

Searching for a Black Writer

Carelessly scribbled onto a piece of loose-leaf paper, the note read:

I am in search of a Black writer for a project. If you are interested please give me a call at this number. This is a land line—no text pls. Thanks :)

An older woman tapped me on the shoulder and slipped the note into my hand. I watched her spindly figure slip away between the rows of foldaway chairs, behind the balding man taking notes on a Santa Barbara Writers Conference pamphlet, and in front of the legs of the hopeful blonde holding a pink notebook to her thighs.

“What was that?” Sophie said, leaning over my lap. Despite being in a room of fully grown adults, I felt like a teenager whispering in the back of the class, fearful the panel of speakers at the head of the room would snap their heads toward us and tell us to put our phones away. Sophie, the two other UC scholarship girls, and I were the only people under 30 in the room. I was one of only two black people there.

I shook my head, unable to shake the cat-like paranoia of a woman being watched. “I’ll tell you later.”

On the second floor of the Mar Monte Hotel, overlooking downtown Santa Barbara, a panel of published authors and agents introduced the conference. They went on and on about how much we were going to learn in the next few days of publishing panels and writing workshops. I watched crowds of ships bob on the ocean’s surface through the window behind the panelists’ heads.

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Commented [2]: “It” is ambiguous. consider replacing it with a more “the note”

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Commented [3]: Changed "spiny" to "spindly" to better convey the intended description of thinness rather than spikiness.

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The day before, a group of billionaires had made news when their submarine went missing somewhere above the wreck of the Titanic. At that point, everyone assumed that the ship had imploded. I imagined it somewhere outside the window, below the gray-blue waves of the Santa Barbara sea floor, sucking into itself like a vortex and taking everything with it.

My dad was the first person outside of the conference I told about the note. I did not know who else might understand when I phoned him a week later. He laughed and then asked if I had called her back yet.

“Why would I do that?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

When I got the note, I felt shock, slight disgust, and the strangest sense of enamored flattery. I laughed imagining someone writing this note in a fervor, pen pressed to thigh, ink staining her designer skirt at the sight of brown skin from the corner of her eye, so proud of her find: what a rare find.

But to my dad, the goal of me going to school in Santa Barbara was to have opportunities like this: to meet people who would get me somewhere farther than that house in Long Beach. I was about to enter my senior year with little to show for it besides a few small publications and three years of work experience in fast-food restaurants. I was one year away from becoming a failed writer.

So, part of me really did want it to be real: that feeling of being discovered and knowing I could be something special.

At five years old, I was an artist and an escapist. I scribbled in the gaps of my reality with stubby colored pencils, scattered paper, and Legos and Polly Pockets in the playroom of my

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family's old house in North Long Beach, the first place we've ever actually owned, my parents and I.

It~~was~~ where my mom taught me to read my first chapter book~~and~~ where I wrote my first stories.

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As years went by~~,~~ that glorious play space—the big room with the sliding glass door and aging futon where we sang to Far Far Away Idol and sipped apple juice from a plastic kitchen set—wore away.~~The~~ creamy ceiling tiles~~browned and rotted and broke away at their corners,~~ allowing in all kinds of buzzing wasps and spiders; the door to the backyard~~would not close~~ properly. I didn't think about that stuff until it became broken enough for us to leave~~;~~ back then~~,~~ it was ~~just~~ my castle.

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I remember ~~drawing~~ myself. I was beautiful, all grown up and tall, and dressed in a pretty red dress, a pair of pretty red shoes, and a pretty red handbag. And I remember ~~wanting~~ to show my mom because Mommy liked it when I drew her things. I wanted her to be happy and proud, to scrunch her nose and tell me, "You did so good, Lovie," as I presented it to her.

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She looked at me in confusion. "What's this Lovie?"

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"It's me!" I smiled so big.

I watched her excited smile fall~~,~~ and a now-familiar grimace replaced it.

She began to yell~~,~~ "What is this? This isn't you. Do you look like this? Does your sister look like this? Your Daddy?"

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Mommy didn't like that beautiful me had hay yellow hair down to her waist~~,~~ or her skin was the same color I used to color in the sand on the beach. Beautiful me was supposed to be brown; brown like my family, and like my neighbors, and like my reflection. But not like my mother. She is not blonde and White, but she is not quite Brown either.

