

“My dear sister, Wanda!” I was cheerfully greeted as I walked into the salon, with the little bell atop the door exclaiming my entrance. I smiled and walked towards the empty salon chair, beside which my sister, Viola, styled a woman’s tightly curled, black hair. “What brings you here today?” Viola said in her business-like tone of voice that she used for all of her customers.

“I came to get my hair cut,” I replied above the voices of several women conversing over their magazines while getting their hair dried. Viola smiled; a wonderful smile that told me she was delighted with my decision. My big sister had been badgering me for months to get my hair cut, and, after much hesitation, I finally took her up on her offer.

“A change of heart, I see,” Viola said with a soft laugh, “I knew you’d come around eventually!” I grinned and took a seat on the rusty-orange, leather salon chair. As Viola finished adding products skillfully to the women’s hair, while continuing their cheerful conversation, I turned my gaze to the mirror in front of me. A young woman with black ringlets that reached her shoulders, wearing a white blouse that shone brilliantly against her chestnut-coloured skin, stared back. The length of my locks had been something I was proud of, but now, as my sister had encouraged, it was time for a change. My eyes shifted and fixated on Viola. She now stood smiling as the woman admired her new and fashionable hairstyle. Viola always seemed just as delighted as her clients when they liked their new appearance. I hoped I’d be just as appreciative. Seeing Viola doing what she loved best reminded me of why I looked up to her. She had worked hard to reach her dream of becoming a hairdresser, and even through the difficulties and challenges, she had created a successful business. Not only did she have her own beauty salon, but she also had her own beauty school, The Desmond School of Beauty Culture, to help support the employment of Black women. She had even created her own line of beauty products, made especially for women with darker skin tones. I suppose she was encouraged by our parents’ hard work. Father was a barber and had probably kindled her dream of owning a hair salon, but I’d assumed that Madam C.J. Walker had also influenced her ambitions. Madam C.J. Walker was the first black millionaire in America, and since I’d heard Viola mention her name more than once, I could tell she really admired her. Viola’s sophisticated composure and elegant way of conducting herself made her a pleasant and friendly person to be around. I knew many others felt the same way because there were always plenty of women who made it a night out to go to Vi’s Beauty Salon - even if it was just to relay the latest town gossip. Viola met my gaze in the mirror, her hands resting on the back of the newly emptied chair, bringing me back from my thoughts. I pulled my eyes away, and she came up behind me and began running her hands through my thick, black, and tightly curled strands of hair.

“What will it be?” she asked, referring to what type of haircut I wanted.

“You choose - you’re the expert,” I replied, “Just don’t do anything too extravagant!” She smiled, “I’ll do my best!” Viola leaned closer and whispered softly in my ear, “And you get a family discount!”

I looked once again into a face displayed in the mirror ahead, though now I could hardly tell it was that of my own. Viola crouched down beside me, wrapping her arm around my shoulders, beaming.

“You look wonderful!” she proclaimed, and it was true, I did indeed look fabulous. I was pleased with my new look, despite the fact that I had watched in horror as my locks fell solemnly to the floor below, hardly enduring the amount of time it took for her to straighten, cut, and style my hair. As her contagious smile adorned my face, I realized how much we two sisters looked alike, especially now that I had acquired a similar hairstyle. But I believed that I hardly compared to her remarkable personality, achievements, and ability to make anybody feel beautiful. That was another thing; in a world of the status quo being white, Viola was becoming a pioneer in paving the path for coloured women entrepreneurs, and Black beauty culture, though I didn’t know this at the time.

As I sat reminiscing over the events of my first haircut at Vi’s Beauty Salon, I now recognized what an amazing person Viola was. And that is why I just could not comprehend how such an innocent and capable woman could be arrested. When I had first been informed on Viola’s circumstance, my mind had churned with selfish thoughts of what people would now think of me. I mean, after all, my sister had been arrested! Think of all the disgrace, shame and humiliation that would be placed upon my respected parents and their children. But as I was told what had instigated the imprisonment of Viola, I had become bewildered at what was the actual cause. I had been told that my sister was arrested at a movie theatre for refusing to pay the difference between a balcony ticket and main floor ticket’s cost. But something about that didn’t sound right. I knew my sister would be more than willing to pay extra for a main floor ticket, since she had poor eyesight and preferred sitting up close to the screen. I had a feeling that whatever had provoked Viola into not paying the additional fee for the main floor ticket, was something other than simply unwillingness to pay more; something that had caused her to be indignant and refuse to concede.

