## Chapter Twenty-Five

# Ambushed by Reporter

CHIEF STRAUB WASN'T THE ONLY ONE who had hired a private investigator to dig into my past. Josh's legal team had one of their own, and he was responsible for telling Shawn Vestal, a columnist for *The Spokesman-Review*, during the first week of June that I wasn't born Black and that Larry and Ruthanne could confirm it. With this knowledge, Vestal, who had been writing about the spree of hate crimes directed at me and my sons, had been handed the scoop of a lifetime, but, as he later claimed, he'd had no interest in doing any "racial vetting." The dubious honor of dissecting my life story in print went to Jeff Selle and Maureen Dolan of the *Coeur d'Alene Press*, who, after getting tipped off about my background, called Larry and Ruthanne to ask if I was Black. Their article "Black Like Me?" was available to read online and in print the morning of June 11.

Selle and Dolan's story remained mostly a local phenomenon until video was attached to it later that day. Having heard through the area's media grapevine about the imminent publication of "Black Like Me?" Melissa Luck, the executive producer at the local television station KXLY, had sent senior reporter Jeff Humphrey to interview me on June 10. He'd come to my house while I was proctoring final exams at EWU and left his business card with Izaiah, who was home from college. When I got home from work that afternoon, Izaiah told me about the reporter, and I called the number on the card. Humphrey informed me that the Spokane Police Department had completed its investigation into

the packages sent by War Pig as well as the other incidents for which I'd filed a police report and that they'd found no suspects. He asked me if I would discuss it on camera. One of my duties as the local NAACP president was to comment on such things, so I agreed. He offered to come to my house. I had plans to meet Esther that afternoon at the Starbucks on the downtown mall to discuss the upcoming hearing in her case against Josh, so I told Humphrey it would be better if we met near that location.

When it came to his career in journalism, Humphrey had some big shoes to fill. His father was Don Harris, the award-winning NBC News correspondent who was killed on November 18, 1978, during the notorious Jonestown Massacre. One of the stories that helped solidify Harris' reputation as a hard-nosed journalist concerned airport security—in 1972, he filmed two people carrying guns through the security checkpoint at Dallas' Love Field Airport and did a piece about it that attracted a lot of attention. As an eighteen-year-old college intern a decade later, his son Jeff tried to one-up his father by filming people smuggling explosives through security at the Fort Myers Airport in Florida but only succeeded in getting his photographer fired and himself barred from the state by the FBI. Now middle-aged with gray hair and hanging jowls, he'd settled into a career at KXLY covering crime and safety.

In Eastern Washington, the press generally skewed right-wing conservative, so its coverage of human rights issues was never as thorough as I would have hoped, but I was surprised at just how unsympathetic Humphrey's line of questioning during the interview was. From the outset, his body language and attitude indicated he was unmoved by my plight, and he only grew more insensitive the deeper into the interview we got. First, he told me the noose my sons had found on our property when we were living in Idaho was actually a rope meant for hanging a deer carcass. He made this implausible scenario—that someone would butcher a deer on someone else's property using what was clearly a noose—sound perfectly normal. Then he suggested that a "key holder"—presumably someone who had a key to the NAACP's P.O. box—had planted the first package sent by War Pig, a notion I

found equally absurd. Then he took it a step too far, albeit in a very passive-aggressive way.

"What do you say to the folks who say maybe *you* put that letter in there because you were one of the people who had a key to do so?"

I was momentarily stunned speechless. There's a long history of Black Americans being vilified by the press, hate crimes aimed at them going unsolved, and, in some cases, guilt being placed on the victims of the crimes instead of the perpetrators. In this moment, as Humphrey essentially accused me of perpetrating hate crimes against myself, all these injustices came to mind. His cavalier attitude and contemptible insinuations angered me. He was so smug and condescending I considered ending the interview but continued because I felt it was my responsibility as the OPOC chair and NAACP president to let people know when justice wasn't being delivered.

