Chapter Nine

Separate but Equal

SOON AFTER EZRA'S FIRST BIRTHDAY, an adoption agency in Chicago called Larry and Ruthanne to inform them that there was a good chance a baby would be available in June. The mother and father were both Black, and the mother had hoped to place her baby with a Black family, but once she discovered that the only Black families looking to adopt at that time were looking for a girl, she loosened up her criteria, allowing the Doležals to adopt Antwon Dante'. In accordance with the guidelines set by Larry, we renamed him Izaiah Allen. He was born June 11, 1994, and two weeks later Larry and Ruthanne drove to Chicago to pick him up, while I stayed home and took care of Ezra.

When Izaiah was six months old, Ezra contracted whooping cough. Because the disease was so contagious and carried such a high infant mortality rate, and none of us were immunized thanks to Larry and Ruthanne's distrust of vaccinations, someone had to be quarantined with Izaiah. With Ruthanne focused on Ezra's recovery, the task fell to me. The only time I ventured out of my bedroom was to use the bathroom and prepare bottles of formula for Izaiah, and whenever I did, I'd walk on bedsheets to avoid touching the carpet, which was difficult to sanitize, and always made sure to thoroughly wash my hands. Izaiah and I lived together in my room for more than a month, so long I began to lose track of the days of the week, and it was during this time that I began to form a deep and lasting bond with him.

When Izaiah was nine months old, we got a call from a couple who'd been doing missionary work in Haiti and had returned to the United States with a baby roughly Izaiah's age. The baby's exact birthdate was a bit of a mystery because he'd been left on the doorstep of a hospital one morning, forcing the doctors to guess his age from studying what remained of his umbilical cord. Did Larry and Ruthanne want him? Certainly! His name was Joshua Alexander, but any possibility of confusing him with my older brother was cleared up after we changed his name to Zachariah Amoz, soon to be shortened to Zach. He arrived with eyes full of wonderment, a persistently runny nose, and lots and lots of energy.

Larry and Ruthanne had planned to stop adopting babies after they'd taken in three. But the very same day that the missionary couple introduced Zach to our family—they were actually sitting on our couch at the time—an adoption agency in St. Louis, Missouri, called to let us know that a female baby was available. Baby Grace had been abandoned at a hospital and placed in temporary care after two prospective families had backed out at the last minute. One of the families thought the hospital bills they were being asked to pay were way too high; the other worried that the baby's dark complexion made her a bad fit for their lighter-skinned Black family. Larry and Ruthanne expressed no such reservations.

Names for women that contain a "z" are scarce in the Bible. Larry wanted to name the baby Ezther, but I lobbied to make the name more palatable to the eyes and ears. Approving my suggestion, he and Ruthanne named her Esther Ahava, which means "beloved star." Larry and Ruthanne often referred to her as the "icing on the cake," the one girl amid three boys and the final piece of the puzzle that, now solved, ensured they wouldn't be paying taxes anytime soon. In eleven hectic months, Larry and Ruthanne had adopted three babies, all born within eight months of each other. Only the parents and siblings of quadruplets can understand the sort of chaos that ensued. Simply changing my adopted siblings' cloth diapers was like working on an assembly line.

With four Black siblings and two white parents, I was now living in a home that was Blacker than it was white. Some of my relatives began referring to Larry and Ruthanne as "colorblind"

and "cultural revolutionaries" for adopting four Black babies, but this assessment didn't sit right with me, as I was a firsthand witness to the cultural ignorance and racial bias they continually displayed. Often describing my younger siblings as "a little gang," Larry and Ruthanne treated each of them differently based on the color of their skin. Ezra, whose biological mother was white, had the lightest skin. He passed the "brown paper bag test," a method, popular in the early part of the twentieth century, of determining whether a particular Black person merited inclusion in certain institutions such as a church, fraternity, or university. If your skin was darker than a brown paper bag, you were denied entry. Larry and Ruthanne often referred to him as "the smart one," and it quickly became clear from the preferential treatment they gave him that he was their favorite. They indulged his every whim, and all the attention he received came at the expense of his younger siblings, who were often ignored for long stretches of time.

