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A Balance of Dignity

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A Balance of Dignity

Alexis Smith

Charles R. Pritchard boarded a bus with dignity. He didn't look right or left, he didn't glance about for an available seat, he simply lifted one finely clad foot, then the other, back straight as an operating table, black socks sitting snugly against smooth skin, and kept going. Most people, he had noticed, liked to sit in the seats that looked to the front of the bus, but Charles R. Pritchard didn't like to waste time gazing out of windows, and so almost always chose the seats facing the aisle. He liked it best when there was someone directly across from him, that way he could stare until they became uncomfortable and looked at the black, dirt-laden floor. He especially liked it when that other person was a white boy.

When Charles boarded the bus one marble gray day in November, he felt the familiar pull of eyes onto him, into him, and then quickly dart from him. He sat. Surrounding him were the young college children on their way to campus. He didn't have to take this bus every day. He had a car and easily could have driven to his office. He told his colleagues and wife that it was cheaper this way. And in the winter, who wanted to warm up the car, even if it did sit in the garage all night. His colleagues at Peterman Law thought it was because he was cheap, his wife thought it was because he didn't want the Mercedes to appear used, and he told himself it was because of his concern for the environment and the rising cost of gasoline that he took the bus. But in reality, Charles liked to look at people.

Not just people, but these kids. For being young, he always thought, they sure were quiet. Hardly anyone talked on those early morning rides into the city. He watched them stare out of windows, stare at the floor, and at the backs of each others heads but never, ever at each other's faces. Or rather, they did, but the glances were sly, furtive, and quick. Especially where he was concerned.

It wasn't as if none of them had never seen a black man before. Despite the fact that it was a small Iowa city, there were black students who came from Chicago. But they were few enough and far between enough that the white kids still hadn't lost that curious gaze which led their eyes up his pants, across his chest, and into his mouth. They often thought to themselves that

he was the blackest black man they had ever seen.

Charles knew this too. And he knew what they meant when they thought "blackest," for Charles Pritchard carried his blackness like soup. He carried it the way pregnant women carry their unborn, the way homeless men carry soda bottles. It was close to his center, to right his balance. It lay within in him and spread over him like the sea at night would swallow him whole. And he made sure that everyone around him could see that as well. Made sure they could see that his blackness wasn't other people's blackness; his blackness was his, made by him by years of being better, darker, and more pure than white men.

The white men knew it. The white men in his office changed their tone when they spoke to him, white checkout boys and waiters tried to match his level of dignity, but it only pointed out their flaws. This Charles knew and he tied this knowledge up with his shoelaces every morning and walked with it the whole day.

The seat Charles chose this morning was between an elderly white woman and a young black woman. The white woman rode this bus Mondays, Wednesdays and every other Friday. He was used to her fear, and as he sat down, he could feel her retract into herself, the way children do when they want to become invisible. He composed himself, setting his jet black, shiny briefcase on his lap, golden clasps pointing into his bleached, crisp shirt. He laid his hands palms down on top, lightly, as if the treasure inside would crumble if pressed too harshly.

The old woman moved her elbows just slightly in at the corners, and her veil-like fingers wound around her green leather purse handle. Charles had seen hands like those before; hands so old it made you forget you had ever been alive; hands so old you forgot about death. On black women these hands were comforting, but on a white woman they were alpha and omega.

Try as he might, he could not fight the memory. Every time he sat next to this woman, there it was, popping up again to dangle like a spider before him. The little boy that lived somewhere inside Charles R. Pritchard shifted his weight and settled in his left eye. Through that child's eye he saw Alabama fifty years ago. He saw the heat and the dust settling on his family like ants, and he saw the white men settle on his father like rats. He remembered every bit of the struggle that ensued, but he watched it now with an air of calm detachment. He hadn't known what

the argument was about, and his father never said. His father had just stood up after the white men scattered, wiped the blood off with the dirt, and walked past him, straight, into the house, where he laid down with a bottle of beer and stared at the ceiling for two days before he got up to take a piss.

