

*Note: this is a translation of a piece originally published by Swiss magazine "Reportagen".*

## **Snow White**

**Diandra Forrest is the first successful African-American model with albinism. About the many struggles of being both black and white in an industry with controversial beauty ideals and a society still deeply divided by skin color.**

A sense of wonder permeated the air when it all began. It was a sunny October morning in 1989, barely a cloud covered the sky. A gentle breeze drifted across New York City's endless concrete expanse. Janet Jackson had been at the top of the charts for weeks with her song "Miss You Much" and the Yale Bulldogs had wiped out the Columbia Lions 23-0 the previous evening.

Next to the football stadium, in a room on the ground floor of Allen Hospital at the northernmost tip of Manhattan, they suddenly appeared, those golden curls. From a pale body they protruded into the world like a scraggly crown.

Outside, leaves drifted colorfully to the ground in their gentle dance of decay. Inside, between bare walls and the stinging smell of disinfectant, the life of Diandra Forrest began. It would be complicated, full of doubt. Because of her skin color.

Her mother Sharon had been in labor for seven hours that autumn Sunday, when the midwife asked, "Do you know what albinism is?" Sharon was twenty and worked as a postal clerk, her husband Hassan was six years older and drove an ambulance. Both were black, had dark skin and dark hair, just like their two other children. They had never of albinism, didn't know anybody else in the family with blond hair.

The midwife eyed them, seemingly trying to gauge how they would react to a daughter so unlike themselves. It's not uncommon for such children to be abandoned, abused or put up for adoption. But Hassan broke into a broad grin when he saw Diandra for the first time. Later, he was fastidious in ensuring that the hospital staff spelled her name correctly on forms and name tags. That those wouldn't read Deandra or Diandre.

Even though nurses had told her not to, Sharon slept with the baby on her belly. "Like a little angel," she thought, her gaze wandering. From lustrous hair to tiny hands and smooth skin so sallow, it appeared almost translucent. During doctor's appointments, tests and exams the parents learned that albinism is a congenital genetic disorder, which causes the body to produce little to no melanin, the pigment responsible for coloring skin, hair and eyes. The lower the amount of melanin in the body, the lighter and desaturated they appear.

There are fewer than 20,000 people with albinism in the United States today. The disorder affects all ethnicities, but for black people, whose skin would normally be much darker, it can be a particular burden. While they don't have to fear the fate of albinos in some parts of Africa, who are slaughtered and their body parts turned into potions by witch doctors. But even in the US, life for albinos is far from easy.

In the 28 years since her birth, she has experienced it again and again. At the same time, she has also established herself as a successful model, gliding across the world's runways, working with designers like Jean Paul Gaultier and Vivienne Westwood, gracing the pages of glossy magazines and starring in music videos alongside Kanye West and Beyoncé. Just a few months ago, she became the first model with albinism to be signed to a major agency.

Diandra is tall and slender, she has her parent's features, a wide nose and full lips. At times, her hair flows smoothly straightened over her shoulders, other times it encircles her head in Afro curls.

Her green, almond-shaped eyes rarely stop darting around. It's another symptom of her disorder. Visual defects are common among people with albinism, in some cases, the lack of pigment will even cause the iris to appear red. And so her eyes oscillate restlessly, rummaging through thin air, as though they're uncertain of where to go. As though they're searching without pause.

Diandra's life has been a search indeed—for answers. Initially, she questioned why she's different. Later she wondered, where she belonged. Those thoughts are like weeds she's trying to uproot. But they keep coming back. Thoughts that doubt an entire society. Because in America the skin color still weighs so heavy, it keeps people from moving ahead. 150 years after the end of slavery, half a century after the Civil Rights Act.

For African-Americans it's the land of limited opportunity. Injustice lurks at every street corner, at schools and universities, in the health care and justice system. Official statistics show a sobering picture: black kids often grow up in poor families with lower education. Crimes occur more often and more violently in their neighborhoods than in areas with higher household incomes, usually predominately white. In school, they get suspended four times as often and expelled two times as often as their white peers. When trying to find a job, they still need to wrestle the system: the unemployment rate of black people is twice as high. The chances of ending up in prison are even fivefold. They are more likely to contract diseases such as HIV and asthma. And they die sooner, life expectancy is a whole three years below the US average. Even the recent depression hit them harder, by various estimates, black America lost half its wealth between 2008 and 2011.

