

A light-skinned African-American girl is born to a light-skinned African-American man. He realizes his daughter's complexion could help her avoid the trauma of being Black in America if he can raise her to appear and behave like a White person.

She's Such A Bright Girl: An American Story

by Petula Caesar

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**SHE'S SUCH A BRIGHT GIRL:
AN AMERICAN STORY**



PETULA CAESAR

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CHAPTER ONE

I gave birth to my daughter, Jasmine Marie-Lorraine on Friday, September 27, 1991, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. She was named after the actress/dancer Jasmine Guy, one of the stars of the popular television show *A Different World*, my absolute favorite television show at the time. Jasmine Guy played the rich, snobby Hillman College student Whitley Gilbert, and the role made Guy the “it girl” of that moment in African-American pop culture. I asked Tamal, Jasmine’s dad-to-be, if he liked the name Jasmine for our daughter-to-be, and he did. Jasmine’s two middle names were the middle names of her grandmothers, my mother and his mother respectively. Additionally, the middle name Marie is a bit of a tradition on my mom’s side of the family. All the girls had the middle name Marie, including myself, my mom, my sister, and several cousins. I even have a cousin whose first name is Marie. When she was born, I found I had given birth to myself. Jasmine was chubby, dark-eyed, round-faced, round-eyed, big-headed, light-skinned and kinky haired, just like me. When Jasmine went with the nurse to the nursery at the hospital, Tamal went to see her, and my mom found him sitting outside the nursery looking quite dejected. When my mom asked what was wrong, he said, “Man, that’s Tula’s baby. Ain’t nothing of me in her nowhere.”

“She doesn’t look nothing like me,” he said when I asked him about it later. “She’s all you. She looks just like you, same color as you, not even a little bit brown, a little redbone baby.” He seemed extremely disappointed. It wasn’t the response I expected from a man fortunate enough to have his first-born child arrive healthily into this world. It never occurred to me Jasmine’s father would be anything other than loving toward her. Tears of joy filled his eyes when I told him I was pregnant. He gave a heartfelt declaration of love for both of us as he touched my stomach, eyes wide with amazement, telling me he couldn’t wait to be the best father in the world. Tamal grew up without his dad,

and he spoke of his dad's absence quite often. It always troubled him. "I can't wait to be a father to our baby," he said in the softest, gentlest voice imaginable. "I want to be a good father. The father I never had. I swear I will be." He repeated this throughout my pregnancy. Would our daughter's light skin change his desire to be a good dad? On the other hand, I knew my father's sentiments about Jasmine's complexion would be the exact opposite of Tamal's. My dad expressed endless concerns about his future granddaughter's complexion during my pregnancy, but I didn't have the energy to address his comments about "darkening the line" in our family. After Jasmine's birth, my dad adored his little "Jazzy-Poo," as he called her. His pride in being a grandfather poured out of him. The mere mention of Jasmine's name made him smile brightly; his face turned into the sun. I did all I could to block out my thoughts around how much his adoration had to do with her coloring, trying not to wonder how he would have felt about a dark-skinned grandchild.

I enjoyed bringing Jasmine to visit my parents on Sunday afternoons at their house in East Baltimore to enjoy a big country breakfast with them. When we pulled up in front of the house, my dad would often be sitting on the front porch, and the minute Jasmine got out of the car she would call out "Pop-Pop" and run up the porch steps as fast as she could to fling herself onto his lap, throw her arms around his neck, clutching him with all her might and kissing his face. He would kiss her back with just as much enthusiasm, and they would begin laughing and chattering away. It reminded me so much of my childhood, my heart filled with warmth as I watched them. I was delighted at his pleasure with her. Seeing Jasmine and my dad together healed a little broken hurt place inside me, the place where a younger me sensed my father's dissatisfaction with me. Their closeness offered a bit of salve to the sore spot where my insecurities about my identity lived. I finally offered him something he could find no fault in. My beautiful, bright-eyed daughter adored him as feverishly as I did when I was her age. Maybe he could never accept me, but if he could accept her, it would be as if he was accepting me, because he would be accepting the best part of me.

One Sunday morning when Jasmine was four years old we went to visit my parents. My mom and dad were in the kitchen, my mom at the stove making pancakes, and my dad sitting at the kitchen table. Jasmine ran over to Pop-Pop and hugged him tightly around his knees. He picked her up and placed her on his lap, balancing her gingerly, the huge sunshiny smile she always brought out of him in place. Jasmine snuggled up close to him, burying her face in his chest. He began gently stroking her head. I remembered how he would often stroke my head when I was little. I recalled how protected it made me feel. How safe and sound and secure, like nothing in the world could hurt or harm me. And as he stroked Jasmine's hair, my dad looked over at me with great affection. My heart swelled. Before I could say, "I love you daddy," my dad said, "Petula, you have a beautiful little girl here. You should be proud of her. But it is a shame about her hair."

Jasmine immediately sat straight up. Her smile disappeared. She grabbed at her hair with both her little hands, pulling at it, her face full of abject horror. "Pop-Pop!" she cried out. "What's wrong with my hair?" She tugged and tugged and tugged, pulling harder and harder. "What's wrong with it? What's wrong?" I rushed over to her, tearing her from his lap. I was livid. My daughter saw the dark anger in my eyes and asked in an even louder voice, "Mommy, what's wrong? Is it my hair? What's wrong with my hair?" She began to cry. My father responded to her outburst with, "Jazzy? What are you crying for? Stop that!" And then he turned to me. "You know exactly what I mean, Petula. She's pretty. Lovely complexion. Smart. But this hair just isn't what we hoped for." He shook his head to emphasize the point.

