

BLACK ON BOTH SIDES

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There is you. And then there is the ghetto girl. Both of you always in the same places. On the same train car. In the same grocery store. Or in the same bar that's in the neighborhood where she grew up that is now being gentrified (by whites and by you if you're being honest with yourself) and she is the element that is no longer supposed to be there, but she and her friends showed up anyway. Made sure you saw them. Heard them. Judged them. Hated them. She is in the Walmart and at the liquor store.

She is everywhere you are. Seeming to take up all the space. Leave you with little air to breathe. Because she is always louder. Brighter. Bolder.

Today, you are both in the middle of a nondescript café in downtown DC where busy people are waiting for their breakfast sandwiches but are really engrossed in their phones. She is standing to your right, just a few feet away from you. Her weave too long, in a neon hue no human could be born with. Shirt too tight across chest. Jeans too tight across thighs and ass. Life too tight and suffocating everything—as she makes it known to her friend on the phone and everyone in the café—these niggas ain't shit, and she is short on the rent so she might have to sell her food stamps, and the kids need some new clothes but you know she gotta put them in some Jordans, and she was late to work again cause see #1.

“You right, they ain't shit,” her friend's voice blares through the speakerphone.

Shared cackles.

“So let me tell you what happened last night...”

You do your best to ignore her. Shift your weight in your Chanel shoes that you bought on sale. Adjust your pencil skirt. Play with the colorful, chunky beaded necklace—the one Matt from work asked if it was from Africa and you told him, no because Africa is a continent and besides it was from J. Crew.

Your phone vibrates and it's an email from Matt. State school to your Ivy League school Matt. Three years of experience to your seven Matt. Daddy is friends with the CEO to your submitting a resume and getting interviewed and selected Matt. You roll your eyes before you've even read the first word and your eyes are definitely in the back of your head by the time you get to the end:

Hey, Sasha –

I came to your desk but seems like you haven't made it in the office yet. I made a few edits to your report. Let's meet around 11 to discuss. I'll come by later to check in. Sound good? Thanks.

You start typing:

No mothafucka because no one asked you to make edits to my damn report. You're not my boss, you're barely my peer

Delete delete delete

First of all, why are you clocking me? Are you my supervisor? No, I don't want to meet with you because all you do is interrupt me cause you think you know it all when you don't know a damn thing

Delete delete delete

Listen, you got one more time to send me another BS email and then you can meet me outside and we can handle this like

Delete delete delete

Matt –

I'll take a look at everything when I get into the office. Thanks.

You look up just in time to see it.

The bump.

A quick bang of his front shoulder to the ghetto girl's back shoulder.

The culprit? White guy. 27. No, maybe 30. Dark suit. Blue tie. Short, professional haircut. Cookie cutter. Unremarkable really. Capitol Hill type. No maybe a lobbyist. You check the shoes. Lobbyist. iPhone in one hand. Head down, eyes on phone. The bump comes with the quick pace to the counter to order and no looking back.

"Damn, you can't say excuse me," the voice calls. It comes out perfect. The right amount of staccato on the right syllables. Meant to be a question, it is more a statement. A condemnation of who raised this white boy.

No answer.

"And you gonna act like you don't hear me? Cause I know you know you bumped into me."

Collective breath. Everyone takes a step back. Yourself included. No one wants any part of the drama that's sure to come next. He looks back once, his eyes go from her feet to her hair, chuckles and then he turns back to the cashier.

She moves in closer.

"So you just not gonna say excuse me?"

Number 65, please call number 65, you pray.

"62."

You check your phone again. Debate on taking a selfie. Or maybe you should capture this moment on Snapchat. No, too obvious. Maybe you should just relay the incident on Facebook when you get to the office. Ask your friends and followers why this girl had to be so Black? No, you can't say that. That's racist. Black people can't be racist you tell yourself. OK then, classist. Fine. You agree with yourself.

Your eyes scan the room and you do a quick count of who is witnessing the scene: three white men, two white women, and the Latino employee cleaning a table. What you find is that they are already looking at you. Does she belong to you, their eye seems to say. Like she is your responsibility. When in reality she is your problem, your headache, your burden. The reason you get followed in stores, and stopped randomly by police or in the airport, the reason you have to emphasize your words and your college degree.

