

CORA
HAL AMES



It was 1969. It was time of change. People were protesting the war, drugs were becoming a problem, and civil rights were being demanded. The society as we had known it was being challenged. For a young man in high school, it was difficult for me to make sense of everything that was happening.

For the most part, I was not aware of most of this. Our community was small and very conservative. While some were demanding change, most of the people where I lived were saying, “Why?”

I was born into a family that had no worries about where our next meal would come from. My grandfather was a very successful businessman and he made sure we had everything we needed. My father worked for him and had a big salary.

My father liked to drink and when he drank, he was mean. I didn’t like him very much. He died when I was 9 years old in a car accident after drinking too much.

Soon after he died, we moved to a new house in a new town with a new school and new friends. This place had even more families that were like mine. Very rich and very privileged. My school was small.

Our new house had three floors as well as a big basement. We needed a big house since I had five siblings, three sisters and two brothers. We were close, and most of the time we made a lot of noise. My mother would yell at us to be quiet and to not run in the house. Soon she decided to get some help.

As was normal in our community, we had a live-in housekeeper. Her name

was Roxie. She was black. She lived in our house on the third floor.

She took care of us kids, did the laundry, prepared our meals, got us ready for school in the morning and made sure the house was clean and neat. I liked her a lot, but we were told to just let her do her work and not to bother her. Sometimes I would talk with her while she fixed our supper or folded the laundry. She was nice and very kind to us. My siblings didn't talk to her at all because she was the 'help'. I didn't care, I liked her.

On the weekends she would go home. I never knew where she went. Every Saturday afternoon she would go away in a taxi and then on Sunday night she would return.

Two years later my mother re-married and the man was terrible to us, he was worse than my father. Soon after he came to live with us, my oldest sister moved out to live with another family. My stepfather had hit her in the face when he was angry. Instead of going to jail he agreed to let my sister leave. Not long afterwards my second oldest sister moved out too. I never found out why. She was always bitter and never said a kind word about him. I was now the oldest in the family.

My stepfather tried to hit me once, but I fought back. He never tried to do that again. I warned him that if he ever tried to hit me or one of my siblings, I was going to call the police or worse I would kill him. He believed me and never did anything physical to us again. Instead he always called us stupid and no-good children.

When school got out for the summer, I got a job delivering newspapers in the evening. It was easy work and gave me money for things I wanted. The summer was a time to get out of the house and be with my friends.

After one of Roxie's weekends away, she came home and brought a girl with her. I think she was about fourteen or fifteen. I found out the girl was going to stay with us for the rest of the summer. My mother had agreed to let her stay with us, but my stepfather got angry. He didn't like her and kept saying she should leave.

He told us we weren't supposed to talk to her because she was not like us, but that didn't make any sense to me. Why shouldn't I be able to talk to someone just because her skin was a different color?

I found out her name was Cora. She was Roxie's granddaughter. Her mother and father asked if she could stay with Roxie until school began because her younger brother was sick and was in the hospital. My mother agreed she could stay as long as Cora helped her grandmother with the housework.

Cora was quiet and sweet. She did everything her grandmother told her to do without complaining. She helped clean the house, did the laundry and prepared meals. She was not allowed to speak to us, and she wasn't to sit with us during meals. She always ate with Roxie in another room.

Our house was always filled with noise and confusion, and it was always a big mess. Cora was told to clean it up. I told my stepfather it was unfair for her to have to clean it up; she didn't make the mess, but it didn't help. He never listened to me.

I didn't like all the noise in the house, so whenever I had the chance, I would leave the house and either ride my bike or go to my special place on top of our garage.

Behind the garage I would climb the fence, get onto the telephone pole, and then I would sit or lay down looking up at the sky. The roof faced away from the house, so no one knew I was there.

I liked to daydream about what life would be like if I were an only child, and what it would be like to be in a normal family. It was my chance to be alone.

One day, Cora was curious about where I went all the time, so she followed me. She found me and looked up to where I was sitting.

“What ya'll doin up der?”

“Looking at the clouds. I can see all kinds of things in the clouds.”

I was surprised that she was talking to me. I'm sure she was surprised that I

answered.

“Can I come up an’ see?”

“Sure, but be careful.”

She climbed up as if she had done it a thousand times.

“Wow, you did that fast.”

“I’m use ta climbin’ da fence behind my house. My best friend lives der, so I climbed da fence to her house, at least ‘til da fence gots a hole in it. Now I just go through da hole.”

“You talk different, why is that?”

“I don’ know. Maybe it’s ‘cuz I’m black?”

“Maybe.”

I shrugged my shoulders. Then I laid back and looked up at the sky.

She laid down next to me and looked up as well.

“See over there?” I pointed to a white puffy cloud floating slowly overhead.

“That’s a monkey.”

She laughed.

