

The Colour of Milk

Camilla Balshaw

The first letter came on a December morning a few days before Christmas.

It was addressed to Elizabeth and I recognised Alice's familiar handwriting that sloped and glided like an aeroplane. There was one single line of text.

*'Dear Elizabeth,
Look a little more closely, honey.'*

'What does it mean Richard?' Elizabeth said.

'It's some kind of joke, a prank'. I said.

I kissed Elizabeth's head, and before I tore the letter into tiny pieces I noticed the stamps, North Philadelphia.

Alice was my first wife and I'd left her two years ago. She was the neighbourhood beauty who sang spirituals every Sunday as though her life depended on it and now she'd found me.

The second letter came when Elizabeth's folks were over. I didn't hear the mail until Elizabeth came into the dining room with an envelope clasped in her hand.

'We're getting the strangest letters', she sat down and placed the unopened envelope on the table.

'Perhaps you shouldn't be reading it now honey'. I glanced at her folks. 'I'm sure your dad would love another piece of apple pie'.

'What letters dear?' Her mother said. She put down her fork and looked to me for reassurance.

I smiled, cut a deep slice of pie and watched juice spill from the buttery centre.

Elizabeth's mother knew her daughter wasn't much to look at and she recognised I was a good catch: solid, hard-working and reliable. I'd given Elizabeth a white picket fence, a symmetrical house and coffee mornings with her friends who looked like Doris Day. Her parents liked me, even though they didn't know much about my background. They'd never met my family. I told them they were all dead.

Elizabeth tore open the letter and read it in her long accentuated southern drawl.

*'Dear Elizabeth,
Ask the fraud if he remembers.'*

I turned up the radio and asked my father-in law who he thought would take the league this year.

'Someone's playing a prank on us', I told them.

By Wednesday there was another. I came home to find Elizabeth in the kitchen. She handed me the letter and sat at the table with her head in her hands.

*'Dear Elizabeth,
He left me. He wanted an easier life.
I was too visible. Ask if he remembers?'*

'What does it mean Richard?' she said.

I patted her head as though she were the family pet.

'Ain't no use worrying yourself. I said.

Friday came and there was another.

*'Dear Elizabeth,
He's a cutey ain't he? Those big brown eyes.
Look a little more closely, honey.'*

I pulled Elizabeth toward me. Her voice was muffled. 'I want a baby'.

'We talked about this, remember? The condition in my family. We could have a deformed child. How would you cope?'

There was a defiance in her I'd never seen before. Her chin tilted upward. She met me square on and even stood a little taller.

'Richard, I want a baby.'

Maybe it was over confidence on my part; I agreed.

The letters stopped as swiftly as they'd started and by the fall of 1954 she was pregnant. I told Scott, her brother, I presumed it would take longer. We were tight Scotty and I, and so close Elizabeth said he was more of a brother to me than her.

'Maybe she's got herself another fella'. I confided in him. 'I've been so busy at work I haven't had the time for you know, any of that kinda stuff.'

We were sat in Pete's Bar. We met there most Fridays. Scott cradled a beer and told me about an altercation he had with an 'uppity' negro. We listened to an antiquated juke box. It played country music, which I hated, but drummed my fingers against the counter to show I was one of them.

I sipped my beer, inhaled, waited and lowered my voice.

'You know Elizabeth's kinda sympathetic to the coloured cause' I said.

'I didn't realise my sister was a nigger-lover!' Scott snorted.

'Well, times are a-changing' I said sipping my beer.

'Not here in Pulaski. 'Ain't nothing like that here. Folks know there place'.

I nodded my agreement and said, 'I just hope Elizabeth knows that'.

And then I told Scott of my concerns, that she might be over-friendly with one or two of them. Scott's mouth twitched and his eyebrows knotted in the way they did just before he got into a brawl.

I'd planted a seed. I sat back in my seat confident germination had taken place. Over the next few weeks Elizabeth's 'nigger loving sympathies' became a regular topic of our Friday nights at Pete's.

She and I continued on as usual. I patted her stomach and told her I loved her. She was convinced we were having a girl and one joyless afternoon we painted the nursery pink.

When I got the phone call in the spring. I was at work.

'You'd better get over here Richard'.

It was Scott and I knew by the tone of his voice something was wrong.

The hospital smelt of cleaning chemicals and baby powder. Nurses in well-ironed uniforms spoke in hushed tones and wouldn't meet my gaze. Elizabeth's eyes were bloodshot and her words incomprehensible. I told the nurse to give her a sedative.

It was covered up in swathes of fabric like gift wrap. One of the nurses held it as though it were contagious. She offered it to me, but I didn't take it. She pulled the blanket so I could more closely, as if it were a moment to savour.

It was the colour of coal and had a full head of black, kinky and unruly hair.

There was a scandal of course. There was no question I could accept what Elizabeth had done. She and the baby left town and folks in the community rallied round. I ate pumpkin pie and cookies till my belly burst.

I never knew how Alice found out where we lived. She never wrote to me again but I remember what she used to say.

'Richard,' you're the colour of milk. You can blend right on in, you can pass, but not dark girls like me'.