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# **BREAK SKIN, BREAK SPIRIT**

by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah

I used to think that if you wanted to succeed in this country, be you black or be you white, all you needed was desire, and opportunity.

I used to think that a fair number of the black people who failed did so because of their own lack of desire and discipline—and it's true, there are those. But there are also those who have everything in place except a chance. They lack the opportunities that would open doors.

It wasn't until I became a mother that I realized that what binds these two groups of people—besides their race or, better said, as a result of their race—is the fact that at one time or another, most likely very early in their lives, somebody broke their spirit, shattered their sense of themselves as full-fledged human beings with the capacity to love, to learn, to achieve.

This breaking is an initiation into life inside your skin, life as a black person in America.



Here's a joke a former neighbor told Korama, my then-five year old daughter: What do you call white babies who go to heaven? Angels.

What do you call black babies who go to heaven? Bats.

I'm not the sort who is easily shocked into silence, but . . .

well . . . that shocked me into silence. Korama giggled politely,

nervously, then turned and looked at me. I'm sure she wanted answers. I only had questions: what the f—? Why on earth would somebody tell a little black girl, my daughter, a joke as tasteless as that? Political incorrectness and racial hatred aside, the “joke” wasn't even funny.

To be sure, I never spoke to my neighbor again. But that wasn't the end. It was, in fact, just the beginning. Children aren't dumb. Far from it; they absorb everything, and they're quick with their associations. Korama's favorite book at the time was *Stellaluna*, a sweet story by Janell Cannon about a baby bat who is separated from her mother. Until the bat and her mother are reunited, she finds herself living amongst birds, and it gives her the chance to notice that the two species actually share a lot of similar characteristics, that they're not so different after all.

That night when I tucked her in, Korama said she didn't want me to read *Stellaluna* to her. When I asked her why, she pointed to the small chestnut-colored bat on the cover of the book. “Is that what I'm going to look like when I go to heaven,” she asked. “No,” I assured her, trying to find a way to change the subject. “Then what will I look like when I go to heaven?” My first thought was to show Korama a picture of a black angel, but I didn't know where I could find one or if such a thing even existed. Had I even seen one before? I couldn't remember. A friend had recently given

Korama a book of verse by Walter Dean Meyers titled *Brown Angels*.

Included with the poems were various photographs of black children.

I figured it would do. I pulled the book off the shelf and began

reading the first poem. Korama propped herself up on the bed.

“These are angels?” she asked. “Hey, this one kinda looks like me.”

Until she grew tired of it and asked for another book, *Brown Angels*

took the place of *Stellaluna* as Korama’s regular bedtime reading.

Weeks went by without another mention of bats or angels. I interpreted my

daughter’s silence as something of a victory. She had gone

through the experience unscathed. Then we decided to eat cake.

It was a weekly ritual, our mother-daughter date. Every Sunday,

she and I would bake a cake together. We went to the corner store

where we usually shopped to pick up some cake mix. They were all

out, so we went to a grocery store that, unlike the scantily stocked

mom-and-pop shop, had an entire aisle devoted to baking.

Korama was beside herself as she stood there in an aisle, wider

than her outstretched arms, full of cake-mix boxes, each displaying

a single scrumptious slice of cake. It was a step up. She pointed to

each box and asked me to tell her what the flavor was. One by one,

I read the labels.

When I finished, I turned to ask Korama which one she wanted

to buy. There were tears welled up in her eyes. “Mommy,” she said.

“Why is the angel’s food cake white and the devil’s food cake black?”

Are devils like bats? Does that mean I won't go to heaven?"

Again, I didn't have any answers. So I did what I do best. I wrote and asked for them. The article, which was published in the *Los Angeles Times*, presented the whole situation blow-by-blow from the joke to the book to the cake; then it ended with the question, *why is angel's food cake white and devil's food cake black? You tell me. And I, in turn, will tell my daughter.*

Reader response to the article was unbelievable. We got a ton of mail, letters from people sharing similar experiences, offering comfort and encouragement or attempting to explain why angel's food cake is white (*the cake is so light, like clouds; it tastes like a slice of heaven*) and devil's food cake is black (*so rich it has to be sinful; only the devil can make something that hard to resist*). We got packages and packages of carvings, drawings and other representations of black angels.

