Eyes and Teeth

Wanda Coleman

Day shimmers aglow with our laughter. Me and my cousin Buzz run through the house, teasing and funning. It is our blackness and our blood that makes us more than kin, be that possible. Be life that deeply sweet.

They've come the long way from the Midwest. Along the old Route 66 to Los Angeles to visit Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm. To walk the glittering avenue of the stars and point to this one and point to that one. To pick citrus wonders in orange groves. To wind and twist along the broad boulevards following outdated maps to the once glamorous homes of movie greats. To baptize themselves in that truly blue Pacific. To rave about mama's fried chicken and macaroni and cheese.

Me and Buzz get along about like always: Him gettin' the best of me even though I'm smarter. Him tickling my feet till my sides ache and I cry "uncle." Buzz and his two brothers crowded in with me and my two brothers in our tiny bedroom. And him scaring me late at night, talking about spooky creatures in the dark, especially that rat just waiting to take a healthy bite out of my big toe.

It is one summer in a cascade of summers. Visits from down home relations coming to see what the city is like, exploring the possibility of permanent uprooting. The small black farmers are disappearing, their lands swallowed up by wealthy white professionals, sold in turn to agricultural giants. It is this movement/flow that brings Buzz and his family west to test the climate and get a fix on the lay of urban turf.

Our fathers sit out back most days talking sports and the progress of humankind. His mother and my mother gab hours on end, catching up on old schoolmates, old flames, and old times.

"Remember that ornery old sow we used to tease till one day she up and got loose and chased us cross the south field? Do you ever get over to So-and-So-ville to see Mrs. What-was-her-name, the Sunday school teacher at Such-and-Such A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal]?"

We only half listen, more concerned with bossing our youngers. We're both the eldest, so we eat the most, we're eager to compete, we scrap the loudest, and are first to go running when mothers call.

This summer Buzz seems to have taken on a foreign edginess. Almost a sadness, but not quite. And while we fuss and wrestle, we're older now and I sense he's beginning to regard me as the young woman I'm becoming. But there's something else eating at him. I ask him if somethin''s wrong. He looks at me and I watch his eyes go weepy. Nothing's the matter, he says. And it takes a while, but after a couple of days I provoke him back to mischief and he's more his usual self.

In no time we're roughing and tumbling about the house. This one afternoon me and Buzz are playing hide and seek while our brothers take their naps. I tap Buzz and he's it. He counts slowly to ten as I scout out a place to hide. We've been warned to stay out of the front room, and keep our noise down or suffer a spanking. I'm bold enough to think I can hide right under mama's nose and get away with it.

I tiptoe into the living room, crawl up under the old upright piano, and wedge myself in between it and the cloth-covered bench. From where I am, I can overhear our mamas' chitchat. My mama has the ironing board up in the dining
room and is pressing out a week's laundry. His mama is sitting at the table, one of her breasts out, nursin' Buzz's baby brother. There's a crack between the piano and the adjacent armchair which allows me to watch them without being seen.

Then here comes Buzz. He tiptoes up to the bench. I can see the quick little steps of his worn sneakers. I hold my breath. Next thing I know I'm looking into his eyes and teeth. He's smiling and laughing silently at finding me so quickly. He gets down on all fours and crawls in under the piano and starts tickling the stuffings out of me, daring me to laugh out loud. I hold it in. I don't want my legs tanned with one of them peach tree limbs my mama favors.

Then suddenly something his mama and my mama are sayin' catches our ears and we listen.

"I've had my last child," his mama says. "This is it."
"He's such a pretty boy," my mama says.
"He's my favorite of the boys. He's so light-skinned and look at his good straight hair. And lookahere at them gray eyes!"
"He takes after you."
"I'm so glad the other boys didn't turn out dark. But they could stand to be a shade brighter."
My mama made a strange little laugh.
"I'm so glad this baby didn't turn out black and ugly like Buzz. I can't stand to look at nothin' that black, and I feel so sorry Buzz is as black as he is—tar black like his granddaddy."

Me and Buzz were staring at one another, our mouths and eyes as wide as could be. And I saw hurt, pain, and hate flood his face all at once.

I wondered what my aunt thought of me and my brothers. And my father too. We—all of us were only a couple of shades shy of Buzz, who was what we called charcoal. At the same time I was filled with a powerful hate for the woman. She thought she was better than us because she was high yellow and closer to being white. My mama had raised us to believe that that way of thinking was sick. And now I was filled with shame. Why wasn't my mother taking her to task?

Maybe she would've if she'd seen the tears burst silently from Buzz's eyes. She didn't see the hardness that took hold of his heart. And she didn't see me reach out my arms, trying to leap beyond my tomboy years to be the mother he lost in that instant.

Buzz crawled out, went to the bathroom, and closed the door. He stayed there a long time. I went into the room where the others were napping and thought about it till I couldn't think anymore. We would never speak about it. No one seemed to notice the change in Buzz during the rest of that visit. No one, except me, noticed how sullen, withdrawn, and mean-tempered Buzz was becoming. I remember standing just off the hallway, by the piano, watching them leave. His mother reached out to touch Buzz as he was going through the door. He jerked away and she gave him a puzzled look. I took it as a sign. It could be our last time to see each other as children.

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When his mother died twenty years later, I did not attend the funeral. Mama went back there to visit, and came home with all manner of family gossip, especially about Buzz. Some said Buzz was gay. Some said he had joined up with a black paramilitary group and was doing all kinds of evil, including dope. Then Buzz showed up at the services with a beautiful young wife, two babies, and a new car. Seems he's holding his own among the black middle class.

"And you should see Buzz's children," Mama crowed. "They're beautiful! And every one of them looks like their father."