"I don't even know that I have any words for them," I finally managed to say, doing my best to control my anger. "Because as a mother of two Black sons, I would never terrorize my children, and I don't know any mother personally who would trump up or fabricate something that severe that would affect her kids. My son slept for two weeks in my bed after we received that particular package, and he's thirteen years old." Thinking about how upset Franklin had been nearly made me cry. "That's the kind of terror that I as a mother and my son as a Black male, a thirteen-year-old in Spokane, never needs to experience. And the slightest implication that I would perpetrate terror toward my kids is at best offensive, but . . ." I was so mad it took all my focus to stay on point and complete my thought. "I don't know how that could be a conscionable statement that anybody could live with or believe."

Seeing that I was upset, Humphrey toned down his rhetoric. "Rachel, despite these threats that started many years ago, you continue to go out and fight for equality and civil rights and you're not going to be scared off from doing this."

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since middle school, high school, college. It's part of my life work so . . . I've heard some people say, 'Oh, you get publicity from these hate crimes,' and I think that's very sick as well because that's not the kind of publicity anyone wants. It's publicity of a negative and terrorizing scenario, especially death threats and photos of lynchings. As a Black Studies professor, I know what these images mean and take them very seriously, given the history of racism in the United States."

There was much more I wanted to say. I wanted to ask him how he would feel if someone accused him of doing something analogous. But he barely let me finish my sentence before he asked, "Speaking of that, did your dad ever make it to Spokane in January for the ribbon cutting?"

It was an odd segue from the discussion we'd been having. The ribbon-cutting ceremony for the NAACP's new office had taken place six months before, so why was he bringing it up now? And what did that have to do with hate crimes? I was a little confused. And very annoyed.

"No, actually," I responded, hoping we'd come to the end of the interview. "Unfortunately, he has bone cancer and was not able to get cleared for surgery yet."

In the heat of the moment I misspoke. Albert was actually suffering from prostate cancer and was scheduled to have surgery on the bones in his leg, and I conflated the two. Not that it was any of this guy's business. Albert was a very private person, particularly about his health, and I immediately felt bad sharing this information with a reporter.

Humphrey pulled out a photograph of Albert. Despite wearing dirty white sneakers that looked even shabbier next to my black Nine West heels, Humphrey literally looked down his nose at me as he pointed at the photo. The vibe I was getting from him was a mix of smugness and disdain.

"Is that your dad?" he asked.

I recognized the picture of Albert from my Facebook account. Why had this reporter been snooping around there? I couldn't believe how unprofessional he was being. When I'd agreed to do this interview, it was with the understanding that we'd be

discussing the fact that, once again, the Spokane police had closed a hate crime investigation after failing to find a suspect.

As confused as I was by Humphrey's question, it was easy to answer. "Yes, that's my dad."

He pointed at the photograph again. "This man right here is your father?"

Somehow a serious discussion about hate crimes had shifted to an examination of my private life. It felt like I was walking into a trap, so I pushed back a little. "Do you have a question about that?"

"Yes, ma'am, I was wondering if your dad is really an African American man?"

I wish I'd been able to steer the conversation back to the issue I'd agreed to discuss, but his question had thrown me off balance. It was becoming clear that this man knew something about my background and that was a little scary. Why was he prying into my private affairs? Whatever the reason it couldn't possibly be good.

"That's a very—I mean, I don't know what you're implying."

I knew *exactly* what he was implying, but after watching him tiptoe around the subject I wasn't about to help him get there any quicker.

"Are you African American?"

And there it was. That's what this was all about. His question put me in an impossible situation. I knew any answer I gave could be used to ruin my credibility. If I said yes, I'd be asked to prove it. If I said no, I'd be tried in the court of public opinion for how I'd been identifying on and off since my college days. The idea that my reputation might be damaged because of this bothered me but not the way you probably assume. I'd never had any sort of job security or financial stability so in that regard I didn't have all that much to lose, but I was frightened about the prospect of people no longer seeing me for who I was and I was even more concerned how this "news" might affect my two sons and baby sister. Esther would be arriving at the coffee shop any minute and I was scared that if I said the wrong thing it might ruin my credibility as the key witness in her case against Josh.

