

# Light

by Michelle McEwen

Freeda had a light to her, like, you could really see it. In the evening, it was lamplight to me. On rainy days, it was sunlight to me. I thought I was the only who could see it until Mr. Adebakin (he's from Africa) told me, "Your friend there, she shine so bright. Don't let her go." We were leaving outta the back door of the library when he said it and I nodded at him and he nodded back. I was twelve then when he said it and I remember wanting to grab Freeda's hand as soon as we stepped out on to the sidewalk by the busy street, but I waited til we were almost to her house before I reached for her hand. You should have seen how she looked at me when I tried to grab it. She made a sound like a hiss and ran inside. I kept on down the street to my house. I was sad but not sad enough to cry.

It was a week before she spoke to me again. She said, "Why did you try to hold my hand?" I just drew up my shoulders fast and told her I was sorry. She laughed and we were good again. I don't know why I thought (*knew*) she wouldn'ta understood me wanting to hold her hand— not like a boyfriend, but more like she was mine. If I had told her that she woulda made that sound like a hiss again and I didn't want that. Sometimes, when braiding her hair, I felt like I could almost kiss her but I knew better than to.

Then summer came and school was out and I had Lamont and she had John. I turned thirteen and she turned fourteen and I didn't think about kissing her anymore. I still thought about her light, though. I tried to get me some of her light by borrowing her little jean shorts and walking like her (my thighs wouldn't rub together like hers, though). But nobody said I had a light; they just said, "What you doing tryna walk like Freeda?" or "Freeda loaned you them shorts, huh?" Even Lamont asked me why I was copying her. He said he liked me as I was and that if he had wanted Freeda, he'd a-been John ("And me and John as different as shit and piss," he

said). That didn't make me forget about Freeda's light, though. I tried to get me some of my own light by braiding my hair in a circle 'round my head like a crown and greasing myself down with Vaseline so that even my shoulders were shiny. But folks only said, "You sho' can braid." or "You sho' is shiny, girl." I gave up after overhearing Mr. Adebakin telling Miss Maureen (the librarian) that "some folks just shine so, some just don't." My mother couldn't figure out why I thought Freeda was so special for. She said the only light Freeda had was her light skin, light brown eyes, and light brown hair. She said that if Freeda had been dark like me and her, she'd be nothing much. "That's not true," I remember saying. Well... was all my mother could say to that. My father, who came around sometimes when I was younger, said once, "Fast and fresh ain't a light" when I had asked him about Freeda's light. Sometimes, he'd stay long enough to drive me and Freeda to the skating rink or to a movie or to a party. One time, Freeda's lips were so red with lipstick my father made her take it off before she got in the car. "You gonna be old before you're old," my father had told her.

When Freeda turned 18, she left— moved north and west to Memphis with John. That was a year ago and she took her light with her. Somehow, I knew she and John would last longer than me and Lamont. When John got a job in Memphis, everyone knew that meant Freeda was leaving, too. John wouldn't leave her behind for some other man to get her— that's what folks said. Lamont, who is still my friend, tells me, "You can leave here, too, if you wanted to." But I would have to do it on my own I tell him and he draws up his shoulders fast like how I do.

Lamont's got a new girl now who can't stand him drawing up his shoulders like me, can't stand him hanging around me all the time on Fridays and some Saturdays, can't stand him leaving her side to pick me up some chicken 'cause I'm hungry and don't drive. He says for me to pay her no mind 'cause "that's just how Brenda be." But she stares at me like she could (and would) cut me and that makes

me smile because girls and women used to look at Freeda that way when she lived here.

