Blackness

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Abstract

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Ann concentrated on the patterns that rippled over the black skin, her own muscles almost involuntarily flexing and relaxing in a similar pattern.

The drums beat faster, faster. The black body, as if made of rubber, jerked and swayed. Suddenly the drums stopped; the boy froze. The observers burst into applause.

"Nice dance," a voice said in Ann's ear. "I guess I'll have to admit he's an asset to the College Dance Club and the show."

Ann glanced at the tall blonde girl beside her. "Oh, Carole, he's beautiful."

Carole frowned. "Hardly that. But a good dancer."

Ann ignored the comment. "I can't figure what it is about Negroes that makes them such good dancers. They seem to be so agile—flexible."

"Let them be . . . that's all they've got."

"What do you mean?"
“Nothing, forget it.” She changed the subject. “Going home?”

Ann picked up the dirty black ballet shoes she had tossed in the corner and mumbled something in the affirmative. “Boy, I’m tired. Dance till twelve, then beat it home and study for three hours.”

“Who studies?”


“Oh, well, in another week it’ll be all over.”

“. . . a poor player who struts and frets his life upon the stage and then is heard no more . . .”, Ann quoted absently, pulling the denim skirt on over her leotard. “S’pose Mrs. Fritz’ll object to my eating in my leotard again? Last time she though it was disgraceful . . . downright indecent with the waiters there and all.” She chuckled.

Carole admired her own reflection in the locker room mirror. “Ready?”

“Wait’ll I run a comb through my hair. No sense being messy about this.”

“C’mon. Let’s go. We’re already late,” Carole spoke impatiently.

The girls made their way through the trees, down the path toward the dorms. “Isn’t that Henri up there?” Ann squinted at the figure ahead of them as she ducked under a branch.

“Guess so. How many black boys do we have in the club?”

Ann gave her a hard look and yelled, “Hen-riii.”

“What are you calling him for?”

“To walk with him,” she replied, waving at him.

“What for?”

“He’s alone. Maybe he’d like some company.” She spoke without looking at Carole. “Wait a minute, Henri,” she called.

“I don’t like him,” Carole said with disgust.

“Don’t like him? For Pete’s sake, why not?” Ann speeded her pace to meet him.

“For obvious reasons.”

“What do you mean?” Ann looked at Carole, her eyes narrowed with anger.

“You know. But don’t worry, I’ll be nice,” she said haughtily.
She stared at Carole. Then she smiled, "Hi, Henri. Where are you headed?"

"Home," he said. "Home, to pick up a little energy for the next session."

"Oh, are you going back tonight? I thought you were through with your dance for today."

"My dance, yes. The scene, no. The flower women in it are wrong. I can’t decide what it is, but something is... there’s something I just don’t like."

"In their dancing or what?"

"Oh, no, no," he assured her. "Their dancing is fine. It’s the spacing or something."

"They’re where they’re supposed to be, aren’t they?"

Ann looked at Carole out of the corner of her eye. Was this being ‘nice’? Ignoring them both?

"Yes, yes, they are. It’s just me, I guess. I’m the one who’s unhappy with them. Composition-wise, I don’t feel their spacing is good," he said, staring in the distance.

"Maybe the stage is too small! Seriously, the grouping isn’t bad, but," she laughed, "where they aren’t, there are holes."

Henri sort of half smiled. "You know, you may be right. That may be the answer. I’ll group them more loosely. You’re a genius," he said.

"Hooray for our team," Carole spoke out.

Henri and Ann stared at her. Ann knew what she meant. Of all the nasty things to say. Had Henri caught it? She looked at him quickly. He had.

"Well, here’s where I leave you. Call me after dinner, Ann, I’ll walk back with you. Goodbye." She turned and ran up the steps to the dorm.

"Where do you live, Ann?" Henri was saying. But Ann was staring at the ground thinking about the scene she had just witnessed. She couldn’t remember ever seeing anyone so obvious about her prejudices.

"Ann, where do you live?" He spoke again, quietly, as if to say, it’s all right.

She looked at him blankly. "West."

They walked on in silence then. She could feel him watching her, but she couldn’t look up or speak. Finally they reached her dorm. "Thanks for walking me home," she said, looking at the ground.
“My pleasure.”

“Thanks.” She looked up and smiled. “’Bye. See you later.”

Ann rushed through her dinner. She was late and had to parade through the dining room under the disapproving stare of the housemother. She ate in silence, still thinking about Carole; thinking that she should have told her off. She certainly didn’t rate as a dancer; her grades didn’t compare with Henri’s. Why did she think she was so high and mighty? Because her hair was straight and blonde; because her skin was white?

As soon as she dared leave the dining room she ran up the stairs, down the hall, past the telephone, into her room. Passing the mirror, she stuck out her tongue at herself. Time: six-forty. You’ll be a little early, she told herself. But she didn’t want to run into Carole.

The warm air from the studio rushed out at her as she opened the door. Apparently no one was around. She looked up and down the hall, then started toward the locker room. The cool night air had lessened her anger, and she felt like dancing again. As she slung the jacket and skirt into the locker, she heard strains of music from upstairs. The dancers were beginning to arrive.

She entered the mirror-walled studio and looked around. One person. Henri! He was putting another record on the record player. He hadn’t seen her; maybe she ought to turn around and leave. But why should she? “Ah-hemm.”