Diandra lived in those neglected and disenfranchised communities, blighted by unemployment, poverty and crime. Her lack of pigment didn't remove Diandra from that demographic. She experienced a society divided along racial lines, where to be born black is to be born at a disadvantage. She grew up as part of the generation that saw the first African-American president, but also stop-and-frisk, mass incarceration, and police officers acquitted after killing unarmed black citizens like Eric Garner. The father of six suffocated in a chokehold on a dirty Manhattan sidewalk. "I can't breathe," he gasped before his death. Protests sprang up all over the country and Garner's last words became their symbol. We can't breathe! They vocalized a deep-seated sentiment: That black people in the US are second-class citizens, that their lives are worth less than those of white Americans.

Even Barack Obama hardly changed that. Speaking at the 50th anniversary of the "Bloody Sunday" march in Selma, Alabama in 2015, he said, "We just need to open our eyes, and

ears, and hearts, to know that this nation's racial history still casts its long shadow upon us." Then Donald Trump moved into the White House and hatred along with him. Across the country white supremacists feelchant racist slogans and felt the hatred rage all across America.

Diandra Forrest has always lived in this shadow. Every morning, when she looks into the mirror after thanking God for a new day in prayer, she sees a black woman. Asked about her race, she'll speak confidently and without the slightest hesitation: "Black." In public, however, looks often grow into a cordon around her, faces distort into question marks. People exchange snide remarks about augmented lips and pale skin, ask her where she's from. Russia maybe? Or Ireland?

She's white though she's black. And because few people are colorblind, because there are enormous cabinets in their heads with countless drawers to organize the overbearing chaos of this world, someone like Diandra throws them off their tracks.

In New York, where even the biggest celebrities can vanish in a mass of millions, it's tedious for her to escape attention. Her eyes roll when she explains, in limp words, how weary she is of this. Then she drops her shoulders as if her muscles abruptly refused to function.

Her arms are also dangling loosely at her sides on a winter day four years ago. She sits on a barstool in a tiny Williamsburg apartment. Heavy curtains cover the windows of the apartment, in front of which flocks of people meander past, some in washed-out jeans, others with shirts full of holes. A blue and immaculate sky is suspended over the city, yet not the faintest trace of sunlight manages to creep into the room. Cases and bags are spread across the floor, burst open and brimming with various makeup tools: brushes of all shapes, lipstick in all colors, powder, blush, eye shadow. Seven people whirl around the place, attempting to create grace, negotiating hairstyles and clothing.

Diandra is seated like a regal figure at the center of the bustle. She speaks little, and the few words she does utter escape hesitantly, carried by a voice so soft as if it were wrapped in cotton. Her gaze is focused straight ahead into the brightness of the six light bulbs, which frame a mirror and illuminate every pore on her face. She looks even paler than usual.

Frank, the makeup artist, slowly guides his utensils across her face with the precision of a surgeon, little by little concealing every blemish. He's wearing a tight black T-shirt like a trophy of his many visits to the gym. His stature is so muscular that it wouldn't surprise to find him as a bouncer at a club on another day. He appears miscast for such a sensitive task, especially on someone like Diandra. Everything about her exudes fragility: long, thin legs that make her upper body seem like an attachment, narrow cheekbones and skin as white as porcelain. A body so strangely delicate that a careless touch, even the slightest, might break it.

With gentle movements, Frank spreads a translucent, glittering paste over her face. "This is going to look like plastic," he says with a smile, apparently delighted by the thought.

After three hours of brushing and drawing, content with his work, he and everyone else moves to the photo studio in the basement. They're recreating bible scenes from Renaissance paintings for a French fashion magazine. While Diandra slips into the role of Mary, Shaun Ross will embody Jesus. He too is black and has albinism—they're the only two models with that trait in the US. Working together regularly, they have become close friends. When they go out, to restaurants or clubs, they often hear the question, which they mimic in a high voice: "Are you siblings?"

It's late evening and loud techno is blasting through the studio. Shaun's lanky body is covered with a piece of white linen tied around the waist, Diandra is naked except for her underpants. Their movements are stiff, almost mechanical, as though Frank covered up their humanity along with the blemishes. "Beautiful!" the photographer yells against the volume of the music. "Gorgeous!" In the corner of the room, amidst piles of hard drives, the images appear on a computer screen. Two figures can be seen in close embrace. They seem pale, sickly almost. Their skin looks like plastic.

A few months before, Diandra stood in the wasteland of space and looked out onto the universe. Every step, no matter which way, led into the unknown. Her back straightened, she paused there, on the moon. Everything seemed to stand still—time, the world, life itself. Only her eyes kept flickering restlessly.

