Betrayal

The election of the 45th president of the United States of America was one that many could not fathom. The popular phrase, “choosing between two evils” became very famous. We had Hillary Clinton, referred to by many as the “liar”, or Donald Trump, referred to by many as a racist, misogynist, and many more labels. I knew neither candidate would do for this country what it truly needed but I knew that one would stand more for the equality we have worked for and are working towards, and the other would take us back a couple decades.

The stage was set - seven college students sitting in a small dorm room on Indian Quad at the University at Albany with drinks in their hands and the TV playing. Each had different stressors affecting them at the moment: a failed biology exam, an upcoming statistics exam, a failed statistics exam, a hectic work schedule, an impossible microeconomics quiz, a computing project, and an upcoming criminology exam. Yet you could never tell by just looking at them. They sat, drinking, eating, and laughing. It was one of those nights where they just needed each other in more ways than what was explicitly said. The vibe in the room was so warm and familial, someone would think they had been friends for years rather than a little more than two months. This was the scene six of my friends and myself found ourselves in the night of November 8, 2016.

The conversation started off with despair, each of us lamenting our struggles of college life. Then our attention turned to the more important matter at hand which was the counting of the electoral college votes for the presidential election. The conversation took a sharp nose dive to the land of politics. We were all in agreement for who we wanted to win, thankfully, but we all had a different perspective on why. Our anxiety raised as we counted off which states were
taken by either candidate and saw the number of electoral votes change. This was the first presidential election all of us could have voted in and we all felt the same way - this country is fucked either way. Tension was frequently traded in for a joke as an attempt to comfort one another. Some of my friends joked about the future of black Americans if the “antichrist” (aka Donald Trump) becomes president. Although said in a joking matter, the reality of said jokes were very possible. That is what scared me the most. I laughed at the jokes and even said some myself, but then I would sit back and think about the chances of this actually happen. Many say it isn’t possible but I say that it just won’t be as extreme. Extreme in the sense that slavery may not occur again, but Jim Crow laws and segregation is very likely. An increased wage gap between females and males is very real, rights taken away from women are very real. I think that the fact that this is a fear within American citizens speaks volumes as to what Trump stands for. I speak about these specific fears with the bias that I am considered a black woman in America. There are so many other fears felt by numerous demographics in America from what Trump has advocated in his campaign. We all sat down and opened up in a playful manner about the dread felt with the possibility of Trump winning. Each of us spoke on a specific fear of the possible future but masked it with more jokes, eating, and drinking.

The polling was still going on when I gave up and retired to my bed. I woke up the next and was told the results through multiple texts, Instagram tags, Snapchats, and even emails. I couldn’t help but feel my heart drop when the news processed in my head - Donald J. Trump was the next president of the United States of America. Along with receiving the news came posts with multiple jokes about the future of the country and various demographics of people who are
at risk with Trump being the president. I scrolled through countless posts and laughed at almost every single one.

As I stepped into the peach and white tiled shower of my suite’s bathroom and let the hot water fall over my black curly hair the reality of the future of the country and myself really hit me. My hair had always been a marker to my diverse background and therefore made me stand out. I think it’s a marker for everyone really. Isn’t that strange? We automatically assign ethnicities based off of the appearance of someone’s hair. It’s like the strands of hair that we see with our naked eye get replaced with the label of a specific ethnicity or race. I always knew my hair was different but it became a negative difference in the 8th grade. My middle school was made up primarily of kids of a Hispanic or Indian background. Most of my friends fell into the category of having an Indian background. Although they had an Indian background, their families came from Guyana just like my family. Even though our families came from the same country our racial makeup was vastly different, which caused us to look extremely different. Of course at the ages of 12 and 13 years old we were completely unaware of this. Our school never taught us about race, culture, ethnicity, or the importance of any of this. In all honesty, I feel like not many public schools in New York really does. In such a diverse city like New York I think it’s so weird that they don’t teach things like that. Personally speaking, I feel that is where the issue with social injustices start - in the schools. I’ve heard a lot of people say that things such as racism and sexism are ideals that are taught. If you think about it, in New York kids can start school from as early as four years old and continue in its education system until the age of 18. It’s the one system that almost all children encounter. If we were to teach children the proper meaning of words such as racism, sexism, feminism, and all associated vocabulary, then they
would be more mindful when they interact with others that are not like them. They would be more conscious of microaggressions they are guilty of as well as being able to identify microaggressions around them. The children is where the hope for a change lies because they are the future. As cliche as that sounds, it is entirely the truth. They are the ones becoming politicians, teachers, physicians, and most importantly parents. They have to pass down the traditions and teachings they were taught. What is so hard about this is that the question of who deserves to teach the kids about these things needs to be answered. Everybody has a bias and is therefore inclined to teach in favor of their background. But without this teaching, our country will continue along this dark path of discrimination.