Anger burned through me. I wanted to punch my dad. I wanted to curse him out. Somehow, I managed to cap my rage long enough to ignore my father, bounce Jasmine on my hip, smile sweetly and say, "No baby, your hair is beautiful." I touched her hair with as much tenderness as I could muster, winding my fingers gently through her kinks, trying to will the reassurance into her four-year old body. I moved my hand to her face, drying tiny tears. Jasmine placed her head against my shoulder, and I closed my eyes, feeling the generations of hurt swirling around the room.

When I opened my eyes, I looked over at my mother, as I had so many times during my childhood during moments like these. I stared at her as hard as I could. She stood by the stove. I thought about how most of my childhood memories of her were of her being in the kitchen. I thought about how every time I looked toward her for support when my dad did this, she was usually feeding him. Despite our history, despite all the times she let my father pull my sense of self out from under me, despite the hurt she knew I'd suffered because of what he wanted me to be, I still looked to my mom. I needed her to intervene. After all, this time it wasn't for me. It was for her granddaughter. This moment in time needed to be grasped and made right and whole. Our eyes locked. I silently pleaded with her, begging her to join me in stopping my dad from hurting my baby. I beseeched her harder than I ever had in my life, mentally on my knees, asking her not to allow this to be our legacy. This wasn't about Petula or the past. This was about Jasmine and the future. I searched her face, and though I felt the disapproval of my dad's words vibrating through her, she said nothing. Not a word. She looked over at her husband and gently shook her head, but her mouth remained closed. After a few long moments, she turned away from all of us.

After she turned away, I looked back down at my daughter, who was soothing herself in my arms. She had placed two fingers in her mouth, which she always did when she was upset, and was sucking them. With her other hand, she was playing with my hair. I said, "Sweetie pie," and she looked up at me, dark eyes still cloudy and confused. "Why don't you go to the living room and find something to watch on television for a few minutes. I need to have a few words with Pop-Pop." She released my hair and touched her own. After watching her play in her own hair for a few seconds, I raised my hand to her hair and joined her. Her fingertips found mine, and our fingers locked together for a moment, strands of her hair pressed between our palms. I knew how I handled her in this moment would impact her for years to come. "Your hair is just fine baby. It's beautiful just like you."

Still unsure, Jasmine turned her head slightly to look back over at her grandfather. He didn't return her gaze. He sat stony faced and angry, looking straight ahead. "Look at me sweetheart," I said to Jasmine, who turned back toward me. "Your hair is fine. I'm not sure what Grandpa

meant but let me talk to him about it. Go watch television.” She finally seemed a bit more at ease. She smiled, and I kissed her cheek, and she kissed mine. She climbed down out of my arms. Before she ran off, she turned and said to her grandfather, “I like your hair Pop-Pop. It’s so shiny and black.”

Once she left the room, I let the dam break.

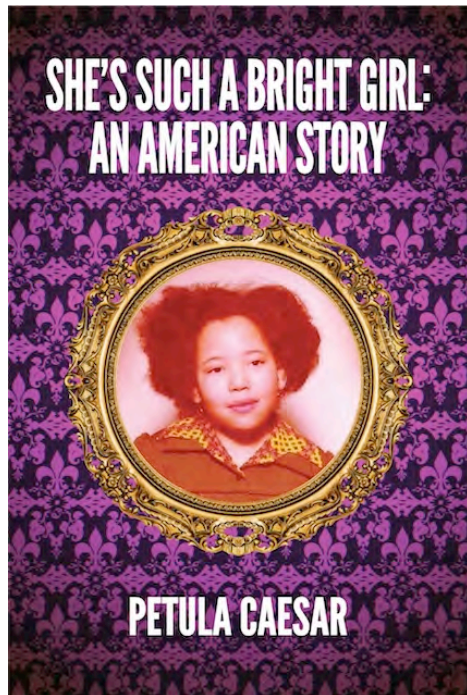
I was loud, louder than I had ever been in my life when speaking to my dad. I made no effort to be respectful, to be mindful that he was my dad. I made no attempt to remember his past, to remember the seeds of self-hate sewn into him so young. Now he was someone who hurt my baby. My memories of him doing the exact same things to me flew around in my head like a tornado. By displaying so many self-hating behaviors, he constantly reminded me I wasn’t good enough. To him, everything was wrong with me from head to toe because I was Black, and only being White could solve it. It all came bubbling to the surface. It added volume to my voice. I cursed at him. I cried and said things about self-hatred, about White supremacy, oppression, and pain, and how well so many Black people oppressed other Black people. And I WOULD NOT allow him to inflict those things on Jasmine. The rage I suppressed all my life flew at him full throttle for at least five minutes. My fists were tightly clenched the whole time, and I repeated in my head over and over, *don’t hit him, don’t hit him, please don’t hit him. Don’t hit him like the last time.* My mother made a few comments about me shouting at my father, telling me to be respectful. I ignored her the same way she ignored me all my life. I was so hurt by my dad and disappointed in my mom tears began to sting my eyes and I started to yell at them both, even louder than before. I began blubbering. The angrier I got, the more incoherent I became, and the deeper my sobs became. I was breaking in half. I yelled so loud and so long and with so much force and emotion I started to blackout a little, floating in and out of consciousness. I would come to, hear a little bit of what was happening, then black out again. My brain became overloaded and started short circuiting. The connection wouldn’t hold the entire time.

When I fully came back to myself, Jasmine and I were sitting in my car. A sharp band of pain wound itself around my head. “What

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happened mommy,” Jasmine asked. “I heard so much yelling. Are you okay mommy?”

I drove away in silence. I really didn't have an answer. It took the next ten years of my life to find one.



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