

BRAIDS

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“**O**w. Careful.”

Auntie Ruth snapped, “Don’t you ‘careful’ me, Lateesha. You know beauty can be painful. How long have you been letting me braid your hair?”

I would have shrugged, but I was afraid of making the hair-pulling worse.

“Since you were five, that’s how long.” She spritzed me with more detangler. Then her fingers started working again, the fast, confident movements of a real pro. She combed off another section of my hair, and with a hundred little tugs, turned it into a delicate braid going from my ear to the back of my head. I’d been in that chair for three hours, but she was almost done with the eighteen cornrows.

“There you go, honey.”

She handed me a mirror so I could see the back. Proudly, I admired the geometric design on my head, like a field of crops in ancient Africa. It was beautiful.

The bell over the salon door dinged and my friend Paulie entered. “You ready? Wow, that looks fantastic. I can’t believe you didn’t wait a week, though.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Aren’t you worried it will get messed up at the farm tomorrow?”

The farm! I’d completely forgotten. Who knows what I might get on me there - hay, cow patties. “Aw, you could have spoken up earlier.” Realizing I was being rude, I gave Auntie Ruth a smile and a kiss. “Thanks. It’s just perfect, like always.”

We’d found out two weeks before about the trip to the farm, and I wasn’t thrilled. That’s the kind of field trip for eight-year-olds. What did they think a bunch of high-school juniors from Harlem would get out of seeing them milk cows and stuff? My uncle Marty once traced our African-American family tree,

so I knew that some of my ancestors risked everything to get away from farms and come north to the cities.

So I didn't want to go. But Paulie could talk me into anything. "Come on, Lateesha, it'll be fun. And even more fun if you're there." What a charmer.

"How can it be fun to stand knee-deep in manure?"

"New experiences are fun," he said. "And it's an honor. Only the good kids with good grades got invited, so you should be proud to go."

I was suspicious. Paulie couldn't even stand getting his hair wet when it rained, so a farm seemed like the last place you'd find him. Gently, lovingly, I pinned him to his locker. "Why are you really going?" I drew my face close to his. "The truth, Paulie."

"Trevor Williams is going," he whispered, pushing himself loose.

Now I got it. "No way. You're going on this trip because you're crushing on a boy?"

"It's a two-hour bus ride," he reasoned, the glint returning to his eye. "A lot could happen."

I couldn't believe it. "So you're trying to get me to go to keep you company, but then you'll abandon me if Trevor Romeo smiles at you. Is that about right, you traitor?"

I reckoned Paulie should become a lawyer or a politician. He always knew how to argue a point and change tactics when necessary. With a sly grin he said, "Melissa's definitely not going."

I was intrigued. Melissa and I had been dating all term. Two weeks before, she'd dumped me with a text message she wrote while at the mall with another girl. Just being in the same room with her now made my stomach hurt, yet I still had to see her in most of my classes. A day off from her would be worth a smelly trip to the country. But I wanted to be sure. "How do you know?"

"Her sister told me. She's got bad allergies."

Well, that settled it. I was going up to northern New Jersey to play milkmaid for a day.

The next trick was to convince my mom to let me have \$30 for the field trip fee. It was just the two of us, and she wasn't getting rich as a subway clerk, but we managed. Our agreement was: if it was essential like food, rent, and on-sale clothes, she paid. If it was extra, like cool clothes or movies, I paid. I worked part-time at Mervin's Herbals on 116th Street. Mervin was a really nice boss, but he couldn't pay me much.

That night I found Mom in the kitchen, looking kind of glum. I should have been more polite and asked her about her day, but I was too preoccupied with this farm thing.

"That's extra," she responded flatly when I asked for the thirty bucks. "You cover it."

"But it's for school," I argued, feeling my face get hot from frustration.

She wasn't buying it. "It's a field trip. An extra thing. If you don't want to pay for it, then don't go."

The wise words of lawyer-to-be Paulie came into my head. “That’s just *great*,” I said, trying to sound wounded. “I get A’s and B’s in school, stay out of trouble, but you won’t let me take this trip that’s supposed to be a reward for being a good student. I thought you were proud of me, Mom!”

Even Paulie would have been impressed by my act. I closed the deal by turning as if I would storm out of the room.

“Oh, sweetums,” called my mom, just as I’d hoped, “I’m so sorry.” She stood up and gave me a big hug. “Of course you can have the \$30, and don’t you *ever* think I’m not proud of you.” After kissing me, she stepped back and shook her head. “I’m really sorry, Teesha. It’s just that Lois and I broke up this morning.”

“Mom! Oh, no!” Wow, did I feel like a jerk for playing her on a day she got her heart broken. “What happened? I thought you two were so good together.” That was the truth. Mom and Lois had been dating for over a year, and I was starting to think of the lovely lady cop as a second mother.

“Nothing really happened. I just couldn’t stop worrying about things.”

“What things?” I asked, trying not to be mad at her, not believing she was going to be single again.

