

THE WATER FOUNTAIN—A TRUE STORY

Teresa Reid

On a hot and humid day in the early 1960's, a five-year-old, pig-tailed, curious, and very thirsty little girl stood in front of the two grey water fountains in the J.M. Field's Department Store in Opa-locka, Florida.

She hadn't been there before, and she couldn't read the signs. All she knew was that she was thirsty, there were the fountains, and she needed a drink. After all, her Momma, who was standing right there, said she could.

As she approached the fountain on the left, and stretched up to take a sip, she felt a tap on her arm and heard an unfamiliar voice filled with great concern: "Oh no, no. Not that one, dear. The *other* one's for you."

The little girl, still thirsty, stopped and turned towards the voice. A woman wearing a stern look and a blue button-downed dress—a dress much better than the little girl's Momma ever wore—pointed repeatedly to the signs. "See honey. See, the *other* one's for you."

"Momma," the still thirsty little girl asked, "what, what does she mean? Can't I get a sip?"

"Of course you can, honey," her Momma's voice was calm and smooth. "You go right ahead."

"But, but, she's using the *wrong* one," the woman in blue argued.

"My baby's thirsty," and the little girl's Momma turned away from the woman and towards the little girl. "Go ahead honey, get your drink." And the little girl did.

"Well, I've never . . . !" The woman in blue walked off, shaking her head as she went.

"Momma, did I do something wrong?" The little girl asked, wiping her mouth with a chubby little hand.

"Of course not, baby."

"Well, what do the letters say?" The little girl always had questions.

"They say nothing that makes any sense, baby."

“Well, why did that lady say those things?”

“Because she’s never really been thirsty.”

“Oh.”

And that’s how I, a little girl of mixed race (White and Native American) toeing the poverty line and reaching up for a sip, learned that a sign that says “Whites Only” or a sign that says “Coloreds Only” is to be ignored.