

## Parsing Privilege

by Jerrold Mobley

I stare at myself in the mirror, taking stock of the man reflected there. This tight, single-person restroom in back of the store, with its bare white walls and oversized vanity, doesn't leave much room to focus on anything else. Nothing else to shift my eyes towards. No way to avoid the questions there in my own gaze. "You know they hired you because of your looks," she'd said. I'd convinced myself that a fresh business degree and a solid interview landed me this job selling unmentionables for Victoria's Secret, but whatever truth there was to that couldn't erase the other truth I was now staring in the face. It couldn't erase those words of my mother, that weighed heavily on my spirit and sucked the very air out of this room - "...they hired you because of your looks..." Why had it always come back to this? This fleeting, superficial quality of being attractive. The novelty of being African-American with light skin and straight hair. For to me to even acknowledge the possibility that I'm "good looking" incorrectly presumes haughtiness, or at the very least, arrogance on my part - the thought of which makes me shudder with embarrassment. My humble spirit and quiet nature beaten down, my self-worth slowly dying with each compliment. I'd read somewhere that being attractive

simply meant you satisfied the mind's desire for symmetry. That our brains were pleased by a face with equal proportions - that the left side of your face matching the right side. That your two eyes sat an equal distance from your nose, the nostrils of your nose identically flared. That your lips curved perfectly the same to opposite corners of your single mouth. It was scientific. Beauty was simple, and I was beautiful. But that educated answer leaves no room for the complexities of gender and race, or the more complicated concepts of colorism or lookism. And like this tiny restroom with its unforgiving mirror - it really leaves no room for me to understand my struggles navigating life as a beautiful Black man in America. It's an awkward thing to grapple with power at a young age. To spend time contemplating privilege and exceptionalism when most of my friends were either dodging bullets or worrying about whether they would eat that night. But I was a very self-involved child, typically quiet, with a strong preference for spending time alone, so it was natural for me to wander through my own thoughts - sometimes for hours. Still, when I was aware of my surroundings, I was very observant, and began to piece it all together. The reactions of strangers and friends, alike whenever I was around. The odd looks when this full figured, chocolate, brickhouse of a Black woman introduced this pale, straight-haired baby as her child. This indescribable buzz of

energy that followed wherever I went, whether it was church or the local hardware store or a trip to the grocery store. It was constant, and uncomfortable, and I would have been content never leaving my room. I would later learn that the odd look that flashed and disappeared on people's faces when my mother claimed me as her child were looks of disbelief... sometimes shock. I'd learn that the buzz of energy from others that disrupted my spirit were linked to my appearance. More specifically, an attraction to my fair skin and the half straight, half curly locks of hair on my head. How long had I been here? I probably should have been on the sales floor a long time ago, but I can't seem to leave this restroom. The mirror pulls me closer, and there she is. My slim jaw and high cheeks are hers. My kind eyes and delicate nose... just like her. My cheeky grin and closed-mouth smile, a carbon copy of her. I am my mother's child, even when differences in skin color and hair texture convince people otherwise. As I've grown, I've inherited the best of her, either through her blood or through her example, and she loves her baby boy. So does everyone else. I can say with no sense of pride or boastfulness that I had been the favorite child of the family for a long time. Whether I was deserving or not, remains a mystery to me. It's a dangerous questioning that plaques my spirit if I linger

on it too long. This self-made family of strong Black and Brown men and women. Big-framed people shaped by country living, with skin the color of ebony or molasses, choosing to lift up this big-eyed, curly headed baby, "high yella with gud hair." Is it an unconditional love for me - that would reside here regardless? Or are their minute traces of their segregated, sharecropping past - where the fairer you were, the better you were? Would it hurt them to know I struggled with their affections because of my own battles. A desire to be known by my heart and my deeds - a question I will never have the courage to ask...why do you love me? A fear that my loved ones, the other children of the family, suffered at the hands of my privilege. Where there are favorites, there are casualties. Was I to blame for their poor choices and missteps? Were their decisions directed by their own need for a spot in this sun that I enjoyed? Crying out for acknowledgement... longing for love and acceptance, their actions leading them down paths they would be lucky to survive - through no fault of their own. How many others around me have suffered? There is a price to pay for it all.