Zach, who had the darkest skin, was often treated the worst. Larry and Ruthanne made references to him being "blue Black," a variation of an old racial slur. Some people, particularly a certain type of southerner, believed that Black people's ancestry could be determined by looking into their mouths. If their gums were very dark or bluish, it was believed to represent a pure bloodline (100 percent African), proof, in their eyes, that they were dumber, lazier, and more savage than everyone else. This sort of overt racism spawned a myth, accepted as fact in some parts of the Deep South, that you could die if you were bitten by a "blue gum." After bathing Zach one night, Ruthanne commented on the bathtub ring he'd left behind. "This is why [white] people think Black people are dirty," she said. "The residue from their skin looks like dirt."

In the racially determined hierarchy that existed in our household, Esther was just above Zach because her skin was a shade lighter than his. But growing up, she had to endure the double burden of being both Black and female in a household that was white and patriarchal. Izaiah had nearly the same complexion she did, but the fact that he was a boy ensured that he received better treatment than her. Happy-go-lucky as a baby and a toddler, Izaiah grew more serious and cautious as he grew older, trying to

avoid making the same sort of mistakes that had gotten Zach and Esther severely punished.

Growing up, my adopted siblings were not only treated differently from each other but were also raised much differently than Josh and I were. Ruthanne would often make them put on their church clothes and sing songs for dinner guests, something that had never been asked of me or Josh. The way they were disciplined was also different. Spooked by the random post-placement visits made by social workers during an adopted baby's first six months in a home, Larry and Ruthanne ditched the wooden paddle they'd used to spank me and Josh in favor of twelve-inch-long glue sticks, which were designed to be used in a hot glue gun but which Larry used like a switch. Whatever redness or welts one of these glue sticks left faded quickly, but, boy, did getting whacked with them sting! Larry and Ruthanne used the glue sticks so often it began to seem more like a way for them to take out their frustrations when dealing with four crying babies than an actual disciplinary tool. The adopted kids' punishment was also doled out in a much more haphazard fashion. While Josh and I only got spanked on our butts, any part of my younger siblings' bodies was fair game. If one of them refused to finish a meal, Larry would "glue stick" that child on the knuckles. As hard as it was to witness, it was even worse when Larry made me (and Josh whenever he was home from college) do it.

I imagine Larry and Ruthanne thought they were treating my adopted siblings fairly, despite treating them differently than they had Josh and me, but in effect, our household was a two-tiered system. When I later read about *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the 1896 U.S. Supreme Court case which gave legal authority to the idea of "separate but equal," I couldn't help thinking about my brothers and sister. In its decision, the court ruled that, as long as services, facilities, housing, medical care, education, employment, and transportation were equal, they could be separated along racial lines. Segregation, the judges determined, didn't violate anyone's constitutional rights. But the facilities and services provided for Blacks were the same as those reserved for whites in name only. In reality, they were almost always inferior.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that by denying Black children the right to attend schools closest to where they lived and forcing them to go to segregated ones, the Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas, had violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* effectively overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* and brought an end to the Jim Crow era.

In making its historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court seemed to be particularly moved by the testimony of Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, educational psychologists who'd conducted a series of experiments with Black schoolchildren, ages three to seven, in the 1940s. In the experiments, the Clarks gave each of the children four dolls, identical in every way except for the color of their skin. Two of the dolls were Black, two were white. The Clarks then asked the children a series of questions: Which dolls were "nice"? Which were "bad"? Which were most like them? Which did they like best?

