

A Dilemma

Creative Writing by Trina Higgins, English 208

“Being alive and being a woman and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma I haven’t conquered yet.”—
For Colored Girls

I’m not pretty.

“I wish I were a white girl,” I announced, staring at my brown face in the mirror. I felt a shift in the air. My once warm mother turned to ice as if she was in defense mode. We were standing in the bedroom I shared with her and my father while I sat on a chair looking into her vanity. She was by the bed, folding clothes, and laying them on the plaid comforter.

I knew my mom’s eyes were on me; her mouth probably fixed to give a quick-tongued remark. But I didn’t care. At the age of five, I was bold and indignant, and I knew what I wanted. And black skin wasn’t it.

What did I know about race anyway? My older sister and I attended a private school in Columbia where we were two of the few black children in the building. My best friend was a little white boy named Greg. I always thought it was funny because he had the same name as my older brother. I had two Gregs. Despite our differences in appearance, race was never an issue with us. It was a topic that went untouched at school and at home, until that day.

“Why do you say that?” my mom asked, returning to folding clothes after a long silence.

“I want long straight hair and pretty skin.” I told her. My Barbie had long straight hair. My favorite Disney Princesses had long straight hair and fair skin. And they were beautiful. That was enough to tell me that my kinks and dark skin were just the opposite.

“You’re beautiful the way you are,” Mom assured me. But I couldn’t believe her. The little boys at school used to chase and tease the pretty girls. If I was so pretty, how come they wouldn’t chase me?

I’m not a girl.

I was kind of relieved when I heard we’d be moving. Granddaddy had passed and left my mom a nice house in Hopkins. I was going to be going to a new school, filled with people who looked just like me. I clung to my mother’s legs as we toured the new building, eyeing the colorful drawings on the wall. A grown-up lady was telling my mom how this was a nice, safe school full of nice, safe children. We entered the classroom I would be in with my new teacher, Mrs. Simons. It looked nice enough. There were alphabet letters strewn across the wall with the appropriate animal by its side. Classwork was displayed everywhere, and there was a carpeted corner of the room with a play house and a chest overflowing with toys. A black boy named Tony stared at me with his finger jammed in his nose as my mom spoke with my new teacher. He pulled out a slimy booger and whispered, “Look, look at my booger.” He grinned at me, and I stared back, perplexed. Is this the kind of fun they had at this school? I ignored him and clung tighter to my mom’s leg. He smiled still and wiped the nose nugget on his own cheek. Gross.

I didn’t have too hard of a time making friends at my new school. I was loud, brave, and smart. I loved to play pretend and act like I was a mother or doctor. My classmates would ask me to scribble colorful butterflies or flowers on their nametags like I’d done to mine. I always obliged.

I made sure I steered clear of Tony whom the class called Booger Boy—and rightfully so. It was apparent that my first meeting with him was not uncommon, and he often greeted his classmates with a hand covered in his own various

secretions. He was also one of the three bullies in class. He and two other boys loved to disrupt class and make the girls squirm and scream with farts, burps, and other obscenities.

One day the boys' target was a nice, quiet boy who wore glasses and a yellow sweater every day. The bullies circled him by the playhouse, "Yella is for girls. You look like a girl!" They all chanted, laughing in his face.

"Ya'll leave him alone!" I ordered. "Yellow can be for boys, too."

"No, it can't!" they challenged me. I wasn't scared of them.

"Leave him alone. Or I'm going to tell the teacher."

One of the boys pushed me down while the others looked at him in horror.

"You can't do that to a girl!" they whispered, looking around to ensure they weren't spotted.

"Are you a girl or a boy?" the offender demanded as if he didn't believe them.

"I'm a girl," I said quietly, hurt.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were a girl," he said genuinely. The bullies looked at me warily to see if I would cry.

But I didn't cry, even though I was hurt more by their words than I let on. I was a girl, right? I stared around the classroom and soon realized the problem. I despised everything that my peers liked. I hated dresses and getting my hair done. The girls in my class wore rose- and plum-colored dresses with matching bows tied in their chemically straightened hair. I didn't look like them in my jeans with dirty knees (that my mom would kill me for later), and hair that was once beautifully cornrowed but was now a tousled wreck. I didn't look like a girl. I definitely didn't look like a Barbie or a princess. I looked like one of the boys. Maybe I wasn't a real girl after all. Well, what did it mean to be a girl anyway?

