

CHOCOLATE MILK

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The lunchroom at Miami Elementary wasn't large enough to accommodate the 650 students who attended the school; so, everyday around noon, cafeteria-style, folding tables were set up in the gymnasium.

Eating lunch in the gym was an experience I'll never forget. The prattle of each child blended to create a cacophonous noise that resonated throughout the gymnasium. Since the collective racket swallowed our voices, we had to yell to carry on conversations. No one could speak in a normal volume, and thus, the situation was exacerbated. The commotion sounded like a convention of starlings.

A pungent odor filled the gymnasium. *Rotten fruit, sweat, and rubber- -that's* how I described it. I tried to hold my breath while I ate, but it was impossible; consequently, my lunch tasted like rotten fruit, sweat, and rubber. I'm sure that the stench was responsible for infinite numbers of lost appetites. My stomach usually began rumbling in the late morning hours, and by noon, I was starving. But once I inhaled that malodorous air in the make-shift lunchroom, all I could think about was how to get out of there as soon as possible! I routinely choked down my peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich and then escaped to the playground for some fresh air.

If students wanted to risk contracting a serious illness, they *bought* lunch. In the cafeteria, there were only two choices of beverages: Cartons of white milk and cartons of chocolate milk. Of course, we all tried the chocolate milk first, but most of us soon discovered that it was a little disgusting. In my opinion, it didn't taste anything like Hershey's chocolate;

actually, it didn't taste like chocolate at all. It was an indescribable flavor that left a sourness in my mouth. If I didn't bring a drink from home, I had to settle for the white milk.

However, the chocolate milk didn't have the same effect on everyone. Some of the kids--like Claudia--actually preferred it.

Claudia was one of my best friends. She had a good-natured, refreshing personality, and she was one of the two black children in our entire first-grade class.

On a sunny day in November, Claudia and I grabbed some seats at a fairly empty table in the gym. Claudia's lunch consisted of a hamburger, tater-tots, green beans, and her usual carton of chocolate milk. We were soon joined by Angie, Vicki, and Beth.

Angie was a thin, french fry of a girl with a big mouth--it was the only thing that was big on her. Although I considered her to be a friend, my feelings towards her were somewhat mixed. She had a very moody and unpredictable personality; at times, she was congenial, but she could also be irascible and downright nasty. She would often take turns getting mad at different people for no apparent reason. Her unstable behavior vexed me, but I had never taken her too seriously. So far, she hadn't crossed over any lines.

On this particular day, though, Angie chose to make an issue out of Claudia's decision to drink chocolate milk. Why it suddenly caught her attention after several months, I'll never know.

Angie was screaming at some boy who had pulled her hair when she reeled around and fixed her stare on Claudia. "O-o-o-o-h, Claudia," she said, "you're still drinking that yucky chocolate milk?!?!"

Claudia glanced up cautiously and replied, "I just like it, that's all."

Now, I didn't really care *what* Claudia drank with her meal. Why should I? She wasn't cramming it down my throat. We all like different things; if we didn't, the world would be pretty boring.

Angie, on the other hand, persisted with her attack on Claudia's beverage choice.

"That stuff is *so-o-o-o* gross! How can you drink it? It tastes like puke!"

Claudia tried to ignore her, but Angie continued with her insults. Suddenly, the conversation took a very ugly turn.

"You know, Claudia," Angie began, "you must like the chocolate milk because you *are* chocolate milk! You're different from us. We're all white milk, and *you're* chocolate milk. Ha, ha! You're the color of chocolate milk! You're *gross* chocolate milk! I'm gonna call you 'chocolate milk' from now on!"

A sickening feeling came over me, and my face became hot--burning hot. I felt embarrassed for Claudia as the other kids laughed with Angie. It reminded me of what my mom had experienced as a child. *This isn't funny*, I thought. My gut instinct said, *This is mean, this is wrong. Why is Angie doing this? Isn't Claudia our friend? Aren't we all friends? Why is Angie focusing on the color of Claudia's skin?*

I never thought of Claudia as being different from me or anyone else. She was a six-year-old who laughed and played and went to school with me. When I reflect back on my first impression of Claudia, I can't remember ever placing her in a particular category because she was black. I saw her as an individual, not as a representative of a certain group. For all intents and purposes, I was pretty oblivious to the color of her skin--and I thought everyone else was, too. But I was wrong.

As Angie continued to shout, *Chocolate milk! Chocolate milk!* like some kind of mantra, a sheepish expression covered Claudia's face. My boiling rage increased intensely. I wanted to choke Angie. I wanted her to shut up and apologize to Claudia. I wanted to call her a name-- something terrible and hateful! The most atrocious word I could think of was "brat."

"Shut up, you--you brat!" I yelled.

Angie was slightly dismayed. "What's your problem?" she asked.

"My problem is your big, mean mouth! Her name is *Claudia*, not chocolate milk!" I wanted to add something else, too, but it eluded me.

Angie didn't know how to respond, so she seized a handful of popcorn and fired it at me. I ducked, and most of it hit the kids seated behind us. In a few seconds, a food fight broke out; Angie was struck by some flying green beans. In the midst of the chaos, Angie didn't miss an opportunity to shove Claudia's carton of milk. Some of the liquid spilled onto Claudia's dress, and she ran off to the bathroom.

I followed Claudia into the restroom. She was trying to scrub the milk off her dress with a paper towel. For a moment, I stood in the doorway feeling awkward and confused. I *hated* what Angie had said; she had destroyed the bond between friends by treating Claudia as if she were some kind of alien.

Finally, Claudia broke the silence. "I think it's coming out," she remarked while wiping the fabric.

I rushed over to her. "I saw you talking to Mrs. Gordon. Did you tell her what Angie said to you?"

"No," Claudia replied bluntly.

"Why not? I know it hurt your feelings."

"Yeah, it did, sort of," she paused and then looked up at me with a resigned expression, "but it doesn't matter."

"Yeah, it matters. I'm gonna tell Mrs. Gordon."

"No, Michelle, *don't* tell her. *I don't want you to tell her.*"

"Why not?"

"Just because," she answered flatly.

I persisted in trying to change Claudia's mind but wasn't successful. She absolutely refused to go to Mrs. Gordon about the incident, and I respected her wishes. She never explained why she wouldn't tell Mrs. Gordon about Angie's name-calling, but I eventually developed my own theory. Claudia's lack of surprise in regards to the whole episode led me to believe that she had experienced this kind of prejudice before--probably on several occasions. I'm sure she felt that telling Mrs. Gordon wouldn't accomplish anything; she would only manage to draw more attention to herself. Instead, she decided to pretend that Angie's insults didn't bother her.

Before leaving the restroom, I put my arm around her shoulders and said, "Well, *I* don't think you're chocolate milk, Claudia."

"I know you don't, Michelle."

Claudia and I avoided Angie for a few days, but she eventually approached us like nothing had happened. Maybe in her mind, it *was* nothing. The other kids--our "friends," supposedly--also acted like nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Only Claudia and I shared the secret knowledge; we understood that it was more than just casual teasing.

In any event, Angie had discontinued using the phrase "chocolate milk" to refer to Claudia; I suppose the novelty had worn off. I don't know if she ever actually apologized to Claudia, but I doubt it. I never looked at Angie in the same way after that upsetting scene in the gym. For me, she symbolized something that was very ugly. At the time, I didn't know what to call it; however, I knew that it greatly disturbed me. A few years later, I realized this ugliness had a name. *Racism.*

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