

Beautiful Day

I sit at my computer looking at the long list of colleges that offer scholarships for African American students. I am only fourteen, but I want to know the requirements so I am sure to meet them when the time comes. I begin to type an email introducing myself and requesting more information.

My name is Bonita Jasmine Day. I am a mixed race teen growing up in Idaho. I aspire to do something great with my life and I am well aware that that aspiration starts with a good education. At school I am an honor student, soloist in the school choir, pep rally coordinator, mentor to new students, and I am on student counsel.

Just as I am getting my thoughts onto the email I hear momma call me down for dinner. "I'll have to finish you later," I say to my computer as I stand up to head down for dinner.

"Momma do we always have to listen to this crappy classical music *every night*?" I say entering the dining room with annoyance dripping from my tongue as I roll my eyes and sigh.

Momma turns her head towards me and shoots a subtle glare in my direction and replies in her usual dismissing tone "It's called praise and worship music Bonita. It invites in the Holy Spirit, helps set a calming mood in the house. Hurry now, wash up for dinner and let us say grace so we can eat."

I head to the kitchen with a heavy foot, turn on the sink, and pretend to wash my hands as fast as I can, doing my best to tune out her boring music. I didn't mind the music so much when I would have to fake smile and make nice all day at school, but it's summer vacation which means less stress and less faking for me.

I look like everything is perfect on the outside, but I am dying on the inside. I hate living in my skin. I wish I was like everyone else. I take my seat at the round table and take the hands of my little brothers, seven year old twins, Bubba and Booger, or as my parents call them Noah and Isaac. Daddy invites everyone to bow their heads to say grace, an invitation I always ignore. I never bow my head, close my eyes or say grace and that upsets momma. She says I need to set a better example for my little brothers as I am eight years older than them and they look up to me, but she doesn't understand. It's not that I don't want to...I can't! I tried a few times, but I feel like everyone is staring at me so instead I stare at them. I look around the table at the hands in hands and then I look at mine. I hate holding hands with anyone, especially my family. Seeing their tiny pale white hands wrapped around mine makes me look darker than I really am.

Daddy starts the prayer, "Lord God and giver of all good gifts..." As momma and the boys join in, "We are grateful as we pause before this meal..."

My eyes fall upon the dining room mirror that hangs across from my seat behind momma and I look like I don't belong. It's like playing which of these is not like the other as I stand out like a big bruised sore thumb. My curly black hair, dark colored skin, green almond shaped eyes, round face and full lips... none of them from momma. I look like an outsider at the table with a family full of blonde hair blue eyed angels. I look at daddy sitting at the head of the round table in his king's chair, his hair is the blondest of them all, obviously I am not from his seed, I wish I was, but I am not.

In that moment I feel Booger squeeze my hand and I look in his direction. Despite his squint our eyes meet and he does as booger always does and sticks out his tongue before closing his eyes again ever so tightly. I look back in momma's direction.

I wish momma would move that dang mirror so I would not have to see myself every time I ate at the table. Seeing them, a picture perfect family, and then seeing myself is a constant reminder of just how different I really am and I don't like it at all. Sometimes I swear that momma does things on purpose. As I look around the dinner table, everyone with their blonde heads bowed, I wish that I looked like them, so angelic, but I don't. In unison I hear my family say "In the name of Your Son, Jesus. Amen."

Everyone at the table digs right in except for me, I just pick at the food on my plate.

"Daddy are we going to the beach while we are visiting Nana and Papa?" Bubba questions.

Daddy lets out a sigh and replies "Well I haven't worked out the details yet. The trip was kind of spur of the moment." Daddy looks at momma in a way that tells a story that I don't understand. They seem to have a way of understanding each other without saying a word.

I listen to the four of them carry on a conversation about daddy taking the boys to his parents on the Oregon coast. The last time we visited them we went to the beach and they insisted that I slather on the sunscreen. When I resisted they replied by saying "The sun will make you darker than you already are." I complied with their direction all the while my insecurities growing stronger. I hate being different. I manage to nibble a few bites of this and that, enough so that daddy will excuse me.

"May I be excused?" I question daddy.

Momma jumps to respond, "But you haven't even touched your potato salad."

