

At Last



“I want to marry you,” Bob said, then grabbed my hand and led me – against traffic – across a busy White Plains Street. I followed, dumbstruck. That wasn’t the answer I’d expected when I asked what he wanted from me. I thought he’d say sex, or maybe even friendship. He was 50 years old and I was 43, but he was talking like we were high school kids with everything in common, and a rosy future ahead. We had nothing in common, and I couldn’t even imagine a future with him. I was black, brought up under South Carolina segregation. He was a native New Yorker, in the middle of a divorce. He was the first white man I’d ever let cross my threshold. And every time I did, I expected the worst. Growing up, my mother had warned me that white people were deceitful.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” I said when we reached the library plaza and sat on a stone bench under a tree. He said I was everything he’d ever dreamed about, and he wasn’t going to let me get away – like all the men before him had. When I laughed and told him he was just saying that because he was old fashioned and thought that if you slept with a woman you should marry her, he said he wanted to marry me because he loved me. “I can’t understand how you managed to stay single all these years. You’re so beautiful, inside and out.”

“What I look like doesn’t matter,” I said. “If you marry me, my skin color will ruin everything you’ve worked for.” Bob stared me straight in the eye. “Don’t be silly. This is 1990. Interracial couples get

married all the time.” And I won’t be one of them, I thought. Once his divorce is final, he’ll wake up and move on.

Bob was handsome, sexy, attentive, and appreciative of everything I did for him. I loved talking to him and being with him. But he was white. I wasn’t supposed to like him. With my parents long dead, and my older sisters no longer surprised by anything I did, it wasn’t my family’s reaction I worried about. What would his children and stepmother say?

“If they love me, they’ll love you too,” he said nonchalantly. I looked around to see if anyone was watching us and asked if we could talk tomorrow – after I had time to think about what he’d said. He kissed me before leaving and said, “Fate’s on our side.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d given fate credit for our relationship, but he was wrong. It wasn’t fate that led me from Baltimore to New York. I had come in search of literary fame and fortune. When my nest egg ran out, and all my submissions to magazines brought rejection slips, I was desperate for a job. “You’re overqualified,” I heard time and again at interviews. “You should be looking in Manhattan.” But I was scared of New York City’s fast pace, and my small-town upbringing made me want grass and open spaces with trees and hills on the horizon. Then I saw an ad for an administrative position at a consulting engineering firm in a quiet country setting. At the interview, I didn’t mention my graduate degree, writing background, or experience as a college and legislative librarian. Instead, I said that I could type, didn’t smoke and was willing to serve coffee to visitors. I got the job.

The company employed 40 men. Bob was an up-and-coming engineer. While I was friendly with all the men, their white skins kept them off my romantic radar. At my first Christmas party, the company lawyer asked how a smart, good-looking woman like me managed to remain husband-less. I told him that the price of marriage was too expensive for me. The truth was, I wanted marriage, but on my terms – as an equal, not a helpmate.

As the years passed, it seemed I’d end up just as lonely as my mother, even though I’d managed to avoid all the mistakes she’d made. But I loved my job and was so good at it that I was promoted to office manager. When Bob made partner, he moved into an office down the hall from mine. The girls in the secretarial pool joked about how square he was with his three-piece suits and gold pocket watch, and how up-tight he seemed. I was impressed by how honest and reliable he was. Even though he was one of the bosses, he always pitched in whenever a crisis or deadline loomed. Sometimes when I filled-in on the switchboard, his kids would call with problems. He always took their calls. I wished I’d had a father like that.

Bob was friendly and talkative. He seemed like a happily married family-man, though he was so depressed on his 40th birthday that everyone teased him for months. I still can’t recall when we began to trade personal information or dreams – the stuff that friendships are built on.

Like Lucy in the Peanuts cartoon, over time, I took on the role of the company’s human resource person. In a corner of my desk drawer, I stored a bowl of nickels collected as payment from employees who sat in my visitor’s chair seeking advice on love, work and family life. Sometimes Bob sat in that chair and paid his nickel. Other times, younger guys flirted with me and asked for a date. “You know what they say about dating on the job,” I told them, “Breakups make everyone at work uncomfortable.” What I didn’t say was that I had no intention of being just another notch on some white man’s bedpost.

