



Courtesy, Mari E. Jorgensen

Hannah Jorgensen, age 4

*To fling my arms wide
In some place of the sun,
To whirl and to dance
Till the white day is done.
Then rest at cool evening
Beneath a tall tree
While night comes on gently,
Dark like me—
That is my dream!*

—Langston Hughes

The Color of Love

Mari E. Jorgensen

I'm sitting on an antique chair in my bathroom giving my four-year-old daughter one of her usual marathon baths, several of her McDonald's figurines lined up like miniature divers along the tub's faux marble edge and Suave's Go-go Grape bubbles piled high, when she cries, "Look, Mommy!" Glee lighting her face, she holds up both hands, palms out, so that I can see their pale, puckered skin. "I'm getting whiter!" she cries. "Pretty soon, when I grow up, I'll be white all over—like you!"

I gaze into the sweet, eager face of my child. I stare at her, stunned. All parents, I tell myself, have known moments like these. Moments when we feel infinitely ill-equipped to answer a question, respond to a comment made by a person who is purportedly less experienced, less intellectually developed than ourselves—a person over whom we have been given stewardship but who nonetheless holds it so easily within his or her power to throw us for a loop.

To buy time, I dip water into the blue mixing bowl I use to douse Hannah's dark ringlets. I glance out the window, barely registering the riot of fall color on the mountainside, a view that would normally evoke from me at the very least a sharp intake of breath. I swirl my finger in the cloudy water. Finally, I go back to my daughter's expectantly upturned face. "Why?" I say. "Why do you want to be white?"

Left: First stanza of "Dream Variations," from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* by Langston Hughes, copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

When it comes to the subject of our daughter's adoption, my husband and I tread carefully. Five years ago, when we were handed a form by LDS Family Services that included a battery of tiny boxes to check, we felt overwhelmed. "Would you accept a child with an unknown father?" one of the questions asked. "Would you accept a sibling group?" "Would you accept a child with moderate to severe mental retardation?" As we pored over these questions, we struggled against the sense that we were shopping for a new vehicle or piece of electronic equipment and were being asked to list our choice of upgrades. It's not as though God gives couples similar options when they're planning on having biological children: "Will you accept a child with muscular dystrophy? Spina bifida? Visual impairment? Cerebral palsy? Cancer? Check all that apply." And what would it say about us as parents, we wondered—as human beings, even—if we were unwilling to accept a child with special needs?

Fighting our guilt, we filled out the "Medical and Social Background" section as best we could. But when we moved on to the section labeled "Racial/Ethnic Background," we found checking the boxes easier. "What does it matter what race the child is?" we asked each other.

Now, as a preschooler, Hannah is just beginning to recognize the differences between us, just starting to notice that her parents are white ("the whitest people I know," as one friend has labeled us) while she is not. She is a beautiful nut-brown, with dark, snapping eyes, dimples in both cheeks, and a witty, stubborn personality. And while it's true that no one is simply the sum of his or her parts and Hannah is certainly not the color of her skin, it *is* a part of her—an aspect of her appearance that must be reckoned with, especially since it makes her different not only from most of her friends and schoolmates but also from her own parents.

"I want to be white," Hannah reiterates, in case I missed it the first time, "because I want to be like you."

It's not that Hannah necessarily feels herself to be inferior. Steve and I both try on a daily basis to help her build a positive image about her whole self. We tell her she is creative and artistic. We compliment her on her curly hair and tell her how much we wish our skin were more brown like hers so that perhaps we wouldn't resemble a couple of radishes every time we take out the trash on a sunny day. And I thought we were succeeding pretty well one morning several months ago when I took Hannah with me to Jiffy Lube.

While we were waiting in the lobby, Hannah approached a gray-haired woman sitting in another of the orange vinyl chairs. This is not an

uncommon occurrence with Hannah, who has no qualms about approaching grandmotherly types, whether she knows them or not, and striking up conversations with them. (She also has a marked affinity for teenage girls who resemble the Spice Girls—girls in low-rise jeans and belly shirts whose toenails are painted metallic blue—but I try not to think about what that might portend for the future.) This particular woman was engrossed in a copy of *People* magazine when Hannah sidled up to her, and I could tell that Hannah was casting about for an opener, an icebreaker. Finally she came out with, “Are you a grandma?”

“Why, yes,” the woman replied, snapping shut her magazine.

Now that she had the woman’s full attention—now that the grandma was beaming down at her—Hannah was, I could tell, again in a quandary. She needed a second line, something to keep the conversation rolling. I waited, amused at the theatrical production, while the wheels in Hannah’s head spun. At last she seemed to strike on something. Lifting the hem of her sundress to just above her knee, she stuck out one leg, like Cinderella proffering her foot for the all-important glass slipper, and asked, “Do you like my brown skin?”