I snap at momma “You know I hate mayo. Why does every meal have to have mayo in it?” Of course that’s an exaggeration, “I think you would get it already!”

Daddy interrupts my rant, “Bonita, show your Mother some respect. Take a courtesy bite and you can be excused.”

“But Daddy...” I plead.

He replies in a slightly harsh tone, “Bonita,” he raises his brow to show me he is serious “It’s only one bite. It won’t kill you, I promise.” My brothers giggle as I comply and leave the dining room, plate in hand.

“Oooo, Bonita’s in trouble.” Booger teases.

As I rinse my plate, I over hear momma say, “I don’t understand what has gotten into her lately.” Daddy whispers a response that I cannot hear and then I hear momma say, “Are you sure she’s ready?” Momma really needs to learn to whisper when she talks about me.

Confused and upset I head up the stairs stomping my way to my room, and slam my door. “You just don’t get it. I can’t like mayo!” I yell loud enough for everyone to hear full knowing that mayo is not my issue. I actually don’t mind mayo, but when I was eight years old I learned somewhere that African American people don’t like mayo so, I decided to not like mayo either. It all started after the twins came home from the hospital. I think I actually expected them to be born darker like me. I remember watching everyone ooo and ahh over the boys and I began to resent them for being white. Over the next couple of years I searched desperately for some ethnic identity. I watched movies, read books, and listened to podcasts; hoping to understand how to happily live in my skin, but to no avail. I put my favorite Michael Jackson playlist on my iPod and turn up my stereo speakers louder than allowed with the intention of upsetting momma or

disturbing the boys, I don't care which, I just want someone upset besides me. I don't know why I like to stir the pot, I just do.

Booger opens my bedroom door and peeks in, "Momma says you're grounded to your room for the rest of the night." He sticks out his little pink tongue at me and I toss a throw pillow in his direction as he closes my door.

Feeling a sense of satisfaction, I yell "You think I care! I don't want to be around you guys anyways!" I lay back on my bed, turn down my music, put in my earbuds and sing along with the music in an angry sort of way which resembles yelling. If I'm upset everyone's going to be upset. I continue this for several songs and feel my throat getting sore.

Momma knocks on my door loud enough for me to hear, doesn't wait for me to say come in, pokes her head around the door and says, "You've got an angels voice, except when your mad," she says in an attempt to lift my spirits, but her eyes pierce me with disapproval "I know it's early but, We've got a big day planned tomorrow. Say your prayers and get to sleep ok?"

I glance at my clock which reads 7:30 p.m. and look back at her in disbelief. I look her dead in the face with a death stare and reply "Seriously?" She nods her head up and down, flips off my bedroom light, and shuts my door quietly.

I struggle to fall asleep so early. Resentment growing inside of me with each toss and turn. All this over some dang mayo?

Momma woke me up just as the sun was rising, informed me that we were heading to the cabin for the week, instructed me to take a shower, pack my duffle bag (minus any electronics), and meet her out front in an hour. I am a little uneasy about why she feels we need to spend some time alone together all of the sudden, but I comply as always.

I don't think that momma and I have ever visited the cabin by ourselves. I drag my feet out to the car carrying my duffle bag, iPod in hand, and ear buds around my neck.

"Bonita, I said no electronics," Momma says as she shoots me a suspicious glare while holding out her hand "Now hand it over."

I slump my shoulders and let out an exaggerated sigh as I hand her my iPod.

"How am I going to survive this week?" I question as I flail my arms about in exasperation and plop my behind in the passenger's seat and continue a losing battle. "You do realize it's going to take me hours to catch up on Instagram after this dumb week right?" I cross my arms and stare out the window and think if she sees I am upset maybe she will change her mind and take me back home. I hate that she doesn't understand what it's like to be a teenager especially a teenager like me.

"You can pout all you want Bonita, but we are going to the cabin. Your internet junk will be there waiting for you when we get back."

I decide to scan the rocky mountain side searching for any wildlife to pass time. I see a red tailed hawk circling above the rocky canyon when I hear momma let out a big gasp and pull off onto the side of the road.

Momma's mouth is hanging open and she is pointing out her window. "Look at all of those butterflies."