Going back to my original dilemma - I was the black sheep amongst my friends. My frizzy, tight, dark curls drew a lot of attention to myself. This attention had a positive mask with a cynical face lying beneath it. The labels of it being “a forest”, “fuzzy”, and “impossible” soon morphed from a joke to being a little cut into my thin, custard color skin every single time. I began to realize the stark difference between my friends and I and gave it a negative meaning. They were the majority and I was the minority, by numbers in the community we were apart of that is. It didn’t help that I was friends with the most well known kids in my school. Everybody knew them and by default knew me. At first I loved it. I couldn’t take 10 steps down the hallway without being stopped for a hug, “hi”, or given a wave. I was never really lonely at lunch or any class. My vice principal and teachers who weren’t even teaching me knew me. Yeah, we were that group of kids. I felt on top of the world in more ways than one. But once these labels started being put on me all this attention suddenly made me uncomfortable. I felt like everybody has these negative thoughts about my hair. One friend made a point of saying, “Latanya you’re not
Guyanese, you’re just black. Look at your hair - that’s not Guyanese hair.” This was probably the most hurtful thing to hear. All this time I had so much pride when I said I was Guyanese. It’s not the most amazing country to go visit but I loved it and I loved the culture and the people. So to hear that I’m not considered Guyanese was extremely hurtful. Thinking back now it was extremely stupid because she shouldn’t have had that much power over me. She clearly is not allowed to declare that I was no longer worthy of my ethnicity. But I didn’t realize that I could be both black and Guyanese. I also didn’t realize that I was not only black, but also white and hispanic. I was constantly called just black due to my curle. I didn’t realize this because it was never something that was taught to me. My parents, both coming from Guyana, wasn’t taught this either because in Guyana race was not taken as seriously. My ignorance resulted in a nose dive of my self esteem levels. Again, they were the majority and I was the minority. So since there was more of them than there were me, and they were really the popular ones, that means there was something wrong with me. Wrong with my hair being the way it was.

I did everything to try and match their appearance. Since it seemed like my hair was the big target on my back, I focused on that. I tried so hard to change my hair. I began straightening it all the time. Now with my kind of hair texture heat protector is absolutely necessary. It is extremely prone to heat damage which means loosing my natural curl pattern, hair breakage, and just overall hair weakness. My mom tried to warn me of the consequences and just how much I’d regret it, but I was determined and she had that mentality of “certain things you just need to learn on your own”. But my mom was completely oblivious to just how deep these problems were going for me. It was more than just trying to change my hair, I was trying to change my body. Eighth grade was around the time that puberty came to visit me so my body started changing. My
hips began to spread more, my thighs expanded, and of course my breasts began to show more. As if my hair wasn’t enough attention my now developing body began to be the topic of discussion as well. I honestly couldn’t tell you if this part was meant to be talked about in a positive light or not but with the negative talk about my hair I just automatically assumed my body was being talked about in the same way. That’s kind of how it became for me. Any type of attention that was brought to me I felt squirmish. Actually, squirmish is an understatement. It was more like being a bug under a microscope and the scientists, my “friends”, were writing down all the things wrong with me. To add fuel to this beautiful raging fire was the fact that I was taking ballet classes and had been moved up to an extremely advanced level, which meant forcing myself to catch up and keep up with the other girls in the class. My instructor, who was idolized at my studio for being the physical definition of perfection, was 5’7”, size -2, straight haired woman. Me being the perfectionist that I am, with no self-esteem thanks to my eighth grade friends, strived to be just like her. That was the beginning of my eating disorder.