I was also enraged by Humphrey's adversarial tone. I wanted to slap the smug grin right off his face. There was a long, awkward

pause as I made myself hold my tongue—and my hands—in check. I told myself to calm down and be professional. It wasn't easy. I felt cornered, and his snide tone convinced me that anything I said could and would be used against me. If I could have pled the Fifth, I would have. Instead I said, "I don't understand the question. I did tell you that, yes, that's my dad, and he was unable to come in January."

Out of the entire twenty-minute-long interview, "I don't understand the question" would be the one sentence people would remember most. My uttering it would be transformed into countless Vines and memes online, quickly supplanting the popularity of Lucille Bluth, the snobby mother on *Arrested Development*, uttering the same phrase in response to a waitress in a kid-friendly diner asking her, "Plate or platter?" For me, that sentence contained much more defiance than humor. I didn't understand—or want to endorse—the relevance of these personal questions to the very public matter of hate and terror being allowed to spread in our community.

Beyond this, in my scholarly circles, "African American" specifically referred to Americans whose ancestors were taken from Africa and enslaved in the United States. When used as a catchall term for Black Americans, however, it often caused confusion. For example, there were significant cultural and identity differences between someone who was born in, say, Kenya and voluntarily emigrated to the United States and a Black American who was a descendant of slaves, but both might be called African Americans. For this reason, I preferred "Black," a much broader term that denotes a connection to the Pan-African Diaspora. "Pan," of course, denotes inclusion and unity, which I found apt, as I'd always considered myself part of this movement.

The reporter pressed me. "Are your parents, are they white?"

I'd had enough. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Esther walking into the Starbucks. Hoping Humphrey and his cameraman would clear out of the area before they caught sight of her and—who knows?—started digging into her personal life as well, I did an abrupt about-face, walked in the opposite direction of the coffee shop, and ducked inside a Lululemon Athletica store. When

the film crew finally left, I joined Esther at a table inside the coffee shop and vented. I was pissed off at the reporter for not being straightforward with me about what his true intentions for the interview were. I was upset about what sort of impact the footage was going to have on my standing in the community, my sense of identity, and my family. But I was most concerned about how it would affect Esther. The reporter had told me that he'd spoken with Larry and Ruthanne and was clearly on a mission to sully my reputation, so I knew the fallout from his investigation couldn't possibly be good for her case.

I went to bed that night with an awful sense of foreboding, and it was confirmed when I woke up the next morning. Izaiah turned twenty-one that day, and when I knocked on his bedroom door to wish him a happy birthday he relayed the news to me: the *Coeur d'Alene Press* had published its story about my racial identity during the night, and *everyone* was talking about it. His friends from high school had been calling him all morning, saying things like, "You lied to us!" and "That's not your real mom!" The exact situation we were hoping to prevent—Izaiah having to deal with the awkward stigma of having been adopted twice—had occurred, and it nearly broke my heart.

Like Esther, Izaiah rarely cried, but he did that morning. "Can someone just call and wish me a happy birthday?" he asked, as he slumped on the couch with his head in his hands.

When I looked at my phone, any hope I'd had that this story might stay under the radar was destroyed. It was only 8 AM, but I'd already gotten more than twenty texts and voicemail messages, all of which said nearly the same thing. People wanted me to explain myself to them. They said they felt shocked and betrayed. They were confused. They were angry. A few of my friends reached out to make sure I was doing all right, but they were the minority. Many more people, who I'd once considered friends, told me they no longer wanted to have anything to do with me.

The initial wave of messages was a trickle compared to the tsunami that was coming. Over the course of the next four days I would receive hundreds, maybe even thousands, of emails and

direct messages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, so many I quickly gave up trying to respond to them. My voicemail box kept filling up within hours of me checking and erasing my messages. When it became clear that I'd never be able to keep pace with the barrage of incoming calls, I gave up and turned off my phone. There was simply no way I could have replied to everyone who contacted me, much less appease them.

