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Black Skin What Mask

My skin sticks out a mile in all the crowds around here. Every time I go out I feel it tensing up, hardening, torturing itself. It only relaxes when I am in shadow, when I am alone, when I wake up early in the morning, when I am doing mechanical actions, and, strangely enough, when I am angry. But it is coy and self-conscious when I draw in my chair and begin to write.

It is like a silent friend: moody, assertive, possessive, callous—sometimes. I had such a friend once. He finally slashed his wrists. He is now in a lunatic asylum. I have since asked myself why he did what he did, but I still cannot come to a conclusive answer.

He was always washing himself—at least three baths every day. And he had all sorts of lotions and deodorants to appease the thing that had taken hold of him. He did not so much wash as scrub himself until he bled.

He tried to purge his tongue too, by improving his English and getting rid of any accent from the speaking of it. It was painful to listen to him, as it was painful to watch him trying to scrub the blackness out of his skin.

He did things to his hair, things which the good Lord never intended any man to do to his hair.

He bought clothes, whole shops of them. If clothes make the man, then certainly he was a man. And his shoes were the kind that make even an elephant lightfooted and elegant. The animals that were murdered to make those shoes must have turned in their graves and said Yeah, man.

But still he was dissatisfied. He had to have every other African within ten miles of his person follow his example. After all, if one chimpanzee learns not only to drink tea but also to promote that tea on TV, what does it profit it if all the other god-created chimpanzees out there continue to scratch their fleas and swing around on their tails chittering about Rhodes and bananas?

However, he was nice enough to put it more obliquely to me one day. We were going to the New Year Ball in Oxford Town Hall.

"Don't you ever change those jeans?" he asked.

"They're my only pair," I said.

"What do you do with your money, man, booze?"

"Yes," I said searching through my pockets. Booze and paper and ink. The implements of my trade.

"You ought to take more care of your appearance, you know. We're not monkeys."

"I'm all right as I am." I coughed and because he knew what that cough meant he tensed up as though for a blow.

"If you've got any money," I said firmly, "lend me a fiver." That day he was equally firm:

"Neither a lender nor a borrower be," he quoted. And then as an afterthought he said:

"We're the same size. Put on this other suit. You can have it if you like. And the five pounds."

That is how he put it to me. And that is how it was until he slashed his wrists.

But there was more to it than that.

Appearances alone—however expensive—are doubtful climbing-boots when one hazards the slippery slopes of social adventure. Every time he opened his mouth he made himself ridiculous. Logic—that was his magic word: but unfortunately that sort of thing quickly bored even the most thick-skinned anthropologist-in-search-of-African-attitudes. I was interested in the booze first and then lastly in the company. But he—god help me—relied on politics to get on with people. But who in that company in their right mind gives a shit about Rhodesia? He could never understand this.

And Christ! when it came to dancing he really made himself look a monkey. He always assumed that if a girl accepted his request for a dance it meant that she had in reality said Yes to being groped, squeezed, kissed and finally screwed off the dance floor. And the girls were quite merciless with him. The invitations would stop and all would be a chilly silence.

I did not care for the type of girl who seemed to interest him. He liked them starched, smart and demure, and with the same desperate conversation:

"What's your college?"

"—. What's yours?"

"—."

Pause.

"What's your subject?"

"—. What's yours?"

Pause. Cough.

"I'm from Zimbabwe."

"What's that?"

"Rhodesia."

"Oh. I'm from London. Hey [with distinct lack of interest], Smith's a bastard, isn't he?"

And he eagerly:

"As a matter of fact, I have just addressed the Africa Society on the thesis that Ian Smith blah blah blah blah blah blah blah . . ."

(Yawning) "Interesting. Very interesting."

"Smith blah blah blah blah blah blah . . . [Suddenly] Would you like to dance?"

Startled:

"Well . . . I . . . yes, why not."

And that's how it was. Yes, that's how it was, until be slashed his wrists.

But there was more to it than that.

A black tramp accosted him one night as we walked to the University Literary Society party. It was as if he had been touched by a leper. He literally cringed away from the man, who incidentally knew me from a previous encounter when he and I had sat Christmas Eve through on a bench in Carfax drinking a bottle of whisky. He was apoplectic with revulsion and at the party could talk of nothing else:

"How can a black man in England let himself become a bum? There is much to be done. Especially in Southern Africa. What I would like to see blah blah blah . . ."

"Have a drink," I suggested.

He took it the way God accepts anything from Satan.

"You drink too much, you know," he sighed.

"You drink too little for your own good," I said. The incident of the tramp must have gnawed him more than I had thought because when we got back in college he couldn't sleep and came into my room with a bottle of claret which I was glad to drink with him until breakfast when he did stop talking about impossible black bastards; he stopped talking because he fell asleep in his chair.

And that's how it was until he slashed his wrists.

But there were other sides to the story. For example: he did not think that one of his tutors "liked" him.

