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FEATURE

My Family's Life Inside and Outside America's Racial Categories

My father was raised under Jim Crow. My children could pass for white. Where does that leave me?

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

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I left the cafeteria where my brother, Clarence, was racing the wooden kit car he built with the older Boy Scouts, and made my way down the long corridor to the restroom. The building was virtually empty on a Saturday and charged with that faint lawlessness of school not in session. When I finished, I fixed myself in the mirror and, on the way out, ran and leapt to swing from the high bar joining the metal stalls to the tiled wall. In third grade, this was hard to do, a feat of superior athleticism that I savored even in the absence of a witness. The bounce in my legs linked me with my favorite athletes. I wore my hair like them, too, shaved low on the sides and back and slightly higher on top with a laser-sharp part engraved on the left. As my feet thrust forward, the door shot open and B. stepped in. An eighth grader, the eldest of three freckled, blond, almost farcically preppy brothers — Irish Catholic but still WASPier than the sons of Italians, Poles and Ukrainians who formed the backbone of the student body at our parochial school — he watched me dismount. In his costume of boat shoes and Dockers, B. was far from an intimidating sight, but he was bigger than me, and he smiled at me strangely.

I made to pass him on the way out, but he blocked me, his smile turning menacing. “What?” I managed, confused. We’d been in school together for years without ever having exchanged a word. “Monkey,” he whispered, still smiling, and my whole body froze: I was being insulted — in an ugly way, I could sense from his expression more than from what was said — but I couldn’t fully grasp why. I’d been swinging like a monkey, it was true, but this was something else. I tried again to step around him, at a loss for words; he blocked my way again, looming over me, still with that smirk. “You little [expletive] monkey,” he repeated with deliberate calm, and to my astonishment I realized that, although I could not understand why, there was, however vague and out of place, suddenly the possibility of violence. Out of nothing more than instinct, I shoved past him with all the determination an 8-year-old can gather.

He let me go, but I could hear his laughter behind me as I made my way back to the cafeteria, my heart pumping staccato, my face singed with the heat of self-awareness, my inexperienced mind fumbling for the meaning behind what had just transpired. But I knew enough to know that I could not tell my father what happened. I could see his reaction — see him shoot from his leather desk chair where he spent a majority of weekends as well as weekdays bent over a book. “Let’s go,” he would say in a clipped tone, with that distant expression, as if he were looking at something else, not at me, and by that time he would already be at the hall closet throwing his dark gray overcoat around his broad shoulders, keys jangling in his strong hand.

If I had told him what that white boy said to me in the restroom, Pappy — as we called my father, in a nod to his Southern roots — would have descended into an indescribable fury, the memory of which can tense me up to this day. He would have lost a week of work and concentration — that was as certain as two and two is four. But I also knew that he would be shot through with pain, unable to sleep, up at his desk in the dark, transported to his past, agonizing over this awful proof of what he’d always suspected: that no matter how strong he was, he was not strong enough to shield — not fully — his sons from the psychological warfare of American racism that whispers obscenities at little boys when they find themselves alone.

A fatherless boy raised in Jim Crow Texas, my dad was a tenacious autodidact, the first in his family to get a college degree. His fury over the mind-boggling injustice of lesser men and even their children thinking they had something over him because of nothing greater than the tint of skin and weft of hair was something I could not fully share. Rather, it was

something I learned very early to empathize with in my deepest core and to anticipate as best I could.

I failed to do this some time later, on a gorgeous fall afternoon when Pappy made the trip himself to pick me up from school. He seemed to be in a good mood. It was hot outside. He'd showered and powdered his neck — the smell of talc and the pomade he sometimes used to brush his hair sweetening the old leather of the seats. The car was idling, but we hadn't pulled out. Somehow we began to speak about sports, which ones I was good at and which might intrigue me. Basketball was my great love, but in those days baseball mattered, too. "And boxing?" Pappy asked. "It's about time you learn to box. You want to be able to box, don't you?"