My feminine guru came later on in life in the form of my best friend in fifth grade. Shay and I were neighbors, and if we weren't doing homework we played in the yard or rode bikes down the dirt road alongside our houses. She was the kind of girl that all the boys liked, and she got lots of pretty cards on Valentine's Day with actual words written on the inside, while I just got generic cartoon cards with my name scribbled on the envelope. Unfortunately for me, having to adopt glasses in the second grade killed my chances of having boys look my way. I was instantly deemed the class nerd, and my grades didn't help much to disprove that assumption. We were walking between classes, her going on about some boy she had a crush on. I didn't like him. He had thick, caterpillar eyebrows and wasn't the brightest kid in school.

"Boys don't have to be smart," Shay explained to me once I pointed that out. I didn't respond. "You shouldn't have cut your hair. You look prettier with your hair long," she added, scrutinizing me for a moment. I shrugged. My hair wasn't naturally long anyway, and my mom wouldn't let a perm touch my sister's and my hair. But I secretly agreed with her. When my mom would braid a long weave into my hair, I finally felt like I was a step closer to beautiful. Shay's hair was long and straight; she'd been getting perms all along. She didn't need fake hair to be pretty. "Trina, can I ask you something?"

"What?" I asked.

"Do you like girls?"

I was shocked and disturbed by this question. "No!" I'd never met a girl that liked girls, and even though none of the boys in my grade caught my interest, I knew I still liked boys. Just not the dumb ones we went to class with. "Why?"

"You should wear tighter clothes," Shay instructed. "Or else people will think you're a gay girl."

"Oh."

That night I begged my mom for some new clothes. I didn't tell her why. I just knew I couldn't walk down the school halls another day in my older sister's hand-me-downs. Not if they made me look like a lesbian. That summer my mom took us all to get new clothes, fresh perms, and I even traded in my glasses for my first pair of contacts. I was going to be ready for sixth grade. I would finally look like all the other girls. Trina was no longer the four-eyed nerd. I was now Trina: Girl Fitting In.

I'm Not Black.

Middle school was an interesting experience for me. I'd joined Drama Club so I met a lot of new friends. It was something I loved and was good at, but it didn't grant me social acceptance. I'd spent such a long time trying to be a girl in elementary school I didn't realize I had yet another flaw. I wasn't really black.

I didn't understand that concept at first. After all, both parents and my grandparents were black. For the longest time, I felt my blackness was my crutch—the reason why I wasn't liked by all the boys in class. I was the wrong kind of black. My complexion was of the dark type rather than the light, gorgeous caramel. The girls in class loved holding each other's hands out against each other to see who was the lightest. I never participated. I'd come to terms with the fact that my black wasn't beautiful. But when I was told by my new friend Shaniqua that I wasn't black *at all*, I wasn't sure how to respond, or what she could even mean.

Despite my initial confusion, I soon learned the Shaniqua version of what it meant to be truly black. I was guilty of the following offenses:

- Speaking like a white girl
- Acting like a white girl
- Listening to white people music
- Liking white people movies/TV shows

I never knew that the more melanin in your skin, the more rules there are to truly belong. And if I wanted to fit in with Shaniqua and her crew, I had to fix these things—fast. Speaking like a white girl wasn't hard to change. According to Shaniqua, when one speaks properly, without cursing in a tone appropriate for an indoor setting, then one is speaking like a white person. It was awkward learning to curse at first, but I gradually got the hang of it. I started listening to music that I told myself I liked and watched more BET than ever. I caught up on my gossip—both school yard and celebrity—so I would have talking points other than school or homework. The hardest thing I had to change about myself was “acting” like a white girl. I wasn't exactly sure what that meant, even when Shaniqua explained it to me. According to her, black people don't get excited about anything.

“You laugh and smile too much” was a comment I was way too familiar with in school. So I toned down my expressions. A blank, uninterested face is much cooler than a dopey looking grin. If it weren't for Shaniqua, I wouldn't have realized what an embarrassment I'd been for all these years.

The final thing I had to change was my grades. Black kids don't get excited about learning. That was really hard for me. I loved school and reading. That was the biggest obstacle that kept me from ultimate black-i-tude. If I was going to fit in, I couldn't bring spare library books to class to read once I'd finished my work. I couldn't be found writing random novels or poems on spare paper in the gym. I would have to deny myself my primary form of escapism. Somehow I would have to learn to compromise. I headed for center stage while Trina was left behind.

I'm not a whore.

It was high school and the halls were separated between the smart kids everyone knows, the cool kids everyone knows, and the kids no one knows or cares about. I like to think I'd placed myself in the group of smart kids that people know, though I admit my view of myself may have been skewed. In my mind, I skillfully mastered my double life—my feigned disinterest in school was actually working, and people thought I was cool. I was smart, but I had status enough to be

recognized as an actual human being, and that was enough for me. I was known for being great at writing and being in multiple school plays. But at the end of tenth grade, the state of my life was starting to head in an unsavory direction.