"He doesn't have to like anyone," I pointed out, "and neither do you."

But he wasn't listening. He cracked his fingers and said:

"I'll send him a Christmas and New Year card, the best money can buy."

"Why not spend the money on a Blue Nun?" I suggested.

The way he looked at me, I knew I was losing a friend. For example: he suggested one day that if the Warden or any of the other tutors asked me if I was his friend I was to say no.

"Why?" I asked.

"You do drink too much, you know," he said looking severe, "and I'm afraid you do behave rather badly, you know. For instance, I heard about an incident in the beercellar and another in the dining room and another in Cornmarket where the police had to be called, and another on your staircase . . ."

I smiled.

"I'll have your suit laundered and sent up to your rooms," I said firmly, "and I did give you that five pounds back. So that's all right. Are you dining in Hall, because if you are then I will not, it'd be intolerable. Imagine it. We're the only two Africans in this college. How can we possibly avoid each other, or for that matter . . ."

He twisted his brow. Was it pain? He had of late begun to complain of insomnia and headaches, and the lenses of his spectacles did not seem to fit the degree of his myopia. Certainly something cracked in his eyes, smarting:

"Look, I say, what, forget what I said. I don't care what they think. It's my affair, isn't it, who I choose to be friends with?"

I looked him squarely in the eye:

"Don't let them stuff bullshit into you. Or spew it out right in their faces. But don't ever puke their gut-rot on me."

"Let's go play tennis," he said after a moment.

"I can't. I have to collect some dope from a guy the other end of town," I said.

"Dope? You take that—stuff?"

"Yes. The Lebanese variety is the best piss for me."

He really was shocked.

He turned away without another word. I stared after him, hoping he wouldn't work himself up into telling his moral tutor—who was actually the one who didn't like him. And that's how it was. That's how it was, until he slashed his wrists.

But there had to be another side to it: sex.

The black girls in Oxford—whether African, West Indian or American—despised those of us who came from Rhodesia. After all, we still haven't won our independence. After all, the papers say we are always quarrelling among ourselves. And all the other reasons which black girls choose to believe. It was all quite unflattering. We had become—indeed we are—the Jews of Africa, and nobody wanted us. It's bad enough to have white shits despising us; but it's a more maddening story when one kettle ups its nose at another kettle . . . And this he had to learn.

I didn't care one way or the other. Booze was better than girls, even black girls. And dope was heaven. But he worried. And he got himself all mixed up about a West Indian girl who worked in the kitchen. Knowing him as I did, such a "come down" was to say the least shattering.

"But we're all black," he insisted.

It was another claret being drunk until breakfast.

"You might as well say to a National Front thug that we're all human," I said.

"Maybe black men are not good enough for them," he protested. "Maybe all they do is dream all day long of being screwed nuts by white chaps. Maybe . . ."

"I hear you've been hanging around the kitchen every day." He sat up.

I *was* finally losing a friend.

But he chose to sigh tragically, and for the first time—I had been waiting for this—he swore a sudden volley of earthy expletives.

"From now on, it's white girls or nothing."

"You've tried that already," I reminded him.

He gripped the arms of his chair and then let his lungs collapse slowly.

"Why don't you try men?" I asked, refilling my glass.

He stared.

And spat:

"You're full of filth, do you know that?"

"I have long suspected it," I said, losing interest. But I threw in my last coin:

"Or simply masturbate. We all do."

Furiously, he refilled his glass.

We drank in silence for a long, contemplative hour.

"They're going to send me down," I said.

"What?"

It was good of him to actually sound surprised.

"If I refuse to go into Warneford as a voluntary patient," I added.

"What's Warneford?"

"A psychiatric care unit," I said. "I have until lunch this afternoon to decide. Between either voluntary confinement or being sent down."

I tossed him the Warden's note to that effect. He unfolded it. He whistled.

The sound of his whistle almost made me forgive him everything, including himself. Finally he asked: "What have you decided to do?"

"Be sent down."

"But . . ."

I interrupted:

"It's the one decision in my life which I know will turn out right."

"Will you stay on in England?"

"Yes."

"Why not go to Africa and join our guerrillas? You've always been rather more radical than myself and this will be a chance blah blah blah blah blah."

I yawned.

"Your glass is empty," I said. "But take a good look anyway, a good look at me and all you know about me and then tell me whether you see a dedicated guerrilla."

He looked.

I refilled his glass and opened another bottle as he scrutinised me.

He lit up; almost maliciously.

"You're a tramp," he said firmly. "You're just like that nigger tramp who accosted me the other day when we . . ."

"I know," I said belching. He stared.

"What will you do?"

"Writing."

"How will you live?"

"Tomorrow will take care of itself. I hope," I said.

And that was the last time we made speech to each other over bottles of claret throughout the small hours until clean sunlight slivered lucidly through the long open windows and I left him sleeping peacefully in his chair and hurried to my last breakfast in college.