“Her career. She’s so smart, and has a chance for all these promotions. Maybe a detective one day, even a lieutenant. It’s such important work.”

“She wasn’t paying enough attention to you?”

“No, she made time for me. It’s just... it’s hard to explain.”

“Try.”

Mom let out a long sigh. “I don’t know. I’m just picturing us down the road. Lois the NYPD lieutenant and Roslyn the subway cashier.”

“So?” I pressed her.

“So, I think she’d get bored.”

“Bored of what?”

“Bored of me. And I can’t take that thought. She needs to be with someone who will challenge her, keep up with her. Better to let her go now, so I don’t have to watch her get bored.”

There was something wrong with her logic, but I couldn’t explain it. So I gave her a hug and went into my room, \$30 richer but a lot sadder.

The day after I got my hair braided, we took our class trip to the farm. As promised, it took two hours to get to the New Jersey countryside. Paulie never even had the nerve to talk to that boy Trevor Williams. As the bus finally rolled up to the Meadowlark Farm’s parking lot, the sharp odor of hay and animals came through the open windows.

Whew! That was a noseful!

“Great, just what these new shoes need.” Despite Paulie's usual cracks, there were a lot of excited kids on that bus. They pushed to be the first out the door to breathe a lungful of stinky farm air. I guess when you live in the city your whole life, you don't think about being cooped up until you finally see some wide open space.

“Come on, girl!” Paulie shouted, snatching my hand. He dragged me so fast I almost tripped trying to keep up. We went past the huge market and gift shop where everyone else was heading, and continued around the side of the building.

“Where are we going?” I demanded, digging in my heels to make him stop.

“We've got stores at home. I want to see the real farm. Look out there.” I followed his pointing finger and saw an old wooden barn. Its walls were opened like sliding doors, so I could see lots of cows munching hay.

“Cows. Great.”

“No, not the building. Look past it.”

I did, and saw what had to be the widest, longest piece of land left on the planet. The fields were lined with rows of stubby green plants. Paulie and I gazed out as far as we could, straining to see what lay on the other side of the rolling plot. But it looked like nothing but rows of crops, stretching to the edge of the world.

“Where's the end of it?” Paulie asked quietly, really to himself. We both jumped when another voice answered.

“It's an illusion caused by the curvature of the Earth.” And there he was: big, handsome, brainy Trevor Williams. I felt Paulie's hand go limp in mine.

“Hey, Trevor,” I said, enjoying my friend's paralysis. Paulie wouldn't even look at the boy he talked about constantly.

“Hey, Lateesha,” Trevor answered. Coughing, he added, “Hullo, Paul.”

Paulie just stared at his feet. I kicked him lovingly on the ankle. “Trevor's speaking to you, *Paul*.” I emphasized the formal version of his name. “Don't you have anything to say to him?” I pushed him one step closer to Romeo.

“Hi,” he mumbled.

“Hi,” echoed Trevor, who was now also studying Paulie's shoes. They laughed nervously.

Okay, they were both on the same page. Time for me to *va-moos*! Leaving the lovebirds shuffling at the edge of the cornfield or wheatfield or whatever it was, I trudged back up to the cow barn. I never really thought Trevor and Paulie might hook up, leaving me on my own in this weird place.

Love ate at me like poison. I had just been dumped. My mom had just split up with someone who was practically her wife. And my so-called best friend had just taken another swig of this poison. It all

seemed crazy and pointless. I should have walked back to the market or joined one of the groups of my classmates wandering toward the fields. But I had that particular kind of loneliness that makes it painful to be around other people.

Cows seemed like a good alternative. I'd never seen one up close before, so I wandered into the barn. Some of the cows had been led forward into their narrow stalls, which meant I got too close a look at the wrong end. But others had their wide, shiny nostrils sticking out toward me. They snorted, sniffed, and mooed as I strolled by. Their silly faces cheered me up. I stopped to watch a light-brown one shoo a fly away by flicking her big ears back and forth.

"Hey, sweetie," I said, and reached my hand over the wooden stall gate to pet her head. "It's okay, pretty thing." I talked to the cow in that high, sing-song voice they tell you never to use with babies or they'll grow up poorly adjusted. I figured it couldn't hurt a cow. "Such a pretty-itty coooooow," I cooed.

Suddenly I felt ridiculous, but also realized that my depression had lifted. Time to hunt for other kids from my class to hang with and enjoy the fresh air. Turning toward the barn entrance, I found myself facing a girl I didn't know.

"You're really good with her," she said, pointing to the cow. Now, I'd seen princesses like her in Disney movies, but never in the real world. That creamy skin, those blue eyes, those pink lips. And, most stunning of all, those two long, sandy-blond braids, draping over her t-shirt all the way to the top of her stone-washed jeans. I knew a lot of white girls, but none of them wore their hair like that.

As I was thinking this, she said the most surprising thing, "I love your braids."

My braids? I thought, running my hand over the nubby ropes pulled against my scalp. How could someone with flowing braids of golden silk possibly like my...