The results were chilling. Most of the children cited a preference for the white dolls, assigning positive characteristics to them, even saying they looked like them. When the Clarks conducted this experiment in Massachusetts, some of the children got so upset they refused to answer the questions, while others cried and ran out of the room. But the response Dr. Kenneth Clark found most disturbing occurred when he asked a Black child in Arkansas which of the dolls most resembled him. The boy smiled, pointed to one of the Black dolls, and said, "That's a nigger. I'm a nigger."* While writing the Supreme Court's opinion in *Brown v. Board of Education*, Chief Justice Earl Warren specifically noted the adverse psychological effects that segregated schools had on Black children, including "a feeling of inferiority as to their status

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* Due to the long history of hate and oppression associated with this word, I've done my best to limit its usage in this book. Like the NAACP, I believe the word should be permanently removed from our vocabulary. To this end, I have replaced it with "the N-word" wherever possible, but have kept it in places where it was directly quoted to limit awkwardness and underscore the emotional trauma it delivers.

in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely to ever be undone."

When I was a teenager, I was scared that the subtle racism and abuse routinely directed at my younger siblings might affect them in a similar way, but whenever I tried to talk to anyone about it, I was dismissed. How could Larry and Ruthanne possibly be racist? They were devout Christians who were doing God's work! At least that's how Larry and Ruthanne presented themselves in the annual newsletter they sent to the Christian supporters who helped finance the babies' adoptions and ongoing expenses.

The newsletter started its life as a very detailed Christmas card, giving approximately a hundred people an update about what each member of our family was up to, but it quickly turned into a letter of need. For Larry and Ruthanne, adopting babies was an integral part of the mission field to which God was calling them. Of course, missionaries receive donations, and, as Larry and Ruthanne would soon come to find out, missionaries who write newsletters and include photographs of Black children they've adopted get even more donations. They often used pictures of my siblings taken after they'd gotten dirty from playing outside in an attempt, I imagine, to generate more pity (and more money) from donors. As young as I was, I still understood that making money in this way was unacceptable and just plain disturbing, and I didn't want anything to do with it.

After I moved out of the house, Larry and Ruthanne succeeded in pulling in enough money from guilty white do-gooders to pay for moves to Colorado and South Africa, where they lived in a three-story home in a gated community with a pool and Black servants. In describing the adoptions of four Black children as being part of a mission, Larry and Ruthanne created an image of themselves that made them appear holier-than-thou. They deserved medals or a pat on the back.

Given what I'd witnessed inside our house, I knew better.

Chapter Ten

Hair I

As much time and energy as I devoted to my little brothers and sister, it rarely felt like work. It was, in fact, true love. The bond we shared was much deeper than that typically found between a big sister and her younger siblings. As I was often asked to assume a maternal role with them, my feelings toward them became more motherly than sisterly.

There was also something else going on, something that I've come to realize as an adult but that I wouldn't have been able to articulate back then, as it was more of a feeling than a thought. Spending so much time with these four beautiful Black babies—changing their diapers, feeding them, bathing them, dressing them, and rocking them to sleep—I found myself drawing closer to something that felt oddly familiar. With Larry, Ruthanne, and Josh, I'd always felt distinctly other. We rarely saw eye to eye about anything. But now, for the first time in my life, I felt like I was truly part of a family, surrounded by people who loved me exactly as I was. Growing up in a house where guilt, anxiety, and occasional moments of terror were the norm, I'd never felt like I was *home* (and all that word implies: safe, loved, comfortable, relaxed, happy). But something changed after we adopted these babies. I suddenly didn't feel so alone.

With love came fear. I grew fiercely protective of my younger siblings. Having witnessed how they were mistreated within our household, I began to worry about how they were going to be treated by the rest of the world.