Shaniqua had moved away, but I managed to find a few other questionable friends to stand in her place. At the same time, being in honors classes introduced me to some new people to hang with as well. I felt like I was a girl divided between two sets of friends: the Vixens and the Squares. My crew was split between the kids who were going out and partying and having sex and the ones who were just as lame as I was. I had managed to upgrade from boyish, ugly, possibly lesbian Trina. But I had become a liar instead. When I was with the Nerds, I could be myself. I could show them I was smart, and when a book reference was made, I didn't have to pretend I didn't know what they were talking about. I could share my writing with them without hearing complaints about the lack of sex in the story. Trina was allowed to peek out from behind the velvet curtain.

But when I was with the Vixens, I pretended to do things I'd never even come close to doing. I made sure I had all of the coolest songs loaded up on my MP3 player (we weren't rich enough for iPods), so that if anyone asked to borrow it they would know for damn sure that I was cool. I pretended that I'd been to parties when I'd really spent the weekend curled up with Harry Potter, and I talked to boys that I must have really lowered my standards to even think twice about. That backfired when I began to hear rumors about myself that I definitely didn't like.

"I heard you got a hotel room with Trevor," Shanice whispered during school breakfast. I forced a laugh and raised my eyebrows.

"No... I never did that."

"Well that's what people are saying," she sniffed, an annoying air of arrogance gracing her face. "You'd better watch what you do."

Or what I say. I was beyond embarrassed, though it was ridiculous for me to feel that way. I might as well have written it on the bathroom wall myself. No wonder I'd been so into creative writing and theatre. I'd put on the perfect show. I cast shadows over myself and created a horrid shadow puppet of who I really was. A myth and a legend now followed my name. A legend I'd created. I was both Frankenstein and the monster.

I distanced myself from the Vixens who, from what I heard, had started some of the rumors themselves. I clung tighter to my beloved Squares though the shadowed side of my identity had reached them, too. They were unsure of who the real Trina was. I wish I knew.

I'm Trina

The incident with the Vixens caused a full-on retreat into myself. I was no longer loud or brave or outgoing. I only showed my real face to my closest friends. The ones I knew I could count on.

I'm not sure how Zach and I became best friends. I was the girl who faked being cool, and he was part of the Squares—the only one who called me out on my bullshit. And I kind of hated it, despite his truth. Gradually we became friends, and I disclosed more of my life to him than anyone else in school. Soon the very thing I once hated about him gave me a form of relief. It felt good to be able to tell at least one person the truth.

Zachary was an anomaly to me. He was one of the handfuls of white kids in the school, yet he wasn't ostracized like the others. I was fascinated by his ability to be cool and smart and himself all at the same time. He didn't have to lie. And so for my senior year in high school, I decided that I didn't have to either.

It was a lot harder than I thought it would be. It was about more than just changing my look and the friends I hung out with. I had pushed and kicked Trina so far down into her shell that she was afraid to come out. The key was to do it in baby steps. Though I'd severed ties with most of the Vixens by then, I was still afraid that my remaining friends may call me out for being fake before, or think that I'm weird now and refuse to hang out with me. My stomach was full of rocks, lead

and anchors the start of senior year. At my school, music was kind of a representation of who you were. Most of the kids liked mainstream rap, but the rock kids all hung together and so did the country or underground music groups. I remember going through my MP3 player and deleting every song that I secretly hated over the years and filling it with music that I liked—a plethora of genres—pop, hip hop, classical and rock music. I felt powerful and brave the next day at school. My pop—my white girl music—blasted out of my ear buds, and I didn't care about the strange looks thrown my way.

“Can I borrow your MP3?” one of my friends asked. We were in the middle of drama class, and we were filling out worksheets. I was nervous. If I said no, Megan would think I was being weird. But if I agreed, she'd hear my music and think I was weird anyway.

“Sure.” I watched her out of the corner of my eye as we continued to do our work. The frown that formed on her face as she scrolled through the different songs, trying to find one she recognized. Finally she picked a song and shrugged, returning to her work bopping her head slightly to the tune.

At the end of class, she returned my MP3 to me. “You have a lot of cool songs on there,” Megan smiled. “I've never heard of them before.”

“Yeah, I'm starting to listen to some different music.”

“I wish I could listen to different music,” she said. “I never know what to look for if it's not on the radio.”

I told her some of my favorite artists that she should check out before heading to my next class. That was it. It was the beginning of making my final year in high school one that I didn't have to be ashamed of.

And I failed miserably at that. My senior year was filled with moments of embarrassment and memories that still make me want to cringe when I look back on them. But despite it all, I'm proud. I am no longer a myth. No longer a legend. And I'm still working on me.

Pulling Trina back into the spotlight.