

## With A Name Like Arzie

by Carla Bradley

In the late summer of 1975 my parents and I stood outside a door we thought led to my new college dormitory room. We'd found the right residence hall, floor, and room number, and my name was on a nametag on the door. The other name on the door was of someone I'd never met, and belonged to the person my parents and I presumed to be my new college roommate: Arzie Williams. My mother, who was born in 1936 in rural, farm-country Indiana, quietly said to me, "*With a name like 'Arzie,'* she may be Black.

Arzie and I both grew up in Indiana, she in a Black family and I in a white one. I knew little of her world, and far less about the Jim Crow apartheid occurring in the many states south of us. But, we rapidly became friends as we learned how to share a small college dorm room together. Arzie and I both loved music, and both of us were singers. Arzie introduced me to *The Wiz*, Minnie Ripperton, Natalie Cole, and Black Gospel. We sang together so much and so often that Arzie once said to me, "Girl, we're gonna get you singin like one of us yet!"

In the months to come I learned to set aside the books long enough to watch how Arzie worked on her boyfriend Ricky's hair, plaiting it into braids, and then applying Afro Sheen and a stocking cap. There was an interesting lack of reciprocity in the ritual, and after Ricky left the room, Arzie would roll her own hair, put in the Afro Sheen, and cover her head with a scarf. Eventually she taught me how to do that for her, and then with infinite patience she would braid my waist-length hair into numerous small braids which produced the most amazingly wavy hair that has ever graced my head!

Even as our friendship grew, there were unwritten rules that quickly became apparent outside our dorm room. We simply didn't talk to each other. Arzie ate in the cafeteria with the other Black students; the energy of separation exuded from that table, and the no-fraternizing rules of the American North could be heard as the distant yet clear echo of the Jim Crow South. We lived together again for the first semester of our sophomore year, and then Arzie got mad at me for wearing too many of her clothes. Second semester, she moved in with a group of Black girls down the hallway who had rooms in a cluster together. Near the end of our second year in college, Arzie experienced an unplanned pregnancy and a miscarriage. She didn't feel well after the miscarriage and thought something was

wrong even though the white doctors at the Student Health Center assured her she was fine. Some weeks into the summer term, Arzie spontaneously passed the rest of the miscarried fetus while sitting on the toilet. Having nowhere else to go for health care, she went back to the Student Center, where she was again assured she was just fine despite what had happened.

Arzie didn't come back to college the fall we would both have been undergraduate juniors. We wrote each other from time to time, and I learned that Arzie eventually joined the Army, married, and had her first child. Sometime around 1982 or so, we wrote the last of our very sporadic letters before completely losing touch with each other.

And then so many decades passed! One night in 2015 while on Facebook, it occurred to me that *with a name like Arzie*, my old college roommate could possibly be found. Her picture and details of her life came up immediately when I searched her name. We soon had the first of many catch-up conversations via cell phone. By this time Arzie was almost 57, and I was almost 56. I invited her to come to Boulder, Colorado for her 57<sup>th</sup> birthday, and she accepted. The night she arrived I parked the car in the passenger pick-up lane at Denver International Airport and recognized her immediately. I waved and she opened

the door saying, "Girl, you look just the same!" From that moment on, and for that week-end we were 17 and 18 years old again.

We celebrated Arzie's 57<sup>th</sup> birthday with a cookout, where we subjected my Colorado friends to a very bad, impromptu rendition of the two of us singing "The Way We Were." We drove up into the Rocky Mountains and played in the snow. And we took a long day trip to the hot springs with the car roof window open, the Colorado sun pouring in, and the CD player cranked up as loud as it would go while we sang every song from *The Wiz* and from the one Michael Jackson CD I own! We talked for hours about the things that had happened in each of our lives during the 35 years we'd been out of touch. That week-end while we were 17 and 18 again, and for the first time in years and years, I loved someone with the full-hearted, unencumbered love of the 17-year-old little girl I once was.

Over the months that followed we spoke regularly by phone. Arzie returned to Indiana to help care for her ailing father and went through his death and funeral. After her relationship with her boyfriend deteriorated, Arzie moved in with a friend and started working the nightshift at one of the many hourly-wage jobs she'd had throughout her life. She began

complaining about feeling tired and experiencing abdominal pain, and she saw several doctors who told her she had a bladder infection. The pain continued, and she complained of the doctors not believing her and not working very hard to figure out what was happening. The pain continued but the job didn't, nor did the health insurance. Once she was able to access some level of medical care again, she was diagnosed with the same rapidly spreading cancer that had taken her father not long before.

Arzie's phone call to me telling me about her diagnosis came about a year before the one I received telling me about my own diagnosis. My call came at 4:45pm on a Friday afternoon. The voice on the other end of the line that Friday gave me some very unexpected news. Then on Monday morning the amazing health care system that is Kaiser Permanente in Colorado went into action, fighting on my behalf. Kaiser told me, "We're sorry this is happening to you, but we've discovered the situation at a point where we expect to be able to fully treat you. Yes, there's every reason to believe you'll live into your 90's like your grandparents. What's coming won't be pleasant, and you'll need to be strong as you go through this. But we've got this, and we'll take you to the other side of it."

I went through my own medical ordeal with a fair amount of stoicism—I wanted it that way because I agreed with Kaiser’s advice that I needed to be strong to make a hard journey. There was plenty to cry about along the way: my mother saying through her tears, “I wish it was me;” my father’s voice on the phone line choking up as he told me he loved me; my mother’s hands on my shoulders at 5:45am the morning we were about to leave for the hospital in Denver, telling me, “You’re in God’s hands now;” my mother sleeping in the pull out window bed of my hospital room for four nights after the ordeal of the incredibly intense and delicate surgery Kaiser gave me to help me preserve my precious, precious life. When I think only of these tender scenes from my own life, I don’t cry, at least not much. When I think about all the complex reasons why Arzie never saw her 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, but I was able to see mine, that’s when I cry. When I think about how I received hundreds of thousands of dollars of medical care to preserve my life, and how my friend Arzie received a coffin, that’s when I really cry.

Because *with a name like Arzie* there was no amazing health care system to add decades to your life. *With a name like Arzie* you might be able to finally receive a form of medical insurance that—once it’s too late—will send you into hospice care for a few days while your minister mother stands beside your hospital

bed holding the phone to your ear so your friends can tell you they love you for the last time. I know that until Arzie died, Pastor Williams stayed at her daughter's side, continuing to pray that God would work a miracle on behalf of her firstborn child. I know this because she told me over the phone what was happening as Arzie was dying. She and I text each other on holidays, and she was very touched by the Mother's Day card I sent her a few months after Arzie death.

But I've never been able to tell Pastor Williams about my own illness, because the fact that her daughter died and my mother's daughter lives makes me ashamed. I am ashamed that I received from the system what someone I loved did not. And in a much larger, far less personal way, I am ashamed of who we are and what we do to each other here on this planet. Because *with a name like Arzie*, no matter how many people love you and want your life to have been different, the injustices that plague us as a species, and that have stalked us throughout each historical epic of which I'm aware, continue to define whose journey is far too hard, and who lives and who needlessly dies.