

## The Black Nun

*black*

1. *lacking hue and brightness; absorbing light without reflecting any of the rays composing it.*
2. *characterized by absence of light; enveloped in darkness:*  
*“a black night.”*
3.     *a. pertaining or belonging to any of the various populations characterized by dark skin pigmentation, specifically the dark-skinned peoples of Africa, Oceania, and Australia.*  
        *b. African American.*
4. *soiled or stained with dirt:*  
*“That shirt was black within an hour.”*
5. *gloomy; pessimistic; dismal:*  
*“a black outlook.”*
6. *deliberately; harmful; inexcusable:*  
*“a black lie.”*
7. *boding ill; sullen or hostile; threatening:*  
*“black words; black looks.”*

—Dictionary.com

Troy Trout was one of those boys that wanted to start his week off by going to mass. He woke up at 7:00 a.m. every Sunday morning to iron his favorite pair of pants, which were the same color as the almond crayon he used to draw Jesus’s cross with. He didn’t like how his stiff pants made his pee-pee hurt while sitting through the priest’s long stories, but relief came when he’d stare at the photo of Jesus that hung above the Holy Father’s head. He imagined he was floating beside Jesus in a white robe as crisp as his Sunday morning pants. He saw David or Moses or some prophet in a coloring book doing this with Jesus once. He didn’t know what air up there felt like; it probably wasn’t much different from a salty sea breeze from the ocean’s breath. The light blue sky in Jesus’s photo had to be above a nice place like a beach.

Troy wanted to float with this Jesus in particular because he had green eyes and short reddish-brown hair. Troy never saw a Jesus that looked just like him. Jesus usually had long brown hair and blue eyes, or at least that's what he imagined. This Jesus must've been real because his memory could only paint bad copies of the other photos of Jesus. He saw his classmates' fingers making messy pictures of that Jesus in his brain. When they were done, Jesus's arms extended across storm clouds with open palms full of black holes in each hand. Troy didn't like the black holes; they represented a pain he didn't have enough imagination for. He wished that Jesus would stay out of his brain.

Troy didn't like it when the priest would end his sermon. This meant he'd have to leave his Jesus and his daddy, Frances Trout, would try to take him shopping for black pants. Troy wished he could pick out what he really wanted, which was a pair of white pants. Frances wouldn't stand for this. He'd say "come on, boy, don't be ridiculous," or something like that. Troy didn't like disappointing father, yet he always refused to try on black pants. The lighter the better. He didn't like black. Black reminded him of the holes in Jesus's hands.

Black also felt wrong. His classmates would finger paint Mr. Scrooge's last ghost carrying his pointy stick. Sometimes they couldn't even paint stuff that looked like anything. He'd just see a big lake of black. He knew if he stepped in it, the black would stick to him, or swallow him whole. This wasn't good.

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One Sunday after mass, Frances tried taking Troy shopping again in the store with the milky colored plastic floor. Frances picked up a pair of black pants from the circular chrome rack and scratched his chin. He looked like he was pretending to think. "You know what these pants remind me of?" Troy shook his head. "I fell into a burnin' ring of fire." Frances left the verse open for Troy to finish. Troy got excited and skipped to the end.

“The ring of fire! The ring of fire!”

“Calm down now,” Frances said pushing his open palm down into the floor.

“The ‘Ring of Fire’ song.”

“Yes, Johnny Cash,” confirmed Frances.

Troy nodded. It felt good to know answers to questions.

“What do you think of Johnny Cash, boy?”

“He’s pretty cool.”

“That’s right. Pretty cool. He’d sing to bad boys in prison dressed in pants just like these.”

“No way.”

“Yep.” Frances was quiet. Troy felt like he was supposed to answer his father with something, but he didn’t know what. A few seconds passed and Elvis started yelling through the speakers:

*The warden threw a party in the county jail  
The prison band was there and they began to wail*

Frances pointed to heaven. “Who’s that?”

“Jailhouse Rock!”

“Elvis Presley.”

“Oh.” Troy thought this was Johnny Cash too.

“You remember Elvis?”

“Yes sir. He was in *Forest Gump*.”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” Frances paused. Troy still didn’t understand what he was supposed to say. “He was pretty cool too, no?”

“Yes sir. Very cool.”

“Would you like to be cool like them?”

“I guess so.” Troy never really thought about it before.

“Well, all ya gotta do is wear these pants on Sunday. Cash and Presley were Christians and they wore black to Sunday service.” Troy felt sad. He didn’t like being tricked. Frances continued. “Why, Elvis was born in Tupelo, Mississippi. That ain’t but four hours north from here.” Troy looked at Frances staring through the fog of fluorescent lights. Troy didn’t feel like Frances was talking to him anymore. Frances looked back down at Troy and smiled with lots of lines in his face. He looked like the Roman that asked the crowd if they wanted to kill Jesus. “Go on now.” Frances nudged Troy forward. “Put them on and see how cool you look.”

