

PROLOGUE

This is not a coming-out story. It's not a down-low story either. I never could have passed for straight, even if I'd wanted to, and so I never had the dubious luxury of living a lie.

By the time I was five, it was all too clear that something was wrong with me. Everyone knew it, and I knew it too. It was why grown-ups shook their heads and spoke in lowered tones whenever I was in the room. It was why I had to talk to a Nice White Man once a week, in his office in the big building up the street. The man and I played games, and he asked me a lot of questions. Sometimes I knew the answers and sometimes I was confused.

But I wasn't confused about why I was there. The Nice White Man was a doctor. He was working to help fix me. I didn't know the name of my mysterious affliction, but I did know that it had already manifested itself in many unacceptable ways.

For one, I was drawn to all the wrong pastimes. Double Dutch jump rope and hopscotch and jacks were for girls. It was wrong to want an Easy-Bake Oven for Christmas, and therefore Santa was never going to bring me one. I would get a set of drums instead (but the noise would bother Aunt Dorothy and I would seldom be allowed to play them). It was wrong not to care about football, wrong to shun contact sports in general.

I was also taken with all the wrong clothing. I brightened at the sight of all the wrong colors, the deep jewel tones and soft pastels. I loved the wrong fabrics too: taffeta and lace and velvet and lamé, material that rustled and swished and swirled with every step. It was wrong to love all the glorious hats on the ladies at church. And the trimmings on those hats! Veils and feathers and flowers and sequins and beads and rhinestones and ribbons and bows. Paul the Apostle had decreed that women should cover their heads during worship, and Black ladies had turned this directive into an art form.

It was wrong to be mesmerized by Aunt Sharon's shoe closet. To be excited by the rows of slingbacks and stilettos in silver and lilac and violet and mauve. To run my fingertips along their leather and satin and crocodile sides. It was especially wrong to slip on my very favorite pair—the candy-apple red pumps with the highest heels—and sashay back and forth before the full-length mirror, overcome by the splendor of them on my very own feet. It was why I was no longer allowed in her room.

Though I could not have articulated it back then, not even to myself, my fixation on fashion went deeper than mere aesthetics. I sensed that clothing was a potent signifier—that its import went beyond its visual appeal. Later I would come to understand that the finery donned by Black churchgoers was a powerful form of resistance. Many of them were employed during the week as domestic servants, or security guards, or custodians, and were required to wear uniforms meant to reinforce their status as less-than. To dress impeccably and regally on the Lord's day, then, was to insist on their own dignity and worth in a world that sought to systematically strip them of both. It was a way to assert that they were God's children too, and in His house, they would adorn themselves in a manner befitting the glory of the Lord!

I didn't have the words for any of this at the time, just a child's awareness that people carried themselves differently in different clothing, that fashion could effect a profound transformation, on the outside and inside both. The dazzling pageantry of Sunday worship filled me with delight, and I longed to be a part of it—but even in this, my desires were all wrong, for while I adored rockin' a three-piece, reversible Easter or Christmas suit situation, I also longed to dress like the ladies, from spike heel to majestic crown.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. To render a childhood in which I was continually urged to seek the Bible's guidance in all matters, let us do as that Good Book does, and start *in the beginning*.