



Thick

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My attraction to thick girls began

when I was eleven and growing up in the South Bronx. For the most part I hung out with my Uncle Kove, who was ten years older than me and a master of kung fu, gymnastics, and graffiti art. He had the initial attraction to larger girls. That was also the year I discovered my parents' devotion to the crack pipe, and Kove became the closest thing to a savior or superhero that I was going to get. I endeavored to love all that he loved.

As a boy in the boroughs, I was immersed in a male culture that adored voluptuous black, Puerto Rican, and Dominican women. It was common, if not obligatory, for men to salivate over thick thighs, asses, and breasts, all sheathed in skintight, faded jeans and slick halters. Uncle Kove naturally was attracted to these big girls, but he didn't stop there: he went for the dark-skinned sisters, the ones mothers warned their daughters they would look like if they played too long in the sun; the ones boys dared one another to kiss as penalty for a lost bet. Many of us felt a secret longing for these girls, but we denied it because of an urban hierarchy that defined the value of a girl's thickness by the fairness of her skin.

One afternoon Kove and I were at Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, standing in a crowd that had gathered to hear a group of teenage boys beat on the underside of plastic buckets with drumsticks. Every so often Kove would nudge me and flick his chin in the direction of a plump, dark girl who had wandered into the fold. He'd lick his lips and grunt and mumble how much he wanted to "get between them crisp thighs" or "handle that black ass." On the walk back to the train station, I asked Kove, Why those girls? It wasn't that I found anything repulsive about their black skin, but I was too young to know much about desire. Too young to recognize that one must desire if he has any hopes of becoming something other than what he is. I needed Kove to help me understand why men and women long for each other.

He grinned and nodded as though he'd been expecting the question. At the top of the subway steps, he leaned close (I could smell the scents of permanent magic marker and spray paint on his clothes) and said, "The dark ones are the finest."

I'd been raised by a mother who

preached the importance of always wearing clean underwear, carrying breath mints in your pocket, and using lip balm in the winter, and a stepfather who threatened to whip the ass

of anyone on the block who messed with his kids. But these formerly protective parents were now pipe-smoking zombies. I had no real idea what drug abuse was, only that it made people weak in the head and heart and limbs. Many years later I learned that Uncle Kove's mother had been an alcoholic, and I wondered whether he had positioned himself in my path because we had this in common. Our relationship was more than just uncle and nephew: he was the man who made the idea of women real for me and taught me that possessing them was crucial to my existence. If Kove believed there was something grand in the darkness of thick women, or the thickness of dark women, then I'd devote my energy to cultivating that same desire.

People in the Queensbridge Housing Projects, where Kove lived, considered him odd because he spent his money on paint cans and samurai swords instead of gold caps for his teeth and beepers for his hip, but he remained a stud to all those women who felt like outcasts themselves. He wasn't always faithful to the women who were caught up in his mystique, but these girls would tolerate his affairs (for a time, at least), perhaps because their only alternatives were loving an urban thug or being alone. And every once in a while, when Kove fell hard for a girl, he'd spray her name on the side of the elevated 7 train that traveled back and forth from Queens to Manhattan, and it moved the girl, and me, to see her identity carried across the sky in his unorthodox, elegant calligraphy.

The first steady girl I remember Kove having was a truly dark-skinned, stocky beauty named Denise. She was the kind of dark girl who, if she could have pulled off that layer of pigment and replaced it with any other color, would've been just as fine-looking to anyone on the block as she was to Kove. Any number of times she caught me checking her out, because I could never manage to be sly about it. But she was used to folks staring and puzzling over how someone so dark could still be so lovely.

Denise seemed aware of my attraction to her and would stand close to me when she talked and throw her arm around my shoulder. Often she promised to hook me up with her younger sister, though she never did. I didn't care. It was enough to have Denise squeeze my biceps and tell me my arms were getting bigger every day, even though they were no thicker than garden hoses, or rebuke me for running my mouth too much about shit I knew nothing about. She treated Kove the same

way, only with more sincerity and fidelity, and the more time I spent in their presence, the more obvious it was why he cared for her. I couldn't help wondering if my mother and stepfather had been crazy about each other as well before they'd decided to live for the rock.