I sensed a level of approval in the way he was regarding me. I was old enough now to be let in on this masculine secret. Intellectual development was paramount to my father, of course, but he was hardly a geek. He was a man who happened to be of a certain Southern culture and a certain age, and his talents and tastes had been molded accordingly. That I was not only academically inclined but physically promising pleased him, and both aspects of the self were to be cultivated, that was obviously true. The sun shone warmly on me through the windshield, relaxing my mind, which wandered ahead into my room to lose my school uniform and rush outside to play. I missed the gravity of my father's query. "Oh, I don't know," I said distractedly. "I don't really care that much about boxing."

"You don't *care* about boxing?" he repeated. "Who told you that?"

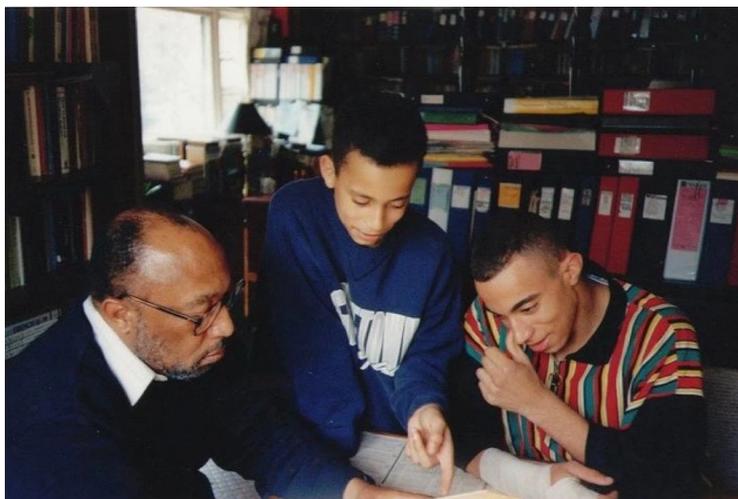
"No one told me that. What do you mean?"

Pappy's face tightened. I remember: the ignition churning; that old Benz K-turning; Pappy gesturing at my very white classmates loitering. "Who *told* you not to like boxing?"

"But no one did!" I didn't even understand the question.

"*Goddammit!*"

I had not yet spent significant time with the other black boys I would come to know and acculturate myself to, the boys from the redlined peripheries of my small town who were a lot like the boys from the larger, all-black neighborhoods beyond it, boys who seemed older than me even when they might be younger, who threw their hands at each other habitually — and skillfully — both in earnestness and in jest. I was still a few years away from familiarity with any of that, and boxing was something that I had only ever seen my father do. I remember the enormous, generations-old frustration in his exclamation in the car. I don't remember whatever I could have said to him in return, whatever I must have stammered to save myself and calm him down. I do remember his astonishing wounded rage that seemed to have very little, in fact, to do with me — or at least with who I thought myself to be — when he shouted, for the first and only time in my life, "I'll be *darned* if they make you white!" And I remember the most excruciating silence for the duration of the ride back home, as my brain fumbled around the notion that you could be made into something you knew you could not be.



From left, the author's father, Clarence Williams, the author and his brother, Clarence II, at home in 1993. From Thomas Chatterton Williams

I have spent my whole life earnestly believing the fundamentally American dictum that a single “drop of black blood” makes a person “black” primarily because they can never be “white.” My own father is a red-brown man. Despite a dusting of freckles under the eyes and a prominent nose, no one has ever described him as anything but black. His appearance, along with the strength of his persona, allowed me to assume that the Williams family identity would forever be in his image, even though my mother is unambiguously white — blond-haired, blue-eyed and descended on all sides from Northern European Protestant stock.