It was a gradual process. Kind of like the King Da Ka, that metal death trap of a roller coaster in Six Flags Great Adventure New Jersey. So the King Da Ka starts off with an extremely fast pull off from the station. That was my realization that I “needed” to become skinnier and the one effective way was to just not eat. After that pull off you slowly start climbing to what seems like the heavens but is really the top of a 456 foot drop. This slow climb was when I started weaning myself off of food. Instead of three meals a day, it became two meals and a snack. Then it became one meal and two snacks...then three snacks...then two snacks and two bottles of water...one snack and two bottles of water...finally, it became only four bottles of water a day. When I had those four bottles of water is when I reached the top of the 456 foot
drop and paused to “enjoy” the view. I was at the top of it all. I got special recognition from the
dance instructors, got accepted to an amazing high school, selected for a solo in my school’s
cultural show, my straight hair had me looking like the rest of my school - I had it all. When I
looked down to the 456 foot drop and back up again to the view - the drop was worth it. As fast
as I was able to take in and appreciate the view was as fast as it was gone. Soon I was falling,
and falling fast. My hands kept shaking, my nails were breaking, my hair was brittle, I lived in
big sweaters so nobody saw how small my frame got, and I began to drink energy drinks to make
it through my day of school and dance.

Fast forward a couple years to junior year of high school and I have defeated anorexia
and have self confidence that is sky high. In fact, it was so high that I even modeled in a fashion
show for my school. My confidence wasn’t just in my aesthetics, but in my entire being. My high
school, one teacher in particular, taught me the value and strength of my voice and value of my
race. I came to terms with being a mixed race Guyanese American female and was proud of it. I
became very vocal about the issues surrounding my race, culture and gender.

With Donald Trump as the president elect, I can’t help but feel that I am going back to
the eighth grade version of myself. I have a lack of hope and confidence but not in myself, rather
in this country and its future. I fear that this time it won’t be just a few people commenting and
discriminating against my hair verbally, but that I will be in physical danger. I fear of the
possibility of being restricted from certain resources and opportunities. I’m scared that my voice
will no longer have power; that I could scream at the top of my lungs and still won’t be heard.
He just does not make sense. Donald Trump has verbally attacked women, African Americans,
muslims, immigrants, and anybody that opposed him on more than one occasion and yet he is the
president elect. I feel betrayed by my country. My family started immigrating here in the 1980s to escape a country of violence and poverty. Their, along with many others like them asylum, seems to have now been destroyed. Trump has encouraged the violence that has occurred at many of his rallies and has even spoke of himself acting violently. Now the icing on this triple decker cake of this violent, racist, misogynistic “man” is that he has been endorsed by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). This is a group that made its name for being a white supremacist group that has committed multiple hate crimes, including murder, against African Americans. But I guess the saying really does stand true - birds of a feather, will flock together.

I am an 18 year old African American female. Actually no - I am an 18 year old African American woman. I am sickened by the results of this 45th presidential election. I am appalled by the people of the United States of America for allowing and promoting this to occur. I am betrayed by those who said they want to see me go far in life but have voted this man into the presidential seat. I am now going to wait in anxiety and fear for the tension of the racial rubber band to finally reach its peak and snap back on me, leaving me to cry out in pain from the red hot welsh that will be left on my melanin infused skin. Despite all of this, I know who I am. I am educated and will continue to attain the highest degree of education. I am capable of taking care of myself, rather than having to be taken care of. I am vocal about what is wrong and exactly how I feel. I am confident in my own skin and how I was raised. I am proud of where I have come from, where I am, and where I am going. Most of all, I am proud of my race.

No.

I am honored by my race.

I am honored to be an African American.