I look to where she is pointing but the sun light is glaring off the dirty window. Just then momma opens her door and gets out of the car so I do the same. I can hear the rapid water flowing as I step out of the car. The smell of the air in the mountains is so refreshing. I forget for

a moment that I am supposed to be annoyed with the whole situation. Now I see what all of the fuss is about.

“There must be thousands of them sweetie,” momma says “Do you see them?”

“How can I not! They are everywhere!” I replied with excitement as I spin around in slow circles like a ballerina with my arms stretched out wide. There are thousands, if not tens of thousands of black and orange butterflies swarming around us. The road just ahead is covered with a black oil and dead butterflies. Just as I am taking in all the wonder I feel something brush by my ear and then I feel a lot of tickling on my arm. “Momma look,” I whisper quietly “There’s a butterfly on my arm. Does this make me Madame Butterfly?” We both chuckle at the sight and the butterfly flies off to join its friends fluttering above. We get back into the car, still in amazement. Momma must be trying to stay on my good side as she tunes in my favorite radio station and we continue our journey to the cabin. I can’t stop thinking about the butterflies. I question momma. “What were they doing? Why were there so many? Why hadn’t I seen this before on the way to the cabin?” Momma tells me it’s their migration season and continues with so many boring details. I lean against the window, close my eyes and listen to her ramble.

I feel momma nudge my side and slowly open my eyes, I must have fallen asleep. I notice that we are parked in front of the familiar old log cabin that sits nestled into the backwoods of the Boise National Forest. Momma, like always, is the first out of the car, the first in the door of the cabin, and the first to suggest an activity. I, on the other hand, am always the last as I do not like water or bugs and the weekends at the cabin are nothing but bugs and water.

I walk into the cabin just as momma says, “I hope you’re ready for a tsunami of a week sweetie.”

Not knowing what that means, I respond with my familiar saying “It is what it is.”

Duffle bag in hand I walk past momma and head up the loft ladder as she says, “This weekend is all about you Bonita, you and me are going to figure some things out.”

Confused, I continue up to the loft. I plop myself down on the twin bed and stare out of the tiny round window above the pine dresser. All I can see is tree tops for miles and that makes me miss the city even more. My eyes fall on the dresser once again and I notice something I hadn’t noticed before. It’s one of those shadow box things. I walk over to the dresser and pick up the shadow box. It has two butterflies pinned inside of it with a scripture; *In this world, not of this world Romans 12:2.*

I holler down to momma, “What’s this about?” and just as I turn to go down to the living room I see that she has made her way up the loft ladder.

“I was hoping you would find that soon. Those are Monarch butterflies, like the ones that we saw on the ride up. Daddy found those butterflies last time he was up here and made that.”

“But what are they doing here in this box in my room?” I question in a demanding tone.

“OK Bonita, I think it’s time that we talk about some things.” I nod my head in anticipation while still holding the shadow box in my hands and take the seat next to momma who is now sitting on my bed. “You know how much struggle these butterflies experienced before becoming the beautiful butterflies that you see in that box?” I nod up and down once again. “These butterflies weren’t born as butterflies, they were ugly caterpillars first...”

I interrupt, “Momma, I know about butterflies. What’s your point?” I question with an exhausted tone.

“Well, Bonita, this weekend I want you to take what I am about to tell you and think about these two butterflies in that box. They are in the world everywhere, doing what God intended them to do regardless of what is going on around them. One is you and the other is me.”

“Ok momma, now get to the point.” I shoot her a suspicious glare.

Momma draws in a deep breathe, “You’ve been such a good girl and have never asked me about your father. I am sure you have questions. So, daddy and I decided that you are mature enough to know the story.” I feel an unfamiliar, yet genuine, excitement well up inside of me as my eyes open as big as half dollars and I bounce up and down on my bed with anticipation.

“It’s about time!” I exclaim. My eyes glue to momma and I see a dreamy gaze wash over her face. She looks out the round window of the loft and begins her story.

“He had shoulder length dark dreads of hair that he wore pulled back in a ponytail and greenest eyes I had ever seen”. I think to myself, that’s my dad? I visualize a man dressed GQ like and I imagine that he smells good too. I stare at momma as she continues.

