

Light Brite. Redbone. High Yellow. White chocolate. Milkman's lil girl. I heard these names long before I understood what they meant.

I heard them - on the playground, on the basketball court, at family gatherings, and even from strangers who felt entitled to name me before I had the language to name myself. Even from my sassy nine-year-old daughter, who once commented that I was "white chocolate," as she tried to make sense of a world that had already begun teaching her to measure Blackness by complexion.

One day, I stood staring at myself in the mirror. Not willing to step outside because my new growth was so thick that folks from across the world could see that part where nappy met straight. For years, I sat next to the stove with a hot comb in momma's hands. Ears and forehead burnt, turned into hours at the beauty shop, leaving with fresh, silky straight hair covering the scabs on my scalp. Relaxing my hair made it easier to explain. Easier to fit into a box. Easier to belong. The cream crack had been a part of me since early girlhood. It promised straight hair, not nappy. Acceptability.

But this time, as I stood in the mirror, my reflection felt like a new beginning.

I thought about all the times people questioned my Blackness. Are you mixed? You know how it is for us mixed folks? "Excuse me - I'm not mixed", exclaiming with an attitude. And I thought about how, as a Black girl, I had spent so much energy trying to prove something that had never needed proving.

When I first started dating, I noticed a pattern in myself: I was always attracted to the darkest brotha in the room. Then, I told myself it was love at first sight. But now I know it was more than that. Somewhere deep inside, I thought his Blackness would stop mine from being questioned. I couldn't explain it then. I didn't have the words for it. I couldn't name what I was doing or why. I thought his Blackness would make my Blackness easier for people to see, easier for them to understand.

In my family, surrounded by many biracial first cousins with white mommas and my uncles as their fathers (that's a story for another time), I am still the lightest - despite both my parents being Black. My ancestry dates back four generations, rooted in Texas and Tennessee of beautiful and brilliant Black lineage on both sides of my family. However, DNA is a trip. The sexual violence of

TAJA,

ABSOLUTELY BEAUTIFUL!

slavery forever stained my bloodline, although it's not traceable by name.

But standing there, in that mirror, a realization came to be.

I was tired. Tired of performing authenticity. Tired of having to fit into someone else's box. Tired of my Blackness being questioned. So I stopped. I stopped relaxing my hair. I stopped explaining myself. And in that stopping, a newness began.

My Blackness does not need validation, approval, or defense. Becoming a Black woman meant letting go of the need to convince anyone of what my ancestors had already made undeniable. It meant walking unapologetically in the beauty of Blackness; in the beauty of my Blackness.

Now, when people question me, I stand tall. I don't rehearse comebacks in my head; I don't search for ways to prove myself. I. Just. Stand.

I think about my great Aunt Velma, who could pass if she wanted to, but never did. Her Blackness lived in the way she stood, in the way she dressed, in her voice, in the curl of her hair, and in the way she occupied space without apology. I never asked her how she carried that certainty, but I carry it now. And I carry it for my daughter.

So when she asks questions about my skin, I answer honestly. I teach her about all the beautiful ways Blackness shows up in Black women, the varied melanins, the complex sounds, and the fullness of our stories.

The unapologetic truth is that society's definitions never suited me. I stopped seeking a seat at tables that weren't built for me. I stopped seeking approval. The moment I truly became a Black woman, I was the only witness. I stripped away every label the world tried to pin on me and named myself. It was quiet, private, and the most transformative act of my life.

I am BEAUTIFUL!

I am more than ENOUGH!

I am Taja Henderson TS#13 of 52 of The SoulTown Magazine. I want to thank you all for having SOUL! 🌿



TS#13

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