

"My Crazy Beautiful World" by Jacqueline Woodson

I will give you this – a few moments in my life.
Do with them as you wish. They are yours now.
I was twelve then and even as I write this, twelve
is leaving, going away from me. Tomorrow, I will
5 be sixteen, and maybe sixteen is twelve all over
again – a different body, a fuzzier brain, boys
draping into vision everywhere, girls mysterious
now – new to me and old, too. I will tell you all
I remember. Then I will be free of twelve –
10 allowed to move on. Where I will go from here –
even though the years have passed, I do not know.
For at this moment, I am twelve still – tall, lanky,
unsure. My hair has been straightened, parted in
the center, and pulled into two braids. At the end
15 of each braid is an elastic – pink, perhaps, or sky
blue. These are my favorite colors and I wear
them often. It is summery today – bright morning
and I am wearing sky blue shorts and a sky blue
top. In cursive iron-on letters, my name moves
20 across my flat chest – *Angela* – scripted like a
promise of something I do not yet understand.
Somewhere far off someone is calling my name
now. I have a small gap between my two front
teeth. Otherwise my teeth are straight and white
25 and my smile is the only part of me that feels
pretty. I am not pretty. The pretty girls surround
me, move past without seeing anyone but others
like them. Their skin is clear. Their bodies are
beginning to curve into something – something
30 that will make them even prettier. Their laughter
makes others smile. Their fingers are long. Some
are short-haired and some aren't, but the way the
hair moves around the face takes the breath – and
holds it. The pretty girls don't see me. How can
35 they?
I am not beautiful. I am not here.
Then, where am I?
I am the tallest girl in my class, and when my
classmates want to be mean, they yell, *Here*
40 *comes the Jolly Green Giant*. The taunt echoes
through schoolyards and hallways. *Comes ...*
comes ... comes. Giant ... giant ... giant.
----- **End of part 1** -----
But it is summer now and I do not have to line up
45 in size order anywhere. I do not have to listen to
the taunting of classmates. No, it is summer. July
perhaps. Or early August. Hot already. I am
standing with my hands on my hips. Waiting.
Behind me, someone keeps calling my name, but
50 I ignore this. My block is clean this morning.
This first clear day after a week of rain, my
grandmother and other mothers came out to
sweep damp newspaper, potato chip and candy
wrappers, and brown paper bags into the street.
55 This morning, the street-cleaning truck cruised by

– bleach-scented water and heavy black brushes
taking our trash, and everyone else's, with it. It
was early but already hot, and I stood there, my
shorts pulled up, my feet bare – letting the truck's
60 cool, smelly water breeze over me. My head
back, my dark arms out like wings, my T-shirt
growing damp.
The sweepers had all gone inside by then, my
grandmother complaining, *Looks like nobody*
65 *lives here* even as my front yard brightened with
the absence of trash, even as a small breeze
pushed the pale curtains lovingly through my
family's windows. In the mist of the street
cleaner, I was alone. And even as the water
70 cooled me, a sadness crept up, out of my very
bones, pushing through marrow and blood and
skin to drape me in itself. It was not unfamiliar,
this sadness. But as always, it surprised me,
seeming to come at once from no place and from
75 the deepest parts of me.
C'mon Angie, I been calling you for like a year
already.
And now I turn in the hot afternoon to find my
best friend standing beside me. Where I am dark,
80 she is olive. When my hair is straightened, hers
curls down her back, ringlets circling her face.
Where I am still flat-chested and skinny, she is
not. She is beautiful, and although we have been
friends since we were five years old, I worry that
85 the day will come when she will realize I am not
beautiful like she is, that this will suddenly matter
to her, and the seven years of friendship will
mean nothing. But today is not the day. Today she
stands before me dressed in pale pink shorts and
90 a T-shirt with *Maria* across the front. Although
we often dress alike, Maria's mother is more
daring than my own, allowing Maria to wear the
clothes of the moment – miniskirts and go-go
boots, ankle-length leather coats and platform
95 shoes. I am confined to flat shoes and practical
cottons – clothes my mother swears will feel
better and last longer.
Get your sister for double Dutch, Maria says,
holding up the long cord we talked the telephone
100 man into giving us.
She won't want to. Think of somebody else.
This is the year my sister is moving away from
us. She is fourteen, and there is a far-off look in
her eyes. Her brilliance has been discovered – by
105 teachers and social workers and everyone on the
block. But while this is a moment I dream of
often – to wake up understanding math and
science and geography – my sister has moved
inside herself, to a quiet place I do not
understand. She sits for hours now, a bowl of

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popcorn and a glass of water next to her on the end table, with books whose words are as foreign to me as the understanding of pi and Fe and the USSR open on her lap. She reads with no sense of who is around her, what is happening in the room, on the block, in the world. When she closes a book at the end of the day, she looks up, surprised, it seems, that there is a world and she is in it still. We call her Einstein and Freak Show and any other name that will get her to react – to see us. Us regular, not-brilliant kids who are stuck right here on earth.

