NEXT

“NEXT!”

“We want to get a marriage license, please.”

“Name?”

“Johnson, Akisha.”

“Age?”

“Eighteen.”

“Groom’s name?”

“Jones, Yusef.”

“Yusef? You with him? Honey, you kids are in the wrong line.”

“We are?”

“Try that line over there, on the other side of the Pepsi machine. And good luck. You’re gonna need it, child. Next!”

* * *

“Next!”

“We want to apply for a marriage license.”

“For who, might I ask?”

“For us. For me and him.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“She told us to get in this line. I guess because—”

“I can’t give you a marriage license. He’s black.”

“I know, but I heard that if we get a special permit or something—”

“What you’re talking about is a same-race certificate. But I can’t give you one, and I wouldn’t if I could. The very idea of blacks marrying each other, when—”

“So why’d she tell us to get in this line?”

“This line is for same-race certificate applications.”

“So what do we have to do to get one of those?”

“Under the law, just ask for it. Even though there’s something disgusting about—”

“So look, lady, I’m asking.”

“Here. Fill this out and return it to window A21.”

“Does that mean we have to start in line all over again?”

“What do you think? Next!”

* * *

“Next!”

“Hello, I’m not even sure we’re in the right line. We want to get one of those special certificates. To get married.”

“A same-race certificate. You’re in the right line. But under Equal Access Provisions of the Melanin Conservation Act, we can’t just hand those out. You have to have an Ozone Waiver to even apply for one.”

“I already have the application filled it out. See? That white girl over there told me about it.”

“She told you wrong. What you filled out is the application for the waiver. But you can’t get the waiver without twelve and a half minutes of counseling.”

“Can’t you just stamp it or whatever? We’ve already been standing in three lines for hours, and my feet are—”

“Excuse me? Maybe you know more about my job than I do?”

“No.”

“Good. Then listen up. I’m trying to be helpful. What I’m going to give you is an appointment slip to see the marriage counselor. Take it to Building B and give it to the clerk at the first desk.”

“We have to go outside?”

“There’s a covered walkway. But stay to the left, several panels are missing. Next!”

* * *

“Next!”

“We have an appointment slip.”

“For what?”

“Counseling. To get a waiver, so we can apply for a certificate, or something. So we can get married.”

“Sit down over there. The Sergeant Major will call you when he’s ready.”

“The Sergeant Major? We were supposed to see a marriage counselor.”

“The Sergeant Major is the Marriage Counselor. Has been ever since the Declaration of Marital Law, under the Ozone Emergency Act. Where have you been?”

“We don’t get married every day.”

“Are you getting smart with me?”

“I guess not.”

“I hope not. Take a seat, in those hard chairs, until I call you. Next!”

* * *

“Next! At ease. State your business.”

“We need to get the counseling for—”

“I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to him.”

“Me?”

“You’re the man aren’t you?”

“Uh, yes, sir! We, uh, want to get married, sir!”

“Speak up. And don’t call me sir. I’m not an officer. Call me Sergeant Major.”

“Yes, sir; I mean, Sergeant.”

“Sergeant Major.”

“Sergeant Major!”

“Now tell me again what it is you want.”

“This is ridiculous. Yusef already told you—”

“Did I ask you to speak, young lady? Maybe you think because I’m black I’ll tolerate your insolence?”

“No. Sergeant. Major.”

“Then shut up. Carry on, young man.”

“We want to get married. Sergeant Major!”

“That’s what I thought I heard you say. And I guess you want my approval as your marriage counselor? My blessing, so to speak?”

“Well, yes.”

“Well, you can forget it! For Christ’s sake, boy, show a little backbone. A little social responsibility. You kids are the kind who are giving our kind a bad name. You don’t see white folks lining up trying to evade the law, do you?”

“They don’t need to line up.”

“Watch your mouth, young lady. And nobody told you to sit down. This is a military office.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“Will you quit butting in, young lady! Now, let me get this straight. Is she pregnant?”

“She is.”