Korama was incredibly moved by all the kindness. She found it hard to believe that people who didn't know her, perfect strangers, could care so much, would take the time to reach out to her. It was a salve, that outpouring of love, a saving grace for my daughter's spirit which I'd noticed had been breaking a little bit more every time she stood in front of the mirror and stared at her black body, wondering if she'd make it to heaven or if her skin would relegate her to an altogether different fate. But that love, that love, corny as this may sound, it made her whole again.



When I was nine and a half years old, a friend's father used the word *nigger* in my presence. He wasn't calling me a *nigger*, not directly anyway. He was recounting a story about how he'd almost gotten into a car accident earlier in the day. The *nigger* to whom my friend's father referred was the individual driving the vehicle with which he almost collided.

I wasn't at all offended; of course, I had absolutely no idea what that word meant. It'd only been three years since my family had emigrated from Ghana, so I was still relatively new to the country. Also, ours was a household with little tolerance for assimilation. We didn't even speak English in our home, so *nigger* had not yet become a part of my new American lexicon.

My friend was embarrassed. "Dad," she whined, rolling her eyes and tilting her head in my direction to remind her father that I, a black person, was present.

"You said she's African, right?"

"Well, yeah," his daughter confirmed.

"Then she's got nothing to worry about." He sounded so certain.

It made me curious. "You see," he continued, "it's true that all *niggers* are black, but what a lot of people forget is that not all blacks are *niggers*. Africans are Africans, plain and simple. A completely different breed, straight outta the jungle. You guys aren't like the common black folks we got here. And I'm sorry to say, a lot of them

are *niggers*, just no good. Nah, if you hear us talking about *niggers*, don't think twice because we're not talking about you."

What could I say?

"Oh, okay. Thank you." That is what I said, even though what he said made no sense to me. How could he have possibly known where that black person in the car was from? He could very well have been African. Even so, what was it about being African that supposedly shielded him—and me, for that matter—from being a *nigger*? I really didn't understand. I wanted answers but I didn't know where to get them. My parents were far too literal, too logical. They didn't understand the nuances of racism in America.

A couple of months later I watched *Roots*, the miniseries that was based on Alex Haley's novel with the same title, and made some disturbing associations. In the first part of the miniseries, Kunta Kinte, a Mandinka from the Gambia, was captured into slavery. After he and the other captives were loaded onto a ship as human cargo, they sailed the middle passage to America, where they were then sold at auction to the highest bidder. In Kunta Kinte's case, that was John Reynolds, a plantation owner who immediately decided to change his new slave's name to Toby. Of course, Kunta Kinte refused to answer to, or even acknowledge, his new name; he refused to relinquish his identity, his sense of self. So they beat him. They cracked a whip, again and again, over

his bare back until the flesh was bruised and swollen. Then they beat him some more, hoping that when the skin broke, so too would the spirit. Time and time again, after having beaten the new slave within an inch of his life, they asked him his name. He used what little breath there was left in him to answer, “Kunta. Kunta Kinte.” Not long after one of these beatings, Fiddler, an older slave whom John Reynolds had chosen to oversee and train Kunta Kinte, told his young charge, “Things start looking better once you stop being African and start being a nigger like the rest of us.” Suddenly I remembered my friend’s father and what he’d said. I wondered what it all meant to me and to my future in America.

The next time they beat Kunta Kinte and then asked him his name, he told them it was Toby.



Granted, there’s nobody standing over us with a freshly oiled whip waiting for us to say the new name that we have been given—but we still don’t have total freedom. Freedom to name who we are. Freedom to name what it is we want to be. Being black in America can still so easily be about the surrender of identity, the relinquishment of your sense of self. It can still so easily be about using whiteness, definitions of the dominant culture, as your Rosetta Stone, as a way to translate yourself to others and, sometimes, even to yourself.



When my daughter was twelve years old, she decided that she

wanted to attend a junior boarding school. I know it's not a common practice among most Americans, especially African Americans, but in my family sending one's kids to boarding school is commonplace. My parents, my aunts and uncles, their parents—all of them attended boarding school. Blame it on the colonial upbringing. When she was in first grade, Korama went with me to visit Foxcroft, the Virginia secondary school I'd attended my freshman and sophomore years. The school, which is all-girls, boasts a beautiful and serene 500-acre campus, complete with a breathtaking English-style garden named after the founder, Miss Charlotte. When Korama laid eyes on that garden, she fell hard and fast, vowing that she would one day attend Foxcroft. She made it her goal. Every grade, every year brought her one step closer; and each summer, she'd announce her progress. "Only seven more years until Foxcroft." "Only five more years until Foxcroft."