----- **End of part 2** -----

There is a stillness to the air. Down the block, three boys are playing Skully – shooting tar-filled bottle tops over a diagram of numbers drawn with chalk on the street. They crouch down on their knees, their butts up in the air, and use their thumbs and pointers to shoot the tops. I am not allowed to play this game. Not allowed to crouch down like this. My mother doesn't allow it and my friends don't. *You're not a guy*, Maria says when I speak of my longing to play. Down on the street, their bodies curved into the strange position of the game, the boys look powerful and free and oddly beautiful to me. They crawl around on the warm tar and laugh loudly when one bottle cap knocks another out of the game. Their knees and elbows are dirty. I watch, standing back, away from them. There is something in this game, in their laughter, in the ferocity of their togetherness, that I don't yet understand. When Maria comes close, they duck their heads, look away while looking at her. She smiles at them, then turns quickly away. *C'mon, Angie*, Maria says. *You ain't no guy. It's not about being no guy*, I say. And we sit on the curb and watch them. Her not understanding why I would want to get down in the street, me not knowing how to talk about the word that comes to me: *freedom*. Not knowing now what I will one day know – that Maria already lives the word. That the word *freedom* exists for her in the slow turn of her heel, the flip of her dark, curling hair, her thick eyelashes, her smile. I watch the boys while Maria untangles the rope. How many games of double Dutch have we played this summer? How many games of hopscotch and Miss Lucy and handball? How many times have we run across the street to the park, climbed onto the swings, and tried to touch tree leaves with our toes?

This summer there is a longing in me so deep, I feel some mornings that I will drown in it. A longing to belong. Not to my friends or my block,

but to *me* somehow. To grow into my skin and hair and gap-teeth. To know what I feel, like everyone around me already knows or doesn't care to know. Who am I?

When the boys look past me, who am I?
When the kids call me the Jolly Green Giant, who am I?

When the grown-ups talk about my manners and my long legs that I'll *grow into*, who am I?

When I lean into the bathroom mirror, trying to find the beauty there, who...?

----- **End of part 3** -----

It is Thursday night and my grandmother is brushing my hair. She pulls the brush quickly through it. Then there are the hard plastic teeth of the comb making a part down the center of my scalp. The kitchen is quiet. On the stove what is left of this evening's meal remains – okra that I hate, fried chicken that I love, and mashed potatoes that I can either take or leave. Tonight, because my grandmother has used skim milk in them instead of whole, I have left them. Now my grandmother pulls the left side of my hair into a tight braid as she lectures me.

That's why you're so skinny now, she says. *Clothes just hanging off of you. I shouldn't even have told you I used skim milk. You wouldn't have known the difference.*

Yes, I would've. They tasted different.

Different how?

Nasty different. Like potato water.

My grandmother taps the comb against my head. It's a firm tap but not a mean one.

Shouldn't even have told you. You would've eaten them right up.

She braids my hair to the very end, and the neat tight braids stop at my shoulder before curling up. This year I want to be able to comb my own hair, but when my grandmother holds out the brush and comb with a stubborn *Go on then. Comb your nappy hair*, I don't. Her hands are too sure, too strong. Too familiar.

My sister pulls her own hair back into a ponytail. I am told I have my father's hair – thick, crinkled, jet-black. My sister's curls are looser, falling over her face and down her back in a way that my grandmother says her own mother's hair once fell. I do not understand how my sister and I got such different hair.