As overwhelmed and heartbroken as I was by the way my life was being dissected and my reputation destroyed, I knew I needed to focus my energy on protecting my sons and my sister. Izaiah seemed to take it the hardest. He said that he didn't see any way forward for me and that he would understand if I needed to leave the country and disappear for a while. I was pretty sure he didn't mean that and I was *positive* Franklin wouldn't be fine with the idea, but I was touched that, after his bid to escape his past had failed, he was more concerned about my welfare than his own. He asked me what I was going to do, and when I told him I was going to find a way through this ordeal, he said, "You're the bravest person I know."

Esther was also worried about how the news would affect me but wasn't initially concerned about it having an impact on her case against Josh. After all, it was her bid for justice, not mine. Her response to the growing media frenzy was to lie low and not talk to anyone, particularly reporters, about what was going on. Only after several days had passed did she open up about her feelings. "It amazes me how fast people are willing to tear down someone who has worked very hard to get where they are," she wrote on her blog. "It amazes me how, after all these years, and the civil rights movement, it still comes down to what color someone is . . . For something that is making a difference, someone that is making positive changes in this messed up world, why would someone want to stop the good work they are doing? Why would someone want to reverse the positivity that has been created? Why does everything have to come down to race?"

Perhaps because of his age and his inherent optimism, Franklin took the news much better. He hugged Izaiah and me and assured us that everything would be okay, that it wasn't as bad as it seemed,

that it would all blow over soon. "We might as well have fun with this!" he said as he took his cat October outside, sat with her on the front stoop, and posed for the television cameras that were starting to arrive. Only later would he come to realize just how big of an impact the story was going to have.

# Epilogue

WHEN I TELL PEOPLE I STILL IDENTIFY AS BLACK, they want to know why. I explain that Black is the closest descriptive category that represents the essential essence of who I am. For me, Blackness is more than a set of racialized physical features. It involves acknowledging our common human ancestry with roots in Africa. It means fighting for freedom, equality, and justice for people of African heritage around the world. And it requires understanding the legacy and context of Blackness beyond the physical into the realms of the spiritual, psychological, historical, and emotional. I know from personal experience that our true selves consist of much more than the color of our skin or the texture of our hair. It's the culture we choose to inhabit, the lives we choose to live, and the way we're perceived and treated by others. From these experiences, our identities are formed. When my friend Nikki in college, multiple boyfriends and girlfriends, and a professor at Whitworth all made statements to the effect of "Rachel is Blacker than most Black people"—something that still happens to this day—they clearly weren't talking about my complexion or my hair. They were pointing to my commitment to the cause of racial and social justice, my work on behalf of the Black community, and the sense of self it took me multiple decades to fully embrace.

For me, being Black isn't playing dress-up. It's not something I change in and out of or do only when it's convenient. This is who I am. It's the culmination of a lifelong journey during which I've experienced as much heartbreak as I have joy. I doubt I'll ever speak to Larry, Ruthanne, or Uncle Dan ever again, although I recently reconnected with "Uncle" Vern, who confirmed what I'd suspected: that Larry and Ruthanne had intentionally discredited

me in an attempt to get Josh's sexual assault charges removed. "I'm not them," he assured me.

My relationships with Ezra and Zach continue to be strained. I haven't spoken to Ezra since I unfriended him on Facebook in 2013 and Zach since March 2015, when he asked me if I could cosign a loan with him so he could buy a new truck. Despite our differences, I remain hopeful that we'll reach an understanding one day and their wounds will heal. They are still the same little babies I once bathed, fed, and rocked to sleep. Out of love, I have already forgiven them.

As hard as it was to sever ties with some members of my biological family, it's been even harder to lose members of my chosen one, so my heart was warmed when my dad reached out to me to offer his love and support after he saw me on television in April 2016. "I just watched the *Today* show," Albert texted me. "I think you did great and I love the way you answered the questions! I have always known you would do good for the human race. No one is perfect and your story will add an important part to history. I wish you the best and will do anything for you if I can. Love to the boys and you." The tears rolling down my cheeks were quickly replaced by one of the biggest smiles I'd had in a very long time.

My sons and my sister continue to be great pillars of support for me. After the public backlash against me, I had Franklin transferred to a new middle school, where he could get a fresh start. Now in high school, he's getting good grades and plays on the football team. Still hoping to pursue a career in film or television, he'd like to study acting at UCLA.

