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Smart

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Smart

I learned all my adjectives by the time I was 6. All the words that described me, and told me who I was: smart, funny, clever, cute, and chubby... but I was wasn't pretty. I looked like my daddy, but not in a good way. Something was missing, that left adults searching for words, something nice to say. My cousins Chloe and Joy, we were all close in age, so I knew I walked and talked first, read first, and adults loved pinching my chubby cheeks no matter how much I winced. They told me I was going to be tall like my daddy, smart like my momma, and strong because of the people I came from, but Chloe and Joy would be beautiful. I learned the value of that at 6.

Chloe and Joy lit up adults who had easy words for them and soft hands with gentle touches. It wasn't their fault that they had good hair, that laid down with a wet brush and waved with a little oil, staying in place with the pretty slippery ribbons my hair couldn't hold even with bobby pins. I had hair that misbehaved and rebelled, tamed with only the hottest pressingcombs, but would revert to kinks and naps when I ran around, sweating out hours of painstaking work, because mine was as tender as it was hard. Well, really I just hated sitting still that long.

Which is why I was always looking wild about the head, as someone, an aunt or a lady I had to call Ms. before I could say her name, would always tell me. They would be smiling a little when they said it and offer me a sweet (but not too many), but there was never anything warm in their eyes, just thinly veiled disappointment. But I knew what it meant, those eyes, I am smart.

At 6 I knew math and could read at a 3rd grade level, but Chloe and Joy knew how to garner favor without a please or thank you ma'am, and never got scolded for frowning or having a fresh mouth. And they stayed clean, in dresses that already didn't come in my size or were for a smaller framed girls whose shoes were always shiny, and their socks never needed to be pulled up because their calfs weren't too big. I tore tights, I had scabbed my knees so often they never healed and left scars that made bare legs impossible.



I couldn't be delicate or demur, just too loud, drawing attention to myself that only embarrassed adult friends and family at gatherings, who would roll their eyes, whispering that I must get it from my mother's people.

And I did try to do better. I tried to stretch my hair at night so that it would grow and hang down my back. I tried not to eat so many sweets, so I could lose the weight now because it would only get harder as I got older, or so cousin Lilly would say, every, single, time, she saw me. I wish I had known the word "bitch," not that I would ever use it, but so I could think it. I tried to at least be quiet and sit still, so I could be seen and not heard, and stay out of grown folks conversations. I failed of course, miserably, and I was smart enough to know it.

RONDA CRAWFORD