Troy thought about it. It would make his father happy, but the black lake took over his brain. Frances sighed. Troy had been shaking his head very fast without even knowing it.

“Well, well. Mr. Trout. Didn’t know they let sinners in this store,” Sister Claudette shouted over Elvis at Frances.

“Well you’d be the first to know where the sinners frequent now, wouldn’t ya?” Frances smiled with Roman lines in his face again. “How ya doin’, Sister Claudette?”

“Was fine a minute ago. Now, not so sure.” She shook Frances’s hand. Her black sleeve dangled in midair—it was a tiny bit darker than her skin. “What are you boys doin’ here? Creatin’ mischief?” Sister Claudette put her hands on her knees bending down to look at Troy. All he could do was look at her garments rippling like black tidal waves.

“Hardly,” Frances said speaking for Troy. “Tryin’ to get Troy here to dress like a man. He’s never worn black slacks in his life. Well, not by choice anyway.”

“Is that right?” Sister Claudette shook her head.

“Tryin’ to tell him Elvis dressed in black, even on Sunday.”

“I’m sure he did,” Sister Claudette said standing up and shrugging. “Good seein’ ya, boys. Y’all have a blessed week.”

Frances nudged Troy forward. “Say bye to the Sister, boy.” Sister Claudette bent over again, but this time without bending her knees. All Troy could see was a sticky black tidal wave ready to take him away from his Jesus and Father and beaches and his almond pants.

“No! No! No! No! No!” Troy covered his ears and shielded his eyes with his elbows. He tried to bring light into his brain. Tried to go to the beach with his Jesus. He fell out of this scene because of a sharp pain that slammed against the back of his brain. He fell into the chrome rack swimming through the black pants.

“What’s the matter with ya, boy? You got a screw loose or somethin’?”

Troy looked around for Sister Claudette. She was swooshing through the warm fluorescent fog towards the finger printed glass door. Troy felt the imprint from his father’s knuckles in the back of his brain. They burned like fire. Troy began to cry.

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Troy could barely sit down. The black leather car seat felt like it was cooking the whoopin’ marks on his bottom. He wanted to cry, but he didn’t want Daddy to yell anymore.

Frances took a deep breath. He gripped the steering wheel so tight that Troy thought his white knuckles were going to pop. “You know, I thought we were over this nun business. You’re no dummy. You know they didn’t take Mommy away.” Troy felt like he was supposed to answer him with something. He didn’t want to. He looked at the radio and listened to “Ring of Fire.”

*I fell for you like a child  
Oh, but the fire went wild*

Frances popped the sound knob with his knuckle. “Answer me, boy!”

“I know they didn’t take her.”

“Then what?” Troy didn’t understand what he was asking. The Mississippi heat created a white mist in the car. Troy could feel sweat dripping between his tummy lines. Troy looked over hoping he wouldn’t have to ask what father meant. Frances seemed to understand that his question needed clarification. He spent time pronouncing every syllable slowly. “Why did you freak out on Sister Claudette?”

“She’s black.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Black’s scary.”

“Boy, that’s ignorant.” Frances let go of the steering wheel. The lines in his face looked as sharp and confused as fishing wire tangled in a reel. Troy could tell he was doing real thinking this time. When he seemed to figure out the answer, he started the car. Troy pushed the knob.

“Ring of Fire” was a relief.

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Troy liked how cold his white sheets were. He knew they would make him shiver from leaving the warm shower. He pulled his sky blue comforter over his body. He looked above his cedar dresser and saw a photo of a black Jesus. Troy shielded his eyes with his forearm. He was about to cry, but he muffled it to a soft whimper not wanting father to whoop him some more. He lowered his arm and opened his eyes slowly.

Black Jesus had long straight hair like blue eyed Jesus. He stood in front of a gray window with blue and red and green gems making circles and T’s. Black Jesus had his right finger up with two fingers ready to cross His believers. Black Jesus was strange.

Troy sat up against his white wall and stared. He thought about the movies. The movies always had villains, but he didn’t always like cheering against the villains. He remembered

watching a Jesus cartoon where all the characters looked like they were drawn with fat markers. Judas took gold coins and then kissed Jesus in the black woods. Judas was bad, but he knew the people making the movies were trying to make him bad. He felt sorry for Judas because nobody watching the movie would like Judas. Every time he saw the movie he wished Judas would do the right thing and not kiss Jesus this time so other people would like him. Black Jesus wasn't a villain, but He wasn't Troy's Jesus. He felt bad for black Jesus. Even though black Jesus was good, Troy felt like some people wouldn't think of Him as good. He couldn't say why. He did know his Jesus would be in mass on Sunday and the Holy Father would tell his people that Troy's Jesus in the photograph was good. Troy didn't understand what he was supposed to think. He didn't like Jesus in the pictures no more.