When my father was my daughter's age, in the early 1940s, there were still horse-drawn buggies and outhouses where he lived in Galveston, Tex., a short sliver of an island in the Gulf of Mexico that bears the deplorable distinction of having been among the last places in the entire United States of America to free its slaves, some two and a half years after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. His grandmother was married to a man born in the final year of chattel slavery. Since I was very young, I understood that Texas was not so much where my father came from as where he never wanted to return to. My brother and I were raised in a small but gloriously book-crammed house by loving and devoted parents who came from elsewhere. They kept few photographs or clues to the past and valorized individuality, cultivation and self-creation over membership in any particular lineage or clan. I did not have the language for it then, but compared with all of my Polish and Italian and Puerto Rican and black and Irish neighbors and classmates, what was odd about my parents was just how uninterested in their ancestry they seemed.

To speak about a thing clearly you must first be able to name it. To speak about yourself, you must first be able to assemble a sense of origin. For descendants of slaves, this has proved one of the most precious losses of self-knowledge we've endured. The black experience in the South is tantamount to the biblical flood; we've stumbled off the ark without an inkling of what things were like before it. As I write this, a tab on my laptop displays a pastel pie chart of my ancestral-geographical makeup. I scrutinize the color-coded slices for meaning. That fuchsia “sub-Saharan” segment is markedly less than half — 40.1 percent of the pie — though that is where my received social identity comes from. The marine-blue “European” section, on the other hand, which I always understood existed but nonetheless thought of as existing somehow outside me, makes up 59.2 percent of the circle. This lopsided ratio surprised me, though it should not have. Millions of “white” Americans have sufficient African ancestry — often a result of some wily predecessor's successfully having slipped the yoke — to theoretically have been enslaved in the Southern states that enforced racial-purity laws most fanatically. But that is not the case in my mother's family. My aunt came back 99.9 percent European. Presuming she and my mother share all ancestors, that would put my father around 80 percent sub-Saharan African — right on average, according to some estimates, for the (often forcibly) mixed, Afro-European population of Americans we refer to as “black.”

I am well aware that my situation is not yet, and may not ever be, a terribly common one, and that I have experienced a specific set of breaks and good fortune outside my own control that have contributed powerfully to my own sense of autonomy in the world. Growing up, I understood myself to be black, and yet I was also exposed to whiteness through my mother and most (though certainly not all) members of her family in nonantagonistic, positively nurturing ways. Today, my children, who are roughly a fifth West African descended, are so blond-haired and fair-skinned that they can blend in with the locals when we travel in Sweden. All this and more has forced me to wrestle with the particulars of my family's story — its painful past as well as its unwritten future — and reflect on what these specific contradictions might imply about the broader color categories we are all forced into. My family's multigenerational transformation from what is called “black” toward what is assumed to be “white” has led me to yearn for ways of seeing and relating to one another that operate somewhere between the poles of tribal identitarianism and Panglossian utopianism. People will always look different from one another in ways we can't control. What we can control is what we make of those differences.

It has become commonplace to acknowledge the following point, but it bears repeating anyway: The idea of racial classification, as we understand it now, stretches back only to Enlightenment Europe. I have stayed in inns in Germany that have been continuously operating longer than this calamitous thought. But even though we can trace race's origins without much difficulty, it seems impossible — and worse than that, woefully naïve — even to speak of an end to such

persistent and flattening thinking, thinking that has led to so much human suffering, precluded and squandered so much human potential. And yet I am convinced that we will never overcome the evils of racism as long as we fail first to imagine and then to conjure a world free of racial categorization and the hierarchies it necessarily implies.

Pappy's father was a living ghost, and his mother died when I was a young child. But from time to time, once a year or less frequently, the phone would ring, and his voice would grow folksier, maybe even slower, and he would chat with some relation for an hour, sometimes more. I tried to picture the faces of these phantom men and women who — incredibly, to me — knew who my father was, knew from what world he had come, but imagine as I would, I had no idea what lives they might lead. “Oh, that’s so-and-so from Detroit,” my mother might say, as if that could clarify matters for me. When Pappy hung up, whatever link had been temporarily forged with the past immediately receded from our home, and it was obvious the subject was closed. Sometimes, when I asked him how he learned to fight so well, he would get a gentle, wistful look in the eye and say that his uncles in Longview had shown him how — one of the few memories of home I’m aware of that could provoke a wholly uncomplicated smile.