Despite Larry and Ruthanne's belief that, unless I was studying the Bible, doing chores was a more valuable use of my time, I'd always loved books. I was a voracious reader—imagine how many books you'd consume if you didn't have a television or any electronic devices!—and while reading about Black history I'd started to understand how many land mines there were in America for Black children. Preparing one's kids for negative encounters like the racial profiling they could expect to experience came to be called "The Talk," the painful yet necessary conversation nearly all Black parents give their children to make them mindful of how most white people perceive them and to emphasize the importance of being cautious when confronted by the police. The Talk has become an obligatory responsibility when raising Black children—particularly boys, because it would be difficult to find a Black man who hasn't felt threatened or harassed by the police. As a rule, white parents don't need to have this discussion with their kids, and many haven't even heard of it. I wasn't aware of The Talk at this point in my life, but I instinctually understood the importance of educating my younger siblings about the perils of the world around them—and I had no confidence that Larry and Ruthanne would ever do it.

There were numerous threats to their dignity and self-worth that they needed help avoiding. When our family went to the grocery store or church, strangers often walked up to my siblings and stroked their hair and skin as if they were exhibits in a sideshow. The way these people acted you would have thought it was perfectly normal and acceptable to fondle vulnerable (and confused) children simply to satisfy one's curiosity. Seeing this always turned my stomach. I made it my duty to shield my siblings from such ignorance as best as I could and serve as a bridge between them and the all-white world that surrounded us for miles and miles. I made it clear to them that strangers had no right to touch their bodies or their hair unless they gave them permission. At times, I felt like a ninja, as I whisked them away from hands that threatened to touch them inappropriately and corrected rude comments directed their way.

The slights my younger siblings suffered were often so veiled no one else seemed to pick up on them but me. Grandma Schertel

wanting to give Ezra a drum for Christmas. Ruthanne referring to them as a gang. Dinner guests, encouraged by Larry and Ruthanne, asking my siblings to sing for their entertainment. People staring at them whenever we went into town. The sheer absence of Black people, and therefore Black culture, in our small town underscored their otherness. There were no Black doctors, teachers, coaches, or pastors who lived anywhere near us. Even Fabian, now divorced from Rosie, had moved on, settling in Redding, California, to work for the Forest Service.

In 1970, Chester M. Pierce, a professor of education and psychiatry at Harvard University, coined a term to describe instances of racism that were so subtle (but no less offensive) they were easily overlooked or misunderstood: "microaggressions." I wasn't aware of this word when I was growing up, and yet I still had little trouble identifying them when I saw them. And from what I'd read, I knew the treatment my younger siblings could expect to receive as they grew up would only get worse with time. People saying things to them like, "I never think of you as a Black person," or, in a surprised voice, "You're so articulate." Having store managers follow them up and down the aisles to make sure they didn't steal anything. Having white people cross the street to avoid walking past them on the sidewalk. Getting stopped by police officers for no good reason.

Many researchers have argued that microaggressions can actually be more damaging than overt expressions of bigotry because of their frequency and, counterintuitively, their size. Because they're so small—nearly invisible to most white people—they often go ignored or get downplayed. In the white community, that is. In the Black community, these subtle slights are *always* picked up on, and Black people often talk about them with other Black people. This dichotomy often leads to victims of such transgressions feeling isolated, distrustful, hesitant, and abnormal. Studies have shown that long-term exposure to microaggressions affects one's mental health, decreasing happiness, energy, and productivity while increasing frustration and anger.

In 1991, the clinical psychologist and author Na'im Akbar produced a groundbreaking article titled "Mental Disorder Among

African Americans," which claimed that, even in the mental health world, Black Americans were treated unfairly. According to Akbar, the current view of what was considered normal behavior was based on that exhibited by the majority of the population—that is, white people. Akbar argued that many of the mental health disorders Black Americans had been diagnosed with were actually just normal responses to being forced to live in an alien (and often cruel) society. Meanwhile, actual ones, including alien-self disorder (seeing yourself through the lens of the majority, rejecting your true identity, and living in isolation and confusion), anti-self disorder (wanting to be part of the majority so badly you adopt the temperament of that group and promote negative feelings toward your own), and self-destructive disorders (engaging in harmful behavior such as doing drugs or binge eating as a way of escaping oppression), were being overlooked. Studies like Akbar's show how much impact microaggressions can have on the mental health of individuals from minority groups and how often that impact gets overlooked.