I stood in my mother’s kitchen, whipping up the cream to top off our pumpkin pie. While the rest of my siblings helped put food on the table for our Sunday dinner, my mind was dwelling on other things. I peered out the kitchen window to catch a glimpse of the road but could not see Viola coming. My thoughts had been full of questions ever since I had received the news. I could not fathom how Viola must feel. Having just been in jail and in trial, I would be surprised if she came. I placed the bowl of freshly whipped cream onto the counter just as Mother took out the steaming hot, wonderful smelling, golden pumpkin pie. I could tell that my mother, too, was worried for Viola, and didn’t expect her to be joining us, as she had set the table for all but two places, thinking that Viola and her husband would be missing. I subconsciously glanced out the window once more, and Mother noticed my searching eyes.

“I wouldn’t count on her coming, Wanda,” my mother placed her hand on my shoulder, “She is probably worn out from her trial, and won’t want to have to explain it all to us just yet.” I nodded silently as I heard the truth of my thoughts spoken out loud. I had secretly hoped that she would come, longing to ask the questions I had been holding in, needing affirmation that my sister had not been justly arrested. But that was a false hope, and I realized it as we all sat down at the table, embellished with plates full of piping hot food to warm us up on the chilly November afternoon. I always looked forward to our family’s delightful Sunday dinners, with pleasant, lively conversation and delectable meals, but with Viola and her husband absent from the table, and knowing what she had just been through, the occasion felt very different. It felt as though a piece was missing from the puzzle.

My family grasped each other's hands and bowed their heads in prayer. My father's gentle, deep voice cut through my disappointment as he began to give thanks for our plentiful meal and the bringing together of our family. *Except Viola*, I thought to myself, and as if he'd heard me speak it out loud, he began to pray for her.

"And, Heavenly Father, I pray that You would make known to Viola whether or not she was rightly convicted, and if she should confront her accusers. Amen." While he finished the prayer, I realized that I had already concluded to the fact that she had *not* been rightly convicted, and I hoped I was right. As if on cue, the door opened to reveal the faces of Viola and Jack Desmond. All of our heads turned to greet them, and I heard a sigh of relief, as if it was a surprise to see her alive and walking through the door. But as she approached the table, she was limping and her gait faltered. There was a grimace displayed on her face. I couldn't help but wonder how she had gotten injured.

"So," Viola concluded, "I need your help and your advice." Her gaze swept pleadingly across the faces of our family members who all sat silent after hearing about Viola losing her trial. She had told us about her experience at court, where she'd felt unable to defend herself. She had been fined \$26 for "defrauding the government" with six of those dollars bestowed to her adversary. Viola had known all along that the whole thing was about her skin colour, not about her unwillingness to pay the extra fee. She was now faced with a dilemma; she could either accept her loss or retaliate against it. This was why she needed our assistance. When she looked into my eyes, I knew what needed to be done. She couldn't just let herself be wrongfully accused. She had to stand up for herself, and for us. My face took on a look of determination, and I arranged the thoughts in my head, so they were ready to be spewed into the air as words.

"No." My ambitions were dispelled as the word was thrown, like a rock, into my family's contemplating minds. The cold, hard voice belonged to Jack, my brother-in-law. "Viola doesn't need anyone's advice. The trial is over, and she lost. To try and defy it would just lead to hardship and disappointment." Viola stared at her husband in disbelief, as shocked as I was that he had told her to give up.

"That's not true!" The words I spoke surprised even me, but I knew I was right. "I suppose we could just let things lie and back down from an injustice that happened to my dearly loved sister, but I for one, believe that being treated unfairly just because of our skin colour is wrong, and should not be tolerated."

"I agree." Viola smiled, a sad but hopeful smile, and I acknowledged that the obstinate, determined person I knew had returned. I looked around for the agreement of the others. Several nods, earnest words, and determined expressions rang out from my family. I stole a quick glance at Jack's face, which held a set look of disapproval. I was disheartened by what this disagreement would do to my sister's marriage, but I knew she had ultimately won, and would not give in to defeat.

Amidst a sea of declarations and notions of preparation as if for battle, an almost inaudible request for the truth was spoken.

"Viola, what actually happened in the movie theatre?" Half-finished sentences were cut off abruptly, and valiant words trailed off where they hung heavily in the air. My mother's words stopped me in my tracks as well, and my previous questioning resurfaced. I still did not understand what had triggered Viola into refusing to pay the extra cost either. I looked to where my older sister stared gravely at her hands, and many other eyes turned the same way. Was Viola embarrassed by whatever happened? Had she indeed been found guilty?