Taking full advantage of the University of Idaho's study abroad program, Izaiah is currently taking classes in South Africa after spending a semester in Spain. Majoring in international studies, sociology, and Spanish, he's been on the dean's list every semester and hopes to go to law school when he's done with his undergraduate work.

Before he'd even turned one, Langston had already racked up an impressive amount of frequent flier miles, having accompanied me on trips to New York for my second appearance on *Today*, Dallas for

a festival, London for a BBC interview, and Antigua for the launch of a nonprofit for which I remain a board member at-large. Ahead of schedule for all the important baby milestones, he even tries to count to ten in French along with Franklin. He is the sunshine that brightens all our days.

Even though Esther never got her time in court, she refuses to let it hold her back. Like me, she's a survivor. She continues to live in Spokane, where she works on a hemp farm and teaches piano lessons. I still do her hair every other month, and she stops by regularly to play with her nephew.

As for myself, what can I say? It's been hard. I used to hate going to the grocery store out of fear that some uneducated white person might say something stupid about my hair. Now I hate it because I'm *that woman*, the one who people still laugh at or despise for "pretending to be Black." Ever since my outing, I've been unemployed and have been rejected for every single job I've applied for, many of which I was overqualified for. My name is such poison in the professional world that on October 7, 2016, I legally changed it, adopting a name given to me by a man from the Igbo tribe in Nigeria. He'd reached out to me the year before to say that I was a "twin soul," born with a white veneer but living as a true Nubian in order to fight for justice for the Black family and culture. I can't tell you how liberating it felt to shed my old name and the connotation with victimhood, misrepresentation, and tabloid journalism it had come to embody.

Just as vital to my rebirth has been the support I've received from total strangers. During a layover while flying home from the UN's International Day of the Girl forum in Louisville, I noticed a Black woman with a fair complexion and green eyes glancing over at me from time to time as I ate in a restaurant. When I finished eating and asked for the check, my server informed me that the woman had paid for my meal and left a note behind, telling me to keep my chin up and stay strong. A month later, the owner of a celebrity Black hair store in Dallas, Texas, told me she wanted to sponsor my "next curly look" and put a photo of me wearing her store's brand of hair on a wall next to photos of Sanaa Lathan, the

cast of *Empire*, and other Black celebrities. (Unfortunately, her gesture wasn't well received by her clientele, who forced her to remove the picture from the wall as well as from her Instagram account.)

I've also received thousands of letters, emails, and messages online from people telling me how, just like me, they feel trapped somewhere in the confusing gray zone between the Black and white worlds. Some of these people are biracial. Others have said they simply don't appear or feel entirely Black or white. This marginalized group of people grows larger every day. The United States is experiencing a demographic shift that's rapidly turning the white population into a minority—U.S. Census Bureau projections predict that by 2045, the majority of U.S. citizens will be from groups that are now classified as "minorities." Every year families are becoming more culturally mixed and identities of individuals across the spectrum more nuanced.

The number of children born into interracial relationships is also rapidly increasing. According to a Pew Research Center study, 12 percent of all new marriages in the United States in 2013 were between people of different races, up from a mere .4 percent in 1960, a number that will only keep rising. Yet our society's level of acceptance of individuals with plural racial identities remains almost unchanged. Unlike most countries in the world, when it comes to the Black–white divide, the United States requires its citizens to choose one or the other. Racial categories in between those two poles aren't legally or socially recognized, forcing the children of mixed-race couples, caught in the middle, to experience an existential crisis from birth onward. These people are constantly reaching out to me, confirming that I'm not the only one who doesn't fit neatly into society's archaic racial categories. They relate to my struggle because they don't fit into a single box on a census form, but rather somewhere on the spectrum of racial identification. The gray area between Black and white is a very lonely place, and living there can be stressful and exhausting.