Why was I aware of the microaggressions my siblings faced while everyone around me remained ignorant? I believe it was a combination of intuitive awareness, protective instincts that emerged from caring for my siblings, and the knowledge I'd gleaned from reading about Black history. I certainly didn't have a "white" perspective. I was starting to think more from a Black one.

That I was the only one picking up on the microaggressions aimed at my younger siblings flipped something like a light switch inside of me. It was an awareness of just how vulnerable they were and a realization that I was the only one who was willing and somewhat able to protect them. I was aware; therefore, I was responsible. I knew that if I didn't serve as a buffer for them against ignorance, misunderstanding, isolation, and hostility, no one else would. In the process, I became a kind of cultural translator, helping them navigate the white world safely while trying to keep them connected to the Black one.

Because dolls that had white features and books that starred white characters were the norm, I passed my Black Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls down to Esther and painted over the illustrations

of the white characters in the Bible Larry and Ruthanne had given to Izaiah to make them look Black. Whenever I went into town, I searched for and collected Black children's books, dolls, and toys. I also became an ardent researcher of African history and Black fashion, culture, dance, music, and food in the United States, making frequent trips to the local library to borrow armfuls of books on these subjects. Larry and Ruthanne grudgingly approved of books that had to do with my younger siblings' heritage. Employing knowledge gleaned from library books, I was able to educate my siblings about Black history in America, including but not limited to the biographies of Harriet Tubman, Nat Turner, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. I would soon be going off to college, and my goal before I left was to help my younger brothers and sister gain an appreciation for the wonderful world of Blackness from which they'd come.

A funny thing happened while I was teaching my younger siblings about Black culture and history: I began to feel even more connected to it myself. I began to see the world through Black eyes, and anything that had to do with Blackness or Africa always grabbed my attention. When I'd read about the Rwandan genocide and the plight of the children caught in the crossfire between the Hutu and Tutsi groups, it touched my soul. While I bathed, fed, and dressed my siblings, I couldn't stop thinking about the refugee children, who were being punished just for being born in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Late at night, in between rocking babies to sleep, I worked on a piece of art that allowed me to express my concern for the people of Rwanda. I didn't have canvas or paints, so I took an old white bed sheet and stretched it over a piece of wood. I tacked down the edges and stained the sheet by dunking it in hot tea to give it an earthy hue. With dough made from flour, water, and salt, I sculpted a two-inch relief of two faces and a hand, baked it until it was hard, molded pieces of leather over the faces, and painted them with shoe polish and bear lard. Using a piece of wood I found behind the house, I fashioned a crutch to fit the hand. For the background, I made a mosaic out of eggshells, forming the continent of Africa on one side and a small globe on the other. I titled this mixed-media

artwork "In a Broken World" and saved my money to get it framed in a shadowbox relief frame.

When I began reading library books about Black history on my own, I was not only educating myself but unconsciously feeding my soul. I became particularly enamored with the books of James Baldwin, who seemed to perfectly capture what it must have felt like to be Black in America during the 1950s and 60s. While he wrote from a viewpoint that was unapologetically Black, he projected a sense of open-mindedness that resonated with me. I particularly enjoyed *Go Tell It on the Mountain* because it brought all the issues that most concerned me together in one book: corporal punishment, religion, sexuality, and Black culture.

I had a much different opinion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I appreciated the important role the book played in strengthening the abolitionist movement in the Northern states prior to the Civil War and understood how dated books written in a previous era can feel, but the way the characters were written still bothered me. The little white girl, Eva, acts so entitled and condescending toward Tom, the Black slave who saved her from drowning. Everything seems to revolve around this spoiled little girl, and the fact that a grown man must spend his life catering to the needs of someone so young registered as an injustice to me. Why is no attention paid to what Tom wants or what his goals and dreams are? The Black characters Harriet Beecher Stowe describes are basically walking stereotypes, and the ones who get portrayed in the best light are the "good Christian" characters like Tom, who in retrospect I believe suffered from something like the alien-self disorder Na'im Akbar described. Stowe's book may have garnered sympathy for Blacks among nineteenth-century white Northerners, but it simply didn't align with the way I saw Black people. Blackness to me was bold, beautiful, and empowered.

