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First Pain

Through the years, Binta often told people I was her “first pain.” I assumed it was because I was her first born, but the more I thought about it, I was not her primal pain. She was in pain long before I came along. As a child, I recall her telling me many times that she was the “black sheep” of her family. By my observation, she was a copper-colored, smooth-skinned beauty with dark, inquisitive eyes and long, thick hair. Knowing her siblings as I do, she may have seemed like a prickly-know-it-all in her conversations with them.

 Binta also made statements to me, questioning her parentage, saying, “My aunt I got named after is really my birth mother.” She never said why she thought that. Other times, she’d say about her mother, my Nana, Dia Mae Black, “She didn’t love me; in fact, I think she hated me. That’s the reason my family and me seemed like a poor fit.” How awful! What a mindset to have about your own mother and family members!

 Through the years, my mother’s attitude made me wonder about the kind of family she was raised in. Being an inquisitive person, on a number of different occasions I’d ask Nana about her own childhood and about the kind of life my mother had growing up.

 Both of Nana’s lower legs had been amputated, one because of an unusual event: She stepped on a chicken bone, which got stuck in her foot. In spite aggressive medical intervention, she developed gangrene in her foot that was resistant to treatment, requiring the amputation of her foot and leg below the knee. A few years later, she developed a persistent blood clot in her good leg, requiring amputation above the knee. After that, all she had were stumps covered by flaps of skin.

 Nana’s shortened legs left a lot of room at the bottom of her bed so when I would come to town to see her, my persistent questions about our family’s history occurred in her bedroom, with me lying across the bottom of her twin bed. Our conversations became intense on occasions, especially when I asked about her early married life. Nana once told me, in response to my asking her if her life was easy or difficult, “Oma, I know I had trials raising my children, and my gin drinking didn’t help matters, but I loved them all, every one of them, and especially my Binta. She had a special snap about her, but seems like I could never really let her know how much I loved her. I’m just not the hugging and kissing kind, except for them men.”

 *Wow, there’s an opening*, I thought. “What do you mean by ‘them men’? What are you talking about?”

 “Well, first, I don’t know what happened to my real dad, but my first step-dad, who raised me during most of my childhood, was good to me. That good treatment ended with his death when I was fourteen.

 It was step-dad number two who mistreated, abused, and isolated me. He didn’t seem to want me around. He’d always look at me with a scowl on his face for no reason that I could see, and then with just a look and a headshake, with no words, he’d send me outside to the backyard or to my bedroom. Or, the few times he talked to me directly, he’d call me a skinny little thing who wouldn’t make any man a good wife because I was a piss poor cook, didn’t know how to clean the house right, leaving dishes in the sink all night and trash on the floor, didn’t do a good job of washing his work clothes, leaving dirt on the front of his shirts and the knees of his pants which showed me stains I couldn’t see. I didn’t belong to him, and he made sure I knew it.

 I was my mother’s youngest child, so I was the only one living at home when she died. I was sixteen. She’d been the only one who made me feel safe. Most of the time, she was my rock, even though she had to deal with such a mean man. *She* had to, but *I* didn’t. We buried her on a Saturday, and that next Monday I got up in the dark of night, scrubbed the black-and-white linoleum floors on my hands and knees with a towel and hot soapy water, visualizing how proud Mama was when they got put in, hung the rag rugs on the clothesline and beat them like crazy, and shined up the wooden living room tables, chairs, and chest with mineral oil until the dark wood looked smooth as chocolate candy. When I finished, the house’s common areas looked like it was ready for a holiday.

 Then, remembering Mama’s recipes, I cooked chicken and dumplings, greens, spiced yam, and a peach cobbler, the best meal I’d ever cooked up until that time. I could always do it; I just didn’t want to. I no longer belonged in that house so I packed my clothes in a suitcase, sneaked out of the house when my mean stepfather wasn’t looking, and walked three miles to the Greyhound bus stop. The closest relative I knew about was a cousin who lived in Selma, Alabama, so that’s where I headed. As far as I know, my stepfather never asked anyone if they had seen me, and I never laid eyes on or thought about him again.”

 “Wow, Nana, you were a brave sixteen-year-old. So what happened in Selma?”

 “Well, my cousin had a lot of friends, and she was always carrying me with her to church and parties. It was at a party that I met this great man named Calvin Jefferies,” Nana said, with a big grin on her face. He was a tall military guy with a smile and full lips to die for, but he was leaving soon on an overseas assignment. We were going to get married as soon as he got back. His mother lived in Coleman, Florida, so he arranged for me to go there for a visit. She welcomed me like she never knew a stranger, and we started enjoying each other’s company as we waited for my love to return home. On the day he was to return, I fixed my hair in a bun on top my head and put on a pretty red dress with flowers on the bodice. We were tied to looking out the window all day. That afternoon, a military man came walking up the sidewalk and knocked on the door. As Mrs. Jefferies answered the door, with me right behind her back listening, he said, ‘I would like to speak with Mrs. Jefferies, the mother of Calvin Jefferies.’

 Very slowly, she responded, ‘I’m Mrs. Jefferies.’

 He then said, ‘I am sorry to report that your son has been killed in action. He was a brave man who gave his life for his country.’ He said some other words I could not understand after the blow of his initial news. I just remember pulling Mrs. Jefferies up from the floor. Calvin was his mother’s only son. She was devastated, and my dreams were crushed. My love was dead. I was her only link to her son, so Mrs. Jefferies asked me to stay with her long term. We lived in grief and heartache for more than a year, until I met another man.

 Nathan Black brought me out of my sadness with a grin and a touch. He was tall, charming, handsome, and a smooth operator (I always liked that type). He took me to live with him in Sebring; that’s how we ended up there. He loved me, and I loved him. Unfortunately, he also loved other women. The sad twist to my story is that he cheated on me the whole time I was giving birth to his twelve babies.”

 “What about when my mother was born. Tell me that story?” *Now I’ll get at the truth of Binta’s story*.