“Dat’s no monkey, it’s a sheep!”

“You must be looking at a different cloud, that’s definitely a monkey!” I laughed back.

We sat there for a long time arguing over what each cloud looked like. It was fun.

Cora sat up quickly.

“I need ta go now. My granny might be lookin’ fo me,” she said as she climbed down from the roof. “Can we’s do dis a’gin?”

“Why not, I come up here almost every day.”

A few minutes later I dropped to ground. I needed to fold the newspapers and deliver them.

Two days later, Cora joined me again.

We lay on the roof, laughing at the clouds again.

We talked about many things about her family and school. Then she turned serious.

“Dis feels funny. We can talk and have fun up here, but in da house we can’t talk to each other. It seems so unfair. Is it ‘cuz I’m black?”

Not really knowing what to say, I just looked up at the clouds.

“Really, is it ‘cuz I’m black dat yo family cannot talk ta me?”

I turned to her and then gave as direct an answer as I could think of at that moment.

“I would have to say, yes. You know, My stepfather is a very strict man. He’s also not accepting of people, not even of me. I don’t know how to say it any other way. That is what he wants. As for me. I like you. You are fun. I hope we can be friends.”

She leaned over and gave me a hug.

“What was that for?”

“You be da sweetest person I did ever meet.”

Then she climbed down and disappeared into the house.

I sat there a little surprised.

Shortly after that, I left the garage and prepared my newspapers.

It was few days before I saw her again. She was crying.

She stayed on the ground looking up at me.

“What’s wrong Cora?”

“Ma granny knows we’s bin talking, and she wants me ta stop. She says it’s not my place ta be with you. I need to stop.”

She sobbed.

“I don’t want you ta get into trouble,”

“It doesn’t matter to me. I’m always in trouble with my stepfather. I like being up here with you. I don’t care what anyone else thinks,” I answered.

I thought for a moment.

“Maybe we can find a different way. Let me think about it, OK?”

“How?”

“I’m not sure. We’ll figure something out.”

I tried to reassure her.

Several days passed and I missed her, but I hadn’t come up with any ideas on how to get past my stepfather and her grandmother. It was really unfair. Why couldn’t I choose my friends? I realized that I really enjoyed being with her. She was a lot of fun.

I thought about just walking up to her in the house and start a conversation, but then I concluded that it would get her into trouble, and she might have to leave. At least for then we could smile at each other.

I was lying in bed almost asleep when I heard my door open very slowly. In the dim light from the hallway, I could see that it was Cora.

She came over to my bed and sat on the floor.

“What are you doing here? Are you nuts?” I asked in whisper.

“When my granny’s asleep, nothin’ can wake her ‘til mornin’. She won’t miss me,” she whispered back.

We talked for a long time, and then I looked at my clock.

I whispered over to her.

“Geez, it’s already 2:00 am. I need to get some sleep.”

She quietly left my room and slowly closed the door. I didn’t want her to go, but if I didn’t get some sleep, I knew I would be miserable in the morning.

The next day she joined me on the roof of the garage.

“How did you get away?”

“My granny went ta da market. She’ll be gone fo a while. I thought I’d come up here, so we can share some time looking at the clouds.”

She smiled.

“I missed dis.”

“So, do I. There aren’t any clouds today. Just a blue sky.”

We sat quietly admiring how blue it was when she rolled toward me.

“Ya’ll ever kissed a black girl befo’?”

“Huh?”

“I said, ya’ll ever kissed a black girl befo’?”

“Uh, no. In fact, I have never kissed any girl before.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve never wanted to.”

“Why not?”

She persisted.

“I’ve never liked a girl.”

“Do you like me?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I want to kiss you.”

“Ya want ta try?”

“I don’t know,” I responded not sure what to answer. “Have you ever kissed a boy, er, a white boy before?”

“No”

“Have you ever kissed a black boy?”

“No”

“Then why did you ask me that?”

“Cuz I want ta kiss ya.”

She then leaned over to me and kissed me on the lips.

“What did you do that for?”

“I wanted to,” she said with a smile. “Do ya wanna do it a’gin?”

“Ah, I guess so.”

I leaned over to her and we kissed. It felt good. I didn’t have fireworks or anything, but it felt nice.

We lay back on the roof and sat quietly. I thought about the kiss. It wasn’t that bad after all.

“I need ta go now. My granny be home soon.”

“Can I have another kiss?”

She moved closer and I held her as we kissed. I liked it a lot better.

She climbed down from the roof, waved goodbye and disappeared into the house.

I lay back on the roof and remembered her touch, her smell, and her voice. I had never felt like this before. I liked it. I sat up on the roof longer than I should have. By the time I finished delivering the newspapers, it was dark.

I missed supper, so Roxie fixed me a sandwich.

I sat in the kitchen while I ate.

Roxie stopped what she was doing and looked over at me.

