *mise en abyme* is cool but overdone. This is a story of fragments, sketches. Dear author: Thank you for sharing this, but we regret.

I concede that it might have been so much more readable as a gentle network narrative, with the cupcakes and the superheroes and the blue eyes and the nineties image-patterning. But I couldn't draw the bodies while the heads talked over me, and the mosaic formed in blood, and what is a sketch but a chalk outline done in pencil or words? And what is a black network narrative but the story of one degree of separation, of sketching the same pain over and over, wading through so much flesh trying to draw new conclusions, knowing that wishing would not make them so?