



**asali solomon's get down (2006)**

**commentary by peter quinones**

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Have you ever heard the Billy Paul tune, "Me and Mrs. Jones"? What, in your opinion, are the lyrics about? File that question away for a few minutes as we consider a couple of the stories in Asali Solomon's first collection, Get Down. By the way, if I tell you that this collection is about groups of African-American and Hispanic teens and young adults in Philadelphia, your head just might fill with strains of a certain ditty by KC and the Sunshine Band—"Do a little dance, make a little love, get down tonight!"—and, if so, you'd be, at least, partly on the right track. One of the central concerns of this book is language, itself, and its frequent malleability, its capability to take on forms and meanings that catch us off guard. Herein, words aren't only vehicles of expression; they're marvels, objects of fascination; sentences become wondrous carriers of emotions and thoughts that aren't so easy for the stories' characters to articulate—a possible explanation for why seemingly everyone is consumed with music.

There are seven stories, here; but, for reasons of economy, I'll concentrate on the two which bookend the volume (though you may rest assured the remaining five are equally interesting<sup>†</sup>). And, with respect to one of those, I'll focus on something that's, admittedly, not the crux of the story but a thing which I find personally compelling.

"Twelve Takes Thea" and "First Summer" both develop unexpected endings (the second moves, on its last page, to a kind of reflexive metafiction not previously seen anywhere in the volume; there, Solomon inserts herself into the tale as storyteller, directly addressing the reader) although not the type of surprise, shocking twist endings found in thrillers; rather, *these* endings are revelations. The happenings contribute to the emotional educations of the characters and lead the reader to, maybe, reflect on similar events in his/her own life; an ongoing process of the acquisition of maturity is the phrase that comes to mind. A seventh grade girl has her first experience with deliberate, calculated lying, designed to be malicious, and is mystified to discover that the same capacity exists within herself; a young man is amazed to learn, many years after high school, that a girl in his class was infatuated with him all those years ago.

Thea's a sixth grader. When her best friend, Nadja, transfers to another school, at the end of the year, it seems like the end of the world, though the new school isn't far away and the two girls can still see each other and talk often by phone. Seventh grade begins with a group of *new* girls—among them, Frances Dyson and Beth Johannssen, whose name is a curiosity since she's clearly of Indian descent. Frances replaces the departed Nadja as the second black girl in the pack, although, as Thea thinks, she looks so 'ghetto' (Thea's word) and Thea's not sure what to make of her. The rub: Thea's parents attempt to force a friendship between their daughter and Frances:

Eventually, the Black Barrett parents (the BBPs) were going to get together and if my parents went to the first meeting—or 'tea', as it was sometimes called—and met Frances' parents, and if there was any indication that I wasn't carrying her on my back, saving her seats, or showing her how to flush the antique middle school toilets, I would be very sorry.

It's a given that racial identity is a great concern in Thea's life—despite the fact that, at her age, it seems to be an open question as to what degree she can, in such a manner, effectively deal with perceptions of the self—and this is established immediately and definitively within the first fifteen or so pages:

- Thea's brother, Stephen, derisively calls her "Jane"—a sort of derogatory appellation for white girls.
- A teacher in the school can't tell Thea and Nadja apart.
- Everyday, Thea takes the bus from urban Philly (where she lives) into Bryn Mawr (where the school is), prompting a schoolmate to remark "I hear there's pools of blood on every corner in Philadelphia."—the implication being that the entire city is a violent black slum.
- Nadja's new school is one in which nuns still dish out corporal punishment. She observes, to Thea, "Your parents would never let you go anywhere white people get to beat you." When Nadja is about to leave, Stephen says "Now you're *really* gonna be a wanna *Jane*."
- Upon first seeing Frances Thea thinks, "Frances was black. I knew that my parents would be very excited about this."
- When Nadja and Thea gossip about Beth Johanssen, Nadja notes, "She probably thinks she's white."
- Thea and Beth play a little game wherein they pretend that everyone at the school looks like an animal. When Beth identifies Frances as a monkey, Thea wants to protest this cruel racism but doesn't, for fear of injuring her relationship with the 'cool' Beth.

This leads to the narrative's second major theme, which has to do with issues of peer pressure, acceptance, being a part of the in- crowd, and so forth—matters so desperately important to kids of this age. The magnitude of Thea's adolescence is perhaps best symbolized by the incredulous wonderment she exhibits on learning that Frances has a boyfriend. Then, when Frances calls her an 'Oreo', she's stung appearing to conveniently forget her earlier characterization of Frances as being too 'ghetto'. But the real point has to do with the web of relationships Thea has with Nadja, Frances, Beth, and Liza, a girl who's only peripherally introduced as one of the most popular at Barrett.

Thea veritably worships Beth Johanssen, to the extent that she begins to copy her habits—wrinkling her nose, the way Beth dances ("I tried to do what she did"). She whines to Nadja every time they speak, her inability to deal with the latter's move to another school absorbing her emotions ("You never want to go anywhere with me.") In the end, Beth, Nadja, Liza and Frances all connect to Thea in an unforeseen way. It happens, however, that Solomon, under the radar, has thoroughly prepped us for the finish ("Incidentally, Nadja was the sole Barrett girl my brother didn't call Jane" and "A lot of people hated me there, she [Beth] once told me at lunch.") Captivating, too, is the depiction of the manners, etiquette, and ritual behaviors of the school dance.

