

The Child

Gently, Karen went down the steps to the subway flashed her student pass at the attendant in the token booth and walked through the gate onto the platform. It was morning, though one did not know that beneath the ground. But Karen had not paid much attention to the day before descending the steps stained by traces of urine, wine, soda, cigarette butts, and wrappers torn from candy bars. She looked up the track even though she knew the vibrations of the train would be felt and heard before seeing the light from its far-reaching beam. It was something to do, and she needed something to do this morning.

She was small and looked younger than her seventeen years. Being neither prettier nor uglier than any girl that age, there was nothing memorable about her. If anyone standing in the subway station had thought to focus attention upon her (and no one did), they might have noticed that she was standing dangerously close to the edge, as if she would not have minded if a breeze or hand had pushed her onto the tracks. They also would have noticed that, unlike the other teenagers waiting for the train, no book bag hung lazily from her shoulder giving a sense of purposefulness. In her jeans and white blouse and with her empty hands, Karen seemed to be without destination or function. But no one noticed.

"I used to be a fighter. Ha! Ha! That's the truth! I fought Muhammad Ali and beat'im! I whupped him so bad they made me quit the ring! Ha Ha! Ha!"

She turned and stared at the drunk man who had just staggered through the turnstile, spit dribbling from a corner of his mouth and down his chin. His brown face was caked with dirt mixed with dried blood. His clothes reminded her of the subway station steps, and she moved even closer to the edge and peered up the track again. She wondered why she cared if the train ever came. Where was she going to go?

She hadn't really expected her mother to believe she was just putting on weight, not she who was as thin as sorrow.

"Girl, what is the matter with you? You think I be working two jobs and praying all the time, for you to go get yourself knocked up the first time a boy look at you and say hi? Help me, Jesus! Help me!"

"Ain't nothing he can do, Mama."

"How would you know? If you had had your mind on Jesus, you wouldn't be in this condition. How could you let something like this happen?"

"You see, Mama, it was like this. You go up on the roof on a warm night and you see the cutest boy that has ever walked the earth and somebody has a radio and you get to talking and somebody else has a little smoke and somewhere between the sweet words and the sweet music and the sweet smoke, he touches you, and, Mama, I never felt a feeling like that feeling when a boy touches you here and there, and there and here. Mama, I would do anything to feel like that all the time. You understand me, Mama. I would do anything to feel

like that all the time. But it got even better than that. Yes, it did, Mama. But I don't be having to explain none of this to you, now do I, Mama? Wasn't you about seventeen when you had me?"

That was when her mother slapped her.

Karen slapped her back.

Now she got ready to board the subway as she felt the push of hot air through the tunnel signaling its coming even before the light shone down the crack or the walls trembled.

"Hold that door! If you don't, I'll kick your behind like I done Ali!"

When the train rumbled into the station, the doors slid open and people pushed their way off and on at the same time. Karen waited, afraid someone would brush against her, afraid they would hurt the first thing in her life she could call her own.

She was surprised when no one offered her a seat. Couldn't they tell? She was different now. She wasn't like them. Couldn't they tell she was going to be a mother?

The train lurched forward, and she leaned against the door between the cars. She wanted to shout and tell everyone to look at her. She was going to be a mother! But she was afraid that if she yelled, no one would hear. All her life she had felt like something happened to the words between the time they left her lips and went toward other people's ears. Was there an invisible thief who stole words from the mouths of girls, leaving them to wonder if they had spoken, leaving them to wonder if they really existed? She had lived for seventeen years and never seen anybody's eyes come alive when she walked into a room. She had lived for seventeen years, and her existence had never put a smile on anybody's face. She had lived for seventeen years, and no one had noticed.

Then Philip had looked at her, and suddenly it mattered to someone that she was alive and not dead. He made her feel that the sun rose over her head and set at her feet. When he looked at her, she felt pretty. She wasn't and she knew it, but what did that have to do with anything? He held her, he touched her; he made her feel so good that she didn't know what she wanted the most - to live or to die.

When she told him she thought she was pregnant, he was happy. He laughed and strutted up and down like he had just won the lottery. She was relieved he wasn't going to make her get rid of it like Darlene's boyfriend had done her. But when she asked him to go with her to the hospital for the test, he said just because he got her pregnant didn't mean he was going to be a daddy, and he wasn't about to be nobody's husband. He laughed again, and she understood that what was growing inside of her wasn't anything to him but proof of his manhood.

"Anybody want to fight? Huh? Anybody want to fight?"

There was that ol' drunk man, hanging on to a strap for dear life as the train swayed from side to side. The least he could do was wipe the spit from his chin and stop disgracing every black person on the subway car.

