

seeing colors

Voile

Why is it that when a guy compliments me, it's never about beauty—it's about the shade of my skin? by Tracy E. Hopkins

I'm sitting in a restaurant with my mother in New Orleans, trying to stay cool despite the fact that I've made the mistake of ordering very spicy Buffalo wings. So here I sit, chasing the hot wings with glasses of water, when suddenly I feel eyes upon me. I glance over my mother's shoulder, and there they are—a very seductive pair of dark brown eyes.

Nah, he couldn't be staring at me, I think and look away. I mean, if I were a guy, the hot-sauce-fingered sight of me would not have prompted flirtation. But I can still feel the eyes on me. My mother turns around.

"He's looking at you, Tray," she says giddily. I decide to see how far he's willing to take the act. After I pay the check, I walk past him and say hi. He motions for me to come over.

"I'm sorry for being so forward, but when I saw you I just had to get your attention," he says.

Say what? Did I just fall into the middle of a Harlequin romance novel? He continues, "I mean, I was like—This girl is gorgeous. I just love dark women."

Now wait one minute. I didn't find that comment altogether flattering. Why is it that every

time a guy gives a darker-skinned African-American woman a compliment, it always has to refer to her complexion? It's as if he's insinuating that being dark and attractive is unique—an exception to some standard of beauty. It's like saying to an overweight person, "For a fat person, you're kind of pretty."

The "compliment" that guy in New Orleans gave me hit upon my personal pet peeve. Guys always qualify their attraction to me by saying things like, "You're pretty for a dark-skinned girl." Although they have good intentions, their comments sting. What's wrong with "You're pretty," period?

Really, this thing about color has been a part of the African-American community for centuries. It's a result of slavery. A hierarchy developed when white slave masters allowed lighter-skinned slaves to do household chores, while the darker-skinned slaves were forced to labor in the fields. Many African-American men still consider darker women "too dark" and prefer lighter-skinned women because their skin tone and features are more like those of white women. Even film director Spike

Lee has said, "Whether black men want to admit it or not, they feel light-skinned women are more attractive than dark-skinned women. . . . That comes from being inundated with media from the time you're born that constantly fed you the white woman as the image of beauty."

The thing is, though, that while African-American men find lighter-skinned women more attractive, they think darker-skinned women are sexier. We're seen as sex objects. A close friend of mine who is also dark has concluded that we're good enough to fool around with but not acceptable enough to marry.

My old boyfriend Stephen always claimed "Color doesn't matter," but I know it mattered to him. He always used to talk about how different our complexions are. Once, while we were riding the subway and holding hands, he chuckled and said, "This is like the *Jungle Fever* ad." What nerve. The fact is, Stephen is so light-skinned, people sometimes think he's white—so he can "pass" for that if he wants to. Maybe that's why he can claim that color doesn't matter.

I was most conscious of my complexion when I was growing up. I remember another African-American girl calling me names like "blackie." As a teenager, I found that some light-skinned girls acted as if they were better than I am because I'm dark. So you see, the distinction along coloring lines isn't just about men choosing women. I see it happening among African-Americans as an entire group, too.

I wish I could say that I've become immune to insensitive remarks about my complexion, but they do bother me. Although I know that lighter-skinned African-American women put up with stupid comments, too, they must be minuscule in comparison. I doubt if any man ever said to Halle Berry, "I could really go for you if you were a little darker."

I know I may sound ashamed or bitter, but I'm not. I realize that I am attractive, both internally and externally. I just wish that African-Americans could accept ourselves for who we are, not what we look like. I wish I'd told that guy in New Orleans that we're all beautiful, the lightest no more so than the darkest. ■



Color-blind:
Tracy Hopkins
wishes
everyone
were

Tie-front top and dress, Roxy; Hair and makeup, Elisabeth Dreaboud.

Photograph by Mark Contratto