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I didn't know a beautiful brown version of me, but wanting to be something else was just shameful.

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I was unhappy with my reflection for so many years after that, unhappy with my big round nose, puffy cheeks, and short, frizzy hair. I always assumed that things would just get better as I got older, my hair would be different, my nose would fit my face better, and I would be happier.

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I wonder if I understood then that my skin wouldn't just continue to fade until I was just as light. I don't know why it felt like we should all be so unhappy with who and where we were.

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I never had any reason to want to leave my home in that neighborhood. My favorite home videos were in that house, eating mud from the front lawn, and bathing in a chalk-filled kiddie pool. I loved the neighbors who had watched me grow up and brought us oatmeal cookies. But in 2008, my parents lost the house. My dad never did want us to grow up in a neighborhood like that, like the one he grew up in. He told me that later.

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They always wanted more, my parents did. They wanted a house in the suburbs, the nicer suburbs, for my sister and me to go to a prestigious university, to go further, somewhere foreign, somewhere we could brag about.

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But how could I want them both—the house and its memories and that beautiful, rich, white version of me? The comfort and the absolute foreignness.

At least then, my blackness was something of harmony, a warmth surrounding me in what I knew, giving me a sense of self. As I left that house, it became stilt, thin and tall, lifted up from the surrounding land, fragile. But wasn't that what I wanted?

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The opening night banquet of the Santa Barbara Writers Conference—the night I was passed the note—is one I remember through a drunk haze. I had never had wine that expensive or strong before. A very kind woman I met at the bar felt endeared to me and bought me a glass for \$20.

I was standing in line, trying to discern the likelihood of getting carded (at the time, I was only 20), when she introduced herself to me. She complimented my hair, the bright orange I'd dyed it after high school to distract from how much I disliked its appearance. My mother said dying my hair so unnatural was something only white girls could do. I thought that if I was always going to be the only Black girl in a room, I might as well stick out for something other than my skin.

I think the other writers, always searching for their next story, looked at me—my brown skin, bright orange hair, and hot pink lipstick—and wanted to collect me, and I was something peculiar to them. And I was more than happy to let them—as long as I got something in return.

"I think you guys may be the youngest group here," the woman said, gesturing to my classmates across the room, her scarlet-red bob grazing my shoulder. She looked like someone who liked to stand out in a crowd, and put effort into doing so. I didn't like how close she was to me, but I smiled and laughed.

"Well, we're the only ones here on a grant from the University. It's a little intimidating. Everyone here is so experienced."

"Don't let them scare you off. They all want what you have."

As I wondered what she meant by that, I eyed the man in front of us approaching the bar. He didn't once look up from his conversation as he ordered a glass of wine and pressed a \$20 bill to the countertop. The bartender gave him no change.

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“I’ll try not to,” I said.

I did the math in my head. A \$20 glass of wine, plus the \$40 or so I was spending on Ubers to and from the conference, plus the \$700 in attendance, which I paid out of pocket until my grant check cleared. \$760. My bank account would be drained. But I couldn’t sit in this fancy hotel with all these seemingly fancy people and not have a glass of wine.

I was next in line. I hesitated and smiled at the woman.

“What kind of wine do you have?” I asked the bartender. He was tanned and beautiful.

“Just red or white,” he said.

“Like Moscato?” I shrugged to the woman, and she laughed, approaching the bar next to me.

“We only have a Chardonnay. Try this,” the beautiful bartender gave me a pour in a plastic cup. It tasted nothing like the Chardonnay I’d had at my grandmother’s last Christmas, which was bitter and vinegary. It was not sugary and peach-flavored like the \$5 wine my roommate and I liked to share. It was perfectly in between.

“I’ll take a glass of that.”

The beautiful bartender filled a beautifully angular wine glass right to the top and slid it towards me.

“I’ll take the same,” said the woman, pulling out her card.

“Oh, you don’t have to,” I blushed, unsure if I should be embarrassed or flattered.

“It’s my treat.”

I decided to be flattered as she swiped her shiny silver debit card and grabbed her glass by the stem.

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“Don’t let them get to you,” she winked as she returned to her table. “Remember, they’re just jealous.”

