

Tar Baby

*(Yes, I am aware that this is can be seen as a racial slur,
but it is not intended to be offensive in any way—
the TarBaby was a sculpture/character in a book that is now banned in the US.)*

“Don’t worry, you’ll look great!” my mother said cheerfully.

I scrunched up my face, making new constellations with my freckles. She fussed with my corduroy shirt, pulling it and me different directions to make the wrinkled fabric lay to her specifications. She held up a worn pair of overalls and said: “Ok, put this on.”

I glowered at her, no self-respecting seven year-old would wear something as bumpkin as the tattered outfit she handed me. Some fool had even stitched a ladybug patch on one of the butt pockets trying to be cute.

“We’re going to be late--so stop being a pain,” she put her hands on her ample hips.

“But why can’t I--“

“Because you couldn’t make up your mind until yesterday what you wanted to be. So now you’re stuck with what we have here at the house.”

I pouted even worse.

“Sarah Ann...” The threat was obvious.

“Ok,” I grumbled. The overalls smelled like the Salvation Army, and were longer in the leg than I was.

“Perfect,” mom said, rolling up the excess denim to let my sneakers peek out. “And now for finishing touches.”

She yanked the black tights over my head.

The mirror showed me that I looked as horrible as I thought I would.

The toe section of the pantyhose collected on the top of my head like a deflated balloon and I looked like a licorice lollipop in a pair of overalls. Mom snapped a baseball cap on my head to cover the nipple of black hose, and smiled proudly at her work. I lost every feature of my face to the clingy fabric, but I could still see my disgusted expression.

“See, you look terrific!”

I have undergarments on my head.

The only thing saving me from total humiliation was the thought of my father.

Mom dressed him up too.

One year she dressed him as Agnes the cleaning lady from some Sunday cartoon. He had everything from a gray wig and dress, to rolled up panty hose and birdseed bag boobs. I got to dress up as Indiana Jones that year--I did it myself.

Mom paraded me out into the living room where my father was reading in his brown recliner. “What do you think?” she asked him.

Dad folded down the newspaper and did a double-take. A smile crept from one side of his face to the other, like his teeth were doing the Wave at a football game.

“Looks good, but are you sure they’ll let her wear that?”

My mother looked down at me puzzled for a moment. “I don’t think that it’ll be that much of a problem.”

I hate it when they talk over my head, but I don’t have a face to show it.

“Do you think they’ll know who she is?”

“Well...I guess we could make her take the book with her.”

Grrrrr.....

“--Oh! I forgot!”

Mom ran back into the bedroom and returned with two more black fabric worms in her hands. She shoved the pantyhose up my arms, stealing my hands from me as well as my face.

“So what do you think, sport?” my dad asked.

“I hate it.”

He didn't seem to know what to say, “Oh, well....you don't have to wear it that long.”

“I wanted to be a witch!”

“Isn't that a little boring?”

“No,” I said sadly. “This is worse than when Mom dressed me up as a Rubix Cube.”

Dad hid his smirk behind the local crime report and offered: “Well, I think you look cute.”

UUUUURRRRRRGGGGHHHHH!!!! CUTE???

This coming from a man who ran around and won the drag queen contest on their anniversary cruise? This coming from a man who wore suspenders from his shirt-tails to his socks to keep from having to tuck in his uniform? The man who shaved his beard off and laughed because I couldn't recognize him?

Cute is for kittens and little babies with drool on their faces. Cute is for pink tutus and puppies who can't stand up. Cute is for Teddy Bears and bunnies with little wrinkly noses. Cute is disgusting.

I want to be a green nasty witch with nothing that could ever be considered CUTE.

The van bounced around and I could feel the road through my back.

“Oh, stop it-- it isn't that bad!”

My grimace was captured by the black hose and I lay stubbornly on the floor.

“Ok, we're here. Now, just go and have fun.”

“Yeah, right, mom.”

“Go on, you look great.”

Sigh....

As I walk into school, I can feel everyone's eyes on me. Their whispers flash behind foil crowns and cheap plastic masks.

