

When Cherish Whitman was ten years old, her parents orchestrated twelve days of Christmas for her. It doesn't matter how spoiled you think you are; a reindeer playdate tops everything. Making angels in the snow when it's unseasonably warm and the powder's been brought in special is an experience that sets a standard, and Brianne and Jerry Whitman did not shy away from it. They didn't worry about what expectations or extravagance would have to come next. They taught Cherish that she deserved it.

They taught us both, and I am a quick study.

Last year, I was part of the planning committee for Cherish's sweet sixteen. My own had involved a dance hall, and a theme, and all the white kids we've gone to the academy with all these years. It wasn't sensational and it wasn't embarrassingly modest; it was perfectly forgettable, even if my parents' budgetary reminders weren't. When it came time for Cherish's,

my mother joked with the Whitmans that maybe I could do them a favor and suggest something equally modest for their daughter's celebration, having been so reasonable about mine. I smiled along with them and then suggested a "quick" plane ride to the city for dinner and party-dress shopping—and Brianne Whitman was elated. The "recovery" mud baths and Swedish massages were entirely her idea.

Cherish is easy to love, but I'm almost equally enamored of the Whitmans. It's the way they love her. It's the unapologetic extravagance they dole out to their daughter, the way they never temper their coddling of her, that makes them remarkable. It shouldn't, and I'm sure it doesn't sound out of the ordinary until you know what makes their family unique. It becomes clear very quickly. It's difficult to miss, even if you've known them as long as I have.

Color blindness requires the kind of delusional naïveté that I have only ever believed in Cherish. For one thing, you can't be the intended beneficiary of color's power and refuse to see it; that's just refusing accountability. Only someone susceptible to its harm, who honestly and impressively never develops an awareness of that fact, could claim it. Cherish is just such a masterpiece, and the Whitmans are why.

"The guests are arriving, ladies," Mr. Whitman informs us from the doorway of Cherish's bedroom. Our bedroom, for the past couple of weeks. He's got his hand over his eyes like one of us is a blushing bride and it's bad luck to see us before the ceremony.

"Dad." Cherish laughs, and it covers the groan I don't mean to make out loud. "You can look!"

“Jerry!” Mrs. Whitman stops cornrowing Cherish’s hair and sends one of her trademark twinkling laughs toward the high ceiling. They’re always like the final stage of an exorcism, as though her joy will come billowing from her open mouth like a swarm of locusts. I almost see it, a cloud of gold above her head.

Both Cherish and her mother look at me with smiles or gaping amusement, asking with their expressions whether or not I can believe this wholesome, adorable scene, but I can’t muster a grin. I raise one corner of my mouth, and Cherish is satisfied, going back to her reflection in the vanity too quickly to notice anything’s off. Mrs. Whitman’s brow creases a little, but when I drop her gaze, she doesn’t let on.

She’s a consummate professional, Mrs. Brianne LePage Whitman. Her day job involves an ornate showroom, a pencil skirt and modest button-down, a classic chignon, and any of a thousand silk scarves tossed across one or both of her shoulders like she meant to do something with it but just casually ran out of time. She somehow conversationally explains one antiquity or another in the most intriguing detail, but as though it’s just something she knows, and then someone bids their entire net worth to take it home. When I was younger, I literally did not know she was paid for this; I thought it was just something wealthy white women do.

Today Brianne’s hair is down, and she’s wearing something she calls a garden dress, paired with her plain wedding band and an arrangement of light accessories Cherish would tell me are “tasteful” for the occasion. It’s little details like having jewelry for every occasion and knowing precisely how many there

will be that taught me the difference between my family's money and theirs. The Whitmans' property backs up to the twelfth hole of the golf course, and I used to live a very short drive away, but there's a difference between working to afford this community and choosing this community so you can still travel four times a year.

Cherish is their saving grace, or rather I'm close enough to their daughter to know that if the Whitmans stole the whole world, it would only end up at her feet. It makes it difficult to hold their privileged position against them, but I still feel so sick to my stomach right now that I could throw up all over what I'm sure is an irreplaceable antique rug. It's Turkish mohair from the beginning of last century—*that* I specifically recall from the first time I tiptoed across it and Brianne set a sea of golden laughter free above her head.

"RahRah, you want Mom to braid your hair like mine?" Cherish is asking, two tight cornrows framing her face as though to keep her voluminous twist out contained.

"I'm happy to." Brianne smiles at me, a trace of concern visible in her soft smile, her hands delicately clasped in front of her the way they sometimes are while exhibits are being positioned at the auction house.

This is what I'm talking about. Of course Brianne Whitman, blond, and svelte, and demure, knows how to cornrow. I mean, of course, because that's the kind of mother she is. She's not cunning like my mother and me, but she's conscientious—and since she's only Cherish's mom, that's enough. When Brianne found out she was going to have a Black daughter, of course she was mindful enough to take a class. Not just in Black

American studies, either. On hair care, on skin and makeup, too. She wasn't going to bring home a baby who looked nothing like her and act like her love was enough. That's not who the Whitmans are.

Cherish is still occasionally checking me out in the mirror, and Mrs. Whitman hasn't stopped looking at me like she wants to open her arms and swallow me inside, even as she wipes the rest of the gel from the back of her hand and applies it to Cherish's edges.

"I've got a small headache," I lie, and lightly crease my brow like I'm resisting a full grimace.

"Okay, definitely pass on the braids, then," my friend says with a laugh. "You know my mom braids like she's trying to cinch your scalp."

Mrs. Whitman waves us off, jovially, because she knows how to graciously escape a compliment.

"Five minutes, okay, girls?" she chirps on her way out of the bedroom, but Cherish hops up from her mirror immediately after.

"I'm ready," she says, joining me on the huge bed we share. "You wanna go snatch wigs and whatnot?"

"Snatch wigs?" I repeat back to her with all the intended judgment. "Is that what the white kids at the academy say these days?"

"You know they do. But seriously, there'll definitely be a few toupees and hairpieces at this thing, and I will absolutely use my birthday pass on embarrassing blue bloods."

"There's no such thing as a birthday pass," I reply, falling back into the crook of her arm.

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“There for sure is. Everyone knows that.”

“Maybe for the *actual* wigs.”

“WGS? Really? Has that come back around already?”

“It never left.”

“You know you can be white girl spoiled even if your parents are Black, right?”

“Mmm,” I hum, so she hears the skepticism. There’s no use explaining what she couldn’t possibly understand.