



Proudly Presents

A TASTE OF PURPLE

WRITTEN BY CAROL RUST

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Back when my only goal in life was to be tall enough to see over the kitchen counter, things were clearly defined.

Good. Bad. Hot. Cold. Yes. No.

Shreveport was a sleepy cow-town back then, mired in red dirt, talk of cotton prices, the leathery smells of saddles in the hardware store and August that dragged by more slowly than a pregnant hog.

There were good, honest, Christian men, who worked and sweated hard for a living and sang “How Great Thou Art” in church on Sundays.

These were the white men.

The black men, even though most worked and sweated hard for a living, too, and went to church and had kids and everything that the white men did – well, they didn’t get quite the same credit.

They were the lazy shiftless sort you couldn’t trust to do anything but not show up for work.

That’s what the folks said anyway. That was one more designation of my youth, and perhaps the most obvious. Black and white.

There were black and white waiting rooms at the doctor’s office. Black and white water fountains, black and white schools, black and white churches. There would have been black and white swimming pools, but the city didn’t waste time building pools for Negroes, using the polite term. “They’d tear the pool up in a year or two. You know how they are.” That’s what the folks said anyway.

Well, I didn’t think much of it, because that’s the world everybody else lived in back when I was five or so years old.

Another part of my world, as the first born child of a veterinarian,

was the official title of gate-opener down at the pasture when Dad was on call.

The phone call one Saturday morning couldn't have come at a more unfortunate time, because Tom was just fixing to knock Jerry to kingdom come and Bugs Bunny was coming on right after that. And some stupid cow somewhere was sick, and I was going to miss it all.

I reluctantly got ready to go, dreading Dad's dusty truck that didn't have a proper place to sit and smelled so much like animal medicine that pretty soon you started tasting it, too. We bounced along almost clear to the next little town, and I was mighty happy by then to get out and open the gate, when we finally did get there.

The black man who kept the land for whoever owned it came up to Daddy's side of the truck and pointed way out to the pasture. I'm not sure what he said, but whatever it was, it made Dad think twice about taking me with him. So he pointed me to the colored man's front yard, right up next to the road, where a little black girl was playing, and told me to stay there and play with her.

You could have knocked me down with a feather. Not that Daddy ever told me to stay away from black people, but he didn't exactly encourage it, either. And here I was, supposed to play with one.

I walked in the yard, not knowing what to say to this girl about my age who was so very black. I couldn't say much anyway, because my tongue was just about stuck to the roof of my mouth, dry and tasting like dust and worm medicine, from the long ride down.

She was hopping around, making little clouds of dust in the grassless yard with her feet, and holding the most delicious-looking, half-eaten purple popsicle in the world.

I guess my eyes stuck to that purple popsicle about like my tongue