For years, I squirreled away money, looking toward the day when I could quit work and devote my attention to completing the novel that consumed my evenings and weekends. Then, one night a burglar broke into the office building while I was there alone. I was so rattled by the encounter that I resigned from my job and went home to write. Since my apartment was near the office, I’d sometimes stop by to say hello to my old boss and the girls I’d hired. One day, Bob’s secretary told me that he and his wife had separated. I was surprised but thought little more about it.

A few months later, at her wedding reception, I found myself seated next to Bob. “I’m doing fine,” he said when I offered sympathy about his separation. “We should have done it a long time ago, but I

didn't want to leave my kids. They're almost grown now, so I figured it was time for me to have a life." When the band started playing, he confessed that he didn't know how to dance. "Then you'd better learn," I said, "if you want to be a hit on the dating circuit."

He said he was kind of old for the dating circuit but had always wanted to learn to dance. He asked me to teach him, but I refused. We spent the rest of the evening talking and laughing. When the reception was over, he asked if he could call me and I said "sure," thinking he was lonely and simply wanted someone familiar to talk to while he got used to his new life as a single man. The next day, he called and invited me to dinner. I said no; but he kept calling and each time, asked me out.

Finally, I gave in and went with him to a neighborhood restaurant. I could not believe how much I enjoyed myself – until he tried to kiss me. "Don't," I said as I pushed him away. "Where I come from, respectable black women don't kiss white men."

"Well, I lived next door to a black family and went to school with black kids. Some of them dated white kids."

When I responded that they didn't live down south, where the Klan burned crosses in black people's yards and lynched black boys and men for looking at white women, I saw sadness in his eyes. "You've known me long enough to know that I'm not like those people. I'm not even white. I'm Italian and Italians are discriminated against too."

He was right. In the ten years I'd known him, I'd never heard him denigrate any ethnic group, and he had never treated me any differently than he treated the white women in the office. But my mother's old lessons were all I had to go on. When I told him that I couldn't look past his white skin, he said, "Then I'll just stick around until you stop looking at the color of my skin and see the color of my heart – it's the same as yours."

I was taken aback. Martin Luther King, Jr. had preached that black people wanted to be judged by the content of their character. If we wanted that from white people, weren't we supposed to judge them the same way? That evening, I lay in bed sifting through my fears. I felt like I was betraying the racial solidarity I'd cultivated in the '70s. Being black and proud seemed to fly in the face of marrying a man who wasn't black. Would other blacks think I'd gone looking for a white man because I didn't think black men were good enough? What would my friends and family say if I told them that the man I wanted to marry was white? Would they welcome us into their homes? Could Bob be comfortable in a room full of black people? Would his white relatives accept me? Or would they banish us from family events?

On top of everything else, I felt like I was betraying my personal family history. White men had robbed my father of his dignity when they blacklisted him from teaching after he refused to rat on fellow teachers who had joined the NAACP. Years of menial labor drove him to alcoholism and aimless wandering around the south. My family lost everything, including the respectable, middle-class life my mother craved. Alone and disrespected, she struggled to raise five children in a place where white people did not wish her well. How could I marry a white man?

But deep down, I loved Bob. Even the sex was good with him, despite the age-old rumor the Black community circulated about white men being inadequate lovers. Locked in his arms, I sometimes forgot our differences and marveled at how much alike we were. My older sister had once told me I'd never find a husband who had everything I wanted. As far as I was concerned, the only thing wrong with Bob was that he was white. Was it really fate that had brought us together?