She is moving towards Mr. Lobbyist like a hurricane, almost on his neck now. Doing what the old folks told you not to do. Showing her color and all its darkness.

“63.”

She is doing what you would never do. Have never done. What you wouldn't allow yourself to become all those times you were bumped. Had your toes stepped on. Endured white girls and their hair tossed in your face. The pushes. The side swipes. The passive aggressiveness. The defensiveness. You took it all and said nothing. You have the right to remain silent, you think. What bullshit.

She is at the man's back, her lips pressed close to his ear, screaming:

“Say mothafuckin' excuse me.”

They are about the same height, 5' 7, if you had to guess. He is stocky in all the wrong places, especially in the middle, whereas she is solid—thick thighs, wide hips, big arms.

“What?” He turns around and realizes just how close she is, his back is pressed against the counter and for a second you almost pity him.

“What you mean what? Say excuse me dammit.”

“For what?” He is mocking her now. Aware of the optics, what all these white people must be thinking.

“For what? What you mean for what? You bumped into me.”

“Did I? Oh well, my bad. I didn't see you.”

“Your bad?” She laughs at his use of slang. “Well how about now? You see me now? Do you see me now?”

He brings the phone that's been in his right hand the entire time up to his face, and you're not sure if he's going to call the cops, take a video, or both.

“Get out of my face. You're crazy.”

“Who are you calling crazy?” It is your voice. Loud, with a slight pitch. It surprises everyone in the café, even you. For the first time, you hear it—you really do sound like a white girl.

The ghetto girl turns around, equally confused.

“Black women have been overlooked and ignored in this nation since y'all brought us here in chains. You love not to see us. But we have been here. Raising your babies and cooking for you and taking care of your households. We have had to hold our families and this nation together. And yet you claim you don't see us.”

This next part you punctuate your words with handclaps:

“We are here and we demand respect. Don't we? Apologize. Apologize to us. To black women. Because we matter. We exist. And we are tired of being overlooked. Stop acting like you don't see us. And stop editing my damn reports, Matt. Stop that shit. Stop it!”

You've yelled yourself hoarse and everyone is definitely staring at you. June, the cashier, with who you've exchanged “how about this weather and how was your weekend” pleasantries with for the past two years is looking at you confused. Or is that pity? Probably a combination of both.

The white woman who had complimented you on your shoes when you both walked in together has now taken a few steps away from you. You're sure you're going to end up on somebody's social media timeline: "Black woman goes crazy in DC café" will be the headline. What if you go viral? Lord, your mama will kill you if that happens.

Is this what freedom feels like? You open your mouth to yell some more, but you're interrupted.

"This is crazy. I'm calling the police." It's the lobbyist, still pinned between the ghetto girl and the counter.

You don't move. In fact, you feel your feet moving in the direction of the counter.

"Call the police, asshole. I dare you."

Suddenly ghetto girl is at your elbow, pulling you away, dragging you towards the door, your shoes are barely able to stay on your feet as she drags you out and around the corner from the café.

"Bitch!"

She shakes you back to yourself, the summer sun slaps you in the face.

"Huh?"

"I got a court case. I can't have the poh-lice coming up here. What's wrong with you?"

"I'm sorry. I was just trying to help."

"I get it. I 'ppreciate it. But when white people start talking cops, they mean that shit."

"What would the police have done? I mean really?"

She takes you all in, your heels, your outfit, your leather work bag, the engagement ring on your finger, your hair that you keep pressed and presentable, your everything—the said and unsaid between you—and says:

"I don't know what they woulda done to you, but I know for sure what they woulda done to me."

You breathe out what's left of your anger, your fear, your freedom to make a scene.

"Look, you tried. But next time—take that shit to a therapist. You can afford it."

You nod.

"I gotta go. I still ain't ate. You gonna be all right?"

You nod.

"All right. Take care, girl."

She walks away, then stops, turns around and yells to you who is still standing watching her:

"Oh wait. I meant to ask you. Who the fuck is Matt?"