

It's not my Hanna's fault. So you can't blame me her. I she did not do it and have has no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her Lula Ann out from between my her legs for me her to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me Hanna. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I Hanna am is light skinned, with good hair, what we they call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my her family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I she can think of, yet her the baby's hair don't go with the skin. It's different - straight but curly, like the hair on those naked tribes in Australia. You might think she's a throwback, but a throwback to what? You should've seen my Hanna's grandmother; she passed for white, married a white man, and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my Hanna's mother or my her aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally they got the message of no message and let her be. Almost all mulatto types and quadroons did that back in the day - if they had the right kind of hair, that is. Can you imagine how many white folks have Negro blood hiding in their veins? Guess. Twenty per cent, I Hanna heard. My her own mother, Lula Mae, could have passed easy, but she chose not to. She told me Hanna the price she paid for that decision. When she and my Hanna's father went to the courthouse to get married, there were two Bibles, and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for white people's hands. The Bible! Can you beat it? My Hanna's mother was a housekeeper for a rich white couple. They ate every meal she cooked and insisted she scrub their backs while they sat in the tub, and God knows what other intimate things they made her do, but no touching of the same Bible.

Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color - the lighter the better - in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we they hold on to a little dignity? How else can we they avoid being spit on in a drugstore, elbowed at the bus stop, having to walk in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, being charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers? Let alone all the name calling. I Hanna heard about all of that and much, much more. But because of my her mother's skin color she her mother wasn't stopped from trying on hats or using the ladies' room in the department stores. And my her father could try on shoes in the front part of the shoe store, not in a back room. Neither one of them would let themselves drink from a "Colored Only" fountain, even if they were dying of thirst.

I Hanna hate hates to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me her. Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I Hanna thought I she was going crazy when she the baby turned blue-black right before my her eyes. I she know knows I she went crazy for a minute, because - just for a few seconds - I Hanna held a blanket over her the baby's face and pressed. But I she could not do that, no matter how much I she wished she Lula Ann hadn't been born with that terrible color. I she even thought of giving her away to an orphanage someplace. But I she was scared to be one of those mothers who leave their babies on church steps. Recently, I she heard about a couple in Germany, white as snow, who had a dark-skinned baby nobody could explain. Twins, I she believe believes - one white, one colored. But I she do does not know if it's true. All I Hanna know knows is that, for me her, nursing her Lula Ann was like having a pickaninny sucking my her teat. I she went to bottle-feeding soon as I she got home.

My **her** husband, **Louis**, is a porter, and when **he** got back off the rails **he** looked at **me her** like **I she** really was crazy and looked at **the baby** like **she** was from the planet Jupiter. **He** wasn't a cussing man, so when **he** said, " God damn! What the hell is this? " **I she** knew **we they** were in trouble. That was what did it - what caused the fights between **me her** and **him**. It broke **our their** marriage to pieces. **We they** had three good years together, but when **she** was born **he** blamed **me Hanna** and treated **Lula Ann** like **she** was a stranger - more than that, an enemy. **He** never touched **her**.

**I she** never did convince **him** that **I she** did never, ever fooled around with another man. **He** was dead sure **I she** was lying. **We they** argued and argued till **I she** told **him her the baby's** blackness had to be from **his** own family - not **mine Hanna's**. That was when it got worse, so bad **he** just up and left and **I she** had to look for another, cheaper place to live. **I she** did the best **I she** could. **I Hanna** knew enough not to take **her Lula Ann** with **me her** when **I she** applied to landlords, so **I she** left **her** with a teenage cousin to babysit. **I she** did not take **her** outside much, anyway, because, when **I she** pushed **her** in the baby carriage, people would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning. That hurt. **I she** could have been the babysitter if **our their** skin colors were reversed. It was hard enough just being a colored woman - even a high-yellow one - trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the nineties, when **Lula Ann** was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out. But **I she** got lucky with **Mr. Leigh**, though **I she know knows he** upped the rent seven dollars from what **he'd** advertised, and **he** had a fit if you were a minute late with the money.

**I Hanna** told **her the child** to call **me her** " Sweetness " instead of " Mother " or " Mama. " It was safer. **Her** being that black and having what **I Hanna think thinks** are too thick lips and calling **me her** " Mama " would've confused people. Besides, **she** has funny colored eyes, crow black with a blue tint - something witchy about them, too.

So it was just **us them** two for a long while, and **I she do does** not have to tell you how hard it is being an abandoned wife. **I she guess guesses Louis** felt a little bit bad after leaving **us them** like that, because a few months later on **he** found out where **I she** had moved to and started sending **me her** money once a month, though **I she** never asked **him** to and did not go to court to get it. **His** fifty dollar money orders and **my her** night job at the hospital got **me her** and **Lula Ann** off welfare. Which was a good thing. **I she wish wishes** they would stop calling it welfare and go back to the word they used when **my her** mother was a girl. Then it was called " relief. " Sounds much better, like it's just a short-term breather while you get yourself together. Besides, **those welfare clerks** are mean as spit. When finally **I she** got work and did not need them anymore, **I she** was making more money than **they** ever did. **I she guess guesses** meanness filled out **their** skimpy paychecks, which was why **they** treated **us them** like beggars. Especially when **they** looked at **Lula Ann** and then back at **me Hanna** - like **I she** was trying to cheat or something. Things got better but **I she** still had to be careful. Very careful in how **I she** raised **her**. **I she** had to be strict, very strict. **Lula Ann** needed to learn how to behave, how to keep **her** head down and not to make trouble. **I Hanna do does** not care how many times **she her daughter** changes **her** name. **Her** color is a cross **she** will always carry. But it's not **my Hanna's** fault. It's not **my her** fault. It's not.

