

Purple threads

Thursday had always been Aunt Boo's shopping day. Most days when she drove us to school she went straight home again and did her farm work, but on Thursdays she stayed in town all day and visited Aunt Rose when the shopping and banking were done. This was also our day for getting special food at school. Everything was an embarrassment for me at school and my home-made lunches wrapped in the waxy paper from cereal packets were no exception. On shopping days though, Aunt Boo would come to the school at recess time and bring us cream buns and pastries from the bakery and hot pies and sausage rolls at lunch.

It was on one of these Thursdays that I thought I had finally gained some acceptance at school. The bell for recess had already gone and I sat on a bench on the veranda facing the gate, waiting for Aunt Boo. Two girls standing nearby with a skipping rope noticed me sitting alone and after a few muffled comments decided that I would be good enough to turn one end of the rope. The smaller of the two girls approached me. She held out the rope.

'Do you want to turn?'

I was delighted and forgot that my Aunt was late and I was starving. As I was about to take the rope the other girl pointed to the steps behind me.

'Look!' she said to her friend. 'There's that funny old lady.'

I turned and saw Aunt Boo in her old felt hat, with her wicker basket full of goodies, descending the steps. I ran to meet her and she handed me the paper bags.

When Aunt Boo left, the girl who had approached me fell into a huddle with some others. As they whispered and giggled I thought they were deciding who would go first. I was quite prepared to assume the role of rope-turner and stood up quite excitedly when another girl, with blonde pigtails and braces, approached me. I walked a few steps forward and smiled.

'You can't play with us,' she announced loudly.

Another group of girls playing skips gravitated towards us.

'Your aunts are black witches.'

Some of the onlookers openly laughed, while others smirked and covered their mouths.

'They're old hags and they live out of town in a falling-down house with lots of cats and dogs and other dirty animals, and my mother said we shouldn't play with you because we'll catch a disease.'

I walked quickly to the toilet block and away from the laughter. A wave of shame rocked my body. In the tiny cubicle hot, salty tears streamed down my cheeks and into my mouth. When the bell rang sometime later I was still

weeping. I knew everyone would notice that I'd been crying and Miss Chapel would call me a baby and I'd be humiliated again. And that's exactly what happened.

In the car on the way home I told Aunty Boo.

'Kids at school laughed at me today an' said I couldn't play with them coz you an' Aunty Bubby are filthy black witches.'

'Never mind, babe.' Aunty Boo switched on the radio as she spoke and the calmness in her voice wounded me. I'd found it hard to even repeat the insult. 'I know, them real nasty kids,' she continued as she stared at the road ahead. 'Ya jus' ignore 'em. Ya don't believe 'em, do ya?'

'No,' I snapped and felt the colour rise in my face. 'But they won't let me play with them.' I almost screeched the last word.

'Never mind, if they so nasty I wouldn't want to play with 'em anyway. Ya betta off without 'em. They'll get their comeuppance one day, babe, you jus' wait an' see.'

I took no consolation in her words at all. As far as I was concerned that was going to take too long and I mightn't get to see it anyway. My heart sank as I thought about all the lonely days I would spend by myself at school.

Aunty Boo infuriated me. Having gone to school so long before she couldn't understand my need to play with and be accepted by other children. I felt tears welling again. I turned my face away from her and stared out the window at the baking summer paddocks.

'Only two weeks to go till Christmas holidays,' she added in a brighter voice.

I didn't respond. Two weeks wasn't soon enough for me. I cheered myself up with the thought that Aunty Bubby and Nan would be so mad when they heard what the kids said about them that they would think of some reason to keep me home from school just like they did Petal.

'The kids at school said you an' Aunty Boo were black witches,' I announced to Aunty Bubby as she made me a sandwich.

I waited for her angry reaction. It didn't come. Aunty Bubby stopped her cutting and stood calmly with the bread knife in her hand. A big smile spread across her face.

'I wanted to be a witch when I was young,' she announced. My Aunties used to make me wild. They were so bloody calm. 'But they said I couldn't play with them coz they might catch a disease,' I blurted out, embarrassed by the shake in my voice.

Aunty Bubby stopped smiling and came closer. 'Never mind, precious. I know that kids can be real cruel if they think ya different. Don't be upset, love, we'll work somethin' out.'

I sulked in silence.

'You wait till afta tea an' I'll tell youse a story 'bout Aunty Rose an' Aunty Violet an' me when we nearly got to be witches. Now, run along an' sit with ya Nan while I go an' do my jobs.'

Nan was into her seventies by then. She was still active in the mornings but she spent the afternoons and evenings sitting in the kitchen rocking in a cane chair that Aunty Boo had bought her. It was my job to sit with her in the

afternoons while the Aunties were outside doing their chores.