As my grandmother puts an elastic on the second braid, I say, *I wanted a ponytail like Dana's.*

My grandmother looks at me as though I've lost my mind. *Then you better grow some hair like Dana's.*

Outside, it is nearly dark. I stand by the window

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and wait for my brothers and sister to finish
dressing. *You better grow some hair like Dana's.* I
know there is love and laughter and my
grandmother's own strange sense of humour in
225 this statement. Still it hurts. As I stand, dressed in 280
a white cotton blouse and sky blue wraparound
skirt, I can see my sister behind me – her
reflection in the windowpane clear and sure. She
is tall like I am. When her breasts grew, she was
230 no longer skinny but thin. One day, maybe I will 285
have breasts and be thin. When we dress alike,
people often ask if we are twins – same dark skin
and gap-teeth. Same nose – long but broad. Dark
eyes, thick brows and lashes. Our cheekbones jut
235 up out of our faces in a way that makes strangers 290
comment. *Look at those bones, they say.*
Fraternal twins they say.
Different hair, though.
Of course not, my sister says. I'm older. Can't you
240 *tell? Jeez.* 295
But there is something else to my sister.
Something that makes her the beautiful one. I
don't know what this something is, but I see it in
the eyes of relatives and strangers. The way their
245 looks linger. The way fear marches across their 300
faces and dissolves their own confidence.
Why are you just standing staring out at the
darkness? My sister wants to know now.
I shrug. *No reason. Just thought I saw something.*
250 ----- **End of part 4** ----- 305
Every Monday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday,
there is religion. This Thursday evening is no
exception. We have always been Jehovah's
Witnesses, the way my friends are born Catholics
255 and Protestants and Seventh Day Adventists. Our 310
religion is as much a part of us as the color of our
skin. We know who God is and why. We believe
in Christ and everlasting life. We don't curse and
we're not supposed to lie and steal. We carry
260 briefcases with the literature of our religion. As 315
my grandmother locks the door behind us, we
wait at our front gate – my brothers, my sister,
and I dressed like little adults. My younger brother
is nine years old. He pulls uncomfortably at his
265 tie and shrugs out of his sport coat in the summer 320
heat. *I'll put it on when we get there,* he says
when my grandmother starts to speak. He is my
grandmother's favorite, and we all know this so
none of us questions it, and nobody else attempts
270 to remove an article of clothing. 325
I am a Jehovah's Witness. I say this at the
beginning of each school year, and upon hearing
it, my teachers understand – this one is the one
who will leave when we stand to recite the Pledge
275 of Allegiance. This one will not participate in any 330

holiday celebrations. No Secret Santa for this one.
No Valentine. No birthday cupcake on this one's
desk. No candle's bright promise of something
better to come. I am a Jehovah's Witness and have
been so all my life. My Bible is highlighted and
dog-eared. I believe this world will end with fire
and brimstone and this ending is soon to come. I
believe there are two roads – a wide one and a
narrow one. Upon the wide road, people dance
and curse and celebrate holidays. The narrow
road is less crowded, and those walking it walk
with their heads turned toward God. There will
come a time, my grandmother promises, when the
walkers of the narrow road will have cause to
celebrate. This system of things will be destroyed
and we'll live in a new world, a beautiful paradise
on earth.
My mother will not be part of this paradise. As
we walk away from our building, I turn to look
where the curtains billow from the upstairs
windows. My mother is there somewhere. Maybe
she is lying on her side, reading one of the many
romance novels she owns. In the novels, white
women with flowing hair live in wealthy
communities with servants and beautiful clothes.
They meet handsome men who love them deeply
and endlessly. My mother turns the pages slowly,
hoping to linger in this place. My mother is not a
Jehovah's Witness. Although she believes in God,
she does not go with us when we leave for the
Kingdom Hall. In our few hours away from her,
she lets herself get lost in worlds she'll never
know. Her new world. Her paradise on earth.
In her own world now *Al Green* is singing, *Lay*
your head upon my pillow... and maybe she is
moving gently around the living room now,
swaying to Al's deep voice. Maybe she has the
broom in her hands, imagining the broom is the
man who will rescue her from this system of
things, this world that still confuses her. Maybe
she is asking, *How did I get four children? And*
me only thirty-four.
I walk slowly down our block – trailing behind
my grandmother, brothers, and sister. Behind me I
can hear kids taunting, *Churchie, churchie,*
churchie. Churchie, churchie, churchie. Too many
times, my sister has turned to them and shouted,
It's not church, it's Kingdom Hall, you morons.
But tonight she doesn't. We walk with our backs
straight, our eyes directly in front of us. We walk
down the block and away from it. The sun has
set. The road is narrow. Our heads are turned
slightly upward. Toward God.
----- **End of part 5** -----
Lourdes and Gabriella are twins. Not identical.