This whole idea of a *junior* boarding school, though, was something new. It had not been a part of our plan. I worried that maybe she was too young, but she insisted that she'd be fine. She begged and pleaded, sobbed and whined. Korama is a strong-willed girl, has been from the day she was born, the sort of kid who knows exactly what she wants and makes it known. Even when she was nonverbal, Korama never left any room for doubt. She'd slap the bottle of soy milk out of my hand whenever I tried to feed it to her; bob and duck

her head and flail her arms about as I, always a tad chilly, attempted to slide a sweater or turtleneck on her before going for a stroll in our favorite Los Angeles park in the heat of August.

In fact, with the exception of the brief period of doubt and uncertainty that followed the bat joke, my daughter had always been fearless. She was also extremely personable and extraordinarily bright. And she yearned for more companionship than the life I'd built for her offered. She was the only child of a single parent. To make matters worse I was hermitic, a full-time writer, a borderline misanthrope who preferred books to people. No wonder she wanted to rush things along and leave home three years ahead of schedule. Like Foxcroft, this school was also all-girls, except it was located in a small Pennsylvania town. We discovered rather quickly that it wasn't as academically challenging as its catalog and its administration would have had us believe. Korama, who was the youngest student in her seventh grade class (which also made her the youngest student in the entire school), was far too advanced for the courses in her grade level. The school was ill-equipped to handle high-achieving students, so they simply placed her in courses that could accommodate her aptitude—one course at her grade level, two at the ninth grade, and a few more courses at tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade levels. It was socially disastrous. No sane educator would allow a seventh grade child, no matter how smart she

is, to be skipped into the twelfth grade. But in essence, that's what this school did; they had my twelve-year-old daughter taking classes with seventeen and eighteen year olds—and still getting A pluses at that. Ah, to be young, gifted and black.

I'm not sure which of these three things—young, gifted, or black—pissed her classmates off the most, but it didn't take long for the bullying to start. Korama was the lone black student in pretty much all of her classes, so race was the easiest and most obvious difference to hold against her. The other students called her names—*nigger*, rabid rainforest monkey—when school officials were not around. When Korama left the schoolhouse to walk to her dorm, books clutched to her chest, they walked closely behind her and whispered those names. When Korama returned to her dorm room after school she was greeted by the same racial slurs, this time scrawled onto the dry-erase board on her door. It was 24/7 harassment.

The instant I found out, I told her she had to come home—but she wanted to tough it out. “I can do this,” Korama assured me.

“If I leave, it's like giving up. I'm not gonna let them win.” I backed off, took my concerns and complaints to the school's administration, which was as inept on that issue as they had been on the issue of proper academic placement. “Teenage girls can often be mean,” the headmistress told me. “There's not much we can really do.”

One evening Korama called to tell me that the girls had not only been calling her those hateful names, they'd also started kicking her. When I told my sister, Paula, who was based in Maryland at the time, she jumped in her car immediately and made the six hour drive to central Pennsylvania to get Korama. It was a straight-up rescue mission. They left behind Korama's microwave, her mini-fridge, her toiletries, and a fair amount of her clothing. Paula knew, just like anybody who knows anything about real racism (as opposed to armchair racism) would and should know, that if Korama hadn't gotten out then, with little more than the clothes on her back, she would not have gotten out with her life.



It is next to impossible to get a child accepted into a magnet or charter program in the Los Angeles Unified School District in the middle of the academic year, but somehow—with tears, shrewd maneuvering, and an obscenely short skirt—I managed to pull it off. It also didn't hurt that Korama had taken the requisite tests in elementary school and been officially identified as a “gifted” student. So upon her return to Los Angeles, Korama was enrolled into a magnet program for “highly gifted” students.

This program, as it turned out, was one of three programs housed under the roof of one school building. One of those others was the regular neighborhood school program, into which anyone who lived within a certain zip code range could enroll. The students

in the regular neighborhood school program were predominantly black and Hispanic. In addition to the regular neighborhood school program and the highly gifted magnet program, there was also a charter program for gifted students. That's right, students who had been tested and identified as *merely* "gifted," not "highly gifted." And it's worth noting that the students in both the gifted and the highly gifted programs, with the exception of no more than a handful of blacks and Hispanics, were either white or Asian. These three programs that operated under the same roof were run separately, each following their own designated curriculum. The students were essentially segregated except during non-academic elective classes, PE, and lunch—the perfect times for teasing, bullying, and other such potentially life-threatening childhood activities. And how it all worked, the social pecking order, at this particular school was fascinating; predictable, yes, but fascinating nonetheless. The regular neighborhood school program kids teased and bullied the "gifted" program kids. The "gifted" program kids then joined forces with the regular neighborhood program kids to tease and bully the "highly gifted" program kids.