In the short film *Afronauts*, she plays an astronaut who is to fly to the moon for the Zambian space program. At the end of the film is the scene with her standing on the satellite. It's only a fleeting moment on screen, fabricated reality. And yet, this pretense is also fact, characteristic of her life, one of an outsider who's pierced by looks every day as if she wasn't from this planet.

Actually, she's from the Bronx, the only borough of New York where white people don't make up the majority of residents. When her mother Sharon pushed little Didi —as she still calls her today—around the neighborhood in her stroller, conversations stalled, heads turned and eyes followed them. Sharon would stare back until people looked away or forced the corners of their mouths to a smile. As soon as she learned to talk, Diandra began asking questions. One of them, repeated again and again: "Mommy, why are people looking at me like that?"

In the summer, Sharon made sure her daughter was always wearing a hat and sunglasses. Carefully, she spread sunscreen on her child's face, neck, arms and legs. Protection factor 45, the strongest she could buy. For people with albinism, the risk of developing skin cancer can be up to a thousand times greater than for a dark-skinned person. For the pigment melanin not only colors our skin and hair, it also acts as a shield against the sun's damaging UV rays.

Hardly ever could Diandra frolic around outside, carefree like her peers. Her parents worried constantly. About the sun, sure, but also about the other children and parents, whose irritated expressions seemed to ask why the hell white people lived in this dilapidated area.

When she was seven, her parents for once allowed her to go to a summer camp organized by her grandmother's church. Her one year younger brother Deakwon went along. He had albinism as well, but was so unlike his reserved sister. His physique was strong, and from an

early age he carried enough rage inside to defend himself against the taunts of others with blows. A number of times his parents had to appear at school. At the camp, the kids were supposed to spend a week roller skating, bowling, and reveling in nature. Their mother wrote notes and placed one in each backpack: "Please make sure that my son and daughter always wear sunscreen. And don't let them stay out in the sun for too long."

Five days later, Sharon and Hassan stood at the window, anxiously peeking out for the church van. After it finally turned the corner and spat out the children, Sharon gasped for air. The sun had burnt both from head to toe. Diandra had to stay in bed for days in pain and with a fever, her skin peeled off in large flakes. It was her first and last summer camp.

At school, Didi was one of the best, earning straight As and Bs. Handwriting and spelling were her strengths, English her favorite class. She loved to learn new things, always took notes in class and studied hard for tests. It was just that she didn't have friends. Because she was different from her classmates, almost all black or Hispanic. She didn't trust them, the risk of being hurt yet another time made her cautious. To this day, she is wary when meeting new people, wondering if they might be out to harm her.

At the beginning of second grade there was Jasmine, a girl Diandra adored and soon saw more often than her own parents. But only a few months later, her friend moved to Pennsylvania with her family.

"Are you all right?" asked her teacher. "Yeah," Diandra said, unwilling to admit how badly it all pained her. That the other kids were calling her Snow White and Casper. That they asked if she was adopted or had a white dad. That she couldn't go a single day without being mocked.

Sometimes she'd hear other kids sing in the schoolyard, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

"But words do hurt," she thought. Now and again she'd cry. On days when she just couldn't take it anymore, she'd come home from school exasperated. "Can't you homeschool me?" she'd ask her mother.

Still she kept going to school. Until that day in fifth grade, when the December sky had cast a snowy veil over the city. Diandra had only started a few months before at Pablo Casals Middle School, a forbidding functional construction with a facade of rust-colored bricks and concrete, which had stood in the elements so long that dirt crept down its sides.

The school was only one of six in Co-op City's educational park at the edge of the Bronx. Daily several thousand students filed into the buildings, behind which star-shaped concrete high-rises soared twenty floors from a drained swamp into a bleak skyline. Like a massive colony of penguins, the children stood at the roadside that afternoon, all impatient chatter and shuffling feet. The boys wore black slacks, black shoes and white shirts; the girls white blouses, green-and-yellow plaid skirts and black tights. With thick jackets they guarded themselves against the chill and disappeared one after another in the school busses, which they called cheese busses because of the color.

Like most afternoons, Brian was there too, a stocky, crop-haired black boy. With two of his friends, he was waiting a little distance down the sidewalk from Diandra. She knew him from an afternoon homework class. Each time he saw her, he would tease her. Never bothering to use her name, instead calling her 'white girl'. With the ignorance that had protectively wrapped itself around her over the years, she'd let him tease, glance from the very corner of her eyes and trot on.