I should have better understood how fundamental boxing must have been to my father’s sense of himself as a man in the world, as fundamental as books. After all, the evidence, like those books, was all around me. In that basement, we had a treadmill, stationary bikes and resistance machines, in addition to medicine balls, benches and weights. There was a professional-grade heavy bag and a speed bag in the garage, as well as full sets of headgear and scarlet-red Everlast gloves. Only looking back on it now do I realize that my father must have anticipated that he would train us. There would be intermittent lessons throughout my childhood and adolescence, moments of instruction snatched in the hallway or kitchen in which he patiently demonstrated to me where to place my feet, how to hunch my shoulders — chin down, protect the neck — and how to parry a blow. Pappy was unhittable, at least for me, whip-fast with the hands, torso and head well into his 60s. It was beautiful to witness what he could do. Is there anything more wonderful than watching your father soar? Perhaps, I imagine now, it is equaled only in the pleasure of imparting — really transmitting — something of yourself to your child.

One evening thrusts beyond the fog of childhood memory like a rocky peak glimpsed from an airplane window. Pappy takes the scrawny little boy who must have been me down into the basement, puts the gloves on the boy’s fists and then gloves his own hands. It is a hard space, with hard tiled floors cracking to expose the concrete underneath — the most undomesticated part of the house by far. The air is cool and damp on the hottest day of the year. It is an uncomfortable space, with nowhere to sit. You have to stand. You have to work out or remove a book from one of the shelves and read. When you descend into this space, you have to improve yourself in some demonstrable way.

“You ready?” he asks, his Texan accent suddenly ever so slightly more perceptible, or is this a trick of memory now?

“Yes,” the boy of my memory replies, and then his father punches him, with but a tiny fraction of his genuine strength but not in any way like a child of 8 or 9, either. He throws straight jabs, repeatedly, on the chin, which astonish the boy, who has never been hit like that before. Has never been hit at all.

“You need to know how to take a shot, how to feel it on your face,” Pappy explains lovingly but firmly, not jokingly, to the boy, whose mind has begun to race. “That way, once you’re used to it, it can’t ever take you by surprise.” Stunned but determined to own the respect of his indomitable father, the boy nods his assent, wishing he were anywhere else. He withstands several more blows to the jaw and chin, the imprecision of the bulky gloves allowing one to graze the nose, flooding his eyes with salty tears.

The plane of remembrance shoots ahead and the mountain peak recedes; all that’s left are the clouds. I have no recollection of how that session ended, whether on a good or bad or neutral note. I know that Pappy never tried to teach me that strange lesson again, and I didn’t ask him to. As it turned out, I never did muster the discipline to learn how to box. That is not to say I didn’t learn, through trial and error, how to endure a fight. Rather, it’s that everything I knew later to do with my hands, I managed from that day on my own, freestyle — exactly the kind of life-learning my father despises for being unreliable and inexact. But even as a very small child, I understood that Pappy was only showing me the sincerest kind of care. I understood that, for whatever the reason, my father could not relate, not fully, to anyone who

hadn't experienced a certain amount of discomfort in life. And yet, I have always suspected that Pappy didn't like that lesson with the gloves any more than I did. Though he thought of it as an indispensable part of a masculinity that girds itself for so many inevitable threats, I don't believe he really wanted me to ever *have* to rely on my hands.

Throughout my adolescence, largely spent on asphalt ball courts and planted in front of BET with what in retrospect appears a lot like the fervency of the convert, the zealously born-again, I consciously learned and performed my race, like a teacher's pet in an advanced-placement course on cartoonish black manhood. Looking back, I am most jarred by the sheer artificiality of the endeavor. The genes I share with my father and others who look like us, which have kinked my hair and tinted my skin, do not carry within them a set of prescribed behaviors.