I'm not sure why there were so few blacks and Hispanics in the "gifted" and "highly gifted" programs, but if Korama's experience was any indication, then it was because they were made to feel like traitorous freaks. There were only two students of color in

Korama's seventh grade class—her and a bi-racial (black and white) boy who successfully passed for white until Back-to-School Night, when his tar-skinned daddy, of whom he was a spitting, albeit lighter, image, showed up and left no room for doubt.

Not that I could blame the poor boy for trying to slip through the cracks. There's something completely deflating about being the only one. No matter how nice and welcoming everyone is, you're still the "other." You're still the one on the outside looking in, the one who probably won't have a date to the dance, the one who will probably never go out with the most popular guy or girl in your class or get voted homecoming king or queen.

"You tryin' to act white," the black girls in the regular school program accused Korama. "You not really black."

When I was in school, I'd also been accused of acting white, of not "keeping it real." When I'd told my father, he just sneered, acted like it was the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard. "If you're not really black, then what are you?" he wanted to know.

"Tell them you're an African, born and bred. You can't get any blacker than that." He further explained to me that if "keeping it real" meant failing or not otherwise rising up to my full potential, then it was high time we found another reality. And I believed him, that tall African man standing before me; I believed him.

But Korama wasn't a recent immigrant from Africa. She was

born at Cedars-Sinai hospital, bred in Los Angeles. Nothing I said seemed to console her, or managed to convince her that she had every right to be talented, to be bright, to simply be. She'd been all alone at that boarding school, shuttling from class to class in different grade levels, not being able to truly bond with any of the other girls. And now, she was alone again. There were no other black girls her age, in her grade, in that "highly gifted" program, to whom she could look for friendship or even affirmation.



Korama's downward spiral was swift. There were nightmares.

There was screaming. And a whole lot of crying. Tears in the morning as she was getting ready for school; tears in the car as we were driving to school and I was listing all the reasons why she couldn't stay home with me instead. She cried every day, throughout most of the day, and she was sad all the time.

It amazes me now that I didn't figure out Korama was cutting, using sharp instruments to bruise herself, to break skin. The signs were right in front of me. I'd seen the random drops of blood on her sheets and just assumed, no matter where they were located on the bed, they were from menstruation. It would never, not in a million years, have occurred to me that they were from self-inflicted wounds, that my daughter was even capable of hurting herself in such a way. But she was, and she did.

Thankfully, there has never been much room in our relationship

for secrets, so Korama told me about the cutting—right about the same time that I found out she was flunking out of the “highly gifted” program. Since she kept up with the assignments and I checked her homework every night, I found it rather surprising; then it was explained to me that Korama hadn’t handed in any of the assignments. We eventually found them all, stuffed in her locker. I lobbied to have the assignments accepted and her grades recalculated; Korama, on the other hand, wanted to keep the failing grades. “I thought that if I did really poorly they’d kick me out and then I could be normal and go to the regular school with all of the black kids. I want to be normal, Mom.”

And the cutting? “It hurts so much inside,” she told me. “When I cut myself, the physical pain makes it more real.”

The school administrator, a middle-aged white man who seemed genuinely kind-hearted, suggested therapy. I balked at the idea. Ordinarily a huge proponent of therapy, I didn’t see how it would help in this situation. “It would give her the opportunity to discuss her problems,” he offered. I explained to him that I didn’t think the problems were hers, and I didn’t want Korama sitting around for an hour week after week claiming ownership of them.

“The fact of her blackness,” I said, “is not a problem. The fact of her brilliance is not a problem.” But the fact that society did not know how to deal with people like Korama *was* a problem. And

unfortunately, it was our problem.