“Why didn’t you say so in the first place?”

“That’s why we want to get married. Sergeant Major.”

“You’re in the wrong office. I’ll need to see a Melanin Heritage Impact Statement and a release from the Tactical Maternity Officer before I can even begin to counsel you. Take this slip to Office Twenty-Three in Building C.”

“Outside again?”

“Only for a few yards.”

“But the sunscorch factor is eight point four!”

“Quit whining. Show a little pride. Imagine what it’s like for white people. Next!”

* * *

“Next!”

“We were told to come here and see you because I’m—”

“I’m a woman too, I can tell. At ease. Sit down, you both look tired. Want a cigarette?”

“Isn’t smoking bad for the baby?”

“Suit yourself. Now, how can I help you? Captain Kinder, here; Tactical Maternity.”

“All we want is a certificate so we can get married.”

“Negative, honey. No way. If you were both sterile, or overage, maybe. But nobody’s going to give you kids a same-race if you are already PG. Not with active replicator AAs in such short supply. Who are all us white folks going to marry?”

“Each other?”

“Very funny. And watch our kids fry. But seriously, you don’t have to get married to have a child. You can have all the AAs you want OW. What’s the problem?”

“We want to keep it.”

“Keep it? Negative. You know that under the Melanin Heritage Conservation Act, Out-of-Wedlock African American children must be raised in Protective Custody.”

“You mean prison.”

“Haven’t you heard that old saying, ‘stone walls do not a prison make’? And this is not like the bad old days; since the Ozone Emergency, AA children are a precious resource. You should be glad to see them in such good homes.”

“But they are prisons. I’ve seen them.”

“So what? Does an NB, that’s newborn, know the diff? And it’s for the child’s own good as well as the good of the society. Do you realize the culture shock for African American youth when they find themselves in prison at age sixteen or so? If they are raised in prison from infancy, the TA, or Transitional Adaptation, goes much more smoothly. Besides, they get out as soon as they marry, anyway.”

“What if we don’t want our kid to go to prison at all?”

“Whoa, Akisha! Do you mind if I call you Akisha? Are we back in the Dark Ages here, where the parents decide the child’s future even before it is born? This is a free country and kids as well as parents have rights. Sure you don’t want a cigarette?”

“I’m sure.”

“Suit yourself. Let’s cut the BS. You’re nice kids, but under the Melanin Distribution Provisions of the Ozone Emergency Act, the law is clear. If you want to raise your own children, you’ll have to marry legally.”

“Which means marry a white person.”

“As a white person myself, I’ll overlook your racist tone of voice, which I’m sure you didn’t mean. Is there something so terrible about marrying a white person?”

“No. I don’t guess so.”

“Okay. Now why don’t you get with the program. Don’t you know some nice white boy to marry?”

“Then I can keep my baby?”

“Not this one, but the next one. This one’s double M and belongs to Uncle Sam, or at least to the Natural Resources Administration of HEW and M.”

“But what if I don’t want to marry some damn white boy!”

“Jones, I was hoping we could handle this without emotional outbursts of naked bigotry. I see I was wrong. You are in danger of making me feel like an inadequate counselor with this racist attack on my professional self-image. Is it because I’m white?”

“It’s because I want to marry Yusef.”

“Who just happens to be black? Let’s get real, girl. There’s nothing subtle about you same-race couples. The way you strut around, as if daring the world to rain on your disgusting little intraracial parade.”

“But—”

“Whoa! Before you go blaming all white people because of your personal problems, let me warn you that you are already in violation of several applicable federal Civil Rights statutes. I’m afraid you’ve taken this matter out of my hands. I have no choice but to send you up to see the Colonel.”

“The Colonel?”

“The Civil Rights Prosecutor. In the big office on the top floor of the main building.”

“What about me?”

“You can go with her if you want, Yusef. But if I were you—”

“You’re not.”

“—I’d find a nice white girl and get married. Fast. Before you both get in more trouble than you can handle. Dismissed. Next!”