Blackness, as I inhabited it and it inhabited me, was not so much what you looked like — that was often a starting point, but there is no more physically diverse group of Americans than “blacks.” Rather, it grew into a question of how you spoke and dressed yourself, your self-presentation — how you met the world, the philosopher Martin Buber might say. Blackness was what you loved and what in turn loved or at least accepted you, what you found offensive or, more to the point, to whom your presence might constitute an offense. The 1990s will not go down in history as a particularly incisive political epoch in the history of black America. At the risk of overgeneralizing, when compared with the era we now inhabit, my generation's youthful apathy seems outrageous. My friends and I tended to favor form over content, the cant of a brim or the jewel in an earlobe; race pride for us could boil down to nothing more than rhythm and athleticism, the way a person learned or didn't learn to cut through the air; it was fussing over not looking fussed, the perpetual subterfuge of nonchalance.

There are few things more American than falling back on the language of race when what we're really talking about is class or, more accurate still, manners, values and taste. This is why an older blue-collar Italian friend of my brother's could tell me foolishly but in all seriousness that my bookish father was “whiter” than his own financially secure but uneducated dad; and it's why a tough black boy I met could step inside our tiny house, glance at our shelves and in the cramped kitchen at my blond mother cheerily baking snacks and declare against all evidence to the contrary, “Man, y'all are *rich*.”

Back then, I couldn't fathom just how improbable it was that my mother had found her way into that kitchen at all. She led a sheltered life in Chula Vista before graduating from San Diego State in 1968. There have been few eras during which the racial malady of the nation, always lying in wait like Camus's plague, flared to the proportions of the late 1960s. President Lyndon Johnson's ambitious Great Society initiative was in full effect, and though she had intentions of pursuing a graduate degree, Mom decided first to put her idealism into practice. She took a position in the San Diego County War on Poverty program, in Otay Mesa — the same neighborhood as the conservative Baptist church where her father was the minister — and became the director of a center providing basic social and recreational services to low-income black and Mexican families. One evening, she hosted a community meeting and invited the executive director of the county agency to speak. As the fastidious Southerner standing before her carefully laid out his vision of social justice, my mother listened rapt, feeling as if he were speaking not just to her but *from* her, putting into words the inchoate jumble of thoughts that had been stirring in her mind for years.



The author's parents, Kathy and Clarence Williams, in the 1970s. From Thomas Chatterton Williams

They began working together, and she fell in love with this man and his mission all at once, deciding that she would marry him. Nine years her senior, my father took longer to reciprocate. He was wary of the ludicrous, irrational resistance he knew in his bones would be coming for them. Only the year before, the Supreme Court had ruled on *Loving v. Virginia*, invalidating so-called racial-integrity laws that barred interracial unions in certain states, yet a Gallup poll showed a vast majority of white Americans (more than 70 percent) still opposed the idea of black people and white people marrying. My parents, justifiably fearful of compromising his position in the community and her relationship with her family and church, found it impossible to acknowledge each other romantically in public — an excruciating racial tax that boggles my mind to think they were forced to pay. It wasn't until my father accepted another appointment in Los Angeles, where my mother soon followed, that they were able to live openly and freely. After five circumspect years, my father proposed, once he was convinced that they were individually robust enough to withstand the ostracism and scrutiny they would surely encounter, especially once they decided to have children.

There are photos of my mother with the family that was hers before we became her own, which I have to scrutinize at length before I can recognize who she is. Who is this brood, with all that blond hair bleached a blazing shade by the California sun? One photo in which Mom is around 16, in the early 1960s, has her standing alongside her parents and young siblings. Of course the children are just that, which is to say they are genuine innocents, but the parents inhabit a country that does not yet have civil rights, and they are posed with an unperturbed air that reminds me of something James Baldwin once observed about how racism dehumanizes us all but may in fact dehumanize the racist more severely.