By the time I got to Walton High

School, I was spending much of my time trying to master some gimmick to get me laid, though with no success. I wasn't one of those sharp-dressed black boys capable of keeping unscuffed their brilliantly white and expensive sneakers. I was athletic, but too skinny to do anything with the ability; I was tall, but not tall enough to grab the basketball rim; and, finally, my skin was as uninteresting as a brown paper bag, not the smooth caramel complexion black girls seemed to come out of the womb preferring.

Though I had little to offer a girl, it didn't stop me from falling for a number of big-breasted, thick-thighed, light-skinned sisters. Kove's ideology still held its place with me, and I fondly remembered my heart doing its nervous thing whenever Denise came close, but the dark girls I knew in high school weren't Denise. They had no connection to Kove. They were just there, and yet deliberately hidden at the same time, shadowy figures who were punished for the way they looked, as I felt punished for having crackheads for parents; it was too much for me to reach out to them. The fairer-skinned, thick girls stroked their hair and chewed their gum and strode up and down the halls with a confidence that made me believe the love we could share would heal my home life. When those African American queens didn't reward my fealty by leading me to their bedrooms — and when it became clear that my parents would not wake up one day cured of their addiction, as I'd dreamed they would — I became bitter. I joined the fraternity that viciously ridiculed thick, dark girls by referring to them as “dungeon dark,” “fat black bitches,” and “stank, burnt heifers.”

Degrading these girls became so reflexive to me I cannot remember now any specific instance of it. The cruelty soothed my pain and offered protection, as Kove once had, against that which threatened to break my heart or kill me. If I had to endure watching my parents smoke themselves to death (ironically, they seemed more alive after hitting the pipe), then it was time for someone else to feel like shit for a change. It was easy to put my foot on the heads of those bottom-rung girls, just as it was easy for those fairer-skinned princesses to do the same to me.

One afternoon, from my grandmother's bedroom window, I watched Kove and Denise make their way across the project courtyard, where a group of gold-chain-wearing, capped-tooth guys were rolling dice. Kove was wearing a double-lined kung fu jacket with the sleeves rolled back at the cuff and Chinese slippers. Denise was swaying proudly on his arm. After the two of them passed by, a few of the dice rollers folded over at the waist and held fists over their mouths to suppress laughter. Others made swift, chopping motions with their hands, or drew their upper lips back so that their teeth protruded in an ugly caricature of Asian people. I wanted to bash those guys'

heads into the pavement and tear out their throats. And then I wanted to do the same thing to myself, for beneath my rage was the relief that I was safe in my grandmother's bedroom and not down in the courtyard, where I would have been considered just as cursed as those two people I adored.

After that day, there was no way I could hang out with Kove, no way I could look at either him or Denise and pretend not to care about the clothes they wore or the color of their faces. I realized then that I'd never really loved my uncle, only idolized him, and, compared to love, idolatry was a cheap high: the inhalation from the pipe, the smoke hitting the brain, the fleeting orgasms throughout the body.

Blinded by the desperate need to be saved from my life, I'd never noticed just how black-faced Kove was, nor that those girls hadn't adored him simply because he preferred the combination of their massive hips and dark skin, but because he and they were allies in a war with the people who hated them — but who really hated themselves. And now I was also an enemy of Kove and Denise, and too lost in my own hurt to recognize that their pain was mine as well; too proud of my brown complexion to give a damn when Kove offered me one last maxim, after he'd realized I was ashamed to be around him and Denise anymore: *Touch a girl who believes she should not be touched, and you will be loved forever.*

The first thick, dark-skinned girl

I dared to care for was named Latoya. We were fifteen. She had a birthmark on her neck that was identical to one on mine: a discoloration that began at the center of the chest and spread over the collarbones. We were also both Geminis and both liked writing poems. There seemed to be no one else on the block linked by such obscure similarities, and though we often talked about what it all meant, our relationship didn't turn romantic. We dismissed the possibility of love and sex because we had known each other most of our childhood and had watched each other's bodies grow: mine into something wiry and bland, and hers into something undesirably thick, because she was so dark. A few flimsy connections weren't enough to pull us out of our positions in the urban hierarchy of body shape and skin tone.

But that changed when we discovered something else we had in common: our mothers smoked crack together.

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