Before moving to New York, a friend had said that I was afraid of good men. In a way, he was right. If I fell in love with a good man, he might let me down. Then I'd end up alone, just like my mother. But maybe my mother's rules weren't right for my life. Maybe at last I had a chance at happiness. Was I brave enough to take that chance? I closed my eyes and sleep soon calmed my fears. The next morning, I awoke filled with a calm resolve. I couldn't wait to tell Bob that I would consider marrying him. That I'd

try to put aside my fears and embrace the love he was offering me. That I would trust him and try to live up to his trust in me. Mostly, I'd try to focus on the color of his heart, not the color of his skin.

After trying not to love for so long, when I finally gave myself permission, it was like I'd stepped off a pier and fallen into the ocean. Even though I couldn't swim, I felt as buoyant as a life raft. I kept reminding myself to be wary. . . to look for inconsistencies in Bob's behavior . . . to expect some hidden flaw to erupt . . . to maintain some reserve that would sustain me when all of the joy turned out to be a dream. But I couldn't. I tried to work on my novel, but couldn't – my life had turned into a novel, far exceeding anything I had ever read, or imagined.

Bob courted me like I was a movie star. He took me to the Met and MoMa, to Lincoln Center to see the New York City Ballet perform. We ate in restaurants like Manhattan's famous Café Des Artistes, and Peter's, a small neighborhood bistro on Columbus Avenue. I always kept watch for disapproving stares from fellow diners, but seldom spotted them. Or maybe I was too caught up in the euphoria of finally being a part of life on New York City streets. On snowy days, Bob and I read the New York Times or played Scrabble on my living room sofa.

Then, when spring arrived, he moved into my co-op and announced that he was taking me to meet his stepmother. When I asked why, since they seemed to have such a distant relationship, he said, "I feel responsible for her. She took good care of my father before his death and now she's sickly, with no one to care for her. It's the least I can do. You two should meet."

So, in addition to three grown stepchildren, this relationship involved a step-mother-in-law, who, I was certain, would not like me. How could she? By Bob's account, we were as different as night and day: she was a white-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant from a well-to-do, blue-blooded family. I was an ebullient, black woman who had grown up poor, in the Jim Crow south. The fact that she had married a first-generation Italian American meant nothing to me. In my book, Bob's father was just as white as she was.

"She doesn't have to be nice to me," I told Bob, during our ride out to the Long Island town of East Quogue where she lived. "But she'd better be respectful, or from now on, you'll be driving out to Long Island alone."

Our first visit went surprisingly well. Sarah-Lee was taller than I, about 5'9", with a well-proportioned nose and mouth. Silver curls floated above her large, square face and the twinkle in her hazel eyes belied the stern line of her mouth. Her formal, matronly air reminded me of England's queen Mother. When I extended my hand to greet her, she had smiled warmly and embraced me. Her southern-like display of good manners struck a common thread in me and as the visit proceeded, all formality fell away. Perhaps it was that we shared the same first name, or that I too was a strong, independent career woman coming late to the altar of marriage. Perhaps it was because she too had once been the second wife. Who knows?

It's said that children from the first marriage can destroy a second marriage, so I was determined that Bob's children would not destroy ours. Because I had worked in his company, I knew his children long before he and I became a couple. They were nice kids. Smart, polite, fun to be around and willing workers. His son, the oldest was 22, his middle daughter was 20 and his younger daughter was 19. "What will you do if they decide they don't like your marrying me?" I asked him.

"In time, they'll understand that I've dedicated my life to giving them the advantages they need to succeed. They'll come around and understand that I deserve to be happy, and you make me happy. They're not going to make me change my mind."

Once I understood the strength of Bob's intentions, I felt no competition between his love for his children and his love for me. I also knew it was up to me to make them know that their father's love was not in jeopardy. In the beginning, when his middle daughter complained that she never got to see her dad alone, I made a point of going out whenever she came to visit him. After a while, she began to invite me into their visits. I told the kids that if it they ever had to choose between hurting my feelings or

hurting their mother's, they should hurt mine, because their mother had earned more consideration -- by virtue of giving birth to them.

I don't know whether they ever implemented that choice, but I believe that what you do comes back to you; so, I've tried to do right by Bob and his family. And they've loved me back -- and done right by me.