



Short Story

Tinted Origin

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Keywords

African ancestry, Puerto Rico, enslavement, Africa, colonization

She used to take a seat in front of the palm tree that covered a small shed where Mr. Perez had once lived. And she liked to venture behind his shed to look at her reflection in a small pond that had formed after repeated heavy rains. Her long, curly hair used to take up most of the image and exude a sweet coconut scent, although its thickness meant it stayed in place even in strong winds. Her large brown eyes, with full lashes, were her favorite feature, for they had a purple circle around the iris, and she loved purple hues. Her golden-brown skin glowed in the sun, while her coral lips glistened as a few dewdrops fell on them. However, the remains of the small house were gradually decaying; passersby saw no house; they saw ruins; they saw an empty

shed. But Cryselle saw more than that; she saw a story, a story that no one wanted to write down or take notes on.

Cryselle also saw a story in the way her grandparents walked together in the evening, holding hands, and greeting neighbors around Sector Rincón, in the town of Cayey. She felt the warmth of the sun's rays on her skin when her grandmother smiled, and the smell of fresh fudge, when her grandfather kissed her grandmother. She heard salsa music when her mother cooked rice and beans, and she seemed to see a rainbow of colors when her cousins visited. She liked to reminisce about her childhood memories when they all went to the store next to her grandparents' house to buy piragüas and besitos de coco. Sometimes they ignored most of the houses along the way, but not the leafy mango trees that provided good shade for the brown horses tethered to the trees on a weekly basis. Mr. Robert, the owner of the store, always greeted them warmly and gave them more than they paid for. Sometimes she would just stay quiet, unmoved by things, and her mother would worry.

Cryselle was a keen observer who liked to collect details in her head and make up stories when she was idle. She had a fondness for history books, and even more so for those that contained big pictures from the past. She was more interested in encyclopedias and the world atlas. She also loved to get lost in books about traveling, especially the ones that also showed how things really worked. Her favorite book was one with a gray cover and colorful yellow letters that said, "The Why of Things." One of her favorite places to collect data, aside from family documents and pictures, was her grandfather's storage room, which was on the first floor of their farmhouse. There were days when she would take pieces of paper that were scattered everywhere, and write poems that did not seem to stop, until she was no longer able to catch her breath, and was forced to stop writing. At other moments, she wrote stories that took her into another space, and she felt like she was not in her grandfather's storage; she was somewhere else, traveling. She did not know how to end these moments of writing. A pen or a pencil was a great threat to time, because if she took one of them between her fingers, she would lose track of where she was and the time of day. Her grandmother had to call her several times to be heard by her. Sometimes she missed lunch and had to be chased all over the house to get her to eat. Writing kept her alive in a state of contentment, where she did not get hungry.

She spent hours checking the boxes that her grandparents kept under layers of dust and piles of paper.

One summer, she spent most of her time reading these books and looking at old pictures of the family until a rare, dusty letter fell on her lap. She had never seen such a detailed, artistic piece of paper. It was a work of art. It was an old letter written in beautiful cursive handwriting. “It must have been written by an artist,” she thought. The letter was written in a kind of English, not like the other documents she used to find there. And Cryselle could understand that it was a request for freedom. It also looked like a form to free a worker from some kind of contract, but it had not been signed. The date was 1745, and the elegant markings and patterns on the paper were stunning. Cryselle could not let go for a while. She looked at the letter for minutes, maybe hours, until her grandmother entered the room and found her sitting on the cold floor with a stack of pictures around her, and this particular piece of paper in her hands. Her grandmother did not seem very pleased to see her holding it. She became very serious.

“What are you doing with that?” her grandmother asked.

“What is this?” asked Cryselle.

“Nothing important!” she answered, taking the letter from the girl’s hands and asking her to get up and leave the room.

After that day, the room remained locked, and she simply had to stay in the field with the chickens and horses or near the flowing river to occupy her thoughts. But she kept thinking about the piece of paper she found. Who had written it? Cryselle wanted to ask her mother but did not dare upset her like she had with her grandmother.