“Who is that?” a girl asked aloud. She was a coward like the rest of them, too afraid to look foolish by walking up to ask me.

Kevin Masterson from my class tried to show off. “Can you see me?” he said coming close to my face.

I didn't want to say anything.

I nodded.

He smiled and danced around in front of me like a monkey dressed as a cowboy. The others laughed at him, but I just simmered behind the black fabric.

Everything looked shadowed and fuzzy from inside the pantyhose, but I could still see jerks.

Mrs. Hottle stood at the front of the class and looked us over through her thick glasses. She smiled.

Until she saw me.

I knew I stood out against the little fairies, cats, superheroes, goblins, princesses, kings, ghosts, robots, and other miscellaneous cuteness. A black crayon in the box.

When her eyes fell on me, she jerked a little, as if the sight of me was painful.

Thanks Mom.

My teacher forced a smile, “Well, doesn’t everyone look nice!”

I heard giggles and whispered comments among the rustle of taffeta and nylon. Kids still glanced over at me now and then, taking bets on who I was.

Mrs. Hottle announced that before class actually started, we were supposed to report to the parking lot for the costume contest. There were general cheers all around, if we were lucky, we would lose half the school day being outside and get out of homework entirely.

By now, I had somewhat adjusted my eyes to their shadowed vision through the pantyhose. Everything was still more or less a blur of vivid color, but I didn’t worry about running into walls or fence posts. After we got outside, I could see even better. The drawback was that the sun seemed to like me even more now that I stood out like a raisin. Heat joyfully tried to burrow into my skull through the black meshwork.

I got a little worried. I didn’t want to melt like in the story.

“And here we have a lovely Princess!” Mr. Calloway droned on the PA system like a dying bumble bee. “Good job, Linda Egan.”

Being outside didn’t seem so much fun anymore. I was hot, annoyed, and hungry all at once. I had fielded the “Who are you supposed to be?” question at least fifty times, and was getting ready to scream. I swore that I would never forgive my mom for dressing me up like this.

I watched Jimmy Denison go up the ramp and onto the platform where we had to stand for everyone to see. He had lost his blue cape somewhere on the playground and his Superman mask had cracks along the sides. Mr. Calloway still made it sound like he wore a masterpiece of Halloween finery.

I looked over the crowd and saw a flash of red. I bit my lip as I saw Sean Finnias peek over the heads of his 3rd grade classmates. His blonde hair had been pulled under a pirate’s hat and he wore a bright red coat with a plastic hook-hand. A little green bird had been glued to his shoulder, and the eyeliner mustache made him look twice as dashing. His gaze wandered over the students, searching.

My turn.

“Well, who do we have here?”

I was getting it from all sides today.

My answer was in a low voice.

“I’m sorry?” Mr. Calloway was as merciless as the sun.

“Tar Baby, “ I said louder.

“A Tar Baby?”

“Yeah, like in the Briar Rabbit story,” I felt even more stupid to have to explain myself to an adult.

“Great costume! And what’s your name?”

I was doomed. Sean was looking this way, and everyone in the school would hear my name in a matter of seconds. What would he say to me?

”What was that?”

“Sarah Hodges.”

“Sarah Hodges!” the PA seemed even louder than it had been earlier.

I saw, through the haze of tears and black gauze, Sean snap his head around to look at me.

I wanted to run and hide in the school kitchen, or in the bush we had hollowed out into a fort, or up a tree in the playground so that no one would find me.

Anywhere but here.

I had to stay with my class, and hear them giggling and laughing. Some even pointed, but they eventually stopped. I didn't say anything.

We had a piñata that looked like a Jack-o-Lantern with a broken tooth hanging outside our class door. The others took turns bashing it with a broomstick while I just watched. Halloween was ruined this year. Even when the candy rained down on the sidewalk, I didn't get up.

I felt a tap on my shoulder.

I looked up and Linda Egan handed me a piece of paper. She smirked and swished her Princess skirt in my face. She ran off singing: “Sarah's got a *boy-friend!*”

I opened the note, and a clover fell out onto my lap. I squinted my eyes through the fabric and sounded out the cursive words.

I smiled.

He thought I was cute.