But even more than the white men, Charles remembered the old lady that stood on the edge of the yard and watched it all with him. The old lady that had whispered something to the leader of the men, then stood back, folding her white crow claws together as her ancient eyes contemplated, very calmly, the struggle. When his father fell to the ground the first time, the old woman looked over at Charles, half on and half off the porch, his small mouth slack. When she caught his eye, she smiled. Not a sly smile, not a sinister smile, but a genuine how-you-doing-honey kind of smile. That smile had reached up and smacked Charles R. Pritchard between the eyes, and as it sunk into him he felt the hatred start to spread. That woman was long dead by now, but Charles knew that if he turned his head to the shriveled husk on his left, he would see that same smile, but now with a hint of fear behind the runny eyes.

Charles shifted his eyes to the hands on his right. They wouldn't stop moving. The girl was talking on a cherry colored cellular phone, which she kept switching from one finely manicured hand to the other. The free one would wave through the air as she talked, dig into her bag for gum, or flip through her finely molded hair.

Charles watched the young, dark skin, but it was dull in the florescent lighting of the bus. Only the nails glinted, blood red and pointed, and Charles was sure she used them to pluck out the eyes of white boys. Still, he felt a revulsion for her. His wife had been like that when he first met her: flashy and not thinking of her blackness as something that had to be held onto. She hadn't realized that if you didn't take hold of it hard, it would slither out of you like wet leaves. He had soon broken her of that, however, and for the last twenty years when he had voiced his outrage at the white system, she pursed her lips, said mmmhmm, and kicked one foot over the other the way a stingray flips its wings.

Charles could feel them gazing at him, the white woman by his side, the black girl as she hit his elbow with her hand before jerking away, the white boys who would surely know what he had had to wade through to get to be a successful lawyer in this coun-

try, for he knew they taught about the civil rights movement in schools now. He imagined those boys imagining him, and in their eyes he saw an African American man (for surely these boys would think in the current politically correct terms), aged somewhere between 45 and 60, sharply dressed in matching shirt, suit, and tie, briefcase on his lap, close cropped hair hugging his scalp, just beginning to gray at the edges. But he also saw in their eyes their awe for him, their curiosity, and their denial. And it was that denial that caused them to look away, and pretend he wasn't there, or wasn't important.

At least, that was what they usually did. But on this cold morning when Charles R. Pritchard decided he was ready to find the boy to stare at, and when his gaze came to fall on the white boy opposite him, the gaze was returned. And the longer he stared, so the white gaze stared back. Charles was not immediately alarmed. This boy would soon grow tired of the game, and when he looked away Charles could analyze his eyes to see what he saw. But the boy did not look away.

Through six stops the gazes held, each one calmly surveying the other as passengers walked past them to seats, or left the bus entirely, pulling their hats down and the scarves over their eyes. The man on the other side of the old lady left, and she drifted over to occupy his vacated seat. But Charles didn't notice. He was able to maintain his air of dignified calm outwardly, but inside his mind raced. This had never happened before. No one had dared to stare back at him for so long, and he was convinced it was their unwavering jealousy and respect for his blackness that had kept them at arm's length.

The stately brow above his left eye shot up, and before he knew what he was doing his mouth had opened and out of his rich throat came his pure black voice, calling attention and demanding obedience. "May I inquire, sir, what you are looking at?" He was startled to hear his own sound in that small space surrounded by gray, but still sat stony.

The boy appeared unfazed. "You started it," he said, shrugging his shoulders. The brow over Charles R. Pritchard's left eye lowered. He took in the boys' sloppy hair, long and uncombed. The t-shirt, the blue jeans, the tennis shoes; it was everything he had made his mind up long ago to never become, unrespectable, and now here it was, calmly sitting across from him on the bus, telling him that he had started it.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Charles made sure his tone conveyed his displeasure. The boy was growing agitated.

"Come off it, you do too."

Something clutched in his throat, and Charles could only open his eyes a little wider.

"It works both ways, you know," the boy said.

Charles stared. "What works both ways?" he asked.

"Racism." The boy said, and continued to stare at Charles until the next stop, when he got up and joined the silent mob of students pouring onto campus.

Charles R. Pritchard stayed on the bus until there was no one left, and he rode the route three times through before he got back off where he had started.