pact's point of view
The newsletter for adoptive families with children of color

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# A World of Hurt Even a Mother Can't Soothe

## by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

Once upon a time, my 5-year-old daughter, Korama, had a book that she loved more than any of the others on her shelf. Most nights before I put her to bed, she would ask me to read Stellaluna, a sweet story by Janell Cannon about a baby bat who finds her way back to the mother from whom she had been separated.

But Korama hasn't asked me to read that book for nearly four months. Not since our neighbor told her this joke:

"What do you call White babies who go to heaven? Angels. What do you call Black babies who go to heaven? Bats."

Upon hearing this, Korama giggled politely, then looked at me with a curious expression. No doubt she wanted me to make some sense of it for her. I didn't know how. I was frozen in my own state of confusion and disbelief. Words, the very things on which I depend to make my living, failed me. And as a result, I failed her.

This was not Korama's first encounter with racist ignorance. When she was 3, a fellow preschooler told her that the only thing she would ever be when she grew up was a nigger. A year later, at a different preschool, Korama was told by a classmate that she was not invited to the girl's birthday party because she was brown. Brown people, the little girl informed her, were not allowed to enter her home.

Each time Korama came to me and told me what had happened, I would hold her in my arms, as I usually did when she got hurt, and try to love the pain away.

"Oh sweetie," I would tell her in a syrupy mommy voice, "that was a mean thing to say. I'll talk to the teacher tomorrow and make sure you get an apology."

It was the same response I gave for all her other preschool bully complaints. And it usually worked. After a brief early-morning huddle between a school official and the offending child, Korama was given an "I'm sorry," and life went on. For her, at least.

For me, each event was a bitter prelude to the inevitable. Sooner rather than later, Korama's innocent oblivion was going to be permeated by racial hatred.

I knew this. Still, I could never bring myself to sit down with her and address the issue of racism head-on. She appeared to be too young to grasp the concept. And I did not want to have to teach it to her. Not ever, but especially not then. She was just developing socialization skills, just gaining the confidence to define herself on her own terms. I wanted her to spend as much time as she could in the center of her universe before she became conscious of the fact that society had already relegated her to its margins. But this last incident marked the end of such simplicity.

Whatever possessed our neighbor to share such a tasteless joke — which contained neither humor nor logic — with a child, I don't know. Or, for that matter, care. The reasons could never outweigh or erase the damage that was done.

The first night Korama said she didn't want to read Stellaluna, I asked her why. "Is that what I'm going to look like when I go to heaven?" she asked, pointing to the chestnut-colored bat on the cover of the book. There was such fear in her voice. It made my heart sink.

"No," I replied, groping for a way to change the subject.

"Then what will I look like?'"

My first thought was to show Korama a picture of a Black angel. But I wasn't sure if such a thing existed. I certainly hadn't seen any. Fortunately, a friend had recently given her a book of verse by Walter Dean Myers titled *Brown Angel.* Alongside the poems were many wonderful pictures of Black children. I pulled it off the shelf and began reading the first poem.

"Wow," Korama said, propping herself up on her bed. "These are angels? Hey, this one kinda looks like me."

That book became her regular bedtime story until she tired of it and began to request another one. Weeks went by without mention of bats or angels. I interpreted Korama's silence as victory; she had successfully jumped over yet another of racism's hurdles. No such luck.

On a bright Sunday morning, Korama and I went to the corner store to pick up a box of cake mix for our regular weekend baking date. The store was all out. We continued our search at a nearby grocery store, which unlike the scantily-stocked corner store had an entire aisle devoted to baking.

Korama was ecstatic when she saw the aisle, wider than

the length of her outstretched arms, of cake-mix boxes, each displaying a single scrumptious slice. It was like graduating from the Crayola eight-pack to the one with 64. She pointed to each box and asked me to tell her what the flavor was. One by one, I read the labels.

When I finished, I turned to ask her which one she wanted to buy. There were tears welled up in her eyes.

"Mommy," she said, "why is the angel's food cake white and the devil's food cake black? Are devils like bats? Does that mean I won't even go to heaven?"

Despite the years I had spent contemplating the profound statements I would make when I had to finally broach the topic of race, the moment caught me unprepared. My mind was filled with platitudes and ambiguities, all of which suddenly seemed stupid and meaningless in the face of my daughter's pain. But they were all I had to give.

"You are not going to turn into a bat or a devil," I told her.

"Then what will I be when I go to heaven?" she wanted to know. "Probably the same thing you decide to be while you are here on Earth." I said.

As we made our way back home, I explained to Korama that she would always be darker, shorter, taller, lighter, thinner or heavier than someone else. That not everyone would accept her for what she was; people would sometimes attempt to hold her differences against her. That their ignorance was their problem, not hers.

I left it at that, hoping it would suffice, at least for a while. But I know it won't for long. Why is angel's food cake white and devil's food cake black? You tell me. And I, in turn, will tell my daughter.

**The Happy Ending**

As I typed out the last few paragraphs of my essay, "A World of Hurt Even a Mother Can't Soothe," Korama came and stood behind me.

"That's my name," she said, pointing her little finger at the computer screen. "Are you writing me a letter?"

"No," I explained. "But it's a story about you."

All the pain of the incident returned to her eyes as she listened to what I had written. I could see that reading it to her had been a mistake and worried that having it published might prove to be one as well.

Fortunately, that was not the case. After the article was published, Korama and I received huge amounts of mail — in one week, nearly 100 pieces in all. I brought it all home, and as we opened each envelope we sat side by side on the living room floor as if it were Christmas morning.

There were packages containing carvings, drawings and other representations of Black angels; letters from people sharing similar experiences, offering comfort and encouragement.

Best of all, Korama received a letter from Janell Cannon, the author of Stellaluna. In addition, the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency, which represents Cannon, sent us a "Stellaluna" CD, which Korama immediately asked me to play. The story has since reclaimed its place as her "most bestest."

It was hard for Korama to believe that complete strangers could care so much.

"How do you feel about that?" I asked her.

"Good," she replied. "It makes me feel like people I don't know already love me. And that's good, isn't it, Mommy?"

"Yes," I agreed, "that's a real good thing."