Looking at my Bible-thumping grandfather, whom I so markedly resemble in the facial structure holding up my tanner shell, I feel several conflicting emotions well up inside me. I feel both anger and pity, but mostly I feel the cold unreality of familial connection. (I feel this too when I look at the old black-and-white photo my father keeps of his mother, whom I never met but who I always vaguely understood was made uneasy by her son's marriage.) It is hard to believe that we are in any way kin. In truth, we are "family" only in the most technical sense of the term. I feel no more bonded to this man (whose angular features live in permanent stalemate in me alongside Africa) than I feel to that sliver of pie chart on my DNA test results labeled "Senegambian."

Nonetheless, he intrigues me. I neither love nor hate him. I feel sorry for him. And I wonder about the gratuitous charge he paid for having failed for decades to live up to his own professed Christianity — even knowing that he was failing yet unable to help it — by allowing himself never to be bothered in any way at all with the all-American experience of someone like my father. To avoid that experience at all costs, to avoid even recognizing its existence, to drive it as far as possible from his mind and from his interpersonal interactions, to curate his environment to exclude it and, finally, to be the type of man who, when that experience found him anyway, would turn his back on it even as he knew and could admit

that the reason was skin-deep — what then was the price, in real terms, of this clichéd, cookie-cutter life he insulated himself inside?

It is only now that I am a father myself that I can appreciate the exorbitant price of the loss my grandfather inflicted on himself, and on my mother and on my grandmother, too — but mostly on himself. Once a year every autumn of my childhood, my grandmother, Esther, would fly from San Diego to Newark and spend two joyful weeks with us at our home in Fanwood. Two out of 52 weeks a year — not much in the grand scheme of things, but still that's all it took for me to know her, and for me to love her profoundly. I knew without question that she loved me. At the time, I never really stopped to question why Grandma always came solo. "Oh, he doesn't like to fly," was a typical excuse. "He has a bad back, you know." I didn't think to ask myself why he couldn't call.



The author's maternal grandparents, Art and Esther Robbins, in the late 1940s or early 1950s. From Thomas Chatterton Williams

It was only in adulthood that I realized what this absence necessarily implied. It was only while visiting my grandparents during a monthlong stay in San Diego at the home of my best friend from college that I realized how profoundly ungenerous — how impressively unimaginative — my grandfather's entire worldview could really be. I saw it then, suddenly and with the force of an epiphany, because for a moment the circumstances of the exchange had nothing to do with me. My grandfather was, at the time, confined to a motorized wheelchair and completely dependent on my grandmother. A fire-and-brimstone kind of Christian, Grandpa could also turn on the charm when he wanted to and was in a wonderful and welcoming mood that day. He seemed to be genuinely proud that I had graduated Georgetown, and other members of my mother's family had joined us that afternoon, too, lending the gathering a festive air.

After Grandma cleared the coffee and snacks, and as my friend Josh and I said our thank-yous and goodbyes, my grandfather wheeled himself over to a bookshelf and took down a crisp copy of the New Testament, pressing it meaningfully into Josh's hands. "I'd like to give this to you, son," he said. "I hope you'll read it with an open mind and think about it hard." I felt my heartbeat speed up. I still don't know how my grandfather discerned that Josh is Jewish — had he simply deduced it from his appearance? — and I was too young or too shocked to express the anger that I felt welling inside me. As we drove away in pursuit of the Southern California evening, drove away toward the beach and other, lighter concerns, I remember thinking that I had at long last seen my grandfather for who he was. I remember finally feeling convinced, and perhaps on some level vindicated, too, that this smallness was him. But it wasn't him alone. He was simply exercising, explicitly, the prerogative of many men and women just like him. This was the arbitrarily normative nature of my grandfather's WASP identity — the false universality of his own tribal bias — put into appallingly hierarchical practice. Were there a book that could have converted my father from his blackness, I have no doubt in me that my grandfather would have procured a copy and magnanimously slipped it to him.

I was living in France when my grandfather died, and I did not fly back for his funeral. This was the beginning phase of a life-altering relationship with another country that would provide me with several crucial gifts, among which I would count a clarifying distance from the all-American racial binary and its attendant mythologies, as well as a chain of friendships that would lead, eventually, to my wife and children.