Viola broke the silence, "I refused to move from my seat." I had concluded as much.

"But *why*?" Mother pressed on. Viola looked up and sighed, telling me that she was about to confess the whole story.

"It all started because my car broke down," she began with a slight quiver in her voice, "I was on a business trip to Sydney, Nova Scotia, when my automobile started having trouble. I brought it to a shop in New Glasgow, where the mechanic told me that the repair would take several hours, so I decided to go to the movies to pass the time." Viola paused, recalling the memory, "I had no idea merely watching a movie would lead to this. I asked for a main floor ticket at the booth, paid for it, and sat down near the front of the lower level. I had unknowingly been given a balcony ticket, which I didn't realize until I was confronted by the ticket-taker who told me that I had paid for a balcony seat, to which I would have to move. I thought it was just a mistake, so I returned to the ticket booth and asked the cashier to exchange my ticket for a main floor one. She refused, and responded hastily with, 'I'm not permitted to sell main floor tickets to you people.'"

I blinked. It seemed that I was not the only one taken aback by the words that had been spoken to Viola. Combating racism was just a part of life for my family; we knew, for the most part, where we would or would not be accepted, and how to navigate through it. But something about being outrightly told that she was not welcome to sit where she pleased or be allowed a main floor ticket just because of her skin colour, left me shocked, and I could feel the anger boiling up inside me.

Viola continued, "I, too, was stunned as I was hit with the realization that by the words "you people" she was referring to the colour of my skin and wasn't allowing me to receive a main floor ticket. Out of frustration, I made a spontaneous decision, and took my place, once again, on the main floor. There I sat until a large man, whom I presumed was the manager, approached me angrily. I was given another chance to change my seat, but I remained where I was, seeing it unfair and illogical to have to move. He retorted that he had the right to refuse admission to any "objectionable person." I reasoned that I had tried to switch my ticket, and would have paid the difference, had my offer not been rejected. The manager told me that he'd have to get a policeman, but I wasn't afraid because I knew I had done nothing wrong. However, before I knew what was happening, a burly police officer stood beside me, grabbed me by the shoulder, and began yanking me off the chair."

I gasped. I could not understand how two big men could mercilessly, and cruelly take a hold of a dignified and delicate woman like Viola, and physically remove her from her rightful seat. I prepared myself for what Viola had to say next.

"The manager's bulky hand took hold of my other arm, and I started to be dragged down the aisle of the theatre. I was in a state of shock, I guess. I tried to get away from their iron-like grip, but I stood no chance. I didn't know what to do... didn't know how I could stop them. Several alarmed voices echoed in my mind. I felt like I was having a nightmare. I was pulled roughly to the entrance of the theatre, and, acting upon my last hope to save myself, placed a hand on either side of the doorway as an effort to bring myself to a halt. Then they seized my legs and forcefully carried me out of the building."

I shuddered as the image of Viola being ruthlessly dragged out of the theatre materialized in my mind. Viola had become more and more animated and descriptive as she relived the mortifying incident, so much so that we felt as if we were experiencing it right alongside her. My breath had quickened, and my mind whirred with the uncertainty of how I should react to the way my sister

had been treated. I now knew how she had been injured. Viola was staring into the distance, weaving together the sequence of events that had occurred.

