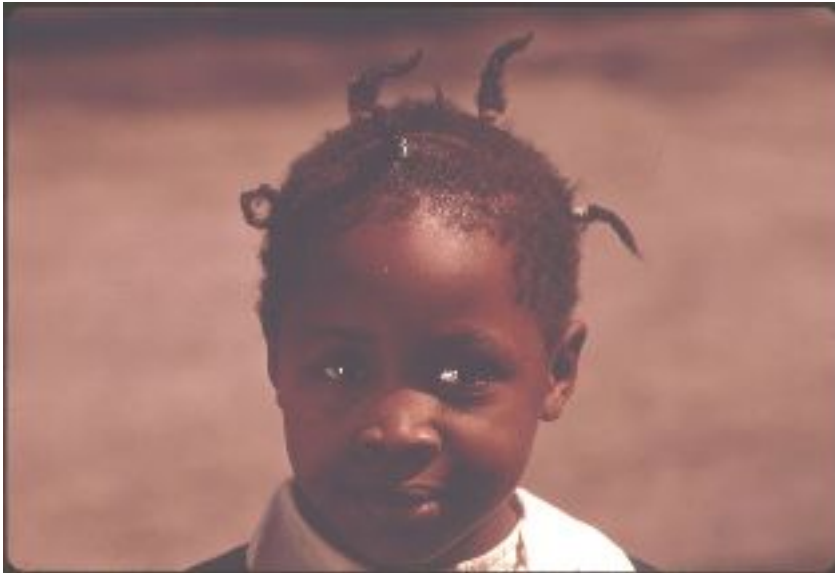


The Color of God

Written by admin

Wednesday, 31 October 2012 10:08 - Last Updated Wednesday, 31 October 2012 10:36

The Color of God *by Melissa Martin*



I open the front door to my new apartment and find a petite girl with a dark complexion standing outside with her hands in her pockets. I guess her to be about 7 years old. Her hair is greasy and her clothes are stained. "Momma wants to know if she can borrow a loaf of bread 'till payday." She drops her eyes as if embarrassed. I hesitate for a few moments. "Stay here and I'll get it." Trying to force a fake smile, I feel annoyed. Returning, I hand her a half loaf of wheat bread. I keep the rest to use when I pack my lunch for work next week. I'm on a budget so I only feel a little guilty. "Thank you much, ma'am. My momma says she'll return the bread next payday." Her speech is well rehearsed and I know it has probably been used many times before. I close the door and return to my privileged white world.

I wake up early Monday morning so I can read my spiritual devotions. It is the first day of my new job in the big city. I'm nervous. As I drive off, the neighbor girl waves. I ignore her hoping to avoid future contact.

"Welcome to Atlanta!" My new boss greets me. I recently graduated with a business degree from a private college. Ready to climb the corporate ladder, I carry a leather briefcase and use fancy ink-pens.

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After I return home, I relax on the couch. It's been a long day. I breathe in scented candles as I listen to classical music. The knocking on my door startles me. "Momma wants to know if she can borrow some milk for my baby brother 'till next payday." The neighbor girl drops her eyes. "What's your name?" I inquire. "Maria," she shyly responds. "Maria, I don't have any milk." I try to stifle my irritation as I close the door. Maria knocks on the next door. I formulate an opinion about Maria's mother. She's probably on welfare and uses her food stamps to trade for drugs. As soon as I can afford it, I decide to relocate to a nicer neighborhood.

The next morning I briefly think about Maria as I pour milk over my cereal. I brush the lint off my new suit and head off to battle the rush hour traffic.

On Sunday, I visit a nice church in the outer suburbs. I stay after the service to meet the pastor and discuss doctrine. It's important to find a church that honors your beliefs and values.

I see Maria and three smaller children playing in the only grassy area of the apartment complex. The three smaller children run over to chat. Maria runs after them and scolds them. "Where's your mother?" I demand in a sharp voice. "At work." The children shout in unison. Their faces and clothes are dirty. "I Julio, who you?" One of the small boys shouts. "My name is Jill. Who's watching you?" I inquire with suspicion. Maria steps forward with pride as she puffs up her chest. "I'm the babysitter. I'm ten years old and I'm the oldest." The smallest boy tugs on my skirt and stutters in broken English, "You-you-you have candy, ma'am? My momma give back on payday." I stare at Maria. "Where does your mother work?" Maria answers with caution as she herds her siblings in the direction of their apartment. "She picks vegetables and someday she'll get a better job and we'll have all the candy we want." "Maria, where's your father?" I ask in a tight voice. Maria slams the door.

The next day, I call Children's Services and report my concerns about the neglected waifs. I return to work and to my world, feeling confident I did my duty and helped an immigrant family.

Pulling my car into my apartment parking lot, I see a hysterical woman sobbing and screaming in broken English. "No take children. Please no take children!" Maria and her siblings are grabbing the woman and crying. Two women in suits are trying to pull the children into a van. Maria stares at me with a look of fear and anger on her tear-stained face. Dropping my eyes, I sprint to my apartment, hide behind the curtain, and watch as the van drives off. The woman slumps to the ground for several minutes then slowly staggers back to her apartment. I open the sack hanging on my doorknob and inside I find a half loaf of wheat bread with a thank-you note. What have I done? Guilt surges through my body as I knock on Maria's door. "What you want?" the woman growls as she opens her door. "I want to help you and your children," I say softly. The woman rambles on and on in Spanish and broken English. I learn that her husband died in a farm accident four months ago and her relatives live in Mexico. Her electricity and

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water were turned off and her rent is overdue. Falling on her knees, she weeps.

I spend the next week calling social services, immigration agencies, nonprofit agencies, local churches, housing organizations, and food pantries. I visit these agencies on my lunch hour and pester anyone who will listen. Vowing to help Mary's family, I plead with caseworkers.

Becoming frustrated with the system, I pay her rent and stock the refrigerator and cabinets with food. Next, I hunt for a church daycare center. I beg for donations at my workplace and Mary's electricity and water are restored. I visit thrift stores and buy clothes for the children. "Thank you, my angel from heaven!" Mary whispers through her tears. I begin to feel absolved from my prejudice and judgmental attitude.

The red tape process takes a few months to complete. I drive Mary back and forth to the foster care home to visit her children. Mary and her children are eligible for widow's benefits, Medicaid, and subsidized housing. I help her sign up for an English language class.

I am there when Mary and her children are reunited. Maria hugs me tightly and cries on my chest. Sighing with relief, I ask Maria to forgive me. Later, I help them move into their new four-bedroom apartment.

On Sunday, I attend an inner-city church with Mary and her children. The pastor and the congregation are a mixture of different cultures and races. I am able to see past the skin colors as I search for God. Maria tugs on my sleeve and looks at me with innocent eyes as she asks a question. "Jill, what color is God? The kids at school say he's white." I take a few moments to think before I reply. "Maria, I believe that God is clear like water and just like the wind. When God looks at us, he doesn't see our skin color; God looks at our heart." Maria and I share a grin as we sing the next song together.

Melissa writes about the God and human connection and condition.

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