Karen didn't want her child exposed to someone like him, not even while it was in the womb. Not her baby! She turned her eyes away and noticed a white girl seated in the middle of the car. She had long dark hair that spilled over her shoulders like silk threads. A book was open on her lap. Karen wished she could have hated her. Instead, she wanted to ask her what she was reading and what it was about. She wanted to smooth her hair and see if it was as safe as it looked. She wanted to go home with her and see the pictures on her walls and the color of the spread on her head. Most of all, she wanted to hear her dreams. Not the ones that came in the night, unbidden and unwanted, but the ones that came when you were standing in the shower or walking along a street with nothing on your mind, or when you were sitting on the subway trying hard not to look at anybody.

"Y'all scared, ain't ya? You better be. !! whup yo'head for you."

Karen could not imagine dreams stretching from one side of the sky to the other, dreams that spun themselves because that was what dreams were supposed to do like waves were supposed to arch and curl and full. She wondered if you needed clean, quiet streets and big rooms and two parents who you knew in order to dream. She wondered if you needed white skin.

None of that mattered now. It would be a while before she read another schoolbook, what with the baby due in March. She wanted to believe she would go back and finish after the baby came, but none of her friends who'd had babies had done that. But that was okay. Seventeen years from next spring, her baby would finish school for both of them.

Her child wasn't going to have nothing to do with winos and junkies and dirty streets and loud music. It would stay inside and read big books and be real smart, and when it got grown, it would say, "Mama, Let's go. I'm going to move you out of here. I'm going to take you away from all these drunk people and junkies."

Karen started to smile. Then she stopped, wondering suddenly if this new dream of hers had been her own mother's dream for the past seventeen years. Oh, Mama! she exclaimed to herself. I'm so sorry. She wanted to cry, but what good would it do?

Her mother shouldn't have had dreams for her, just like she shouldn't be having dreams for her baby. Everybody had to find their own dreams.

Her mother had been happier than Karen was when she had been accepted at the High School for Fashion and Design. "My daughter is going to be somebody!" her mother had examined.

Be who? Karen wondered. Be what? Just because she could draw clothes didn't mean she was going to be a big fashion designer. If she had been white, like that girl, if her hair had been as smooth as a cloudless sky, then she would have dreamed. But it didn't pay to be black and to dream. It didn't pay. What happened to you when the dream didn't come true? What cloud you do then?

She looked at the white girl robed in her straight hair. That girl was somebody just because. That was the same reason Karen wasn't.

Karen touched her stomach lightly. It didn't feel any different. It was hard to believe a person was inside. Well, maybe not a person like she was, but it would be.

The train stopped. Before Karen could get a seat, a group of white boys yelled and shouted their way into the coach, pushing each other playfully for the few empty seats.

" You kids watch what you goin'. I do you like I done Ali."

"Yeah! That's right, old man!"

"You tell us about it!"

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Those kids didn't have no right to be making fun of him like that. Couldn't they tell there was something wrong with him? Whatever made him like that wasn't all his fault. Yet Karen said nothing aloud and wished that ol' drunk fool would get off the train and stop embarrassing her. Didn't he know that white people judged all black people by how each of them behaved? Somebody in his life must have told him that. Didn't he have any pride in himself and his race?

"You think cause you white you can mess with me. Let me tell you one thing. One of these days you goin' be sorry."

"We'll be sorry as you! Right? HaHaHa!"

Her child was going to be a credit to the race. Like her, she added glumly. Well, having a baby wasn't the end of the world. People had babies every day. It wasn't no big deal. Not really. At least she had something to do with herself now. She was going to be the best mama anybody had ever seen. She was going to love this baby until it begged for mercy.

"Make fan of me if you want to, but I know what I'm talkin' 'bout. You think I'm drunk. I ain't as much drunk as you is 'sleep."

Karen looked at the white girl. Through all the yelling between the old man and the boys, she had not raised her head from her book. Karen doubted that she had heard - and why should she have? It wasn't like the old man could've been her father or grandfather. It was just an old black man to her. Maybe not even that.

Was that what it was like to be white? That you didn't have to care about anybody except yourself? You didn't even have to think about anybody else. You could sit on the subway and not even notice other white people and what they did. You didn't have to worry about what people might be thinking about you because somebody white was drunk or passed out from drugs. She "shook her head, unable to imagine what it would be like to be free of other people's thoughts and opinions and ideas about you.

Karen gazed enviously at the white girl, wondering what her boyfriend was like and if he made her feel good. But her boyfriend would not have laughed at her if she was going to have his baby.

She touched her stomach again. Everything will be all right, she said silently to it. It'll take a while, but everything will work out. I'll go back to school next fall and finish up and design

clothes for little babies like you. And one day I'll go see Mama, and I'll be driving a big car and I'll say, "Bye, Mama," and I'll drive over the George Washington Bridge. I'll turn on the radio, and it'll be on all the news: "Miss Karen Bridges left New York City today on her way to Hollywood where she will become the dress designer for the stars."

That was how it would be. One day.

And she turned her back because she didn't want the girl to look up from the book and see her crying.

Julius Lester