“I can still see and hear him like it was yesterday...*Good morning class welcome to Philosophy 101. My name is Professor Mateo Acosta, but you all may address me as Mateo. I desire for us all to feel and learn as one, I will learn from you as you will learn from me...*He spoke with an accent like I had never heard before. I was fascinated by everything about him and felt myself looking forward to his lectures. The things he taught began to make me question everything I had ever believed to be true. Long story short Bonita, despite what I had been taught my entire life, I gave into my flesh.”

What? Momma always said desires of the flesh will mislead you. I readjust myself and lay my head in her lap as tears flow down her cheeks. Momma caresses my head as I close my eyes and continue to imagine what she is saying.

“I asked Professor Mateo to meet me at a café across town and he agreed. Despite the age difference, he was 20 years my elder, we had a great time. He was intensely charismatic and that drew me to him. He was from Brazil and the stories he would tell intrigued me, I felt like I was falling in love with my professor, of course now I know better. I was just smitten by him.”

Momma proceeds to tell me about the night she gave her virginity to my father, how she felt ashamed and how she snuck out before he woke up, never to be seen again. “I was a confused young girl and based on what I had been taught my entire life I was convinced that I was an unforgivable sinner. I prayed night and day begging God for His forgiveness and I did my best to forget about my transgressions. Then I missed my period. I was so scared. I did my best to forget about Mateo and what I had done.”

I again interrupt “Could you? I mean were you able to forget about him?”

“No Bonita, I couldn’t, not a first,” Momma answered sniffing with tears welling up in her eyes “May I continue?” I shake my head up and down and she continues.

“I purchased a home pregnancy kit and sure enough I was with child, Mateo’s child. Bonita, your grandparents are extremists’ religion wise and I feared them and their reaction. I knew lying was wrong but I had to protect myself and my baby. Bonita, I had to tell them that what had happened was not consensual. Do you know what that means?”

I answer without looking up “Uh huh.”

“I can still smell the scent of jasmine in the air, feel the cool ocean breeze blowing through my window, and I can still hear your first cry. Rosa, the midwife nurse held you up and said “Nina Bonita” as she placed you on my breast despite the direction of my parents to swaddle you and take you out of the room. I refused to give you up and made up my mind to be a single parent. I left my parent’s home shortly after that and never went back. Bonita, do you understand why I never told you any of this before?” I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes but I force any emotion down and force that all too familiar fake smile that says I am unmoved.

“Yes momma, I understand.” I sit up and ask to be excused.

“Don’t you want to talk about this?” Momma questions wiping the tears from her face.

“Nope, I’m good.” I let out an uncomfortable chuckle, shoot another big cheesy fake smile in her direction and head down the loft ladder “I’ll be back in a while momma.” I head out the front door and bounce down the front steps unsure of where I am going.

I head down to the beach to be alone and think, despite momma’s plea to talk to her about how I am feeling. I just want to be alone. I have always wondered about my father but didn’t want to offend anyone by asking. Now that I know who my real father is, I don’t know what to do. Do I try to find him? If I do will he teach me how to live in dark skin?

“Beautiful day, don’t you think?” I feel my insides jump as I thought I was alone. I turn towards the voice and see the silhouette of a tall slender image standing just behind me. I raise my hand above my brow to block the sunlight that is glaring from behind him. I can now see that this is a boy about my age. He sets down his fishing pole, tackle box, and net and proceeds to sit down uncomfortably close to me.

I scoot myself over a few inches and mutter a quiet reply “If you like the mountains, I guess.” I turn my head back towards the lake. If I ignore him maybe he will leave.

“Sounds like someone isn’t having a very good day.”

“It is what it is.” I quickly reply without looking his way.

“My names Wyatt” I turn and see that this boy is reaching out to shake my hand, who does that? Who sits down and starts talking to a complete stranger that clearly doesn’t want company?

“Bonita,” I reply taking his pale freckled hand in mine and shaking it to be polite. Can’t a girl just be left alone I think to myself as I force an all too familiar fake smile. “And I really just want to be alone right now.”

“Well Bonita, I am here so you can’t be alone.” He says with a cockiness in his voice and a smirk on his face.

“I could be if you left.” I shoot him a slight glare and a smirk comes over my lips as I am hoping that he will take my hint and leave.