My downward spiral was swift as well. Instead of writing, I spent what little free time I had reading books like Mary Pipher’s classic *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Our Adolescent Girls*—books that, in their efforts to detail all the ways we need to protect young girls, ultimately left me feeling overwhelmed by all the ways the lives of young girls could fall prey. Korama had promised me that she’d stop cutting and I believed that she would try, but could it be as easy as that? I feared that if something else happened before the end of the school year it would push her over the edge. I worried that she might try to kill herself. I worried that she would never recover, she would never regain her self-esteem. I couldn’t sleep at night; I couldn’t eat during the day. All I could do was worry. My hair started falling out; alopecia, the doctor informed me, the result of stress. One morning in the midst of what had become our usual teary, drama-filled school drop-off, I screamed, “Let’s just go home.” Korama thought I meant home to our apartment, which is where I drove that morning, and where she spent the day playing hooky. But I meant home to Ghana. I’d had an epiphany. Ghana was our Gilead. We were both coming undone; we were both hurting in such un-nameable ways. I wanted whatever protection, whatever balm, whatever healing it had to offer.



Accra, the capital of Ghana, is a modern, cosmopolitan city with a

huge expatriate community. Korama attended the Ghana International School, a truly multicultural institution with black, white, Hispanic and Asian students from all over the globe. Even though the majority of the students were black, you'd be hard-pressed to categorize them. Their backgrounds, experiences, and interests were so diverse. There wasn't the illusion of one black reality to sustain or betray.

The protection, the balm, the healing that Ghana offered Korama was, ironically, the very thing that in America she'd been made to believe was her downfall, her burden, the cross she'd been cursed to bear—her black body. We stayed in Ghana for two years—two very pivotal years in an adolescent girl's life. During that time, Korama's self-esteem soared, her confidence returned; she was able to engage her intellect; she was expected to succeed, not because she was black, but because she was smart and capable. Perhaps more important than any of that was her new and improved social life. She had girlfriends with whom she shared novels, lip gloss, and secrets. She had crushes on boys who might possibly return her affections; she attended dances, organized sleepovers. She started to feel normal.

You'd think with everything that had happened, Korama would have gladly forgotten about America, gladly forgotten about her goal of attending Foxcroft—but she didn't. She was actually more

determined than ever to realize those dreams she'd almost allowed herself to believe were impossible, out of her reach. She applied and was accepted as a sophomore.

Three years later, as I watched Korama walking in her tea-length white dress through Miss Charlotte's garden to receive her high school diploma, I couldn't help but exhale a sigh of relief. She was graduating cum laude, as the vice head of the school, had been lauded with various awards and honors, and she was on her way to an Ivy League college; despite all the obstacles, Korama had made it. My daughter had made it. But how many other black children, I wondered, had not?

Korama had, in fact, stopped cutting. But I remembered the days when I thought she might kill herself. It made me wonder if other black children had used sharp instruments to do more than break skin? How often can your spirit be broken until it's beyond repair?

The month before Korama's graduation, an eleven-year-old boy from Georgia committed suicide because he couldn't deal with the bullying anymore. A couple of weeks before that, an eleven-year old boy in Massachusetts committed suicide, also as the result of bullying from his classmates. We don't need any more black angels, little African American children dying for no reason other than our society's inability to see beyond confining stereotypes of the black body. But the list of suicides and attempted suicides goes

on. And on.

We've all heard of the proverbial straw, the one that breaks the camel's back. When I tell white people about Korama's experiences with racism and with bullying, I like to start from the very beginning, from the first word that was spoken by that ignorant neighbor. I like to explain it all step by step, because I don't think a lot of white people are aware of the hurtful and compromising positions into which black people in America are placed every single day. I don't think a lot of white people understand how truly remarkable and oftentimes miraculous, black survival is, black success is. Usually I find that I am right; they're not aware. They don't know.

When I tell black people about Korama's experiences, they nod knowingly. They finish my sentences. It's a story they've heard before, a story they've lived themselves. They have their version of a similar narrative—a different town; a different decade; a different destructive habit to deal with the intense emotional pain; always going back home, whether it's moving up North or down South, with grandparents or to another school district in order to make it stop, to start fresh someplace else.

"There's not one person I know," a friend of mine said, "who hasn't been through that. I think every one of us, from Ruby Bridges on, has had to deal with it in some way. Maybe that's the

price of the ticket.”



After Korama’s graduation ceremony my father placed his arm around her and said, “I’m so proud of you, sweetheart. The sky’s the limit now.” Korama looked up, as though she was already planning, accepting the invitation to soar. She turned toward her grandfather, smiled; and I could tell she believed him, that tall African man standing beside her. Korama believed that the sky was her limit, that her future was, indeed, hers to name.