Brian was sipping bluish fruit juice from a plastic carton with a straw, when suddenly his arm shot forward, spraying the sugar water on Diandra. Slowly her blouse absorbed the liquid, a dark stain becoming apparent distinctly on the white fabric.

"I'll be in trouble when I get home," she thought.

She was still pondering what her mother would say, when Brian sucked saliva with a raspy rattle into his mouth and spat at her. He then turned away, stepping toward his friends with the indifference of the superior.

Diandra stomped after him, her face pulled into a grimace by disgust and rage. She shoved him. Moments later, they were rolling around in the snow, until a teacher pulled them apart. With a quick move, Diandra jerked free, gave Brian a forceful kick in the crotch and hurried onto her bus. The vehicle jolted away, Brian and the school disappeared in a sea of buildings. But the humiliation remained.

"I blocked out a lot of things from my childhood and forgot them," she says today. "It's painful to talk about."

Her parents, who had had doubts about the public school many times before, decided to enroll their daughter in a private school for the visually impaired. Some of the children there were completely blind, while others suffered from less severe visual defects such as those caused by albinism. It was a place where it was normal not to be normal.

Diandra joined the student council and the Spanish club, found friends that became family. She also picked up sports, tried cheerleading first, then track and field. As a member of the school team, she took part in competitions. The mile run was her favorite discipline and she often the winner. Her high jump record was five feet and six inches.

"What would my life be like today, if I'd stayed at the other school?" she wonders sometimes.

Her new life began nine years ago on Manhattan's 34<sup>th</sup> Street. Diandra was eighteen and studied early childhood education. She often thought about having kids herself. The skin color, the hair, what would it be like? The answers would startle her a few years later.

She and her older sister were out shopping, pushing past tourists and businesspeople along the busy sidewalks in the shadow of the Empire State Building. Past small shops and Macy's colossal department store cube.

"How do you feel about modeling?" asked a young man with a face so boyish he couldn't have been older than herself. He was short and looked up at Diandra with chestnut eyes, which sat underneath bushy brows. He was a photographer, he explained, and thought she had potential. The sisters were skeptical—probably just another cheap attempt to get a phone number.

Modeling was in Diandra's blood though. Her mother and grandmother had already posed in front of cameras. When she came to New York by herself in 1954, Diandra's grandmother was sixteen years old. She sought a better life in the city that, following the Second World War, had become the most important on the globe, where the United Nations established their headquarters and buildings were shooting up like mushrooms. In her home state of South Carolina cotton and racism were thriving. Her siblings still worked in the fields. In New York, however, it was hope that flourished. She met a photographer who was delighted with her. But after only a few shoots, she decided against modeling and for a job as a housekeeper.

At age 23, her daughter Sharon was as shy as Diandra is today. She modeled for six months, then quit, not wanting to leave her family behind to travel to shoots and shows. Because her mother worked in fashion, pubescent Diandra began to take an interest in it. Back then, she still imitated her brothers' clothing style: bandanas, sagging pants and wide T-shirts. The one skirt in her wardrobe she would only wear once a week. Sundays for church, because her mother insisted.

When her body grew ever taller, ribs showing under her skin, her friends said, "You should model." The thought thrilled her, she looked at magazines and admired the women posing on the covers. "I want that to be me," she thought.

That in this industry her appearance would be more important than ever before, in fact the only thing that mattered, didn't discourage Diandra—it attracted her. She wanted to be seen as beautiful. If those magazines featured pictures of her, she thought, others would think about her body what she'd thought about so many glossy girls: "She's beautiful."

And thus she, the outsider, decided to climb onto a stage and display her body to the great masses in bright spotlights.

Lured by the clicking applause of the camera shutter and a relentlessly plodding praise machine, glowing photo series, compliments from strangers that finally had the power to quell the doubt in her mind: "Do I look good?" Concerns didn't cross her mind. She was young and naïve. Even though this had never been the case in her life so far, she believed, as a model her skin color wouldn't matter.

Diandra took catwalk lessons to learn graceful posture and charming facial expressions. In a Chelsea loft apartment, girls stalked about on high heels, displaying the sort of confidence she'd never been able to muster. She shrank into a corner, watching as they walked up to the coach one by one. When it was her turn, she lifted her head, placed her hands on the hips and walked toward him with her best attempt at a runway strut. Right in front of him, she

stopped and waited. For praise, how well she did. Or advice, how she could improve. For a moment, he stared at her wide-eyed. Then he turned to Diandra's acquaintance, who'd taken her to the lesson. "Why did you bring her here? She's never going to be a model! You're wasting her time, and mine, too!"