“Why, yes,” the woman gushed. “I like it *very* much.”

I smiled to myself. Hannah’s question seemed to demonstrate that she was comfortable with the color of her skin, that she might well be able to sail through life with her part-African-American heritage—in a country, in a state, in a church where whites overwhelmingly outnumber blacks—and ask those around her this question with complete confidence in their answers: “Do you like my brown skin?”

But even if Hannah is able to sail through life with relatively few choppy waves, our mismatched skin tones may still pose a problem. Several experiences have borne this out. Often they’re relatively innocuous occurrences, amusing little anecdotes we can use afterwards to entertain our friends and relatives, like one time when I took Hannah grocery shopping with me. I was waiting in the checkout line with my groceries and Hannah, who was still small enough to sit in the cart’s child seat, behind a black mother and her two middle-school-age daughters. After loading my items onto the conveyor belt and digging my checkbook out of my purse, I looked up to see that the cashier had pulled my cart through the aisle behind the checkout stand and was beginning to load the other woman’s bagged groceries into it. The other mother and I glanced at each other, then at the cashier. “That’s not my baby,” said the other mother.

“What?” The frazzled cashier’s head bobbed up.

“That’s not my baby.”

“Huh?”

“She’s mine.” I pointed to Hannah, who still sat contentedly in the cart but was eyeing me carefully, a puzzled and slightly anxious expression on her face, as if she were confused as to why I was standing so far away from her. “That’s *my* baby.”

“Oh,” the cashier mumbled. “Sorry.”

Others of these experiences have been less humorous. Take the time that, while living in Belgium for a two-year work stint, our family went to Disneyland Paris. On our first day in the park, we decided to grab a bite to eat at Disneyland Paris’s McDonald’s before heading for Fantasyland. It was raining; it was pouring, flooding, *deluging*. The whole world, it seemed, had melted into one gray slick, with McDonald’s yellow-and-red building rising from the rivulets like a beacon of hope. We pushed our way through the doors only to find that everyone had had the same idea we did: the place was crammed full. People were eating propped against the wall or squatting on the floor, their trays of Big Macs and fries balanced on their laps. It was as though we had stumbled unknowingly into a U2 concert. “Apparently,” Steve said, “they don’t have the same fire safety codes in Europe as they do in the U.S.”

“Guess not,” I said. “Let’s get out of here.”

But two-year-old Hannah, having spotted what I call the “gerbil cage” (McDonald’s patented plastic jungle gym), wanted to stay and play, so we relented. We didn’t order food but stood next to the gerbil cage, watching Hannah and her European counterparts scramble up tunnels and tumble down slides.

Soon we grew uneasy. We’d seen Hannah climb a ladder but hadn’t seen her come down the slide. After another minute or two, we became increasingly worried, so I decided to venture into the gerbil cage. I crawled through tunnels and peered down slides and even ducked into the ball pit, calling Hannah’s name. But to no avail. “She’s not in here,” I shouted out to Steve. “She’s gone!”

It was one of those soul-chilling moments when all your free-floating anxieties gel into a hard mass in your gut and threaten to make your brain go numb and your legs buckle. We moved together through the crush of hungry and irritable McDonald’s patrons, periodically dropping to our hands and knees to peer between legs and feet, calling for Hannah. She was nowhere. It was as though we had blinked, and in that microfraction of time, she had evaporated. We decided to split up. Steve headed for the stairs that led to a mezzanine-like upper level, thinking that he might be able to pick her out better from that vantage point. Meanwhile, I continued to search the crowds. “Ma fille,” I stammered to whoever would listen. “Ma petite fille—elle est perdue!”

Finally, after what seemed to be hours but was surely only minutes, the crowd parted ever so slightly, and a man (who I swear had a saintly glow emanating from his head) emerged with Hannah perched nonchalantly on his arm. He walked toward me, obviously scanning the crowd for any distraught parents—had perhaps been doing so for the last several minutes—but even though I stood directly in his line of vision—my face frantic, my mouth, I’m sure, widened into an elongated O like the man in Edvard Munch’s *Scream*—his eyes skipped over me.

He was looking for *black* parents.

“Excusez-moi!” I yelled, practically diving toward him. “C’est ma fille!”

Steve, who had finally made it to the mezzanine (but, he told me later, not until after nearly coming to blows with the employee whose job it was to stand at the bottom of the stairs and prevent any additional customers from going up), had also spotted Hannah and joined me. I clutched the man’s arm. “Monsieur,” I said breathlessly. “C’est ma fille!”

“Oui?” He looked dubious. He glanced from me to Steve, then back to me again. Obviously, he was confused. And for good reason. Interracial adoption, while somewhat unusual in the United States, is more or less unheard of in Europe. But when Hannah cried “Mommy!” and lunged toward me, he handed her over.

“Merci,” I gasped.

“De rien,” he said, nodding away my repeated expressions of gratitude.

