

Coloring Black as Evil

These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.

—Jude 1:12-13

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. 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. Troy 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 breeze blowing 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 red 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 Jesus and his daddy, Frances Trout, would try to take him shopping for black pants. Troy wished he could pick out 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 Daddy, 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 gooey, black lake. He knew if he stepped in it, the black would stick to him, or swallow him whole. This wasn't good.

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.

"A ring of fire! A 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. Troy thought 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'll 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 doing here? Creating 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. “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 and 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.

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. “Look, Troy. You’re a good boy. I raise you with manners, and you rarely embarrass me. Now I don’t know what has gotten into you with this nun business, but I’m gonna need some answers.” Troy avoided Frances’s bb pellet pupils. He looked to the radio hoping “Ring of Fire” would distract Daddy from wanting an answer.

*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 don’t know.”

“You want to go visit the bathroom again?”

Troy shook his head no.

“Then I’m going to need an answer in “five, four.” Frances began mouthing the left over numbers and subtracting time with his fingers. The Mississippi heat created a white mist in the

car. Troy could feel sweat dripping between his tummy lines. He waited until Frances's last finger began to disappear into his palm.

"She's black."

"What?"

"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. "Who told you not to like black people?"

"Nobody."

"Don't lie to me, boy. Tell me."

"Nobody. I don't like black."

"Black what?"

"The color. It's bad. I know it is. Every time I look at it, I can feel it. Black is always colored as death and sin and bad things in catechism. There ain't any black Jesuses, either. He looks like me."

Frances looked through the warm mist and the foggy front windshield. Troy could tell he was doing real thinking this time. Troy looked out of his passenger window. He felt like if he didn't look at Daddy, he wouldn't get another whoopin'. Troy heard the soft pop of the sound knob. "Ring of Fire" was a relief.

Troy liked ice cream. Frances treated him to some Dairy Queen after the car incident. Troy got vanilla soft serve with chocolate syrup in a clear plastic bowl.

"Hey now, is that black I see in your ice cream," Frances teased.

Troy stared at his ice cream.

“Oh geez. Eat up, boy.”

Troy never thought about it before. The chocolate syrup didn't bother him. It was sweet and felt good. He didn't usually like it when food touched his face, but he liked licking away chocolate syrup when it accidentally dripped down the sides of his mouth.

Troy's thoughts were startled by Frances slapping his furry hands on the red table. Troy looked up and saw Daddy's harvest wheat eyes wide open like Wiley Coyote before he falls into the canyon again. Troy laughed. He knew Daddy was ready to start fooling around again. “I have a surprise for you.” Troy leaned in excitedly wanting the answer. “Want to know what it is?”

“Tell me.”

“Why should I?”

“I don't know.”

“Come now, you have to have more fire in your tummy than that.” Frances folded his arms and leaned back into his seat as if he was resigned not to tell him.

“Please, Daddy. I really, really, really, really want to know!”

“Now that's what I like to hear. But I can't tell you yet.”

“Why not,” Troy asked in a whiney voice.

“Because it's a nighttime surprise.” Troy didn't know what this meant. The buzzing from the fluorescent light above filled a pause he didn't want to be in. It felt like forever before Daddy said anything. “In order to see your surprise, you're going to have to get into bed and look for it.”

“But how will I know where it is,” Troy asked continuing his whiney protest.

“You'll see it. All you have to do is look up.” Troy was confused. He thought maybe it would be a toy on his dresser, but for some reason he didn't think so. He was annoyed. Frances continued talking. “Would you rather I give you nothing?”

“No!”

“Then finish your ice cream. The sooner we get home, the sooner you’ll see your surprise.”

“Okay!” Troy smiled. He filled his long red spoon with soupy ice cream that had melted into the same color as his almond pants.

Troy wasn’t allowed into his room until Frances was done hammering on his wall. Troy was fine with that. He could watch his tape long enough to see Jesus put the ear back on the Roman’s head in the black woods. Jesus snapped the ear back into place like the corner of a puzzle piece. The fat marker blood dripping into the Roman's beard was gone too. Troy knew Jesus could perform His magic if something bad ever happened.

When Frances announced he was done, Troy ran as fast as he could into his room and dove head first into his bed, kicked his feet into the air, and rolled onto his back.

