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.