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But when they put on their Catholic school uniforms, it is harder to tell them apart. They are pale skinned and gray eyed, their white-blond hair making us think of albinos. We whisper this
335 – *How can their mothers love them, and them so ugly like that?* They have two brothers. One brother is seven and normal. The other is four and not. This is the one we tease. His name is Ramon and he sits in his window with the elbow of his
340 left arm in the palm of his right hand. For hours, he shakes the left arm and stares at it. Lourdes and her family move onto our block in May. Before long, we are all imitating her brother. When we see Lourdes we do as her brother does.
345 We say, *Hey, pale girl, watch this.* And pretend that this is the way one says hello. Lourdes and Gabriella are twelve. The day after they move in, they sit on the stoop with their brothers and watch the rest of us, shaking his arm. When I look at
350 him full on, he smiles, a smile for all of us – aimless and open. *You know how to jump?* Maria asks, holding out the rope. And Lourdes and her sister shake their heads.
355 *Where'd you move from that you don't know how to jump?* And Lourdes and her sister shrug. *You don't know where you moved from?* I ask. They shrug again. Gabriella says, *For us to know, for you to find out.*
360 *Like anybody really cares,* Maria says. *Must be Mars if you can't jump.* Some other kids have come closer to listen and now *Oooooohs* ripple through the crowd. These are fighting words. I turn and stare nervously at
365 my window. My mother is in there somewhere. My grandmother, too. If I am standing anywhere near a fight, I'll be in trouble. Our house is full of rules. I am learning that the two most ridiculous ones are *don't fight* and *don't come home with your butt beat, either.* I put my hands in my
370 pocket and move a little bit away from everything. Because this move isn't new for me, I've been labeled a chicken, a chump, and a bunch of other names I'd get in a lot of trouble if I said.
375 Somewhere far off, an ambulance siren is going, moving closer. We all look toward the sound, watch the ambulance speed down the avenue that is at one end of our block. The sun, high up and hot, moves behind a cloud. As the siren fades,
380 Maria says *You act like you wanna jump in my face.* We look at Gabriella, and I say a silent prayer: *Please jump in her face, but please everybody move around the corner so my mother doesn't see me watching a fight.*
385

Like I want to get anywhere near your ugly face, Gabriella says. And for a moment no one speaks, our confusion thick and silent as the heat. How can she not know, we wonder, that Maria and, by extension, all of us are the beautiful ones? How can Gabriella, with her pale skin and watery eyes, not see Maria's beauty? How can she flip her own near-white hair and not tear up at the weight and life in Maria's dark curls. We don't know how to ask this – this simple and crazy question – *How could you possibly not know?*
390 And we don't know how to ask it. None of us. Maria throws the moves fast toward her. I take another step back, my stomach rising up both with excitement and fear. Then everyone is screaming and my mother is at the window, threatening every kid in the group, name by name. But Maria and Gabriella don't hear her, and in another minute my mother is hurrying across the street, stepping between them. Maria's face is unmarked, but Gabriella's is now covered with scratches, thick red lines moving every which way. Maybe she is crying. Maybe, later on, she will look into her mirror and understand then what we already know.
400 Hours later, sitting on my own stoop, I stare out at our block. Some boys are still playing Skully, but the clouds have moved in. After a few minutes, a steady summer rain begins to fall. I stick my tongue out, taste the drops – hear, still, the echo of my mother's threats. There will be no going to Maria's house to play now – not for at least a week. And for at least a week I will have to hear about what a bad influence Maria is, how wild.
405 *Where is her mother, anyway?* My own mother will say over and over. *And don't go across the street near those new girls either. Can't believe people let their kids act the fool.* On and on and on. The rain is cool on my tongue. If water was a color, it would be sky blue. That's the taste of it. Soft. Light. Free.
410 I hold out my hand. Stare down at my long, dark arm. *Whose beauty is this?* I will ask one day. *Whose beauty is this?*
415 Across the street, Lourdes and Gabriella glare out over the nearly empty block, their faces twisting between sadness and confusion. But Ramon gives everyone and no one his crazy, beautiful smile. Holds his elbow in his hand and, for a moment, looks as though he's asking us all ... to come closer.
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430
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----- **The end** -----