The days at school were different, with moments of total concentration on her subjects. Though she sometimes seemed to smell jasmine flowers when her teacher, Mrs. Eloiza, spoke, she never mentioned it and probably never would. And, in recent lessons, Cryselle had been very drawn to the topics of enslavement, the Middle Passage, and her ancestors from the 1600s. Mrs. Eloiza was very realistic about all these topics, not sparing the painful truths about the history of enslavement in Puerto Rico. She presented facts and historical accounts and focused on the African people who were exploited and treated as if they were nothing, next to the celebrated explorers who brought them to the island against their will. She talked about their

journeys through the stormy ocean, their painful struggles, and their arrival in Puerto Rico. Cryselle enjoyed her new teacher's lessons because she had never experienced history in this way. Her previous history classes were misleading, she thought. They focused on the Spanish colonizers of the time, and their cruel actions meant to be "achievements" and "discoveries." Her high school even celebrated a day in honor of Cristobal Columbus, and students were expected to dress as criollos or Taínos, while other students with lighter skin color were encouraged to dress as Spaniards and landowners.

Cryselle always silently noted that no one wanted or needed to dress up as an enslaved African. And there was no reason to talk to her family about it because she would always hear the same obnoxious answer, "We are descended from a line of Spanish and Portuguese settlers, straight from the Peninsula, my dear ..." That may never change; her family may never think of the possibility of descending from Africans. But she felt connected to certain images she had seen in books, with the sad, silent faces of enslaved Africans, who had to work like machines all their lives. So, she decided to do something different at the next Cristobal Colón's Day celebration—dress as an enslaved African. She knew exactly where to get the costume with the off-white shades, and how to get other items like a sugar cane sickle, or an improvised needle and cloth. There was only one small problem; her skin was not dark. Her family was of a light complexion, always spoke of their Portuguese great-grandparents, and their Spanish ancestors, to whom they owed their lineage and ability to acquire farmland. It did not matter to Cryselle; she was going to do it somehow. She did not know if she should ask Mrs. Eloiza first, since she was so caring. But she kept silent.

The day came fast enough; it was a Friday. Cryselle woke up at six in the morning and already had everything ready: a bone white shirt, a skirt of the same color, a rough cotton scarf to fix her hair, an old leather bag with the sickle, and even blue face paint to paint the tears from her eyes that made her look tired. She opened the room door and tiptoed into the kitchen, took a bite of a piece of freshly baked bread with butter that her mother had left on the kitchen counter, and drank a glass of orange juice.

"Baby! I'll be in the kitchen in a minute. Eat your breakfast," her mother called.

“Thank you, Mom. I’m leaving early today; I have a lot of work to do for Mrs. Eloiza.”

She quickly grabbed her backpack and lunch and headed to school. When she arrived, she parked as usual, grabbed her things, and headed towards the classroom while everyone looked at her in puzzlement and disgust. She heard: “You’re crazy.” “What’s wrong with you?” “What are those pieces of cloth?” “What are you?” “Yuck,” etc. Cryselle almost stepped on the principal’s foot because he appeared out of nowhere, and stood in front of her, while she looked at the people yelling at her.

“What are you doing, Cryselle?” he asked.

“I have disguised myself as ...”

“As a slave? Who told you to do that? Mrs. Eloiza? Unacceptable!” he shouted as he walked toward her classroom.

“No! It was ...” She tried to tell him that it was her idea alone, but he was moving too fast.

He entered the classroom and called the teacher, followed by Cryselle, who ran as fast as she could to reach them, and tell them about her idea. When the principal asked Mrs. Eloiza about her costume, the teacher looked directly at Cryselle. She was slightly surprised.

“I don’t see anything wrong with it, Mr. Lopez. Why are you upset?” she said, smiling at Cryselle.

“We did not order the students to dress like slaves. You know we don’t do that. Why did you do it?” he asked.

“I was ...” Cryselle was interrupted again, this time by Mrs. Eloiza.

“Oh, don’t worry about it. We should always have representation for every piece of the puzzle. We should be an example of tolerance for other schools, or not, Mr. Lopez?” she said, looking at the other students who were sitting in their chairs, waiting for class to begin.

“You are right, Mrs. Eloiza. But for next time, I need to know.”

Cryselle sat in her chair after the principal left, feeling the gazes of her classmates on her the entire time, until class was over. What was wrong with her outfit? After all, ... it was herself.

After all the classmates left, Mrs. Eloiza told her that her costume was the best she had ever seen, and that she was very brave to dress like a person who had been

enslaved, which no one had ever done before. She asked her why she did it, and Crysellé told Mrs. Eloiza that was exactly why she wanted to do it in the first place.