But it wasn’t nothing. It was far from nothing. This stranger had given me back my heart—my blood, I’m convinced, would cease to pump without Hannah—and I told him so over and over again in my broken French.

There is, however, something about this particular man being our good Samaritan that haunts me. He was also of African descent, and when I saw him walking toward me with Hannah on his arm, I couldn’t help thinking that she looked more at home with him than she did with me. I couldn’t help thinking that, if anyone had been looking, they’d have sworn she was his. And the thought flitted to me, unbidden: Were we wrong to adopt a child of another race? Did she really belong with us?



I am dousing Hannah’s ringlets with the blue mixing bowl, and she is continuing to insist that one day she will be white like me, when it comes to me with a startling, bell-like clarity what I should say. At other times when Hannah raises difficult issues, I often find myself humoring her, following the path of least resistance, telling myself that going the battle-of-the-wills route with her over a point she’s gotten into her head is futile. “Uh-huh,” I often say, “that’s right.”

But this, I know, cannot be one of those times. This subject is too important. “No, sweetie,” I say, “you won’t. You will never be white, not when you grow up—not ever.”

“Why not?”

“Because Heavenly Father made you brown and he made me white.”

Hannah pauses, seemingly contemplating the pile of bubbles in front of her. “You mean,” she says, “I chose?”

I do a mental blink. Hannah’s conclusion is at best a logical leap. But it is also, I realize, as sound as they come. “Yes,” I say, “you chose.”

When I think of Hannah and her connection to me—a connection that goes beyond genetics, beyond the umbilical cord that never bound us together—I think of an evening drive up Provo Canyon with a heavy-lidded Hannah buckled into her car seat in back, music trilling softly from the radio. It was a cloudless night, with a new moon rising over the snow-topped mountains and casting an eerie, bluish glow over the cliffs around us. It was, I felt, a gift of unadulterated beauty. I was struck speechless. But not Hannah. From the backseat piped a small voice: “Look, Mommy! The mountains—they’re glowing!”

My thoughts exactly.

I think also of a phase that Hannah went through in which she was attempting to define the world around her. Often during this phase, at odd and unforeseen times—in the car on the way to the bank or to her ballet class—she would say contemplatively, “I don’t belong to Miss Katie (or Uncle David, or Sister Herway, or any one of the other people who populated her world), do I? I belong to *you*.”

“Yes,” I would answer. “You belong to me.”

Mostly, however, I think of an afternoon early last May when Steve and Hannah and I sat together on a sofa in one of LDS Family Services’ small offices. Outside the window, a cherry tree was just coming into bloom, its pink, chiffonlike blossoms fluttering in the breeze. Inside, the tension was mounting to a nearly palpable state. Our social worker, the same one who had facilitated Hannah’s adoption, sat in an armchair across from us with one leg slung over the other, playing with the little braided piece of leather on his loafer. “Have you picked out any names yet?” he asked, just to ease the silence.

Finally, the door swung open and in walked another social worker with a young girl. A young girl carrying a car seat with an impossibly small occupant inside. The girl was crying, her face streaked and swollen, her eyes ringed with red. Steve and I sat frozen to the sofa, uncomfortable half-smiles pasted to our faces (what do you say to a person who is about to give you her day-and-a-half-old son?), but Hannah didn’t hesitate. She hopped up, crossed the room, and slipped her fingers into the girl’s free hand. “Is this your baby?” she asked, standing on tiptoe to peer inside the car seat.

“Yes.” The girl nodded.

“But you can’t take care of him?”

“No,” came the choked reply, “I can’t take care of him.”

“Don’t worry,” Hannah assured her. “We can. We’ll take good care of him for you.”

Despite her tears, the girl smiled down at Hannah. “I know you will,” she said.

“But,” Hannah said, squeezing the girl’s fingers, “you’re going to miss him, aren’t you?”

When I think of our little Max’s adoption, of the sacrifice of a young woman who, like the true mother of the baby brought before King Solomon, would rather see her child go into the arms of another than be cut in half, metaphorically speaking, by the only life she knew she could give him, it is the words of a four-year-old uttered in a small room that ring for me in the universe: “You’re going to miss him, aren’t you?”

Surely Hannah, when asked by her Creator, didn’t choose just the color of her skin. Surely Hannah, my alter ego, chose us as well.

“Yes,” I say as I work detangling solution through Hannah’s dark, curly hair, so different from my own. “You chose.”

Yes, Hannah, my lovely, exasperating, precocious Hannah, you belong to me. *You* are my dream.

Mari E. Jorgensen is a full-time mother, a writer, and a part-time composition instructor. A past recipient of the Clinton F. Larson creative writing scholarship, she is currently working on a young-adult novel entitled *Lizzy at Large*. This essay won second place in the 2002 BYU Studies essay contest.