I fell in love with Valentine almost as soon as I met her through friends one winter night at a bar in Paris. The progress of our courtship outstripped the speed of conscious thought. I did not know that I would do it even 20 seconds before it happened, but that summer when I got down on my knee and proposed without a ring or a plan, she accepted. In the morning, I woke next to my fiancée both exhilarated and shot through with terror. Though an overwhelming majority of my girlfriends had been black or nonwhite, and even though I had ceased thinking in terms of having a *type*, the finality of actually having chosen a white woman felt anything but trivial. And while I knew that it was impossible to marry “blackness” or “whiteness” in the abstract, that knowledge did not entirely put me at ease. How could it?



The author and Valentine Faure on their wedding day in France in 2011. From Thomas Chatterton Williams

Of all the things in the world that lazy morning, I thought of Eldridge Cleaver, the Black Panthers' minister of information, excoriating James Baldwin, whom he saw as decadent and cosmopolitan, for what he called the “racial death-wish” that motivates blacks to commingle with whites. I remembered Cleaver's famous, venomous articulation of the story of Yacub from his 1968 collection of essays “Soul on Ice”:

According to Elijah, about 6,300 years ago all the people of the earth were Original Blacks. Secluded on the island of Patmos, a mad black scientist by the name of Yacub set up the machinery for grafting whites out of blacks through the operation of a birth-control system. The population on this island of Patmos was 59,999 and whenever a couple on this island wanted to get married they were only allowed to do so if there was a difference in their color, so that by mating black with those in the population of a brownish color and brown with brown — but never black with black — all traces of the black were eventually eliminated; the process was repeated until all the brown was eliminated, leaving only men of the red race; the red was bleached out, leaving only yellow; then the yellow was bleached out, and only white was left. Thus Yacub, who was long since dead, because this whole process took hundreds of years, had finally succeeded in creating the white devil with the blue eyes of death.

Was I not, right now, all too gladly completing Yacub's sinister work — a racial murder-suicide, wiping out myself and my father's entire line along with me? The thought flattened me against the mattress. How long I spent on my back watching the ceiling fan twirl, I couldn't say. At some point, Valentine shifted to me and smiled, I thought, bravely. Perhaps she'd sensed my anxiety. "You know you don't have to go through with this," she whispered. "You have the right to change your mind." And with that, the material of my life was suddenly back in my hands, moldable in a way it seldom ever can be. I had a decision to make, and no one else could make it for me. I would marry this woman I wanted to marry, I told myself, and all the rest was distraction.

The ceremony was held at Valentine's grandmother's home in Normandy. Before we exchanged our vows, I remember strolling across the property with my father, just the two of us; he was handsome and formal in his suit. We stopped beneath an apple tree overlooking the carp ponds and neighboring cow pastures and little Norman outbuildings all over the lawn, with their dark columns and white plaster walls, little gingerbread houses that epitomize all kinds of things that we are not. My father turned to me with an expression that was tender and, I think, also somewhat grave, and told me, "Son, don't lose yourself." He wasn't scolding me, and he wasn't stern — he seemed almost to be imploring me or perhaps not even addressing me at all but speaking through me to some younger him. I'm not sure. We were interrupted shortly after, and I had to step away. We never resumed that conversation, but his words still come back to me and only grow louder with each passing year.

At 90, Valentine's grandmother C., is a hardy, imposing Parisienne, brought up with servants and a general sense of ownership in the world that, for reasons of race and class and demographic shifts resulting in competition for resources on a global scale, neither Valentine nor I will ever know. As a child, she played and danced ballet with Brigitte Bardot. Once every month or two, Valentine and I, with our daughter, Marlow, in tow, made the 90-minute trip to Normandy, where many of Valentine's formative memories occurred. The place was remote enough that there were no numbers on the address, just an intersection of narrow roads winding through the apple orchards and horse and dairy farms that crop up along the region's *Route du Cidre*. As often as not, the names of the little towns and villages along the way are familiar because of their excellent cheeses. This property had always been Valentine's oasis, one she was understandably eager to impart to Marlow while the family still had it. (It was not something the next generation was able to maintain, and the family sold it before my son, Saul, could ever visit.) It's not a lavish home, but the plot is the size of the municipal park I spent my summers in as a child in New Jersey. I am certain that besides myself and Valentine's cousin's high school boyfriend, the only black people to have set foot on this land came as guests to my wedding.

