

A Swallow of Cola

by Michelle McEwen

My mother calls me "yellow" like it's my name— calls me this 'cause she says beneath all of my dark, there's the yellow I once was as a baby. "Your father was so stingy," she says a lot of the time when she's at the sink washing dishes, her back to me, "he had to take his color along with him when he left!" And she means it— acts as if, before he took off, he leaned into the crib and took back his yellow. She shows me pictures of when I was a baby and I *was* as yellow as she says. In the supermarket, in the dairy aisle, she'll recall that yellow and say, "You was real yellow, like butter." At the beach, when the sun is full on us, she'll recall that yellow and sing, "You was yellow alright, just like the sun." And if it weren't for those pictures, I wouldn't believe her. I'm dark— like my mother, like her sisters, like her mother, like her father. Dark. Nobody believes the picture on the table by the sofa is me as a baby. Folks' jaws drop and they get that "what happened?" look to their eyes. You should see my mother proving that it's me. "See right there, that mark on the left side of her chin— she still got it." And the folks say, "Ah! Sho' is her then!" And they shake their heads—swear up and down my dark is the work of some hex. But my mother says my father wouldn't put a hex on me. "He didn't love me enough to wanna hurt me by hurtin' my child," she tells them and they nod. "He was just stingy is all," My mother says to company, "only wanted that yellow for himself." And she means it— makes them believe my father put my yellow in a sack, tied it 'round a stick, and took off. But you can't steal skin, my friend Jose says. He says all babies are born with no color just about. I tell him I know that and that it's just my mother talking crazy. Jose says he can't picture me yellow nohow— says it was alright on me as a baby, but as a grown girl he says "No way!" and frowns as if yellow is the nastiest color in the crayon box. My mother says Jose don't know what he's talking about. "Yellow, girl," she says, "your father is a thief. He got hold to your yellow and run off— that's what he did." When I tell Jose this, he laughs and says of

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my mother (imitating and sounding just like my grandmother):
"Your mother's loony as a jaybird."

Jose is silly, but he knows what he's talking about. My mother says I gotta watch out for Jose. She says he may be silly and all the time laughin' and smilin' and imitatin' folks, but "he's got a meanness in him," my mother says. She says she can see it in his eyes. "Yellow, girl, keep your eye on that Jose. He might just steal something from you one of these days," she said once while brushing my long, curly hair— the hair she says my father had sense enough to leave behind. "Still stingy, though," she says. I don't know about this meanness she thinks Jose has. Jose wouldn't steal a thing—wouldn't even steal his own bike back if he had the chance. She thinks twelve is too young to know what she means by "something" when she says that he might steal something from me one of these days. I know what she means. And Jose ain't studying me about that. He just likes me the way I am. He likes my hair when it's pinned up and hiding its length; he likes the mark on my chin and the nicks on my shins; he likes the chipped nail polish on my short, round boy-nails; he likes the hair starting to grow under my arms and he likes the smell there when my deodorant is wearing off. "You smell like something cooking," he sometimes says when he smells me after I've been running and jumping around— my deodorant long wore off. Once when, on one of those days I had been running and jumping around, we were leaning against his fence, he told me:

"If your father *did* do what your mother say — steal your yellow — that's the best thing he coulda done for you."

"Why you say so?" I said, biting my low nails.

"Because I like you dark," he said yanking my hand away from my mouth but not in a mean way 'cause Jose don't have meanness in him like my mother says.

"Even if Luther don't?" I said putting my hands in my pockets. Luther is a boy at school who pokes fun at my dark. Luther says people ain't dark like me no more. "Everybody's mixed with somethin," Luther says, 'cept you."

"I'm not thinking 'bout Luther," Jose said and he puffed out his cheeks to look like Luther. We were quiet for a while after that until Jose smiled and said he could smell me.

"You don't smell yellow," he said sniffing me up close.

"And what yellow smell like?" I said letting him sniff me.

"Aw, yellow smells like," he said, "... like ... like ... like a garden with too many flowers, with too many humming birds, with too many—"

"Nothing wrong with that, Jose," I said and I meant it. I moved away from the fence then and told him I had to get home.

"Yeah, but I don't like it," he said and grabbed me back by my elbow but not in a mean way 'cause Jose is the kindest boy on our block. I didn't say a word after that, but Jose kept waiting for me to say something. When I didn't, he said, "You know what I like?" I shook my head and he still had a hold of my elbow. "I like—" and he went on and on about how he liked how my dark smelled like back home and how if his grandfather was alive his grandfather would say the same thing. Oh, he kept saying, you smell like back home. He said his grandfather used to say that all the time to some lady he started seeing (who was dark like me) after his wife, Jose's grandmother, died. But he never said where back home was and nobody knew where Jose was from— not even Jose.

"You know what?" he said catching up to me 'cause I had started to head home because I knew my mother would start hollering for me soon.

"What?" I said slowing up just a little.

"Every time I see you, I want a swallow of cola," he said smiling like he made that up. I knew he was probably saying something he had heard his grandfather say, but I didn't mind so I smiled too. "I like that you're the color of cola," he said and I knew he probably got that from his grandfather, too.

"Ha!" I said.

"It's true," he said and smiled and in one hop he was at my side.