But Shameer Khan, the young photographer who'd approached Diandra, believed otherwise. He was adamant and finally convinced her that he was genuine. That he indeed wanted to turn her into a successful model. He practiced posing with her, the ways a body must be contorted to look pretty. He took pictures of her, sent her to castings. It took only a few months until she signed with Elite Models, one of the most prestigious agencies in the world. Never before in the US had a model with albinism, such a striking imperfection, accomplished this.

Diandra's grandmother and mother were proud of her for taking up where they had left off. "But finish your studies," they said.

When Diandra was flown to Paris for a show, her father Hassan took her job seriously for the first time. When she appeared in the black women's magazine *Essence*, her grandmother, a long-time reader, was overjoyed. On a shelf in her bedroom, right next to the door, she collects every magazine with photos of Diandra. There are dozens, not a single one of them with dog-ears. Soon she'll have to clear another shelf. Now and then, when she has visitors, she'll pull a copy and show them her pale granddaughter.

Diandra Forrest has become a brand in an industry that abhors flaws, where only looks count. By no means is this a coincidence, rather deliberate. In many images she appears as a grotesque, artificial figure. Less herself, more a distorted version. She isn't meant to be the pretty girl next door, but an attraction akin to a carnival sideshow, hawked to passers-by with boisterous words: "Come on, come all and marvel at the albino! This is unlike anything you've ever seen!"

She has long left the doubts regarding her body behind. Not the fashion world, however, which never tires of addressing her otherness. It's hard to market her, say designers. Her appearance would divert people's attention away from the clothes. This sort of criticism echoes through her mind. "What are you?" the voices ask and, "Is she even black?" They say, "She's too white."

"It's like black, white and Diandra," she says on a January day three years ago, sitting on a leather couch in the middle of a photo studio the size of a tennis court with a twelve-foot ceiling. "They want what's more marketable and for some reason what's more marketable is either a black girl with white features or a very black girl with African features, you look black and they know you're black. There's no in-between."

It gets to her. Sometimes, amid all the joy, when she's not stating how happy working as a model makes her, she bursts out, "Why do people care so much about skin color?" Agitation catapults her voice to a higher pitch. "This isn't some kind of freak show!"



In moments like these, she considers quitting, leaving everything behind. But after all the miles on runways, the kilowatt hours in the limelight, a life without modeling has become unthinkable for her.

While the anger escapes her with a wheeze, winter tiptoes coldly through the streets in front of the former print building in SoHo and past the many artist workshops and boutiques. It's her first job of the year. The feminist magazine *Darling* invited a diverse cast of women: young, old, fat, thin, Asian, black, white, and with Diandra also an albino. The project is called "The Sum Of Our Beauty". The message is: People are different, everyone's attractive in his or her own way.

Beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder. But in fashion this mainly means the eye of designers who create clothing for slim people. Of photographers who put flawless models in front of the camera. Of magazines which publish those photos, removing every last trace of excessive fat through digital liposuction. Just as well that of TV shows like *America's Next Top Model*, which judge who's pretty—and who isn't.

"The fashion industry is selling product, of course, and has very specific parameters for acceptable beauty," says photographer Rick Guidotti. A long time, he captured the Cindy Crawford and Naomi Campbell of the world, until he chose diversity nineteen years ago. He started the organization *Positive Exposure* and has been photographing people with visible genetic defects ever since. "The fashion industry is not that diverse," he says. Little has changed over the years and things that might appear like progress, such as plus-size models in magazines and commercials, are merely temporary trends.

*Darling*, too, practices change. The magazine aims to be authentic by featuring women of all colors and shapes, and the promise to not retouch images. Diandra's shoot ends up taking only minutes, with her standing in front of white backdrops, moving her head only a fraction of an inch at a time while the photographer, back bent, balances a camera in front of her.

Diandra wears pink lipstick and matching blush that sets her cheeks aglow. A pattern of pastel blue, yellow and white swirls curves its way across her top and skirt. Nothing gaudy or overpowering about her this time. Below the subtle makeup, red spots of pimples are visible.

Invisible under the skirt is a butterfly tattoo on her right hip, shimmering in violet, green and blue. The same tattoo her mother has. To Diandra, it symbolizes the many changes of life. She admires how an ugly larva morphs into a creature of beauty in a cocoon. It also stands for the carefree lightness she so desires. "Let imperfection shape your character," is one of the many motivational phrases she shares on her Instagram profile. Another: "Not caring what other people think is going to be the best decision of your life."

