

BALLAD FOR ALL THE POBRECITAS

by *Racialicious* Special Correspondent *Latoya Peterson*

i am the girl who you think does not have feelings, because my face has learned not to show you.*

While working at the library last summer, scanning and stamping books, a peculiar sight caught my eye.

A beautiful young woman approached the check out counter. She was petite and delicate, clad in an orange wrap dress and lace up espadrilles. She carried a small child with the same warm brown skin tone as her own. She reached for an adult book, and a voice chastised her in Spanish. A small, squat man stood close to her. She immediately relinquished the book and walked toward the front counters.

She handed me two children's books. As I took the books from her hands, I saw her face up close.

The brown skin of her cheeks was covered in a powder made for a much fairer woman, giving her face an ashen pallor. Her hair, which appeared to be naturally black at the roots, was a pumpkin shade, harshly colored in hopes of achieving a blond color. She looked at me through blue color contacts.

I involuntarily took in a breath, but managed to recover. I welcomed her to the library, and asked if she found everything alright.

She looked deep into my eyes, giving me a radiant 500-megawatt smile.

My heart twisted.

I wanted to ask her so many questions, starting with the obvious - why did a gorgeous woman want to hide so much of herself? I hesitated, hearing myself automatically discuss the library policies.

The man next to her let lose another harsh string of Spanish. The smile died on her face, and she quickly gathered the child and the books, following him out the door.

I turned my eyes away from her retreating back to assist the next patron.

A few hours later, after my shift, I was still troubled by the scene I witnessed. I called my friend Jefe and described what I had seen, and the heaviness that seemed to take up permanent residence in my chest.

"Pobrecita..." he murmured half to himself.

Remembering that my Sesame Street level Spanish skills obviously did not extend to whatever he was about to express, he switched to English. After explaining to me that pobrecita meant “poor girl,” he collected his thoughts before continuing with his next statement.

“It’s sad to hear about that girl. I mean, how can you hate yourself so much that you hide who you really are?”

i’m the girl who has been shut out because of my weight or my race or the style of my hair, because I say weird things, because of the look on my face, because my timing is always off, because the shapes of my body parts are too big, long, flat, wide, or different.

While Jefe’s assessment may be harsh, I found myself agreeing. It was not the issue of the color contacts or the orangish hair - I don’t believe changing the color or your eyes indicates anything other than you wanted to try a different eye color. People are entitled to change their hair color as often as they like.

The face powder is what catches me every time I think of the girl. A white chalky mask, which did not come close to camouflaging the brown skin underneath. It was the type of color mis-match that could not have been a mistake. She saw her brown skin in the mirror, but instead chose the powder intended for a white woman. And that one, small act changed the significance of her color contacts and her aspiring-to-be-blond hair, taking it from innocent self-expression to something a bit more sinister.

i’m the girl who does nothing with her face. (because make-up makes me feel like a clown.)

Still, I can’t quite blame her. In our current social culture, young women (and young men to a lesser extent) are subjected to thousands of subliminal messages that erode away at self-esteem. You aren’t cute enough. You aren’t sexy enough. You aren’t thin enough. You are nothing without a toned six-pack. All of your features are weird. You don’t make enough money. You can’t afford what we are selling. Your life would be better if you bought our product.

Those insidious messages hover around the subconsciousness of most people, waiting for one brutal, exhausting day, when you are exhausted and your self-esteem is ebbing and your high spirits begin to flag. And then they attack, making you feel as though you have utterly failed in the eyes of society.

i’m the girl who goes around with a hat on or my hair in my face. sometimes I keep my coat on, even on hot days. i hide in invisibly colored, baggy clothes, because the less you see of me the safer i feel. (except for that time I showed up in clothes i cut and painted myself, when you said i looked like a loser; believe it or not i was trying for a style, only you didn’t get it, nobody did.)

The messages for people of color are even worse. Not only are we subjected to the same messages, but we receive other silent messages as well. Even something as simple as not finding your color at the

makeup counter or in the drugstore aisle sends a very clear message: you are not normal. You are different. And your different is not beautiful.

i am the girl you know as - the one who has the weird brother, the one who works at the CVS store, the one who always wears the tacky shoes, the one who cried that time in gym in the fifth grade, the one who has that ugly mark on her neck, the one rumored to have had sex at age nine.

For us average girls of color, every time we look in the mirror, we have to fight against societal norms in order to like what we see reflected. In an age where Scarlett Johanssen is considered fat, it is extremely difficult to maintain body positivity. It is often argued that different types of women have different builds, and carry weight differently, but how many people actually believe this? How many times do you have to hear that your hair is "too political," that your accent is distracting, that your eyes are too small, that your hair is not thick enough/long enough/glossy enough, that your body's natural shape is not acceptable?

on the mornings of every school day, i am the girl who puts on my mask before leaving the house, even though it won't protect me.

Now, most of us reach a point where we are tired of trying to assimilate. Tired of trying to fit into a mold that was not created with us in mind. We try to look to the proud, rebellious, fabulous women who revel in who they are, defining their own beauty. We find allies wherever we can. We constantly remind ourselves that we are beautiful, that we are loved, that we are courted, that we are *worthy* of love.

We remind ourselves that we are not stereotypes - we are not ugly, loud, uncouth, hypersexual, submissive. We are not playthings. We remind ourselves that while we may not exist in the realms of fantasy, that we do exist in reality. We are flesh and blood. We are complex. We are three dimensional.

We exist.

So while some may think that beauty politics are a trivial thing, the absence of women of color in mainstream publications, on catwalks, in advertisements is a very subtle way of trying to invalidate our existence. Mass media would like to relegate our existence to an afterthought, a one-inch column in a five-page beauty spread.

In fighting for representation, we are fighting for relevance.

We are fighting to be seen as who we are - outside of the traits and characteristics that are ascribed to us by people who don't care who we are.

To be acknowledged - to be visible- would put us one step closer to breaking down the walls that separate us from the mainstream. It would allow us to finally be ourselves, and not just a token representation.

And isn't that worth fighting for?

you don't need to see my picture because you know who i am.

[*Excerpted from "Dear It Girl," a short piece in the YA fiction book

The Secret Life of It Girls by Dakota Lane.]