As many hours as I devoted to shaping my younger siblings' minds, I spent just as much time caring for their bodies. Because I was conscious of how they were being viewed and "othered" by the residents of our small white town, I went out of my way to make sure they were well kept and well dressed in an effort to dismantle stereotypes. If one of their noses started to run while I

was shopping for groceries, I wiped it immediately. If one of their pants had a hole in the knees, I mended it as soon as I could. I was determined that, on my watch at least, no one would ever find a reason to see them as somehow being beneath them.

Keeping their skin healthy was a challenge. In Montana, the winters were long, cold, and dry, which meant "ashy" skin was even more of a problem than usual. I applied lotion to my siblings' skin at least once a day—several times a day for Zach—and I wouldn't have even considered leaving the house without a bottle on my person. I'm not talking about the watered-down kind so common in white households, either. I made sure Ruthanne ordered thicker, more effective moisturizers made from cocoa butter or shea butter from the local food co-op, because the St. Ives lotion found at the local drugstore was useless.

When it came to taking care of my siblings' hair, I had a steep learning curve. One of the biggest hurdles was the fact that none of the stores in town carried any Black hair products. The biggest shampoo companies design products meant to be used on straight European hair, and most of the information they provide about how to take care of that type of hair is flat-out wrong when applied to Black hair. Most of the shampoos found on grocery store shelves do far more harm to Black hair than good, stripping it of its natural oils and drying it out so badly it causes "breakage."

Unaware of this fact, many white parents who adopt Black or biracial children often cause tremendous damage to their children's hair. Because this is so common, they can expect any Black women they might pass on the street to give their children's hair a long careful look. If it's found to be wanting—chopped off or unkempt—the white parents should also expect to be given a hard side-eye. Such scrutiny is warranted: poorly maintained hair can be a great source of angst for Black children, making them more likely to suffer from low self-esteem and have a much harder time being accepted.

From reading about Black hair in library books, I learned that Black hairstyles are under-braided, not over-braided, so I initially concentrated on giving Esther plaits and cornrows. Unable to find any books that included braiding tutorials, I studied photographs

of Black women in *Sports Illustrated* and learned how to style Esther's hair through much practice. As a budding artist, I was used to working with my hands and using photographs in books as inspiration. With regular repetition, I found I could braid hair the same way I saw it done in magazines.

After all, who else was going to do it? There wasn't a Black hairstylist within one hundred and fifty miles of our house—and even if there had been, Larry and Ruthanne weren't about to pay someone else to style their kids' hair. Ruthanne had always cut Larry and Josh's hair herself using scissors, and she did the same for Ezra, whose hair was loosely curled on top and straight in the back and around the sides. But she grew frustrated by my other siblings' "difficult" hair and was relieved that I enjoyed cutting and styling it.

Using clippers to cut Zach and Izaiah's hair, I quickly mastered the flat-top fade, the classic look of the early 1990s with its clean, boxy shape. Izaiah liked getting a bald fade with a part cut into the side, even though Ruthanne thought it looked "silly" and would try to mess it up by rubbing his head whenever she saw him. When I was cutting Zach and Izaiah's hair, Ezra would sometimes sit on the stairs and sulk, complaining that he didn't have a "fancy" cut like his brothers. To appease him, I tried to cut his hair with clippers several times, but it didn't work very well and he and I quickly got discouraged.