Henri whirled around. “Oh, hello. I was just listening to a little fast music. Working out some jitterbug steps and generally messing around.”

“Mm-m-m. Mind if I watch?”

“Won’t you join me?” He held out his arms ready to dance.

“Why, I — yes, I’d like to.” She took his hand and curtsied mockingly, trying to act casual. Inside she was tense; afraid she would stumble or be unable to follow him.

“Relax,” he grinned. “I won’t bite.”

“I know,” she smiled back, “but I’m just afraid I won’t be able to follow you.”

“Of course you won’t if you’re like a board. Don’t concentrate so hard. Close your eyes why don’t you?”

“Will that help?”
“Sure, you won't know where I'm going!”

She felt as though she were on a bicycle on a roller coaster. And it wasn't hard at all. He knew what he wanted her to do, and he seemed to will her to do it. She opened her eyes. “No pain at all.”

“Ready to wring the dishrag?”

“Let's go. I'll try.”

He spun her out, then in. Then around in back of him. He caught her other hand and they came up, face to face, laughing.

The dancers were returning and were standing around the room watching.

“Demonstrations seem to be your favorite pastime,” Ann teased.

Henri looked around. “Oh! I hadn’t noticed them.”

“Maybe we’d better stop.”

“OK. And thank you.” They walked to the circle and began mixing. The instructors called the dancers’ attention. The drudgery was on. They ran through the numbers, stopping several times in each one. Henri requested that the flower women group themselves — well, not quite so tightly. And it worked. Even Henri seemed pleased with the arrangement as he danced.

After the number Henri went over to her. “You’re a genius — like I said before,” he grinned.

“Why, thank you.” Ann leaned over and took hold of her ankles, stretching the muscles in the backs of her legs.

“What time will you be through?” he asked, watching her.

“Hard to say. What time is it now?” She continued bouncing and stretching.

“Eleven.”

She straightened. “‘Bout forty-five minutes, I imagine. This number is down pretty well, and we’re next. Can’t really say how ours is.” She leaned over again.

“Fine, see you later. And keep your knees straight.” He walked away.

“They are,” Ann yelled. She closed her eyes and bounced, trying to perfect her balance.

“I see you had to get back early,” a voice said.

Ann opened her eyes. She recognized the feet. “Hello, Carole,” she said without looking up.
"Hello". The feet stood there.
"Well?" She stood up.
"Did you have a nice dance?"
"Lovely. Did you have a nice walk?"
"Oh, yes. Marion stopped for me."
"Fine. I'm sorry I couldn't. I was a little too mad to talk to you," Ann said coolly.
"Mad? Why?"
"'For,' and I quote, 'obvious reasons.'"
"Oh! That was rather nasty of me, wasn't it?"
"Don't apologize to me. It's not . . ."
"Who's apologizing?" Carole interrupted. And she turned and walked away.
"How can anyone be so little," Ann thought. She had been angry before. Now she was just sorry. Carole was the one that was losing.
"Witches!" someone yelled. Ann tossed her shoes in the corner and headed toward the other members of the number.

Their's required only four breaks, and none of the mistakes were Ann's. At exactly eleven-forty they finished. Ann staggered to the door.
"Want a strong arm?"
Ann looked blankly at the figure leaning against the door.
"You still here?"
"No, you're having hallucinations."
"I believe it."
"Go get your jacket, et cetera. I'll wait."
She raised her eyebrows. "OK."
They walked down the hall in silence. Henri smiled.
"You are tired."
"Ugh."
"You ought to have more stamina than that if you're going to dance."
"Uh-huh."
He laughed. And then it was quiet again. Only the beat of the drums and a few voices could be heard.
"Be right back." She turned and entered the locker room. There were about five girls sitting on the benches or leaning against the walls. She ignored them and opened her locker.
"Cigarette, Ann?" It was Carole.
"Without turning around she replied, "No thanks."
“Going home now?” She blew some smoke toward the ceiling.
“Yes, aren’t you?”
“Not with Henri.”
“I know that. I am,” she said calmly. “Good night.”
“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Carole called. “Twice.”
Henri leaned against the wall smoking a cigarette. He is awfully black, Ann thought. Just then he turned around. She felt as though he had read her thoughts.
“And hello again,” he smiled.
They walked into the night. Black. Along the path, the leaves brushed against her face. She glanced at the figure beside her. Black. She could hardly see him, only enough to know he was looking at her. Suddenly he took her hand and held it in front of her, next to his own.
“Very little difference, is there?”
Ann nodded.
“Night camouflages a lot of things,” he went on. “But not the personality or the mind.”
Ann nodded again. He still held her hand. “Henri, don’t,” she said quietly.
“No harm in asking, is there. Will you go out with me? Dancing? Say Friday night?”
“No, I don’t think so.”
“Why not? I know you like me. We’d . . .”
“Of course I do. But what good would dating do either one of us? I think we’ll be much closer friends without dating.”
“How do you figure? If we enjoy each other, isn’t that enough to make an enjoyable evening?”
“Do you really believe that? People would stare at us, and it wouldn’t make us any more comfortable. Why should we intentionally make ourselves the object of attention?”
“Why shouldn’t we be together, though? It isn’t right. Color shouldn’t . . .”
“But as long as there are societies, it will.”
He stopped. They stood in the blackness, face to face. He took her chin in his hand. “Night doesn’t camouflage all, does it? Not in the mind.”
They walked on in silence.

— Corky Trout, Sci. Sr.