“You’re just like one of them roly-polies,” Frances teased. Troy laughed even though he didn’t know what that was. Troy climbed into his sheets. They made him shiver.

“Good night, Troy,” Frances said closing the door before Troy could respond. Troy yelled “love you” to the black room and the sound of boots thumping down the hall. Troy looked above his cedar dresser ready for his surprise. He immediately saw what it was—a photo of Black Jesus nailed to the wall above his light cedar dresser. 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 hand

up with two fingers ready to cross His believers. Black Jesus was strange. None of the black boys in his class wore their hair like Black Jesus.

Troy sat up against his white wall and closed his eyes. He was confused. Jesus was swimming in Crayola boxes housing crayons that had dulled to rounded tips, snapped in half, and picked up flecks of others hues from its neighbors. He didn't like a disorderly box, but he decided not to fight this image. Then, the black lake suddenly made an appearance. He rebuked himself for not resisting disorderly thoughts. He tried to remedy this flood of evil by thinking of his Jesus tape. He replayed the scene of Jesus in the black woods with the Roman. Suddenly, Troy thought of an answer. He felt smart, like when he figures out one of Daddy's questions all on his own.

Troy kicked off the sheets and tumbled out of bed. He landed with soft feet on the wooden floor. He tiptoed on the floorboards so they wouldn't moan and wake up Daddy. He pretended he was walking the plank towards Captain Hook's ticking crocodile. He had to see his Jesus tape one more time.

Frances's voice echoed down the small hallway corridor, "You better be sneaking off to go pee-pee."

"No sir", Troy said. He grew tall and stiff as if he had reached the last step before the big splash.

"Come here then."

Troy ran back down the hall away from the Jesus tape and towards Frances's room.

"Daddy, can I watch the Jesus tape one more time," he asked while stumbling through the door.

Frances sat up against the black marble headboard wiping the stickies from his eyes.

"Calm down now." He paused making dramatic grunts adults like to do when shifting. "Aren't you even going to say anything about your surprise?"

"I like it. Can I watch my tape?"

"Maybe. But first I want to hear what you really think about your surprise. Come on, spill the beans, boy."

Troy shifted making the boards moan. He looked below his plank and became afraid of the ticking crocodile beneath him. "I don't mind it. Honest."

Frances patted his hand at a space next to him on the bed. Troy got up on his tiptoes. Frances reached down and lifted him up from under his arm pits. Troy slipped his feet under the warm sheets before looking at Daddy's fishing wire face. "I won't be mad, but I want to know what you really think. Be honest. Saying what people want to hear counts as lying."

Troy shivered thinking of Moses's tablets brought down from the mountain. He colored "Though Shalt Not Lie" with a light gray marker on Moses day in catechism. Troy didn't want to go to hell. He thought really hard trying to think of the most honest answer possible. "Well, Black Jesus reminds me of Judas."

"Jesus," Frances exclaimed shaking his head in his hand. "Go on."

Troy didn't want to continue, but knew he had to save his soul from going to hell. "Well, he's like Judas. In my tape, Judas took the gold coins and then kissed Jesus in the black woods. Judas was bad. Every time I watch the tape, I pray Judas won't kiss Jesus and do the right thing. I know the people that made the tape want Judas to be the bad guy. It makes me sad that people won't like him."

"What on God's green earth does that have to do with anything," Frances exclaimed punching the empty spot of the bed on the other side of them.

"I don't want Black Jesus to be a bad guy."

"He's not! We have black friends. We don't think He is the bad guy."

"I know. But I don't think people like Him. I don't know why. All I know is they know how to make me feel like Judas is the bad guy."

The ceiling fan whipped its cord around and around. The whirring noise filled the silence. Troy was nervous, but wanted to see if he gave the right answer. Frances crossed himself and looked up. "Jesus, I try to be a good guy. Please let me believe I am a good guy." He turned away from Troy, whispering, "I must know I'm one of the good guys." Frances's knees curled up into his chest.

Troy knew Daddy wasn't interested in correcting Troy no more. Troy pressed his finger into his eyeball to stop a tear from sliding down his cheek. He ruined Daddy's surprise. He wished the truth was easy. "The truth will set you free." That's what all the Sisters in catechism said to him. He wished it felt like that.