One of the truly remarkable things Solomon does, here, is transfer us back to grade school with such accuracy that it hurts; it stings to be reminded of what we regarded as important, then. Thea says of Beth Johanssen, "Even wearing some off-brand of tennis shoe, she was clearly the prettiest girl in the class." And although Nadja has gone off to another school and hasn't met Beth, by the story's end, Beth has somehow penetrated Nadja's circle of communication and the results are unsettling for Thea. Sensitivity to language and, thus, to the objects and concepts in the world to which it refers, provides insight into Thea's very soul; italicized appearances of 'sadistic', 'psoriasis', and 'East Hell' flow with ease through her consciousness—once she grasps their meanings as spoken by others. (This comes up, again, in "Party On Vorhees!", in which Sarah has her hypersensitivity awakened by uttered nonsense such as "around the way".) Sentences which express familiar adolescent thoughts and behavior (i.e. "I decided to wait out the slow songs in the bathroom"—Thea has this idea because none of the boys approach her at the dance, and she's embarrassed) get the whole mood so right that they're equal parts aching and gladdening. We come to see that the author, from an adult perspective, is able to put an objective twist on the narrative that the child characters are incapable of understanding.

In "First Summer", race is more of a blunt consideration than in "Twelve Takes Thea". Delayna works the register at a clothing store called Urbanicide, causing Rufus to remark "I didn't know they let black folks get near the money, there. They sure don't like me getting near the clothes." Part of Delayna's rejoinder is, "It's basically my job to make sure black people don't steal." The racism and racist policies under discussion don't need to be finessed, nuanced, or danced around, as in the earlier story. Part of the reason for this is that the characters in "First Summer" are more grown up, notwithstanding that, once more, school days, indeed, play a role.

In summary: Rufus lives with his girlfriend, Shanna, and their newborn son, in the house of Shanna's mother, Alba. One morning, while waiting for the bus that takes him to work, he meets up with Delayna, who recognizes him from high school. At first, she says nothing about this, wondering if he'll recognize her, but he doesn't. Only later, after they meet for a movie and go to her place, the exact level of her interest in him is revealed:

She says, "You can't go, yet. I'm not done telling you my stupid problems. You know, I didn't get to do all this in high school, when you were dating cheerleaders and going to basement parties every night."

When Delayna confesses a substantial secret to Rufus, and he suggests that they take sick days from work in order to be together to work on it, he has mixed feelings about betraying his family.

Now, this story has texture sufficient to support a study just as long as the story, itself; but I should like to stress something that jumped out at me as I was reading, something which must be quite hard to accomplish in short fiction because we don't see it much. I'm referring to the creation of secondary characters who are so strong that they exert immense influence over the tale, despite being featured only briefly. Secondary characters who stick in the reader's mind with exceptional vividness. If you'd like clear examples from another medium—film—think Mickey Rourke in *Body Heat* or Brad Pitt in *Thelma & Louise*. Brief but monster impact. In Solomon's short fiction, the character of Tony, Rufus' friend, functions in that fashion.

Tony was a classmate of Rufus' and Shanna's in high school, where, we're told, he cut classes so often that the other students gave cutting a name: "hangin' with Tone". To have this universal student rite named after oneself is probably the ultimate way to confer status; yet, be that as it may, Tony's a mystery. Even with being the champ of cutters and a pothead, "He's been employee of the month in their department so many times that Rufus has lost track." Not only is he a star at work, but, when Shanna agitates Rufus, the first thing Rufus thinks of is how Tony handled (or *didn't* handle) a similar situation with his own girlfriend; Tony's behavior is a standard with which to be compared. When Rufus meets up with Delayna and has to concoct a lie to cover himself, he says he's going to have a drink with "Tone and them"; Shanna later uses this exact expression. Who is '*them*'? They're never identified and, obviously, don't need to be. It's not "Bill and them" or "James and them". And Tony is the only person Rufus speaks to about Delayna. Although he can't quite bring himself to reveal the truth, Tony knows it anyway: "Rufus, man, all it takes is one false move." In [The Principles of Literature](#), Christina Myers-Shaffer lists seven methods of characterization: stereotyping; exposition; the character's actions; the character's words; the character's thoughts; the words of others; and the use of setting. Tony, in this story, is portrayed to us by all seven of these methods—a remarkable feat! In [The Art of Fiction](#), David Lodge writes that "Character is arguably the most important single component of the novel." In the face of that assertion, these are, of course, stories, but the idea applies the same. And *this* story, in particular, is a fantastic illustration of the claim.

Sometimes the greatest way to appreciate an accomplishment in art is to feel the truth being extracted from *your* specific memories and experiences and brought to light as a more preponderant, ecumenical affair. That happens in [Get Down](#). I can tell you that, for decades, I hadn't thought about episodes of my own high school years, but Solomon's vignettes made me do just that—made me reflect, made me smile, nod, wince, and almost cry a couple of times.

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†"The Star of the Story" operates at, perhaps, a different level of sophistication and observation than some of the others. I heard Solomon read from this fantastic piece at the KGB Bar in New York. All seven stories share some elements, naturally. One, "Save Me", is experimental.