

Her Name is Ivy

By I.V. Greenidge

“India?”

Hearing my name spoken out loud sends a shockwave of icy cold anxiety through me. I fight back a visible shudder, muster up my best smile, and quietly raise my hand. My professor nods in my direction and holds her head down to resume the roll call; I slink back into my seat to try to reason with myself to calm down. At nearly twenty-six years old and with a name that I was sure seemed to taste like an exotic fruit when it rolled off the lips of those who used it, I should have been used to this. Still, it startles me each time like a wound reopened at random intervals. It probably would help if I had a more common name, something people could still consider beautiful and just as sweet. My favorite author Victor Hugo once mentioned that the most beautiful names for women were the ones that ended in “a,” a common feminine suffix for the Latin words that make up much of the English language. Perfectly common. My middle name easily meets the albeit-superficial requirement: “Victoria.” At the time, however, this hardly feels plausible.

The nickname they had given the shadow of who I used to be was “Hope.” For the first few years of my life, that might as well have been my name. It danced on smiling lips plastered on faces filled with pride for someone who no one had anticipated, a bewildered child who stared around at the strange faces with wide, ponderous dark eyes. As she grew, she hid herself in the world of her imagination: a place where light poured down to illuminate all the characters she could think of. The culmination of this went from a simple poem that she sang to her mother on her way to and from nursery school to a series of poems scribbled in the back of a notebook as she meticulously avoided the droning of her unenthused second-grade teacher’s voice. Her entry into the world of fiction was marked with a quiet, wary celebration, unsure of what a child so young could produce, why, and what it could mean. Hope was an unobtrusive and withdrawn child with a vibrant personality that only came out to those she wished to draw into her world with her. It would take many years for people to understand how important that world was to her, how fierce and unyielding her imagination could be when given the right environment to flourish. Hope basked in the light that filled her mind.

“India? That’s a beautiful name.”

My face molds into its customer service smile as I thank the customer and withdraw to my seat beside my supervisor. I have forgotten my nametag again, but at this point, I can no longer be sure that I’m not doing it on purpose. After all, I work in the Print and Marketing Center at the Staples office supply store, with all of the employee’s nametags coming from my corner. On top of that, mine is sitting in my bag in the cubby just by my feet; I only have to put it on. My supervisor, a bespectacled woman with long ash brown hair and who prides herself on her young son and on being a rightfully self-proclaimed nerd, leans against the computer desk. She begins a conversation with me when her eyes start to wander upward from my face.

“Are you growing a fro?” she asked me.

I laugh, surprised that someone has noticed.

“I am,” I reply, pulling a little of the dark, tight curls from under my black beanie with a little bit of pride.

It has been almost a year since I’ve last chemically straightened it. The temptation arises anew every morning while I wrestle my pick comb from my new tresses and wanes each time I remember the chemical burns from keeping the straightening goo on my scalp for too long.

“That’s so cool!” she exclaims. “I’ve always wished my hair could curl like that. I think it looks so awesome.”

I want to give her the full explanation on why she would hate to have hair like mine but my coffee has not kicked in yet. Her eyes continue to dart between my face and my hair.

“You can touch it if you want,” I tell her.

With a thank you riding on the tone of a squeal, her hands are lightly touching my head, making sure not to cross that unspoken barrier and touch my scalp directly. It is strangely comforting; I have often been fond of having my head patted even though I oppose most other forms of human touch.

“My boyfriend won’t stop touching it either,” I laugh while my fingers resume working at the computer to finish up an order. “He freaks out any time I threaten to straighten it again.”

“I’m sick of your crap, India!”

Hope sat in her classroom, the last actual room before the school turning into a set of trailers attached to the back end. It was a ranch-style building with what appeared to be many quick additions added onto it in lieu of decent heat and cooling for the classrooms. It was near the end of the school year and just after final exams. Our school had chosen to reward us with the ability to go home right after the exams were done so we could enjoy the warm weather; students who had been fortunate enough to have parents who didn’t work two or three jobs had been picked up on time, leaving Hope alone in the classroom to wait for her mother to rush over between jobs. By now, she was barely recognizable from the starry-eyed secret genius she had once been: she had been placed in a metaphorical box filled with definitions of herself that she couldn’t recognize, and had been made to make modifications on a person she had never been. Half-asleep, she reminisced about the days when she wandered through her elementary school in New York. It was a building with winding hallways and hidden corridors; in her imagination, it was comparable to J.K. Rowling’s descriptions of Hogwarts. Just like those magical assortments of teachers, she had her own: people of a wide variety of cultures who all spoke with different accents but bore the same encouragement of learning and expression to every student that crossed their paths. As she sat cramped in that classroom that day, she remembered how her teachers in New York had let her explore that world to her heart’s content until she tired and returned. In that new classroom, far away from that place of comfort in this new place where hardly anyone looked anything like her or spoke like her mother—where supposedly well-meaning voices whispered previously unheard condescension about the whereabouts of the girl’s father or the education level of her mother—she would idly stroke her thick braid made from her tangled hair. She would imagine that she looked more like the ones who were never questioned in her classroom: the ones with long blond or ash brown hair and bright eyes, whose parents were always available or never questioned when they could not be. She remembered that no one in that other place had ever insulted

her mother's skillful braiding or the thick, strong hair that sprouted from the child's head. But in this place, she was an oddity, an alien, or at least a stranger destined to be a statistic.

She was brought back to reality by her teacher's sudden movement across the room.

"I'm going to the restroom," he said. "I'll be right back."