'How was school today, love? Ya gettin' ta like it any betta?'

'I hate it! The kids say Aunty Boo an' Aunty Bubby are witches an' won't let me play with them.'

'Rotten little sods! Nan had lost so many teeth that her lips sagged and made her lisp. You tell 'em if they don't leave you alone I'll walk all the way ta town an' clobber 'em with my broomstick! I'll give 'em witches, all right.'

I sighed hopelessly. Although Nan had shown the most sympathy for my plight, I knew she wouldn't do it. She would never really go to town and hit some rich white kid with a broomstick as much as they deserved it. And even if she did, it would fuel the rumours even more.

After tea when Nan was tucked up in bed, Aunty Boo, Aunty Bubby, Star and I sat around the kitchen hearth. It was December and far too hot for a fire, but we always sat around the hearth reading and telling stories and talking year round.

That night Aunty Bubby told us the story of her last year at school. The teacher decided that they should perform *Macbeth*. Being the only black kids in the tiny one-teacher school, Aunty Bubby and her two sisters were given the parts of the witches.

'Auntie Violet an' Auntie Rose weren't real thrilled in the beginning, but I convinced 'em of the importance of the wise sistas an' then they come round. The three of us got really good at our lines an' our actions too. I made 'em sit

for hours every night with their hands under their chins so they'd go pointy like witches' chins, but when all the kids got sick with scarlet fever the teacher shut the school early an' called off the play. Rose an' Vi got over it pretty quickly, but I was so disappointed I cried.'

Auntie Boo laughed and shook her head. 'Auntie here is the only one mad enough to admit she wants to be a witch.'

'Why do people hate witches anyway?' I asked. 'They're not real.'

'Oh, they real right enough, darl', Auntie Boo interjected. 'They jus' ain't bad like people think.'

Auntie Bubby cleared her throat. 'The idea of calling women witches has been around for a long time. Began in a time they call the Middle Ages when there was a deadly illness called the plague. Rats caused it, but nobody knew this at the time. The English were filthy, ya know, lived all on top of each other an' hated takin' baths. Fact of the matter was, them fellas only took two baths in their life, one jus' afia they born an' one jus' before they died.'

'An' they still hate takin' baths!' Auntie Boo added.

'What's this got to do with witches?' I could be impatient sometimes.

'Hush, child. Listen!' Auntie Bubby said.

She was working up to something, I could just tell.

'The only people who didn't catch the plague,' Auntie Bubby continued, 'were lone women livin' outta town who kept cats for company. The cats kept the rats away, see, an' those women didn't catch the plague. The English are suspicious as well as filthy so they blamed these women for

causin' the illness in the first place. Townspeople started accusing them lone women of all sorts of things like having pacts with the devil an' practising evil or dark magic. Next thing ya know searches called witch-hunts started all over England an' Europe an' these women were rounded up an' burnt alive at stakes coz the others thought if they got ridda the women they might also get ridda the plague.'

Aunt' Boo added: 'Women livin' by themselves are always easy targets, girl. For some reason it makes people suspicious to see a woman getting by on 'er own. If a woman keeps a cat for company an' makes up a few stories ta keep strangers away, next thing ya know everyone's sayin' she's a witch. A witch-hunt is jus' a way of huntin' down those that are different an' blamin' 'em for everything that's gone wrong with the world.'

I felt a big lump rising in my throat. 'I want to be like everyone else.' I pouted and curled up in the big old arm-chair that doubled as a bed. I buried my head in my knees.

Aunt' Boo tried another story. She had a passion for quoting philosophers and historians, ever since she'd had to read them aloud to that old Mrs O'Brien.

'Hey, Epictetus told a good story about bein' different.' She paused and took a long whistling breath. She could switch from home talk to flash talk when she needed to. 'When Epictetus' mates told him he should be more like everyone else, he came back real smart like an' said to 'em, *Because you consider yourself to be only one thread of those that are in a toga it is fitting that you take care how you should be like the rest of men, just as the thread has no design to be anything*

superior to other threads. But I wish to be purple, that small part which is bright and makes everything else graceful and beautiful. Why then do you tell me to make myself like many? And if I do, how shall I still be purple?

'I don't care about Epic-wha's-his-face! I don't wanna be purple. An' I don't wanna be black either.'

My face was burning as I choked back the tears, but Aunt' Boo laughed and shook her head.

'Well, you was born to be purple. So be it! An' black too, ya hear.'

I couldn't tell them I wanted to be white then. But if I was white I'd see myself everywhere. In the classroom, when I opened up a book or looked at a picture. In the crowded playground, laughing, skipping and jumping between elastics. Down the main street in town. Or on the movie screen. I'd not stand out from the rest. But purple? Black? Too hard. Too ugly. Too different.