“Yeah, that’s true,” Wyatt says with a chuckle as he buries his feet in the cool damp sand beneath us. He’s clearly not going to leave me alone. I find myself staring at the freckles that have made his knees home just as he questions “You come here often?”

“You come here often? That’s a cheesy pick up line from the 80’s isn’t it Wyatt?” I say with sarcasm dripping from my tongue and annoyance all over my face as my eyes scan him from head to toe then look back out onto the deserted lake.

“Hey, I’m just trying to make the best of a beautiful day. I’m not trying to pick up on you, just trying to be nice,” Wyatt insists.

“Uh huh right.” I say full knowing that he is not trying to pick up on me. Why would he after all, we are clearly different. He is a tall freckled face ginger and I am a short black girl that boys never take an interest in. I continue to stare out over the lake wondering when he is going to leave. “It is what it is,” I again mumble with discontent. We both sit on the beach, side by side, silent for what seems like an eternity before he stands up.

“Well, Bonita, it’s been real.” Wyatt brushes that sand off of his shorts and hands. Our eyes meet as he says, “Well, the fish aren’t going to swim up here on the beach and get into my net so…” Wyatt then stretches his lanky slightly sunburned arm in my direction, extends out his hand as if to help me up and continues, “Let’s go catch some fish?”

I twist my face to show my confusion and say, “Are you asking me or telling me?” Without hesitation I continue, “Because if you’re asking me of course I’d say no, I don’t fish with strangers.”

I see a kind humorous smile consume his face as he says “Well if that’s the case then I’m ordering you!” We both giggle like little kids as I take his hand and get up.

I reply with the standard, “It is what it is.”

“You keep saying that stupid saying *it is what it is*, DUH...but Miss Bonita, have you ever thought it is what you make it.” Wyatt picks up the fishing pole and other things and walks away in the opposite direction of my cabin. I follow a few steps behind him. What does he mean by that *it is what you make it*? Stupid boy he has no idea. I watch Wyatt fish as we make small talk. I realize that he’s not so stupid after all. Actually he’s so different, he’s cute.

Hours pass with little conversation and even less fish. I decide it's time to head back towards the cabin. I say goodbye to Wyatt as I feel my stomach grumble. I spent the entire afternoon at the beach and I am starving.

I make my way up the tiny dirt trail to the log cabin swatting away the bugs that seem to be following me. As I near the cabin I hear momma's dang music again, she doesn't hear me come up the front steps. I see her through the screen door and notice that she is standing in the kitchen with her arms stretched out wide. I stop just outside the door and listen.

"Lord, I lift my daughter up to you. Father this is a confusing time for any teen let alone a teen like Bonita. Lord, I give her to you. May your peace and love wash over her heart, so that she can learn to love herself and others as you love us father. In Jesus name I pray, amen."

The screen door lets out a slight squeak as I open it. Momma turns. I smile and let her know I want to eat and then go to bed. I must be emotionally exhausted. We make small talk over dinner and I head back up to the loft and go to sleep. I dream the most vivid dreams. I dream about Brazil, Mateo, butterflies, and strangely enough I dream about Wyatt.

I awake to an unusual silence. Usually at the cabin the kids are buzzing about bright and early, momma has her music going, and daddy has already brought back fresh fish for lunch, but not today. I quietly creep down the loft ladder and peek through the entry way to the master room and see that momma is still fast asleep. I feel different this morning, I have a natural spring in my step and a strange peace has washed over me. I write momma a note and decide to go for a morning walk. I want to day dream about my future now that I know the truth.

I decide to take a stroll along the many trails that surround the cabin. I walk for about 10 minutes, swatting bugs while cursing them. Dang bugs. A fly keeps trying to fly up my nose,

then on my lips, buzzing about my face and it's annoying me. Maybe it's a single fly, or several flies playing tag, I am not sure which, but it is driving me crazy. I walk past a huge stack of boulders and decide to sit alone with my thoughts. I close my eyes and envision Mateo. I wonder if he has forgotten about momma or if he has spent the years pining over her.

“Do you sing?” I jump and lose my thoughts as I hear Wyatt call out to me and he's not far away. I look in his direction and see him leading a tall whitish-grey horse.