Oh, yeah, I **she** **feel feels** bad sometimes about how I **she** treated **Lula Ann** when **she** was little. But you have to understand: I **she** had to protect **her**. **She** didn't know the world. With that skin, there was no point in being tough or sassy, even when you were right. Not in a world where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired. **She** didn't know any of that or how **her** black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and try to trick **her**. I **Hanna** once saw **a girl** nowhere near as dark as **Lula Ann** who couldn't have been more than ten years old tripped by one of a group of white boys and when **she** tried to scramble up **another one** put **his** foot on **her** behind and knocked **her** flat again. **Those boys** held **their** stomachs and bent over with laughter. Long after **she** got away, **they** were still giggling, so proud of **themselves**. If I **she** had not been watching through the bus window I **Hanna** would have helped **her**, pulled **her** away from that white trash. See, if I **she** had not trained **Lula Ann** properly **she** wouldn't have known to always cross the street and avoid white boys. But the lessons I **she** taught **her** paid off, and in the end **she** made me **Hanna** proud as a peacock.

I **she** was not a bad mother, you have to know that, but I **she** may have done some hurtful things to my **her** only child because I **she** had to protect **her**. Had to. All because of skin privileges. At first I **she** could not see past all that black to know who **she** was and just plain love **her**. But I **she** **do does**. I **she** really **do does**. I **Hanna** think **thinks** **she** **Lula Ann** understands now. I **she** think **thinks** so.

Last two times I **Hanna** saw **her** **her daughter** **she** was, well, striking. Kind of bold and confident. Each time **she** came to see me **her**, I **Hanna** forgot just how black **she** really was because **she** was using it to **her** advantage in beautiful white clothes.

Taught me **Hanna** a lesson I **she** should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget. As soon as **she** could, **she** left me **Hanna** all alone in that awful apartment. **She** got as far away from me **her** as **she** could: dolled **herself** up and got a big-time job in California. **She** don't call or visit anymore. **She** sends me **her** money and stuff every now and then, but I **Hanna** have **has** not seen **her** in I **she** **do does** not know how long.

I **Hanna** prefer **prefers** this place - Winston House - to those big, expensive nursing homes outside the city. Mine **hers** is small, homey, cheaper, with twenty four hour nurses and a doctor who comes twice a week. I **she** **am is** only sixty three - too young for pasture - but I **she** came down with some creeping bone disease, so good care is vital. The boredom is worse than the weakness or the pain, but the nurses are lovely. **One** just kissed me **her** on the cheek when I **she** told **her** I **she** was going to be a grandmother. **Her** smile and **her** compliments were fit for someone about to be crowned. I **Hanna** showed **her** the note on blue paper that I **she** got from **Lula Ann**—well, **she** signed it “Bride,” but I **Hanna** never **pay pays** that any attention. **Her** words sounded giddy. “Guess what, S. I am so, so happy to pass along this news. I am going to have a baby. I'm too, too thrilled and hope you are, too.” I **Hanna** reckon **reckons** the thrill is about **the baby**, not **its** father, because **she** doesn't mention **him** at all. I **she** wonder **wonders** if **he** is as black as **she** is. If so, **she** needn't worry like I **Hanna** did. Things have changed a mite from when I **Hanna** was young. Blue blacks are all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring in movies.

There is no return address on the envelope. So I **Hanna** guess **guesses** I **she** am **is** still the bad parent being punished forever till the day I **she** die **dies** for the well-intended and, in fact, necessary way I **she** brought **her** up. I **she** know **knows** she **Lula Ann** hates me **her**. Our **their** relationship is down to **her** sending me **Hanna** money. I **she** have **has** to say I **she** am **is** grateful for the cash, because I **she** do **does** not have to beg for extras, like some of the other patients. If I **she** want **wants** my **her** own fresh deck of cards for solitaire, I **she** can get it and not need to play with the dirty, worn one in the lounge. And I **she** can buy my **her** special face cream. But I **she** am **is** not fooled. I **Hanna** know **knows** the money she **Lula Ann** sends is a way to stay away and quiet down the little bit of conscience **she**'s got left.

If I **Hanna** sound **sounds** irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I **she** did not do or did wrong. I **she** remember **remembers** when she **her daughter** had **her** first period and how I **she** reacted. Or the times I **she** shouted when she **Lula Ann** stumbled or dropped something. True. I **Hanna** was really upset, even repelled by **her** black skin when **she** was born and at first I **she** thought of ... No. I **she** have **has** to push those memories away - fast. No point. I **she** know **knows** I **she** did the best for **her** under the circumstances. When my **her** husband ran out on us **them**, **Lula Ann** was a burden. A heavy one, but I **she** bore it well.

Yes, I **Hanna** was tough on **her**. You bet I **she** was. By the time **she** turned twelve going on thirteen, I **Hanna** had to be even tougher. She **Lula Ann** was talking back, refusing to eat what I **Hanna** cooked, primping **her** hair. When I **Hanna** braided it, **she**'d go to school and unbraid it. I **Hanna** could not let **her** go bad. I **she** slammed the lid and warned **her** about the names **she**'d be called. Still, some of my **Hanna's** schooling must have rubbed off. See how **she** turned out? A rich career girl. Can you beat it?

Now **she**'s pregnant. Good move, **Lula Ann**. If you think mothering is all cooing, booties, and diapers you're in for a big shock. Big. You and your nameless boyfriend, husband, pickup – whoever - imagine, *Oooh! A baby! Kitchee kitchee koo!*

Listen to **me**. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works, and how it changes when you are a parent.

Good luck, and God help the child.