Like my father, C. has known a world I cannot fully imagine. She had just received her first Communion when Nazis seized her family's property in Normandy to quarter their soldiers; when she returned, she found that the Germans had shot up all the family portraits, and her Communion dress was ripped apart and soiled — and yet, when the fighting was over, her life more or less resumed as normal, back to the country clubs and back to her place in the lower reaches of the upper tier of a European society that still held an immense global network of colonies and influence. We have had vastly different life experiences, but she has never been anything but warm to me and my family.

In spite of — or really because of — this easy acceptance, I am often thinking about skin when I'm in Normandy. Valentine, her younger half sister, Juliette, and I rush into the yard to sunbathe at the first rays of light to puncture the heavy skies; Juliette, whose mother's family is from the south, near the Spanish border, gets several shades darker than I

do, and this is a source of amusement for us both. My daughter, Marlow, is the palest person in the family by a standard deviation, and Valentine and I are preoccupied with preventing her from burning.

And then there is that glistening dark brown skin of the antique that C. keeps on the table in the living room. It never escapes my notice that among the muntjac antlers and equestrian prints — little anachronistic emblems of mastery — C. keeps an astonishing, thick-lipped, bug-eyed porcelain head of a slave or servant woman on her coffee table (lidded and hollow inside, meant to hold bonbons, keys and other knickknacks). Whenever I am in the living room, I am incapable of denying it my attention.

The first time I saw it, we'd just come in from swimming, and I was on my way to the bathroom to wash up before lunch. When I came back and sat down, I wanted Valentine to tell me I hadn't seen what I thought I had. She blushed. We ate the mounds of shellfish C. put out, followed by the customary local cheese, and I thought of other things. But when I took my coffee to the sofa, I could feel that cursed head's eyes glued on me, watching, judging, maybe even beseeching me not to forget. Valentine and her cousins often hide the head when their grandmother isn't looking, but sometimes there is no clear and diplomatic way to do this, and I never insisted, though I have asked myself if this alone is enough to mark me as a traitor.

I wouldn't be able to explain to C. why I don't want my children to see this object when they are old enough to grasp its historical implications. She would be mortified, I know it, but I'm also under no illusions that she could fully appreciate just what about this souvenir poses such an existential problem for me. Valentine does, and I've complained at length to her, and yet the bizarre thing is the more I complain, the more I realize that I am also playing a role, willing myself, even, into some strange communion with an anger that exists somewhere outside me — an anger that has never rightfully been my own. The lived experience behind the anger belongs to someone else, to a memory. My wife and I can argue until we actually begin to laugh because the grievance remains too abstract, too artificial. Try as I might, I do not see myself — or my father or anyone else I know and love, for that matter — in that sad porcelain figure. And so I am left to question just why I am bound and defined by this demeaning past in some truer way than I am allowed to be by my more or less leveled present.

What I do know is that it can come almost as a relief to members of historically oppressed groups when we do find evidence of bias or insensitivity: *What did you think? Of course she keeps a woolly-haired slave's head on her coffee table!* Racism — like race — will always be what it has always been, we tell ourselves, and there can be no exit or respite. Yet the wound can and does heal; I have seen this happen. That slave head in its terrible specificity is troubling, but the conclusion I draw from the greater dynamic of all our lives assembled there in Normandy is far from pessimistic, because the terms on which people like Valentine and me meet and live with one another have been (and will continue to be) powerfully altered, and because we really have created — right now — a mixed-up and imperfect but thoroughly accepting and loving family. I do not, and do not wish to, see myself in the master, but can — and should — I really claim to glimpse in the slave's face my own eternal reflection?