“Everyone always dressed up as colonizers, enslavers, Columbus himself, or something like that. But the enslaved did all the work, and no one ever recognized them.” Mrs. Eloiza nodded her head and smiled.

“Now is the time to pay tribute to the ancestors,” said the teacher, holding Crysellé’s hand and leading her to the center of the school, where everyone had gathered.

At first, people did not look at Crysellé, but slowly they put aside their prejudices, and their own shame, and welcomed her to the activities where there were snacks to eat, and music and games for the students. Crysellé was having a good time when she decided to sit on a wooden bench near the library for a while. She felt a little dizzy, but she thought it was because she had not slept enough or eaten a proper breakfast before school. As she relaxed and began to feel better, she noticed a Black woman looking directly at her. The woman was standing in the crowd but did not seem to move. She was simply standing in the middle of the crowd of people, dressed in a ghostly gray garment, with its pieces of cloth—like made of a semitransparent material or thick fog—undulating in the air. It was not quite clear to her from where she was sitting. But the woman’s piercing black eyes were hypnotizing, and they had a distinctive purple circle around the dark iris, just like hers. Crysellé felt a cool breeze grip her from her toes to her head, leaving her frozen, as she could not stop looking at the woman. While people moved on indefinitely, not noticing the woman, Crysellé saw her raise her left hand and show it to her. Her hand had no fingers, and there were dark purple spots where her fingers were supposed to be. Crysellé immediately looked at her own hand; it hurt very badly. She felt as if something was tingling hard, as if her fingers were about to fall out of her hand. She let out a loud scream.

“Ahhhhh! No!”

“What’s wrong?” asked Mrs. Eloiza, holding Crysellé’s left hand.

“I don’t know! This woman ... I don’t know! I was in pain!” she shouted, pointing to the crowd. But the lady had disappeared.

“What woman?”

“Nothing, Mrs. Eloiza ... I didn’t feel well,” she said.

“I’m going to call your parents. You look very pale.”

She was taken home and stayed in bed thinking about what she had seen at school. She thought about it so much that she fell asleep at 9 p.m., although she usually never did. Her mind lingered on that encounter, and she had a dream that night that she remembered the next day. She dreamed about the woman, who this time, was trying to tell her something about a large book, with old, cream-colored pages. She showed Cryselle the book several times and pointed to it, and there was a red ink blot, the first ink to appear in a series of what looked like signatures. The names were so blurry that she could not make out any of them. These names, many names, were written in fading dark ink on the pages, and the last page had a smudge. For a second, Cryselle thought she saw her grandfather’s name, but it was another dark ink smudge; the rest of the page was blank. After showing Cryselle the notebook, she led Cryselle to a place that resembled her grandparents’ farmland, pointed to it, and the many gaudules that grew there. Cryselle looked at them, and the plants began to darken and curve downward until they died. “What’s wrong?” she screamed in her dream.

“Darlin! Darlin! It was only a dream! Hey ... hi,” her mother said as she gradually came back from her dream.

“Mamá ... I ...”

“Wait, Cryselle... you’re burning up with fever! Let me take your temperature ...” her mother said.

“I am fine ...”

“Not fine at all. You have got a fever. I’m going to call the doctor. You’re not going to school today.”

Her mother let her rest during the morning and brought her medicine, some good hot food, and fresh orange juice. But Cryselle was getting worse, and the doctor could not tell what was wrong with her. It was not a virus; it was something he had never seen before. The symptoms were almost nonexistent. She had a fever, chills, and the fingers on her left hand turned purple for no reason. Now and then she would say a few words that made no sense before shutting herself off and falling into a deep sleep right after.

Cryselle did not know how much time had passed since her last nap when she heard her mother talking loudly on the phone to her grandfather, who seemed upset about something. She could hear that something had happened to the crops overnight, and they had lost the plants. Also, the water from the nearby river had stopped flowing. They feared it was foul play, but Cryselle felt she knew more. She remembered the dream she had the night before, and it did not seem to be a coincidence. She was getting impatient and nervous, because how was she going to make them believe what she had seen? She did not know what to do.

After a few minutes, her body became quite stiff. She knew something was going on, but she did not know what. When she tried to call out to her mother, she felt that the words could not come out of her mouth and suddenly felt too heavy. Slowly, she blacked out, seeing nothing. Her body moved on its own, and as stiff as it was, it took a sitting position on the bed. Her head moved, and her eyes looked at her mother, but they did not look like Cryselle's eyes. The fingers of her left hand turned purple again and swelled, even worse than before. Her mother saw them, screamed, and dropped her cell phone on the floor.

