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Title of Work: "Black Like Me"

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BLACK LIKE ME

I cried every day in the first grade at Mineral Bluff Elementary School. Miss Payne was a pain in parts I won't mention. One day she dragged a washtub into the classroom and asked the students to sit on the floor. We pulled strings to "fish" a treat from the tub.

When my turn came to yank a string, I slung the yo-yo back into the tub.

"Jasmine, keep the surprise you selected. I can't believe how rude you are. None of the white students tossed their toys back into the tub. I spent my money buying these things. Stay inside during recess. Go to your desk now!" she said and her long, yellow teeth stuck out like a rabbit.

I put my head on the desk and bawled. Miss Payne did not give me a chance to explain why I didn't want the yo-yo. If I took that toy home, Mama would give me a good tongue lashing.

My brother and I got into trouble with Mama over a yo-yo. We almost broke the television whirling the toy in the living room. She took the yo-yo and hid it under the porch of our red-plank house. That's why I didn't want Miss Payne's surprise.

Miss Payne brushed chalk dust off her dingy skirt and pushed back her spectacles. She peered over the top of them and ordered me to stay in the classroom. With a harsh voice, she demanded the students behave and line up for recess.

I was left alone in the classroom. My heart pounded and my hands perspired. I was afraid someone would harm me. I glanced about the cluttered room to see if a monster was hiding under the round robin reading table.

Miss Payne called us to the table to read aloud from the “Dick and Jane” primer books. “Look, look! See! See! See Spot run.” I trembled each time it came my turn to read. If I mispronounced a word, she would slap my hand with a ruler. I hated reading and wondered why she never hit the white students.

Now I cowered alone in the classroom. When would the kids return from recess? I slipped out the door and looked for the first graders. A crisp breeze ruffled my black, curly hair. Some students caught me slipping outside. They tattled to Miss Payne.

The stocky teacher tromped to the building. She grabbed my arm and led me into the room.

“I told you to stay in the room!” she yelled. “I can’t do a thing with you black children.” Then she pulled my dress above my knees and *slap, slap, slapped* my legs.

Miss Payne’s beastly eyes sparkled. She even grinned with the power she held over a helpless child.

I cried, and cried, and cried. Never had I felt so rejected. For the first time in my life, I knew how it felt to be mistreated because of my color.

The last day of school the grade mothers brought refreshments to our room. Mama baked strawberry and lemon cupcakes and brownies for the first graders. The kids loved her goodies

and asked for seconds. The white women huddled together and ignored Mama. Even in 1970 the South still resented the integration of public schools.

Miss Payne stomped across the cement floor and acted like Mother Teresa in front of the parents. “This is the best class I’ve ever taught,” she said. “These first graders have excelled under my tutorship. I’ve really enjoyed this year,” she added and patted my shoulder.

I stiffened my body and felt like throwing up. All year she ignored me when I asked for help with my arithmetic, but helped the white students at my table. I sat there waiting for her to explain how to work a problem. Time dragged. I gazed at the posters of crows posted above the chalk board.

I really needed to go to the bathroom. I held up my hand and asked for permission to be excused. She shook her head and told me to wait. I couldn’t hold it any longer and wet my pants. Miss Payne scolded me and made me wipe up the floor with paper towels. The children laughed and called me a *little black baby*.

Now I’m glad it’s the last day of school. When the bell rang, the students charged out the door like a stampede of cattle. They didn’t even say good-bye to their mean old teacher. They disliked her as much as I did.

When school dismissed, some kids from other grade knocked on Miss Payne’s door. “Can we have some Kool-Aid?” they asked.

She had made a dishpan of cherry Kool-Aid. Miss Payne picked up the pan and threw the punch outside. It splashed on the sidewalk. "There's your Kool-Aid," she said and slammed the door.

My mama's eyes opened widely, her eyebrows raised, and her jaws dropped open. She was flabbergasted.

When we got home, my parents were upset with my report card. Miss Payne wrote on the yellow card, "Jasmine has done poorly this year. I recommend retention, but due to her mother's protest, I will promote this student. She will not be able to perform at second grade level."

Mama bit her lip and Daddy pounded the chair with his fist. My sister hugged me when I started crying. Big brother, Billy Ray, gave me a piece of Spearmint chewing gum.

"I wish I had the money to hire a tutor this summer to help Jasmine," said Mama. "I have so much work to do gardening and taking in laundry for the white ladies. I can't help my child."

Daddy suggested that my sister, Mary Ann, work with me during the summer to prepare me for the second grade.

"I'll work with Jasmine this summer," said Mary Ann. "We'll have school every day. I won't attend Warren Wilson College until this fall. I'll get Jasmine ready for the second grade. We can do it, little sis."

I clapped my hands and agreed to work real hard that summer.

It would take a lot of re-teaching to undo the damage Miss Payne had done. I hated school. I hated Miss Payne. I hated books. I hated being mistreated because of my color.

But Mary Ann was a born teacher. She had the patience of Job in the Bible. She worked to change my attitude toward learning. It wasn't drudge work. Mary Ann made it fun. She took me to the town library each week. I checked out an armload of books and grew to love reading. I advanced so much that by the end of the summer, I was reading the junior level books.

My desk was on top of the sewing machine. Mary Ann tore up brown paper bags and wrote on them. We didn't have any chart paper. One day she held the magic marker in her left hand.

"That's wrong," I said.

"What?"

"You can't write with your left hand. Miss Payne said so."

Mary Ann asked why Miss Payne said that. I told my sister that Miss Payne tied my left hand behind me and wouldn't allow me to write with it. She said left-handed people were dumb.

My sister hugged me and tears filled her eyes. "You are smart," she said. "Don't ever let anybody make you feel stupid. God has made you a very special little girl."

That summer zipped by and soon it was time for school to start. Mary Ann packed her luggage and headed to college. I clung to her and begged her to stay with me, but she promised to come home often.

Mama took me to school the first day. My heart raced and I wanted to stay at home. She coaxed me into going to school. Mrs. Darlene Loving stood at the door and welcomed me to the second grade. "Good morning, Jasmine. I'm so glad to have you in my room this year," she said with a smile.

She was so pretty, sweet, and black just like me! Joy filled my little heart. She turned out to be a wonderful teacher and I excelled in the second grade. I was on the honor roll the entire year. Thanks to my big sister instructing me during the summer.

I grew up and became an elementary school teacher. I never forgot my fabulous second grade teacher who turned my life around. Teachers mold the lives of students and their influence affects lives for a long time. Good or bad.