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February 19, 2021

Dear Friends,

It is Black History Month.

All this month, I am lifting the voices of Black women writers, as they should be lifted every day of every month of every year. Here are two more writers whose work should be known, bought, supported, shared, read aloud, and raised up.

Today, the voice of Black cultural critic Rebecca Carroll in a powerful memoir recounting her painful struggle to overcome a completely white childhood in order to forge her identity as a Black woman in America.

Rebecca Carroll grew up the only black person in her rural New Hampshire town. Adopted at birth by artistic parents who believed in peace, love, and zero population growth, her early childhood was loving and idyllic--and yet she couldn't articulate the deep sense of isolation she increasingly felt as she grew older.

Everything changed when she met her birth mother, a young white woman, who consistently undermined Carroll's sense of her blackness and self-esteem. **"Surviving the White Gaze"** is an examination of racism and racial identity in America today and a moving portrait of resilience.

An excerpt:

"Tess," my birth mother, had just two pictures of my birth father, whose name I learned was Joe Banks. She gave them to me when, at about 16, I finally worked up the nerve to ask her, not long after I started going to the under-20s dance club called The Speakeasy in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and spending time with Black boys who had Black fathers.

I'd spent a week in Washington, D.C., as part of the Close Up Foundation's national high school program, and it had emboldened me to lay claim to a biological parent, a lineage and a history that would allow me to keep the joy I felt being with other Black kids as my own. But I needed to see that lineage in my birth father's face and skin and posture, to take his image and existence out from the filter of Tess's subterfuge about their history. I felt like photos of him would allow me to piece together my own distillation of who my father was, and who he might be now.

Tess laid the pictures out on her kitchen table, and I touched the worn edges as if they were velvet, and not the creased, yellowing paper of pictures taken from another time. They appeared both vintage and modern, simultaneously relics and urgent pieces of evidence. "They're yours to keep," Tess said.

I couldn't take my eyes off them. One photo, in black and white, featured Tess and Joe in a wooded area, at a bit of a distance. Joe is in profile, leaning up against a tree, tall and narrow-looking with chiseled cheekbones, extending a thin branch of some sort to Tess, whose hand is reaching out to receive it. He's wearing a light-colored safari-style jacket and fitted pants hemmed at the ankle, loafers, dark sunglasses, and a short, tight afro. Tess, in jeans and white sneakers, has on a hooded windbreaker, her shoulder-length hair is pulled back in a low ponytail and her mouth is ajar as if she's saying something to Joe.

"I think I may have been pregnant with you in this one," she said.
"Really?"

"That looks like the fall, and I got pregnant with you in August. I mean, I wouldn't have known I was pregnant because I was in total denial," Tess said. That was something she'd said before — but I'd already gone back into the pictures, immersed in the images of my Black father, suddenly feeling deeply attached to him.

The second photo was in color but also of the two of them, more close-up, Tess and Joe sitting on the grass among friends — at a political rally of some sort, Tess told me. Joe, again in profile, is wearing the same cargo jacket from the other picture, the same dark sunglasses, leaning back on his arms, looking forward, nose sloping down toward his lips. Tess is looking straight at the camera, her hair down and tucked behind her ears, wearing regular glasses and a denim jacket. Even though I was sitting there staring at pictures of my actual birth father, Tess's comment suddenly reduced him to a faceless, stereotypical Black man in America.

"Joe loved to be seen," Tess said. "And he was cool as a cuke."

"He looks it," I said. "I wish you had a picture of him without the sunglasses."

“Oh, he wore those sunglasses all the time. It was part of his appeal. He was very stylish, and veeeeery into his looks.” I had never heard Tess say more than the five words about my birth father — “Basically, he was a dog” — and so this felt exciting, if also slightly unsettling. Why now? I didn’t dare ask.

I wanted to sit with the photos and write a story in my head about me and my Black father. I wondered what he would say to me about these Black boys I found so appealing all of a sudden. Would he call them “jive,” or “young Negro boys,” as Tess had called more than one of them? Would he caution me to stay away from them, or tell me exactly how to handle them — and myself, as his daughter?

Seek out Black women writers. This month and every month. Tell me who some of your favorite Black writers are so I can learn and grow.

LINKS YOU MIGHT ENJOY

By the way, I don’t ever use affiliate links. Ever.

I started a consistent skincare routine in January and I love the ritual of it. My new favorite water-soluble [face cleanser](#) is the bomb. And I will never use another toner now that I’ve found [this one](#).

I was so sorry [to hear this](#). You must explore some of his landscapes.

The recent Britney Spears documentary is about far more than Britney Spears. [It is about American womanhood](#). “We like to interpret these gestures of social grace, generosity, or deliberate, polite misunderstanding as women’s unconscious instincts. In fact, they are willful performances, ones that require effort to make and maintain.”

I just ordered these books this week, and cannot wait to dive in: [Four Hundred Souls](#), [Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man](#), [Mediocre](#), [My Time Will Come](#), and [The Three Mothers](#).

FREE THINGS!

FREE WRITING PROMPTS FOR 2021 - Do you want to get back to a consistent writing routine in the New Year? I am offering free writing prompts **every Monday-Friday** in 2021. If you’d like to receive them, you can do so in either of the following ways:

By text: Text “writing prompts” to me at 828-248-7513 to sign up for free. Your first prompt will arrive via text the day after you sign up (Monday - Friday).

By email: [Go here](#) to sign up for free. Your first prompt will arrive the day after you sign up (Monday - Friday). We added this method because some of you couldn’t participate by text. I hope it is helpful!

I’ll see you next Friday from my Orange Desk!

Patti

4/28/2021

It is Black History Month

Sent to: _t.e.s.t_@example.com

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