“I hear you and Cora have been talkin’. Is dat right?”

Not wanting to lie, but also not wanting Cora to get into trouble, I asked, “Ah, yeah. Is there a problem with that?”

“Fo me, no. Fo your pa, yes. You better be careful. If’n he catches you; you’ll be in a heap of trouble. You know I like you. You be da only one here who talks ta me.”

“I like you too, Roxie. I can take care of myself. I’m not afraid of him.”

A few nights later, I heard my door open again.

“Cora, is that you?”

“Yeah, it’s me.”

I whispered.

“What are you doing? We might get into trouble.”

“I wanna talk wit you, OK?”

“Yeah, but be quiet. My stepdad hasn’t gone to bed yet.”

She walked quietly over to my bed and laid down next to me. I wasn’t expecting that.

“What are you doing?”

“I don’ like sittin’ on da floor. It’s not comfy,”

“OK, but be quiet.”

The room was dark, but the moon was bright and the glow from the streetlight outside of my window was enough for me to see her face.

She leaned over and gave me kiss.

I was a little surprised.

“Thanks.”

We talked about many things. Mostly about her life at home. Her father was like my stepdad, very controlling. Her mother was a hairdresser and was not home very often. Cora didn’t have any siblings, so she spent a lot of time alone or with her friends. Staying with us was so different. Always noisy.

She told me about her home, her friends, her school, and her church.

Then there was silence. I looked into her face. I could see her smile.

She rolled over onto her stomach.

“Will you scratch my back? My granny always scratches my back befo’ she falls asleep. I like it.”

“Sure, I can do that, but don’t fall asleep. You’re going to have to go back upstairs before your granny wakes up.”

“Don’ worry ‘bout that, she won’t wake up.”

I whispered into her ear, “Don’t fall asleep,”

“I won’t, but it won’t be easy!”

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My stepfather’s voice rang out.

“WHAT’S GOING ON IN HERE!”

The light of the sun was now beaming through my window. We had fallen asleep and hadn’t realized the time.

“Young lady, get upstairs to your grandmother, NOW!”

Then he looked at me.

“I will deal with you later.”

Cora ran past my stepfather. He made sure she went up the stairs.

When he came back to my room, I was sitting on the edge of my bed ready for him to hit me. When he raised his hand, I jumped up and yelled at him.

I screamed as loud as I could.

“You have no right to come into my room! You are not my father and I hate you. Get out of here and leave me alone!”

I pushed him back toward the door.

He was surprised at my reaction, left, and closed the door.

I sat on my bed and I cried. What had I done? Cora was going to be in so much trouble. I knew I was going to be OK, but what about her.

I got dressed and as I left my room, I saw Cora and Roxie were going down to the first floor dragging their luggage behind them. My stepfather had fired Roxie and they were leaving.

When I tried to talk to Cora, my stepfather told me to go away. I tried to find out how I could find her. I didn’t know where she lived or what her phone number was. If my parents knew, they would not tell me. The didn’t want me to have anything to do with her.

I watched out my window as the taxi pulled away from our house. Cora looked

back and I saw the tears in her eyes. That memory remained in my mind.

I never talked to my stepfather again. I would do what he told me to do and I would say, “Yes sir,” but that was all.

My mom tried to make me feel better, but she did not understand.

“We don’t mix with their kind,” she told me.

I asked her what that meant, but she just left it at that.

Why was it so bad that I had fallen in love with a black girl? No one I had ever known was like her.

I tried to find her. I asked my neighbors if they knew where Roxie lived. No one knew. I could not find her. I didn’t know her last name. My parents wouldn’t tell me. They didn’t want me to be with Cora. They made sure it would be impossible, but I never gave up hope. Even her friend who worked in the house next to us would not tell. She was afraid she would lose her job.

A few months later we moved away. My stepfather got a new job and we had to go with him. We moved to another state. Everything I had known was now going to be different. How was I ever going to see Cora again?

I made friends where we moved. They always asked me why I didn’t have a girlfriend. I told them I was just too busy, but in reality, no one I met was anything like Cora.

I got my freedom when I left home to go to college. I was finally able to be myself. The college was in the middle of the city, so I was able to meet and make friends from all races. I found out that I was able to learn a lot about life from them. I wondered what people were so afraid of.

Six years after I moved away, I visited my old home. My best friend’s family still lived in the house next door. I thought I would surprise them, so I didn’t tell them that I was coming.

I rang the doorbell and to my surprise, Roxie answered the door.

I yelled out.

“ROXIE! I thought I would never see you again!”

At first, she didn’t recognize me. I was taller, my hair was longer, and I had a beard, but when I told her who I was, she got a big smile on her face and gave me a big hug.

She was excited to see me.

“Come in! It’s so nice to see ya.”

I was happy that she felt that way after what happened.