Hope nodded. Shortly after that, she looked up at the clock and noticed that her mother was later than characteristically normal. Frightened, she went to the front office to give her a call. She had gotten a cell phone as a present, so she delighted in being able to bypass the nosy office staff.

"Mom? Are you coming to get me?" she asked timidly once her mother had picked up.

"I'm on my way," her mother said.

Hope knew that meant that her mother hadn't even left work yet.

Regardless, she knew that her mother was safe. Yet undiagnosed anxiety quelled, she returned to her classroom moments before her teacher did. No sooner did he cross the threshold into the room than the office called down on the intercom to tell him that she had left the room. Her teacher turned red in the face and, never once asking her why she had left or wondering why she would come back had she intended to get into mischief, he exclaimed, "I'm sick of your crap, India!"

Hope shrunk back into her seat, murmured a tiny apology, and regressed into her thoughts again. The next day, she wouldn't be the only one who had been left a little later than normal, but she would be the only one who was not allowed to leave the room. Every day, the light in her world grew smaller and smaller; it was no wonder it was becoming harder for those she let in to make out what was casting the shadows.

My younger brother hates going outside. He is five years younger than I and well-versed on law and politics. Even though he had trouble reading growing up, he loves to read. His current endeavor is Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, although he admits that he must look up some of the words. He especially loves to read anything I write although he will never admit it. The two of us look completely different from one another: he is much darker skinned than I, with slightly thicker hair and a larger, more muscular frame. With high school having wrought havoc on his disposition, I always keep little reminders of his happier days hidden around me: dolls that he gave me as presents, doodles that he made searching for my favor, and even a painting of a rose that he had done once upon a time. He tells me that one day he wants to graduate from Capital University Law School and become a lawyer or else run for President.

For now, though, he is afraid to go outside.

It is because my mother once had to have a talk with him about having dark skin and wearing a hoodie, because she once had to lecture us about walking in stores with our hands in our pockets; it is because once his elementary school teacher called him a demon because he did not feel like smiling on command one day, and the look of a young boy with darker skin not smiling frightened her.

We sit around joking as he prods at my hair, remarking at my choice to stop straightening it. Suddenly, we go quiet and the air becomes heavy. As I pick up one of my mother's two yorkies, the chubby and obstinate older one known as Jasmine, and put her on my lap, I break the silence.

"Hey, Brian, do you remember when I bought that skin-bleaching stuff?"

He answers with a straight face: "Yeah."

It still sits in our bathroom upstairs, opened but unused, probably long expired. I think of his words from long ago, just after it had been cracked open.

"I would give anything to look like you," he had said.

In the present, I decide to break the gloomy silence by opening my sketchbook to show him my newest drawing. It was a character he had requested be inserted into one of my stories, but he had not given me a description for what the character should look like. Taking my creative liberties, I had decided to make the character a tall man with dark skin and wild hair bleached blond and spiked upwards, almost reminiscent of the Super Saiyans from *Dragonball Z*. My brother looks him over thoughtfully, trying to pretend that a smile is not blossoming on his face.

"Yeah, whatever," he says dismissively, but I end up having to remind him that he can't keep my sketchbook all day. He looks somewhat upset as he sees me pack it up to go home, but I promise him that I will color it in properly one day and make him a copy. He scoffs and murmurs a small, "OK."

Hope's favorite place in the world was her mother's home country of Barbados. It is a tiny island in the Caribbean just out of reach of the worst hurricanes and, at the time, not quite well-known. Anywhere she went, there was the faint smell of the ocean from the horizon; it was the only place she knew where a walk to the beach was never a day-long trip no matter where you started. The capital city of Bridgetown was always bustling with people moving to and fro. Just beside them, the ocean hummed, occasionally leaping up to touch the rocks.

Hope's grandfather was a leathery old man who, despite his temper and peculiar manners, had once been the island's favorite butcher; he was kind and respectful to animals and gave excess meat from his shop to poor families who could not afford to buy any food for themselves. He spoiled all his children and, of course, doted on his firstborn granddaughter: Hope. The walk to his house was a muddy trail accented by nature-made trellises and roaming bulls. His house itself was a rickety old shack whose floors rattled the walls when walked upon, and the house sat on the edge of the cliff that overlooked the horizon. It was a place she always demanded to visit whenever she came, and he was always happy to see her, greeting her with sodas that his illness made him unable to drink. That place was always home to her, always comfortable. It was the one place where the quiet did not discomfit her nor did the noise rattle her from her sleep when it did happen. There, she was not different, not strange, not even when she opened her mouth and her strong American accent spilled out. There, she never felt alone. There, she could be strong and confident and creative to her heart's content. There, she was still Hope no matter how much reality wanted to pull her back into being just India.

I sit at my desk and glance up at my white-board calendar, taking a second look at what assignments I have due as I cross out the day on the board. Books, tiny glass bottles of nail polish, and old empty cans and bottles of soda lay strewn about in some form of organized clutter: bottles to the right, nail polish to the left, books on the side. I do not know the next time I will be able to get a full night's sleep, furthermore to take a vacation. I count down the days and run my hand through my medium-sized afro with a sigh. I think about Hope at times like she was a completely different person; when I look back on what remains of her in old notes and unfinished stories, I think she might have been. I slink back into my seat at my desk and think again about my name, how sweet it is to those people who never knew Hope. The name India carries with it my feeling of being unusual and being

hated for not adhering to the status quo. No number of compliments changes that twinge of distance I feel from it, but I fear relinquishing her completely like I have done with Hope.

I sign most things with the name Ivy.