I decide to shrug off the chip on my shoulder and turn on my intensely charismatic charm which I now know I get from my father “Yeah, I sing a little and by little I mean soloist in school choir.” I brush my shoulder off like I am all that. “Why do you ask?”

“Well, I was going to say from a ways back you kinda remind me of a young Rhianna,” He says in a serious complementing tone, “I mean from back there you do.”

I decide to blow Wyatt socks off and show him my vocal talent. I open my mouth and belt out the lyrics from one of my favorite songs featuring Rhianna “You're trying to save me, stop holding your breath. And you think I'm crazy, yeah, you think I'm crazy.” As I'm singing Wyatt's eyes seem to bulge out of his face in amazement as he follows my lead, obviously doing his best Eminem impersonation, flailing his arms and grabbing at his not so sagging pants.

“I wanted the fame, but not the cover of Newsweek, Oh, well, guess beggars can't be choosy...” Although I think he looks amazingly cute making a fool of himself, I interrupt.

“Ok, Ok Eminem, that's more than I can handle. Hey sorry about yesterday,” I flash him an apologetic smile and bat my eye lashes.

He blushes as he replies “It is what it is, right?”

“Nope, it is what you make it!” In that moment I realize that have a new outlook on everything. I am flirting with Wyatt and I think Wyatt is flirting with me, it feels good. “What’s with the horse? Aren’t knights supposed to arrive riding white horses?” I playfully question.

“I’m no knight Bonita, but I will take you for a ride on ole’ Marley here.” Wyatt hops on the horse and stretches his hand out to mine. I take his hand and all of the sudden I don’t mind the sight of my hand in his despite the color difference.

Wyatt and I ride ole’ Marley deep into the wooded forest. We talk about our families, friends, dreams, and butterflies. Wyatt really knows a lot about everything. I guess it’s because he is stuck up here in the mountains all of the time because he lives here. Wyatt explains to me how he was bullied in the schools in the city, being a ginger and all, so his parents moved to Cascade and let him do school online. Talking to Wyatt makes me realize that it is the differences that makes us who we are and without those differences we would be well, boring.

“Bonita, you don’t need to find this Mateo guy to love yourself and feel like you belong.” Wyatt says as we approach my cabin. “I mean, I know where I come from and it’s not all that fascinating, but if you want we can go to my house and search the internet for him sometime.”

He hops off ole’ Marley and reaches for my hand once again. “Ugh, Mr. Smarty pants,” I say with sarcasm slathering from my mouth. He hitches up ole’ Marley to a tree and reaches out for my hand again. I take it. I feel butterflies in my tummy as we hold hands walking back up to my cabin porch. “I bet my momma’s worried sick. I want you to meet her. Stay right here, I’ll be right back.” I open the door and rush into momma.

“Bonita Jasmine Day where have you been!” Momma seems to leave the ground and fly in my direction, scary upset.

“Momma, Momma, it all makes sense now. Everything makes sense!” I am so excited I am shaking, “I don’t have to be white to be genuinely happy. It’s only me that’s uncomfortable with my skin color. I was so stupid.”

“Calm down now girlie you’re give yourself a heart attack.” Momma laughs at the excitement that I cannot contain as she grabs my shoulders to hold me still.

“Momma, I owe it all to Wyatt. He helped me to see. I can’t believe it. All these years of making myself miserable. I can’t believe it. Come out momma. You have to meet him.”

“Oh Bonita, I am so happy. The Lord truly has answered my prayers. Thank you sweet Jesus.”

Momma comes out to meet Wyatt, “So you’re the stranger that has taken the blinders off my sweet Bonita. It’s nice to meet you.” Momma shakes Wyatt’s hand.

“The pleasure is mine.” Wyatt looks at momma, at me, and then back at momma, “Bonita, you really look more like your mom than you think. I mean it’s like I am looking at an older you with light skin, eyes, and hair. After all you told me I expected to see no resemblance what so ever but....”

Momma interrupts, “Well, Wyatt I am impressed. Bonita, I think this boy is a keeper.”

I feel a genuine smile come across my face and ask momma, “Can he stay for dinner?”

Momma replies, “Well of course. Let me go figure out what our first dinner with Wyatt will be.” She smiles at the two of us and heads back inside.

Wyatt and I sit together on the porch and at last I finally feel like someone gets me...*myself*.