But aside from this, it's mostly images from a seemingly glamorous life that Diandra posts: arranged hair and polished skin, snapshots from the red carpet and selfies with celebrities. Like the fashion industry itself, Instagram is a market place for attention. The right camera angle, sucking in the belly a bit more and picking a flattering filter. All this to get as many people as possible to click the heart under the image, to show that they like it. Because what they're also saying with this is: "I like *you*." Thousands do so on every one of Diandra's

photos, she has more than 100,000 followers. On Instagram she found what she set out to find when she decided to become a model: approval.

"Slowly but surely people are recognizing beauty in Diandra's difference. If they see her often enough, they are going to see beyond her albinism. How exquisite she is as a human being," says Rick Guidotti.

Fewer discussions about looks is what Diandra longs for, more acceptance. Even though she's aware that little has changed in the fashion world over the course of her career, she still wants to change it. Yet she's already held hostage by the very system she criticizes. She plays by its rules and not her own. Doesn't every photo that shows her as an exotic cement her outsider status and that of other people with albinism instead of criticizing it? And considering all the people with high foreheads and low chins, long noses and short legs, dermatitis and thinning hair— isn't Diandra in the end actually one of the few chosen beauties?

Perhaps she's nothing but a cog in an enormous machine, far too small to actually change anything. Though it might just be too early to tell. Maybe we will look back at people like Diandra Forrest in years or decades and realize that things began to shift with them.

For Diandra herself, things shift dramatically only months after the photo shoot for *Darling*. A few drops of urine and a small strip of plastic worry her. She's pregnant. Will her child be born as an albino like her and have to overcome the same obstacles, the stares, sneers and pointed fingers? Or will it have the dark skin of her boyfriend?

When she's five months along, it becomes more and more difficult to hide the growing belly. Only now she tells her friends. They too ask what is going to happen. She has no answer and is unwilling take a test that could detect a genetic defect. She doesn't care, she says. No matter if its skin is black or white, she will love her baby. The uncertainty makes her uneasy nonetheless. Clearly nobody wants a child with albinism—but part of her does. She wouldn't say this out loud, never, but the thought keeps crossing her mind throughout the pregnancy.

It's the day before New Year's Eve, when the contractions set in. A slight drizzle is giving the tarmac a wet shimmer. Diandra struggles out the door and down the stairs, pausing every few minutes when the pain overwhelms her entire body. "No, no, I can't take you," the cab driver says. "Call an ambulance!" Ignoring him, she gets in anyway. When she feels her child pushing, she lets out a piercing wail: "I'm about to have my baby in a cab!"

Having arrived at the hospital, her boyfriend, barely able to handle the excitement, runs into the glass entrance door, before Diandra is rushed to the delivery ward. The room is awash with harsh light, swarming with nurses, doctors and med students. Meanwhile, Diandra desperately attempts to focus on her breathing and calm herself.

A mere ten minutes later, it's all over. About six and a half pounds, that's the weight of the girl, whom she names Rain. It means "blessing from above", Diandra read it online. And Rain Forrest sounds like rainforest, like something pretty and peaceful.

While Diandra's torn tissue is being stitched up, the nurses place the little girl in her boyfriend's arms. Diandra turns her head and cranes her neck. "Why do you get to see her first? Show her to me!" she calls with all the remaining strength she can gather. He leans forward and she sees her baby for the first time, when a thought strikes her like lightning: "Oh my God, she looks just like her father. She looks nothing like me." She stares at the dense, black curls that cover her daughter's head, at skin so much darker than her own.

If she had a child with albinism, nobody would assume it was adopted. Neither would she have to explain it to the teachers in school, nor to her daughter. That she's indeed the biological mother, only with a few faulty genes. The feeling of being an alien in this world, the pain of exclusion, they could have endured it together.

"It would have been something special," Diandra thinks, her mind confined to the very boxes, the cabinets with countless drawers, she's so tired of seeing herself in.

And so the year ends with a sense of wonder. It's a mild December night, heavy clouds drift over the endless concrete expanse of New York City. Adele's "Hello" has been at the top of the charts for weeks, and the next evening, a million people at Times Square next door are drowning a year of worries in confetti. As they did twelve months before, they stand surrounded by dazzling billboards and hope for a better future. Like Diandra.