"Cryselle, baby? What's wrong?"

"Bring me the book, Giselle." came a voice from Cryselle's mouth that sounded like someone drowning in water.

"What... what book? What do you mean?"

"The book your father has. The book of your blood!" she demanded as her eyes began to turn white.

"Okay! All right! But ... you're not my baby. Where's ... my baby?"

"She's fine. She's safe. I need that book, now!"

It was only about an hour before Cryselle's grandfather appeared, carrying a large bag, and coming with his wife. Both looked surprised and embarrassed for something Giselle did not seem to know.

"She will feel the book if we hold it closer..." whispered the grandfather.

"Do it! And stop this madness!" the grandmother retorted.

"What are you two talking about?" asked Giselle.

“You see... there’s a reason why all these names can’t be read clearly and are just blots, ink blots.” he said, holding one of the pages of the old book and showing it to Giselle.

“Papá...what kind of book is this? It looks so old! What do you mean?”

“We hope this will cure our Crys. She is held by the spirit of one of our ancestors who was kept hidden a long time ago. She was a West African who wrote for her first master and mastered the art of words. She was to be freed, but her master died suddenly and did not release her. Shortly after, she was sold to an evil man who raped her and cut off the fingers of her left hand so she could no longer write,” he said as he looked at the ground.

“What are you saying? ...” asked Giselle.

“She is the true mother of our bloodline; without her, we would not exist. Her daughter mixed with a Spaniard, and that’s why we are the way we are. My great-grandparents hated the idea and forbade the mention of her name; she was not even allowed to sign in our family book. That is why the red stain is there. It was her blood. Even though she wrote the introductory pages of the book and drew the title page, she should be the first name in our book,” said the grandfather, his eyes watering.

“Bring her here!” a deep voice demanded.

“We are so sorry ...” said the grandfather.

“N ... Now!”

In front of the bed, Cryselle stood upright and pointed to the book, still with empty eyes. The grandfather showed her the book and went on slowly, trembling slightly at the sight of his granddaughter. He placed the book on the bed and began to walk backwards until he reached the door and stood next to the others. The one who was not Cryselle at that moment, took the book without even arching her back; her neck was stiff as a board and her arms stretched as if she were a plastic doll. She opened the book and looked for the first page with the red stain on it. A translucent quill pen with a long transparent feather appeared between her fingers, and with all the fingers of her left hand still as purple as ever, she began to write something down. A light illuminated the room, and the book closed by itself. Cryselle fainted and fell to the floor, her lilac pajamas soaked in sage-scented sweat.

When the grandfather picked up the book and opened the first pages, instead of the red spot, there was the name “Eshe,” written in elaborate cursive. And after her name, all the other names were also clear and distinct, without stains. The names were easy to read, and he saw his father’s, grandfather’s, and great-grandfather’s names on the list. In addition, he could now read his, which had disappeared shortly after he signed it at the age of 17, when he came of age.

Cryselle regained consciousness and was brought to rest. Slowly, her eyes returned to normal, her skin regained its healthy color, and her fingers were no longer purple. Her body stiffness disappeared, and she looked like the 16-year-old girl she had always been.

The next day, the farmland looked the same as always, as if nothing had happened to the plants. The water flowed to the plants as usual; the river had plenty of crystal-clear water; and even small, colorful fish appeared. But the grandfather noticed that the number of gandules plants increased, and they also looked even healthier than before.

For one day, he took care of the plants, and he was exhausted. He was already old, but he had to continue taking care of the land. He also noticed that most of the names listed in the formerly cursed book were of the male members of the bloodline. Yet, Cryselle had freed the family, so perhaps it was time for her to sign the book. “I will ask her to sign it the next time I see her.” said the grandfather.

After taking care of the chickens and the other animals, grandfather turned to the back of the house, where he kept some of his tools. Next to the sickle he never used, untouched, off-white clothes lay on the floor. Clothes he had never seen before, with a large stain of blood that looked dark brown, lay on the left side of a white skirt.

“The white clothes ...”

“... with my blood in it.”

“And there was my favorite pen ...”

“... lying on little Crys’ desk with its shiny feather.”