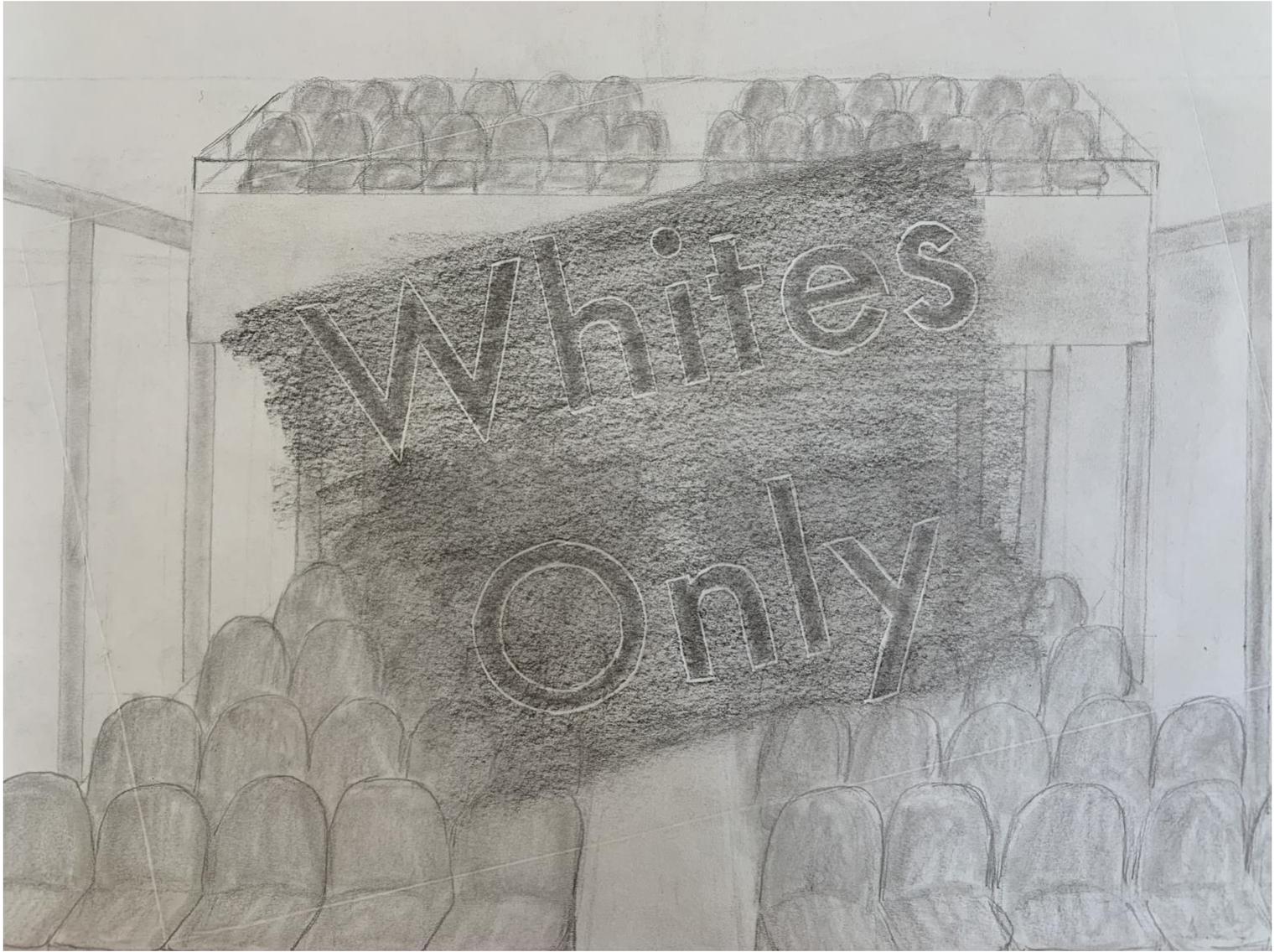
“I was put in jail,” she resumed, in a much calmer, quieter voice, “And there I sat, for twelve hours, all night long, without sleeping. Of course, I couldn’t sleep. I was frightened, shocked, and I kept playing the incident over in my mind, doubting if what I did was right. But I felt that I had been right in not letting things lie or abiding to their made-up rules. So, I pulled myself together, and sat bolt upright all night to make the statement that I did not belong in that cell. When morning finally arrived, I was brought to court, and charged because I didn’t pay the difference between the upstairs and main floor tickets, which actually amounted to only one cent. One cent!” Viola exhaled audibly in her irritation. I, too, was angry. “It was not the money they were worried about. I had violated the unwritten rule that Black people were supposed to sit in the balcony, separate from White people on the main floor. I, along with Wanda, believe that this should not be tolerated!” She looked at me admiringly, and I smiled in return. She wasn’t going to give up.

Viola didn’t give up, and with our support she made a courageous decision to fight for her rights and defend herself. Although she lost her appeal, her stand against injustice challenged segregation in Canada, and her refusal to give up her seat impacted the future of Black people across Canada.

Viola was a heroine who stood up for herself, upheld her beliefs and virtues, and confirmed her value and worth as a Black Canadian. I am proud of her. I am proud of the fight she put on to bring recognition to Black people, to validate their importance, giving them the voice to speak out against injustice, and not conforming to the standards of society. This is my sister. Now, years later, as I stare into her face printed on our \$10 bill, I recognize that if we are to make a difference, if we are to put a stop to racism, we have to take a stand for equal rights. Just like Viola.









Citation

<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/viola-desmond>

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