She invited me into the house, and we sat down at the dining room table and talked.

I found out that our neighbors had hired her shortly after we moved. They had always liked her. I knew why.

“I missed you the most. You were the only one who would talk to me and didn’t treat me like a stranger,” she told me.

We talked for a while and then I asked, “How is Cora?”

“She’s fine. It hasn’t been easy since ya left, though. She’s got a son who’s five years old. He’s really cute. I love my great-grand son.”

“Does she remember me?” I asked.

Roxie said with a smile.

“Yes. That’s easy. She sees ya ev’rah day. Her child’s just like you.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“He’s your son. His name’s Ka’Way. He’s da cutest little boy you evah saw.”

I was shocked at the news.

“I have a son? Why didn’t anyone ever tell me?”

“No one knew how to reach ya when ya moved away. We tried.”

“Does anyone know about this other than your family?”

“No, no one but us knows who da fatha is.”

I sat for a few minutes trying to take in all she had just told me.

“Can I see him?”

“I’ll need to talk to Cora, but I know she will be excited to see you.”

I stopped for a moment to think.

“Is the fact that I’m white going to be a problem?”

“Dat’s another issue, but we can talk ‘bout dat later.”

She paused for a moment and then continued.

“It’s so good to see ya again. I thought it was a bad thing dat happened, but I have a better employer and I have a wonderful little man I get ta see every week. I never thought it would work out so well, being fired and all.”

We talked for a long time. She hated working for my stepfather, but it was the best money she had ever made, plus she liked us kids, especially me.

We talked about the things we used to do and the trouble we caused. It was fun. It made me sad that we had moved away. I missed so much by not being there. My old neighbors let me stay in their extra room for a few nights. They were just as surprised as I about the news. They knew about Ka’Way, but no one told them I was the father. They were happy for me.

I didn’t sleep at all. Many thoughts ran through my head. I was going to meet a son I didn’t know about and see Cora again. I was excited and scared at the same time.

The next day I got a call on my phone.

“Hello,”

“Hi, this is Cora,”

“Cora! How are you?”

“I’m fine. My granny gave me your number. It took a while fo me ta get up the nerve ta call you. How’ve ya been?”

“I’m OK, I guess.”

“What’ve ya been doing?”

I had to think for a moment about what I would tell her first.

“Life got really crazy, and it never stopped. My step-dad only got worse. He treated my brothers and sisters like dirt. I hated him, so when I turned eighteen, I left home and tried to find you, but as you know, that didn’t work out until now. I hear I have a kid. How cool is that?”

“Do ya wanna ta meet him?”

“You don’t have to ask me twice. When can I come?”

“Why don’ ya come with granny tomorra’ when she comes home fo da weekend. You can stay here wit us.”

“That’s an offer I can’t refuse!”

On Saturday afternoon I drove Roxie home.

As we came around the corner onto her street, I looked around the neighborhood.

“Is this where you lived when you were working for us?”

“I’ve lived here fo most my life. All my kids and my family are here. Where else would I want ta live?”

I looked around at the houses. They were simple but clean and well kept. Nothing like the pictures I had seen of black neighborhoods on TV. It was a nice place to live.

When we pulled up to her house, Cora came out to meet us. Little Ka’Way was in her arms. He was a shy little boy.

She looked the same. She had the same eyes, and her smile melted my heart. I cried. I never thought I would see her again. Fate was on my side this day. I got out of the car and just stared at her. In my wildest dreams, I had not expected this.

I walked up to the door and I gave her a hug. Then looked at the beautiful boy in her arms.

“Hi, Ka’ Way. It is nice to meet you.”

He turned his head into his mother’s chest.

We went inside and talked for a long time. While Ka’Way sat in her arms staring at me.

Finally, after Ka’Way settled down, she pointed at me.

“Ka’Way, dis is your daddy. He’s come ta meet you.”

He was surprised and looked up at his mom.

“My daddy’s white?”

“Yes, and he loves ya very much. He had move away ta another place, and it took him a long time fo him ta find us, but now he’s here.”

Ka’Way walked slowly over to me, looking back at his mother for reassurance, and, then gave me a big hug. He sat in my lap and pulled on my beard. Then he laughed and hugged me again.

He called me daddy. Tears came to my eyes.

Through my tears I held him close.

“He used the daddy word!”

He hugged me back. There was no way I could have expected this. I wasn’t going to let him go.

I looked over at Cora, who was crying.

“I have to tell you something Cora. I’m not sure how this is going to sound, but I never forgot you. No one I’ve ever met was like you. You were the standard I used when I met someone else, and they never measured up. I’ve dreamed of this day for six long years. I hope it is the same for you.”

She got up, walked across the room, bent over, and gave me one of her wonderful kisses. She sat next to me, wrapped my arm in hers, and said, “Does that answer your question?”

The End