



# The Birth of Harlem Daffodils

By  
Chi-Chi Mgbako

**S**tanding in the doorway of my old brownstone, I remember being young and frowning as I touched my nappy head. Thinking, *Grandmomma gonna have to cornrow my hair and Jesus knows how that hurts. She gonna come in sayin' "Baby, first I'm gonna have to wash it, then dry it, then press it, then comb it, then oil it, then braid it, and, baby, it gonna look good because in you Africa talks and sways her hips as she walks, honey!"* I was this little girl who would sway her hips as she entered the kitchen, and Grandmomma would cook up some laughter and say, "I know my baby gonna grow up to be a daffodil!" And I'd stop swaying and start wondering what a daffodil was.

Many daffodils have blossomed since then.

I run up that familiar staircase, making sure not to trip over my long black dress, feeling once again like that young, innocent girl from so long ago. Softness is calling me, a softness that can be reached—daffodils growing deep in that unstained part of our hearts, in the kinkiest parts of our hair, in the duskiest parts of our skin. Each step is like a year, long since gone.

Somewhere down deep, deep, deep in that reachable softness, a breeze dances lightly across colorful numbers on hopscotches drawn by colorful children in Harlem. I sit on the landing, looking down at these stairs that once seemed like mountains but now seem small compared to the many mountains I have since

---

*Chi-Chi Mgbako lives in Metuchen, New Jersey, and wrote this story in eleventh grade at Bishop George Ahr High School in Edison. Chi-Chi loves to travel and has visited China, England, Nigeria, Canada, Mexico, Greece, and Italy. She has served as a student ambassador to China, as well as president of United Colors (her school's multicultural organization), and, in 1994, reigned as Miss Junior America, East Coast. Previously published in Merlyn's Pen's Oct./Nov. '95 Senior Edition, she is editor of her school's literary magazine, Reflections.*

climbed and conquered.

I cast my eyes down upon the soft pillows of my cheeks as a smile blossoms on my face—the birth of a daffodil, planted in the whispers of hot Harlem nights, in the warmth from the furnace long since turned off. My life still pulses in these wooden stairs, in the rust-colored carpeted floors, in the foggy windows of this dear brownstone. Chimes from church mix with the sultry voice of that beautiful Nestlé Crunch-colored jazz singer, Sugar May, creating a smoothness known only to the people of Harlem. Sugar May would purr, "I'm Sugar because I'm sweet and May because that's when all the sweet things bloom, baby!" A voice like that should have been known to the world.

I examine my surroundings. The brown of the walls is not the radiant mahogany it once was, but is now a lifeless brown, or perhaps it never really was that rich color. Perhaps the richness of life had somehow made it look that way. I look down, examining my long black dress, my fingertips stroking the fabric, and I realize that I need a manicure. I rise from my staircase seat, walk slowly to the window, and glance out onto the street. The sidewalk is dirtier than I remembered it, but somehow still the same. The same laughter in the voices of children rises from the street; only now I see different faces. Kinky-headed kids spinning through this Harlem universe. I smile as I touch my nappy head.

Moving away from the window, I again become an admirer of my long black dress. The young girl I used to be has recaptured my body and now propels me toward the room of that youthfully old woman, the only mother I ever knew. I step through the doorway and her spirit overtakes me. Again I hear the old-time gospel tapes Grandmomma used to play during those hot Harlem nights. Strong voices singing for Jesus to forgive and Jesus to save and to give us the strength to be worthy of saving. Langston Hughes books are scattered across her desk, and that one poem he wrote, my grandmomma's anthem, rings through the room. Something about a sorrowful wave taking someone to some safe island. I can't remember the exact words; I just remember that the person didn't want to drown. Photographs of those living she loved and those passed on whom she also loved hold a vigil over Grandmomma's bedroom. Her honey-scented perfume fills the room, making it smell like the sweet hive of a honeybee.

I walk over to the closet, open it up, and there she is, sitting still, taking in my presence with her crooked smile. Her skin is dark, her hair in knotty woolen braids, her dress colorful and tattered, her eyes a mute sparkle. I pick up the black rag doll and yesterday changes to now.

**"Baby, in you  
Africa  
talks  
and sways  
her hips as  
she walks!"**

I hear my grandmomma's voice, as clear as eternity on a bright summer's day. "You got a nappy head and dark skin," she says, "just like that there rag doll, and I think you the most beautiful girl in this world. Definitely in all of Harlem. Look at your black rag doll. I made her for you to show how beautiful you are. That there rag doll is the great Harriet Tubman and Miss Sojourner Truth and the glorious Rosa Parks, all rolled into one. That there rag doll is *me*. That there rag doll is *you*. But you don't even pay her no mind. See, baby, if you think she worth something, maybe the whole world gonna think she worth something too, but if you think she worth nothing—who in the world gonna think she worth something?"

My grandmomma's voice fades, and my mind snaps back to the present, to the inner rain that now drizzles down my face. I never thanked my grandmomma for those few words she said, but I think she always knew what I wanted to tell her. My grandmomma helped me start my own personal revolution when I was just a tender bud, never too sure of when I would blossom. She showed me how beautiful that black rag doll was, how much she had to offer to the world. My grandmomma gave me some of her daffodils, too—the knowledge of our beauty, of that reachable softness.

I run swiftly down that familiar staircase, no longer holding the tight insecurity of a young girl, but exuding the confidence of a woman. I glance back at those stairs one last time, realizing that I have conquered that mountain.

Clutching my rag doll, I step out into the streets of Harlem, my dark skin glowing in the embers of the fading sun. I look down and touch the crumpled fabric of my long black dress. And I think, *Grandmomma knew that on the dusky side of the moon we can grow daffodils that blossom into galaxies, and make love on the tips of meteors, in hopes that they won't come crashing to the earth.*

At her funeral, I cried. But that's OK, because . . . somewhere down deep in that reachable softness, daffodils are born in this Harlem garden. ★

## The Sound of Dhows in Africa

My sails are drawn. This ship is home,  
returned for an evening's rest.  
The many-chambered heart of me  
beats slow within my chest.  
My panther sky, with leopard spots  
and constellation tail,  
I sleep by your old moonlight eyes  
until the morning hale.

—Frank Gallimore,  
Eleventh grade, Jefferson High School,  
Jefferson, Oregon

## Did You Know They Stole the Body?

Jesus didn't die on the cross and then rise from the dead—  
rather, "He married Mary Magdalene and had four children,"  
says Barbara Thiering in *Time* magazine.

I had no idea.

Caesar didn't expire after "Et tu, Brute"  
but,  
after lacerating one-third of the Senators  
with swoops of a Grecian bread platter,  
he invented the salad  
at the request  
of a traveling Chinese gong salesman.

FDR didn't care a mustard seed for the New Deal  
but let Ickes hack it out with the Depression  
while he, FDR, sharpened pencils with his teeth  
and chatted with Annie Oakley in the parlor.

Did you know

Fashionable gentlemen of the 1800s  
routinely removed their ears  
in van Gogh courting rituals?

Did you know

The Holocaust was all a hoax?

Flog the New Testament into a froth and plunge your  
fingers into the resulting foam.  
Smear it like graffiti across  
a city sea wall  
and you can pretend  
that Alexander the Great was a woman,  
that Henry VIII owned an Instruments  
of Torture Factory  
and used his 1001 wives  
to test new products  
for quality.

Did you know

Jesus has descendants  
now refereeing for the Harlem Globetrotters?  
Ones that peel grapes for the tabloids after hours?

You didn't?

Good.

—Amy Vinson,  
Twelfth grade, David H. Hickman High School,  
Columbia, Missouri