

Manicure

I had just returned from having my nails done when my mother asked me about when I might go over to see Twyla. “She asks about you all the time,” Mama said. “She lives over there off of Lillie. You should go and see her some time.”

I would receive encouragement from Mama to see any number of people whenever I came back home to Fort Wayne for my holiday visits. It’s not as if I avoid my former classmates, but when I come home I usually try to stay to myself and with family. No need to relive the past, which is why I avoid South Side High School class reunions, too.

But why Mama was emphasizing that I see Twyla, more so than anyone else, was baffling to me, especially since Mama didn’t tell me about where I was most likely to see her. And it was not on Lillie Street.

“Did they do a good job with your nails?” Mama asked.

I held my hands, fingers spread out, in front of her to display my latest manicure.

“I suppose they did a good job. Nothing like the way they do manicures in New York City. Here they cut too many corners. Ha ha. That was a joke, Mama.”

Mama just looked at me, shook her head and grabbed my right hand. “That’s a nice ring,” she said, nodding at the gold band, which tried to mimic bamboo, and the oval shaped lime green stone. “It’s imperial jade. Got it at a pawn shop. That’s the best place to buy jewelry, I swear. You’d be surprised what kind of jewelry people give up when they’re down on their luck,” I said.

Mama let go of my hand and sighed. Was shopping at pawn shops bad? I wondered about this --- briefly --- until Mama said, “I’m almost out of meal. Can you go over to Kroger’s and get some? I need the yellow cornmeal, not the white.”

I wish Mama had asked me to go to the store for her while I was out getting my nails done, but she had an increasing habit of forgetting about what she wanted me to whenever I came home. I had to visit old friends. I had to go to church. I had to visit some of her friends who doted on me as a child. I had to go to the grocery store. There were seemingly a million things I had to do other than relax from

the fast paced life I led as an advertising consultant in New York City. It's all about appearances, I thought.

And perhaps it's because I'm in advertising that I care so much about appearances or marketing. As any advertiser knows, it's all about the packaging. Put dog poo in a beautiful box and say that it'll fight wrinkles and people will actually buy it. No difference than in getting Botox (which I get once every two months to keep the crow's feet around my eyes at bay). Not everyone may like it, but people make their judgments first on what they see on the outside. What's on the inside is what people will take their chances on, but outward appearance is what sells. Maybe that's why I'm so particular about my fingernails.

Some say that you can tell a lot about a person based on the quality of their shoes. I think you can know everything you need to know about a person based on their fingernails. You know that a person with dirt underneath their fingernails is someone who works at a blue collar job that does not have adequate scrubbing soap in the washroom. The nail bitter is insecure and uncertain and thus takes this frustration out on their nails (I used to be that person before I got into advertising). The person who gives themselves their own manicures is cheap and possibly forever broke. But the person who gets the high priced manicure, complete with acrylic nails, is the one who truly cares about her appearance.

And I am that person. My manicure says as much about me as a mink coat. The nails are filed to perfection and look natural, but they're as hard and as sturdy as rock and almost as impossible to break. They'll solve any nail bitters problem because they are virtually impervious to anything including teeth.

Once I started to earn thousands of dollars a week working as an advertising consultant, I was able to afford the weekly \$200 manicure at the Luxe salon in New York City. But here I am, back in my hometown of Fort Wayne to see my mother for the holidays and all I'm really worried about is where to find a suitable nail salon. Not one where there is nothing but Asians working for slave wages while doing nails. Instead, I prefer a salon where the workers at least speak fluent English to where they can actually have a conversation with you while they're doing your nails.

Of course, having nails like mine speaks volumes about so many things like my wealth, my status, my having

“made it” in the corporate world. I don’t like to break them by doing mundane things like washing dishes. That’s why I own a dishwasher for goodness sake! I can only hope that my mother, who suffers from severe arthritis, will not expect me to massage her legs like I used to do when I was a child. Not that my nails could not withstand the activity, it’s just the point that my nails were not meant for pedestrian uses like massaging someone’s legs.

As I drive into my old neighborhood I remember how much I disdain it. It’s in southeast Fort Wayne or what is known as the “hood” or the “ghetto”. My mother’s house is less than a mile away from the corner of McKinnie and Anthony, a corner where many of the cities crimes, including murder, occur. It’s the kind of neighborhood where someone is gunned down in front of dozens of people, but when the police arrive, no one claims to have seen anything. It’s the type of area where you will usually see a man dressed in camouflage with the sign “Hungry and Broke. Can you spare any change?” It seems that I see this man on the corner of Calhoun and Rudisill --- always on the black side of Calhoun, I might add. He’s never on the side of the street where mostly whites live in the nearby Harrison Hill neighborhood. I get ready to pass him and want to say, “Find a job, idiot. Your time is better spent doing that instead of standing on the corner begging.” But I push the button that lets down my window and I virtually throw some change into his outstretched and dirty hand, more impressed with how my nails, dripped in the color of Drop Dead Red, shimmers in the sunlight.

He thanks me and I grumble something back at him. I’ve done my part for charity. I think this as I drive up Rudisill toward Hanna Street where my mother lives across from Weisser Park, the “ghetto park” as it’s also known.