* * *

“Next!”

“We’re here to see the Colonel.”

“I am the Colonel. I’m here to help you if I can. And let me begin by warning you that anything you say will be used against you.”

“Will be?”

“Can be, will be, whatever. Young lady, are you splitting hairs with me?”

“No.”

“Good. Now, I see you are under indictment for Discrimination and Conspiracy.”

“Conspiracy? All we wanted to do was get married.”

“Which is against the law. Surely you knew that or you wouldn’t have gone to the Marital Law Administration in the first place.”

“We were trying to get a special license.”

“Precisely. And what is that if not trying to evade the Melanin Redistribution Act, which prohibits black intramarriage? The mere presence of you two in line A21 is in itself evidence of a conspiracy to circumvent the provisions of the Melanin Hoarding Ban.”

“But we were trying to obey the law!”

“That makes it even worse. The law is a just master, but it can be harsh with those who try to sabotage its spirit by hypocritically observing its letter. However, I’m going to delay sentencing on Conspiracy and Hoarding because we have an even more serious charge to deal with here.”

“Sentencing? We haven’t even been convicted yet.”

“Young lady, are you splitting hairs with me?”

“No.”

“Good. Now let’s move on to the Discrimination charge. Deep issues are involved here. You two aren’t old enough to remember the Jim Crow Days in the South, when blacks weren’t permitted to swim in the public pools. But I remember. Do you know what Discrimination is?”

“I read about it in school.”

“Well, then you know that it is wrong. And blacks who don’t marry whites are denying them the right to swim in their gene pool. Discriminating against them.”

“Nobody’s denying anybody the right to do anything! I just want to marry Yusef.”

“That’s a conveniently simplistic way of looking at things, isn’t it? But it won’t wash in

a court of law. You can't marry Yusef without refusing to marry Tom, Dick, or Harry. It's the same difference. If you marry a black person, you are denying a white person the right to marry you; and that's a violation of his rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. Do you recognize those two pictures on the wall?"

"Sure. Martin Luther King and John Kennedy."

"John F. Kennedy. Somehow your generation has lost sight of the ideals they died for. Let me pose a purely hypothetical question—would it be fair to have a society in which one racial grouping, such as yours, had special rights and privileges denied to the rest of us?"

"It never bothered anybody before."

"Are you getting smart?"

"No. But what about the Fourteenth Amendment. Doesn't it apply to me?"

"Certainty it does. To you as an individual, and to your young man as well. But as African Americans you are more than just individuals; you are also a precious natural treasure."

"Huh?"

"Under the Melanin Heritage Act, your genetic material is a national resource, which America is now claiming for all its people, not just for a privileged few. It is the same genetic material that was brought across the ocean (bought and paid for, I might add) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."

"But the slaves were freed."

"And their descendants as well. But genetic material, being immortal, can be neither slave nor free. It is an irreplaceable natural resource, like the forests or the air we breathe. And whether you kids like it or not, the old days when our resources were squandered and hoarded by special interests are over. Your genetic heritage is a part of the priceless national endowment of every man, woman, and child in America, not just your private property to dispose of as you please. Am I making myself clear?"

"I guess."

"You guess! Would it be fair to have an African American child born double M; while a white child, denied his or her Melanin Birthright, was doomed to twice the chance of skin cancer and god-knows-what-else?"

“Nobody ever worried about white kids being born with twice everything before.”

“Enough, young lady. I am sentencing you to nine months at Catskill Tolerance Development Camp, or until the baby is born, followed by nine years at Point Pleasant Repeat Pregnancy Farm. I sincerely hope you will use your time at Point Pleasant to think about how racist attitudes such as yours threaten the rainbow fabric of our multiethnic democracy.”

“What about me?”

“I’m putting you on probation, Yusef, and taking you home for dinner as soon as court is over. I want you to meet my daughter. Marshall, put the cuffs on this one and take her away. Pay no heed to her crocodile tears—they are masters of deceit.

“Next!”