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The drink and the comment went straight to my head. I desperately wanted to take the glass home—this beautiful, angular piece—like it was a treasure. But I did not; I did not want to be that Black person. Not when I had woken up that morning fully determined to finally be a real writer and adult.

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I knew there was a high likelihood I would be one out of three Black people in the room; I often was. I knew there was a likelihood I’d be one of the youngest people there, which made me a target of what I couldn’t quite figure out. Amusement? Disdain? Envy?

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At dinner, the other grant girls and I struggled to keep our heads above water with the adult writers. As we went to sit down, a group of them split us up like pets, making each of us sit at a different one’s side. I assume it was to get to know us better.

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“They offered him 20k for the first 20 words, and he just never did it! Can you imagine?”

No, I couldn’t imagine, I told the woman sitting to my left as she laughed on a mouthful of steak and potatoes. I couldn’t imagine ever turning down that much money—I didn’t even know what that much money looked like.

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“How old are you, again?” she cooed. I was 20 at the time.

“Just twenty? Oh, you’re a baby. And what do you write, fiction? Oh, how cute. So, so cute.”

A girl in her 20s never wants to be cute. She wants to be impressive. Hot. Professional. Taken seriously. But never cute.

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Someone tapped me on my shoulder from behind.

“Hey! Uh, my memory’s not too good, but did you say you had a spare lodging earlier?”

I turned around in my seat and met the blushed face of my fiction professor, Jervey. He was the first faculty member I met at UC Santa Barbara, and one of the two Black professors in my writing program.

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At first, he reminded me of my grandfather, my mother's father. He had a kind of Blackness that was only recognizable to other Black people or someone whose family hailed from down South—as he himself described it. He had pale, nearly white skin and short, curly hair like ramen noodles. Every room he entered inhabited some indescribable otherness I could only describe as Mariah Carey Black. He told me I reminded him of his daughter, a half-Black, half-Chinese girl. This was all we had in common.

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For my first year of university, I was convinced that this man was the most well-connected person I would ever meet in the publishing industry, and that he was destined to push me toward my goal of becoming a published author. My reasoning was that he had once been a New York Times bestseller, (a title more impressive than the reality of his career), which, of course, meant I had to impress him. With time, I found the truth. He wasn't good for much besides a few old stories retold, and retold, and retold.

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Yet, it was through him that I got my first publishing opportunity, 150 dollars for a piece of flash fiction I wrote as a class exercise. It was a scathing evaluation of my family, a half-baked think-piece on Blackness and religion, and my own shame. It was something I had never planned to publish; it felt more like a chunk of my soul than something anyone else needed to read, and it was not a chunk I liked. It was the part of me that was ashamed of where I came from. The naive, blameless version of me I was pretending to be.

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"This is what you need to be writing," was what he told me.

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At the conference, I looked back at **that man**, **who was** short despite me being seated and him standing, **with** glassy **eyes** and slightly red in the face.

Commented [23]: very vague way to refer to someone who we just focused on and that could cause some confusion. I like the "that" because it gives off your disdain for him but consider something else beside "man" to label him.

"Did you say you had a spare lodging?" he said.

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There was something unsettling **about** the way he said it, as an awkward sort of joke—was he asking to sleep in my hotel room? Or was he just asking to sleep with me?

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I laughed back, as I had all night, but told him **I** did not have a hotel room and that I lived near the school.

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"Ah," was all he said, as I waited for him to recognize me and ask how I was doing. He did not, **]** and instead, **he** walked off with a nod.

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The woman to my left strained her neck, watching him go. "So, you know Jervy?"

"Yeah, **he's one of my professors**," I said, trying to shake the strange feeling he'd left me with.

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"Oh, he's great! You're so lucky."

So everyone kept saying.

I set down my glass and looked around the room. It was not just him, **all** of the writers' faces had gone rosy, all laughing and chewing belligerently. Was everyone **here**, plastered? The woman next to me was talking herself red in the face as she picked at her plate. Mine had already been picked clear, **and** I wondered if it was gauche to go back for seconds.

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I hadn't eaten **much** the last week, mostly living off **stolen** food from work, **tater tots**, **chicken wings**, and bites of old pizza in between shifts. The night before, I'd stayed up until **1** a.m. feeding loud, drunk college students and working my muscles to tight ache. I was constantly broke **in** those days as I wasted any money left over **after paying** my bills on expensive clothes

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and hair to support this ever-beautiful, perfect version of myself. I decided it was necessary to fit in with Santa Barbara. I had to be better than. I'd always had to be better.