But that’s when I see Twyla. On the busy intersection of Calhoun and Rudisill. Holding a sign, begging for money.

I did a double take, of course. Twyla and I had been good friends in high school until she got pregnant and had to drop out. That was pretty much the end of our friendship. I was too busy with the speech team, the yearbook and the National Honor Society to worry about a friend who got knocked up. All of her dreams of going to Purdue were shattered. I’d see her sometimes standing in her bedroom window, waving at some of us as we walked our way to South Side High School. Many times I would pretend not to see her.

I pulled my BMW over to the curb. I noticed that I was the subject of stares from the young men who were standing on the corner across the street and I wondered why there are always young men standing on the corner in this neighborhood, seemingly with nothing worthwhile to do.

Twyla looked busted. Her hair was a nappy mess of an afro that was in need of a trim. Her blue jeans had black smudges on them from dirt that had settled in to make a home. Her jacket was too flimsy for the cold weather and when I stepped out of the car I was thankful for the warmth of my three-quarters length leather jacket that I had bought on sale at Saks Fifth Avenue.

“Twyla,” I said. “Twyla Jenkins. Is that you?” I asked.

She smiled to show missing front teeth, which startled me.

“Katrina!” she shouted out loud in a way that was embarrassing to me. I did not need her to broadcast that we knew each other that loudly. She dropped her sign on the ground and step forward to hug me. My body stiffened. I wondered how long it had been since she had bathed when she hugged me. It’s not that she smelled bad, which was a surprise to me. But she was dirty nonetheless and I didn’t want any of that dirt to rub off on me.

“Look at you!” She continued to shout. “Girl. You look good. Real good.” She tried to run her hand over her hair, but stopped as if realizing that her hair was a mess, especially compared to my perfectly coiffed pixie cut.

I struggled at what I could say. Usually, you compliment people in return and tell them that they look good, too. But that would have been a lie and I didn’t know what to say in place of a lie.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. I looked around and saw the men on the corner were now staring at us. I began to worry about my car and started to clutch my keys more tightly as I pulled at my leather jacket. Then my right leg started to shake a little bit, which always happens when I’m nervous about something.

Twyla laughed and I saw that the few teeth that she had were somewhat gray.

“Girl, I’m just trying to hustle. Just trying to hustle, that’s all.”

Hustle. I immediately thought of the popular dance that we all knew from back in the day when “The Hustle” was a hit song. I could see us doing it as a line dance, much like the Electric Slide. “Do the hustle!” it beckoned and then there was this whistling type of beat with horns. “Do the hustle!” and “Do it!” were the only lyrics and for a moment I could see Twyla doing the hustle with her sign in her hands. It was a funny thought and I almost laughed from thinking about it. But “hustling” was what a black person was supposed to do best. To get your hustle on meant that you were trying to make some money, quick money if possible. Illegally gotten, maybe. I realized that I do the hustle every day in New York. Making that money. Yeah.

I wanted to ask, “What happened?” as in what happened to put you out on the street. Instead I asked about her mother.

“She’s been dead for about three years now,” Twyla said softly. “Heart attack.”

Miss Jenkins had always been a strict, church going woman, which made Twyla’s teenage pregnancy even more of a topic of gossip. How could she let that happen to her daughter when she was so pious and straight laced? It seemed that teenage pregnancies frequently happen to “those kind” of families. The ones that put themselves up slightly higher than everyone else only to come falling, crashing down in their own hypocrisy. I remember that Miss Jenkins always had a curfew that was an hour earlier than what the rest of us had, but look at where that got Twyla. Obviously, nowhere.

“Uh, what about your baby?” I couldn’t remember if Twyla had had a boy or a girl. But that child should be a teenager by this time and I wondered how the child coped with having a mother who was on the street.

“Oh, she was taken by CPS years ago. She’s been in the system ever since. I see her every once in awhile, but not much,” Twyla said as she bowed her head slightly. “I had a little problem with drugs back then, but I’m clean now. I’m clean now.”

I wanted to ask her what her drug of choice was or whether she was still using, but I figured that would be impolite. It was probably crack. That was the drug that usually caused people to lose everything and anything. I thought for a moment that it could possibly be meth and that would account for the missing teeth, but black people didn’t bother much

with the drug that was really associated with white people in rural parts of Indiana, not black folks in the ghetto. No one has time to “cook” up some mess that’s made with battery acid. That’s white folks’ madness. Or at least that’s what many black folks had decided.

“Look at your nails!” Twyla exclaimed as she grabbed my hand, the one that was clutching my coat. “Those are nice! Are they real?”

I almost felt insulted at the suggestion that she could possibly tell my nails were fake so I lied: “Yes, they are.”

Twyla threw her head back and laughed. “I remember when you used to bite your nails all the time. You never had any fingernails. Now look at you now! You be stylin’!”

You be stylin’. We used to say that when anyone was fashionably sharp. I looked down at my leather thigh high boots and admitted to myself that, yes, I was stylin’ alright.

“I heard you were in New York.”