"They make such a nice pattern on your head," she continued, as if this conversation were not insane. "I wish my hair would do that, but it's too fine. So I have to wear this dorky, old-fashioned kind, like on the *Wizard of Oz*." Screwing up her nose in distaste, she flapped one of her braids up and down like a flag of surrender. "Or else I wear plain ponytails."

"I'd love to see you in ponytails!" Oh, I did *not* say something that stupid, did I? But it was already out of my mouth.

Fortunately, she laughed. "You're so cute," she said.

Whee! went my heart, but I remained cool on the outside. "So, uh, what's your name?" It wasn't very original, but it kept me from squealing like a little kid at a birthday party.

"Emma. What's yours?" I swear she batted her eyelashes.

"Lateesha. Or just Teesha."

"Hi, Lateesha." Who knew my name could sound that pretty? Definitely not me.

"You want to see the mustard plants? They just sprouted two days ago."

Only an hour before, getting invited to look at mustard plants would have seemed like the lamest thing ever. At this moment, however, I developed an instant, total fascination with mustard plants.

So Emma and I spent the afternoon walking around the farm, which was owned by her grandparents. She pointed out all kinds of plants and animals, but I only wanted to look at and learn about her. She seemed curious about me, too, and conversation came easily.

After a while, we were interrupted by a girl from my class. “Teesha! Teesha! Come on!”

“Why? What’s going on?” I asked.

“It’s 2:45. We gotta go. The bus is leaving.”

No, not yet! I turned to Emma, not knowing what to say.

She knew, though, “I don’t have my phone on me, but you can put my number into your phone.” All that beauty and brains, too. I did as she suggested and then it was time to go.

“Bye, Lateesha. Call me soon.” She blew a kiss and flashed a dazzling smile.

“Bye, Emma.” I made no promise and was too self-conscious to blow her a kiss. As I boarded the bus, I clutched my phone as if it were a piece of her.

Just as well that Paulie and Trevor were still wrapped up in each other on the ride back. It gave me a chance to sit quietly and think about Emma. But thinking just made me more doubtful and confused. By the time the bus let us out in front of the school, I had decided absolutely for sure that I would never call Emma. It had just been a nice dream, and nothing real could ever come of it.

The next few days, I was a zombie. I couldn’t focus, had no appetite, didn’t want to talk to anyone. One evening, when my mom got home from work, I was at the kitchen table, staring at nothing.

Sitting down with me, she asked, “What is it, baby?” in that soft voice that could melt my defenses.

I couldn’t explain. I didn’t know where to start. Rubbing my hand against my braids, I spoke and started to cry at the same time. “Mom, am I cute?”

“You’re adorable.”

“I mean for real, not through a mom’s eyes.”

She laughed. “A mom’s eyes are the only eyes I’ve got.” She kissed my forehead. “But I know I’m looking at a beautiful young woman.”

“Thanks, Mom.” We hugged, but then she took my hand, looking concerned.

“Teesha, did someone tell you you aren’t pretty? Don’t you listen to garbage like that.”

“No, it’s just the opposite. Somebody much prettier than me said I was cute.”

Mom regarded me with her head cocked to one side. “Now, why is that a problem?”

“Because,” I sniffled, “how could she really think that? Why would someone that gorgeous want to be with someone like me?”

“Lateesha Miller, don’t you ever think such a thing! You are a wonderful person, and this girl has simply figured that out. Don’t you dare think you’re not good enough for somebody, Teesha. You’re more than good enough for *anybody*.”

It was quite a speech, and she was up and pacing around the kitchen by the time she finished. Everything she’d said was right. I could only think of one reply. “I will if you will.”

She didn’t get it. “Hm?”

“I’ll believe I’m good enough for anybody, but you have to believe the same thing about yourself.”

That made her sit down. “What do you mean, baby?”

“You know what I mean. Lois. You broke up with her because you think you’re not good enough for her. But she’s figured out how great you are. Why should I trust this girl to think I’m pretty if you can’t trust Lois’s opinion of you?”

Mom sat silently for a couple of minutes. We were both sniffing, pulling paper napkins from the napkin holder to dab our eyes. Finally she spoke. “You’re right, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I’m right. You’ve got to talk to Lois, Mom. You’ve got to believe you’re worth it. I will if you will.”

She looked hard at me and smirked a little, her eyes still shiny with tears. “If I call Lois, will you call this girl? You seem to really like her.”

“Okay, deal.” We smiled, understanding each other. “But, Mom?”

“Yes, sweetums?”

“Just so you know, she’s a milkmaid.”

“She’s a what?”

“A milkmaid.” I could barely stop myself from giggling. “Seriously. She milks cows.”

Mom’s eyes went wide like they always did when something struck her as hilarious. “You mean to say I gave you thirty dollars to go fall for a milkmaid? Honestly!”

We laughed and laughed and laughed, our hands clasped across the kitchen table.

--The End--