Yet it didn't matter how much better I tried to be in that moment. I wasn't going to be taken seriously. I wasn't even considered. I was a grant attendee, gifted a chance to walk among writing gods, except the gods were more akin to the Wizard of Oz, big, loud, silly man behind a glittery sheet. And I was a thing of amusement, a pop of color. I felt just as much a feature of the room as the decorative wallpaper or a gilded lamp.

I was lured with a grant check that would not clear for three more months into being a diversity check in every room I walked into. Being a Black writer here was to be used. Fodder for someone else's self-enlightenment. A blaxploitation admission essay.

"Are you guys ready to go?" Sophie hissed across the table once our sitters had left us alone.

As we were splitting an Uber, I couldn't leave without them. Sophia nodded enthusiastically.

"Give me one second."

I picked up my empty plate and walked past the buffet to the bar. The beautiful bartender smiled at me, and I bit my lip, a bit embarrassed. I had never left a restaurant without asking for a box to go. I could tell he hadn't been asked that in a while, and though he raised his eyebrows, he did not laugh at me.

"Follow me," he led me into the kitchen. It felt strangely normal that I should be in there at all. But tonight, I wasn't a staff member. I was a guest.

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Outside, the Mar Monte hotel, Sophie, Sophia, and I stood in the cold ocean air in front of the hotel's double doors. I contemplated whether the woman who passed me the note wanted to pay me and for how much. How much would it take for me to say yes?

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The Uber drove us out of downtown Santa Barbara, up the 101 South, back through Goleta, and finally into Isla Vista. My apartment was empty now, only because it was summer. I lived with five roommates, three of us in each bedroom, and the apartment was usually so crowded that it was hard to breathe. Stacks of Emily's furniture and belongings crowded the living room as she prepared to move out. Someone was always moving; things were always changing.

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I fell backward onto the edge of my bed, grateful my bedroom was empty for once. The frat house below my window didn't party as often in the summertime and was truly silent. Already, I was anticipating the sweaty kitchen of the restaurant I worked at, stretching hours long into the night again as soon as I finished the conference, and my time off ran up.

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I pushed myself onto my stomach, hanging over the edge of my bed, and reread the now-crumpled note in the slip of moonlight that came in through the window. I laughed to myself. It was funny, wasn't it? How desperate I was for success?

So many people in my family had sacrificed so much for the idea of their posterity. I couldn't waste getting to go to school here. I needed to be better, to do something great.

I called the number.

"I'm working on a docuseries about Zora Thurston," said the faceless woman. "It's going to be on Netflix, so you'd have to sign an NDA before I can tell you much about it. You do know who that is, right?" Her voice sounded small, clipped, and quick.

“You mean Zora Neale Hurston?” I asked. With my phone pressed to my ear, I closed the Google Document I was typing notes into and searched for the name she’d written—the first result: Zora Neale Hurston.

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“Yeah, Zora Thurston, really important Harlem Renaissance writer. Netflix says we need to have someone Black writing on the team to get it greenlit, which I think is kind of—well, there’s a big push to have a Black perspective on these kinds of things now. You know, I’m South African myself, but that doesn’t exactly count for much,” She huffed with annoyance after this, as if it should have made all the difference.

“So, they need someone Black on the team, and I had someone—my partner, a biracial woman—but she got sick with Covid.”

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It sounded unreal, that this woman wanted me to work on her Netflix show simply because I was Black. “The woman is an absolute joke,” I thought. Does she, do any of them, hear just how ridiculous they sound? But she had connections, didn’t she? Netflix is a big name to drop. Was this the type of person who I had to impress?

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“What do you need me to do?”

“I need you to make a pitch deck, Do you know what that is?”

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I didn’t, and I told her so.

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“Well, research pitch decks and look into making one. They want to present what the show is about, give an idea for it so people will wanna make it, you know?”

“How will I do that if I don’t know what the show is about?”

“Just research Zora Thurston. You know who that is, right? Very famous Black author. My research is on a time in her life that’s not well known, but I can’t tell you about it unless you sign an NDA. Oh, and I’ll need some writing samples.”

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