I credit these people for inspiring me to write this book. By sharing my experiences with identity, race, culture, religion, class, trauma, and poverty, I hope to provide comfort to those who are struggling with their identities and assure them that they're not

alone, that they're not freaks, and that they don't deserve to be ridiculed or shunned by their friends, families, and communities. It's for these people, and for everyone impacted by the belief that humans should be divided into racial categories, that I refuse to be quiet about the racial injustice that pervades our culture. I will consider this book a success if it helps even a single person feel better about where they are on their own journey and makes it easier for them to gain acceptance in the world.

I also wrote this book to set the record straight. I was introduced to the world in the worst possible way, and the story that was told about me wasn't correct or complete. The public's view of my character has been based almost entirely on hearsay and lies, and all my attempts to correct them have been forced through the filter of a writer's pen or a TV host's microphone. In the process, my precise viewpoint has never been fully articulated, creating even more confusion about who I am and what my intentions are.

Having experienced the things I have, I feel like my life has become the perfect metaphor for race as a social construction. Because people observe me through the same distorted lens they use to look at the notion of race in general, they're unable to see my true essence, just like they're unable to grasp that race is a myth, a charade. Understanding how we have been categorized and why humans feel the need to do so is the first step in dismantling a system that was designed to oppress certain people. The "racial score" still needs to be settled in America. Hopefully once the scales are balanced, the next step on the path to justice will be to do away with racial categories altogether, because without race, racism loses its power.

Education is another essential component to solving our country's racial problem. The day after Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, Jane Elliot, a third-grade teacher from Riceville, Illinois, conducted an exercise with her class in which she designated the brown-eyed students as being superior to the blue-eyed ones. She gave those with brown eyes more food at lunch and more time on the playground, invited them to sit in the front of the classroom, and encouraged them to play only with each other. Meanwhile, she forced the blue-eyed students to sit in the rear of

the classroom, didn't allow them to drink from the same water fountain used by their brown-eyed peers, and reprimanded them for making even the smallest mistakes. By the end of the day, the brown-eyed children were acting as if they truly were superior to their blue-eyed classmates, many of whom had grown noticeably timid and forlorn. The following Monday, Elliott repeated the exercise, but flipped the script, telling the blue-eyed children they were now the superior group. Afterward, some of the children hugged, while others cried. Elliot's point had been made. In most school districts in the country, it's mandatory that students be taught state history, but classes about race, how and why the concept was created, and what sort of ramifications that's had are rarely offered. Imagine what could be achieved if they were. If all students had to take such classes, the racial injustice that exists in our society could be eradicated within a generation or two.

Race, culture, and gender classes exist in the curricula of some universities but are rarely required for most degrees. These courses introduce students to the root of race and gender constructs and the inequities perpetrated by sexism and racism around the globe. But as our world constantly shifts, new paradigms and vocabulary are needed. As we grow and evolve, we should keep in mind that a single person's identity, or even the identity of a group of people, isn't the root problem when it comes to race. How people identify themselves along the racial spectrum and how they are treated based on that identification are only symptomatic of the real problem: racism.

When it came to sexism, the way people were forced to adopt either a masculine or feminine identity, with no tolerance for those who fell in between those two poles, was one of the root problems. Allowing fluidity in gender identity—including transgender as a legitimate identity category—did not make sexism worse; instead, it improved understanding both between people and within individuals. Likewise, if people are permitted to adopt "transracial," biracial, triracial, and even nonracial identities, racism will be weakened, not reinforced. If we are to truly achieve equal access, opportunity, and equity for each individual, regardless of gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, language, nationality, disability,

or cultural identity, we must accept *all* identities within the human spectrum.

The only significant regret I have in life is that it took me almost thirty years to give myself permission to name and own the real me. That society has tried to strip me of my identity saddens me, and I look forward to the day when I no longer have to emphasize or suppress different parts of myself to move safely and confidently through the world, a day when I can live as a whole person. Until then, I'm embracing the opportunity to demystify the concept of race and inspire more activism in social justice. After more than three centuries of awkwardness, oppression, and scorn, we're now living in an age when we finally have the opportunity to solve the many problems emanating from racism and the racial divide. If my story can advance that dialogue and provide some measure of comfort to those who find themselves drifting somewhere between Black and white, or with no category at all, I'll consider the struggle I've endured simply for living as my true self to be entirely worth it.