

My uncle was a white man. That's what all us children said. But we were never allowed to ask how he got that way. Too much prying about the past could earn you a firm smack across the lips. It was best to keep your questions to yourself. So, we made up stories instead, about how he had transformed himself. How he had begun his life as black as the rest of us. Black eyes, black skin, black little curls too shy to come out and play.

How one day as a little boy a Cape turtle dove had called the thought into my uncle's ear. The thought, maybe I don't have to be this way. And a little patch of yellow skin had started to grow around his belly button. Every morning when the women were busy shining floors and making porridge, my uncle had retreated to his own place in the fields beyond the yard, had coaxed out of the trees that turtle dove, to come and call to him some more. Every day the two friends would meet and whisper and sing and call, and every day the yellow patch would grow and grow. Now get lighter, now fade to white. Until very soon there was more of the patch than there was of the black. And he was on his way away from the dark.

I remember the visits my uncle paid to my mother. They were few and far between, but I remember everything about him when he came. I remember his hair, delicately light, soft-looking. He kept it cropped closely to the skin so that nary a bone-straight strand could decide at the last moment to change course and curl back all the way home. I remember how it changed with the seasons, straw yellow when the sun shone, light brown when the leaves fell and almost black again when it was winter and there was not a drop of rain. I remember the eyes. Blue. So blue, all the sky could fit in them. If you were lucky enough to have him cast those eyes on you – well then you knew how good life could be on the other side.

I remember how impressed he had been when I had recited Langston Hughes to him. Standing in the middle of that little sitting room, all the grownups showing interest as I spoke of dreams and raisins, nodding and humming as if they understood. But when I had finished and allowed myself to look at my intended audience, I remember seeing in those blue eyes