“I am,” I said. I started searching for words to say, but couldn’t think of anything else to say before Twyla spoke again.

“I ask your mother about you all the time, whenever I see her. She usually gives me some money. Yes, I can always depend on Mrs. Churchill to give me money. I can’t say that for everybody else I know though.”

I took that as my cue. I turned toward my car, opened the door and reached in for the wallet inside of my Gucci bag. I pulled out a \$50 bill.

“Here,” I said as I thrust the money out at her.

Twyla’s eyes widened.

“Wow,” she said. “That’s more than I can get in three days! Thanks, Katrina. Where you going? Can you give me a ride?”

I was surprised by the request. I thought that if I gave her the money I could be done with her. I didn’t want the moment between us to last much longer than it already had.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Not too far. I just need to go over there by Lillie and Pontiac.”

Lillie and Pontiac. It was a well known drug corner even when we were kids. Not much had changed in Fort Wayne, I thought.

“What’s over there?” I asked because I was curious to know her response.

“Oh. That’s where there’s a boarding house. I’ve got a room over there.”

I thought that maybe she was telling the truth and that maybe she wasn’t. But I figured that giving her a ride would not hurt anything even though I shuddered at the thought of someone so dirty being in my car. It’s hard to get stains out of white leather, after all.

“Well, I’m really not headed in that direction, but if you need a ride. . .”

Twyla frowned. “If you don’t want to take me, that’s OK. I have enough money now to take a bus. I mean, I need some change though. They don’t take \$50 bills on the bus.”

I reached into my pants pocket and pulled out the loose change that I always kept in it. As I put it into her hand I noticed her fingernails. They had what looked like black soot underneath the nails and the palm of her hand was blackened somewhat also.

“That’s all I have,” I lied.

“That’s alright,” Twyla said, smiling. “You made my day, Katrina. How long you gonna be in town? Maybe we could go and get something to eat some time. I’m usually here on this corner, but I move around a bit too. If the same people see you too much you end up getting nothing because they get sick of seeing you. But people tend to be more sympathetic to women these days. Times are tough. You know how that is.”

Now why or how would I know “how that is”? Didn’t she notice the car, the way I was dressed and my fingernails? What would I know about times being tough? I was making money. Mad money. Cheddar is once we once called it. What would I know about being unemployed to where I was begging on the street?

“I’ve got to go, Twyla. It was good seeing you though.”

This time I leaned forward to give her a hug. I felt I owed her that much.

“Well don’t be a stranger,” she said in a muffled tone as her face brushed up against my cashmere scarf.

“I won’t.” I said.

When I arrived back home with the corn meal, I told Mama that I had run into Twyla. “Where?” she asked. “At Kroger?”

For some odd reason, I thought that maybe my mother already knew where I had seen Twyla. “No. Actually, I

saw her on the corner of Rudisill and Lafayette. Not far from South Side. She was had a sign and was begging for money. She said that it was a somewhat common spot for her. Have you ever seen her there?" I asked.

Mama hesitated. "I've seen her there every now and then. But you know how it is. 'There but for the grace of God go I.'"

Mama used that phrase countless times and I still cannot say that I understood what it meant --- precisely. Something about how I could easily be in the same position, but I didn't see how that could be possible.

"Twyla has had it rough," Mama said. "She came by once and I would have let her in, but she had someone waiting for her in a car and I didn't know nothing about who was waiting on her. I didn't want her in the house. For all I know, she could have hit me upside the head and burglarize the place. You never know these days. Everybody knows Twyla hasn't been the same since she got on those drugs."

This was news to me. What did Twyla want when she came by? My mother said she had wanted to 'borrow' some money. I knew, by the way Mama had said, "borrow," that it was meant to be something that was assumed, but never believed.

So all this time Mama knew Twyla had become a junkie, but she kept insisting that I look her up. What was the point? So I could see how her life had turned out when we both had started out at the same place? It was not a new story. Two old friends meet and one has become successful while the other has not. One falls prey to the lure of drugs and one does not. Well, almost. . .

I snorted cocaine more than a few times, but I never let it destroy and own my life. I also knew that crack was more potent and that's why I had stayed away from it. But what was the difference between my casual and occasional drug use and Twyla's? I didn't have an answer for that. In my own way I had been a "functioning addict," which meant that I was able to do my gig and get high at the same time without the drugs interfering with my work. Could it be that I was a hypocrite? I stared down at my fingernails and remembered how the fingernail of my pinkie finger could easily scoop up a bit of coke to be snorted. There but for the grace of God go I. It was starting to have some meaning.

Susan Howard

Later that evening I drove to bridge that was near downtown and stepped out of my car. It was a place I had frequented as a child, the place or the point where the three rivers --- the Maumee, the St. Joseph and the St. Mary --- meet. I thought about Twyla as I bit into one of my nails and ripped it off with my teeth, tearing the real nail underneath it to where blood trickled onto my lips. I spit the nail into the river below. But I didn't stop there. I kept biting until the acrylic nails were ripped off of both hands with each fingernail left bleeding. I spit them all out into the river and wondered which direction, which river, would they follow.