I'd gained some confidence working with Zach and Izaiah's hair, but Esther's hair was much more challenging. Some friends of Larry and Ruthanne's in Libby had adopted a Black baby a couple of years before Esther was born and, knowing how interested I was in Black culture, they'd asked me if I'd like to style her hair. I was happy to do it, so I'd already had a bit of practice by the time Esther's hair was long enough to braid. As soon as Esther had an inch of hair to work with when she was ten or eleven months old, I started moisturizing and styling it with the Luster's Pink Hair Lotion I'd ordered in the mail, but she was very tender-headed, so the days I washed her hair and detangled it were her least favorite.

Thanks to my prior experience, I was also aware of the effects of "shrinkage," the natural tendency for virgin Black hair to coil

and appear much shorter than it actually is, especially in humid weather. Black hair that's six inches long can appear as short as two inches in length when it's coiled. Shrinkage isn't bad per se—it's actually a sign of healthy hair—but it's often perceived as such by a white culture that associates long hair with femininity and beauty. Nearly all the classically beautiful women portrayed in Western children's lore—in Walt Disney movies, that would be Cinderella, Snow White, Princess Jasmine, and Belle—have long, flowing hair. Tiana, the first Black princess portrayed in a Disney film, released four years after Larry and Ruthanne adopted Esther, hardly ever wore her hair out, and she definitely wasn't wearing an Angela Davis Black Power afro at any point in the movie.

To help Esther avoid shrinkage, I braided her hair in a variety of styles. The first time I styled her hair, I had her sit in a chair while I stood above her, but the angle wasn't right, so I moved her to the floor as I sat on the couch with her head between my legs. I moved her head from one knee to the other while I worked, but she would still fall asleep from time to time. When she woke after I'd finished, she ran to look at herself in the mirror, smiling from ear to ear and swinging her new braids back and forth while I told her how pretty she was. Sometimes I strung beads in various patterns in her braids. Other times I used ribbons that matched her dress. I learned how to do two-strand twists and part her hair in a variety of geometric patterns. Her favorite hairstyle was cornrows with beads, which pleased me because underhand braids such as these held better and looked neater than the overhand French braids Ruthanne had let me wear as a child. Styling Black hair is a labor-intensive process, but braiding Esther's hair was always a great source of joy for me.

At the time, I was so focused on taking care of Esther I didn't realize the extent to which I was also performing an act of rebellion against Larry and Ruthanne and their decree against braiding my own hair once I turned twelve, thanks to the passage from the Bible (1 Peter 3:3) discouraging personal adornment. Ruthanne was particularly opposed to Esther's hair being braided in "elaborate" and "worldly" ways that were "too fancy" and "vain"—until she realized how fortunate she was to be getting help from me and saw

how much time these braids saved us when detangling Esther's hair. Esther had a habit of rubbing the back of her head on her mattress when she slept, so if her hair wasn't braided, it would always tangle in the back.

To help Esther see how beautiful her natural hair was—and give her something to read beyond the Bible and Grandma Schertel's books about Br'er Rabbit—I made her a homemade book titled *Ebony Tresses*. Ruthanne had convinced me that while I was a good artist, I wasn't much of a writer, so I asked her to help me turn some of my thoughts into poetry. "My hair is powerful, coiled, and comely," we wrote in the book. "Glistening with oils and sculpted with care." The book included full-color illustrations I drew of Esther wearing her favorite natural hairstyles and a paper doll that looked like her and had six hairstyle options, allowing her to change the doll's hair whenever she pleased.

Styling my siblings' hair undoubtedly deepened my connection to them. The many hours I spent cutting and braiding their hair not only strengthened our bond but also awakened a part of me I'd never been allowed to express. In the process of doing something I enjoyed (styling Black hair) for those I loved (my brothers and sister), I felt like I was free, free from the confinement and oppression of the household I grew up in and free to be myself, if only in those moments.

Chapter Eleven

Million Man March

WHILE SERVING AS COUNTY COMMISSIONER, Larry traveled to Washington, DC, to attend the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual event that celebrates the importance of prayer and faith in our lives, and there he met Merle Morgan. When Merle told him he was looking for help with the fine-art greeting card company he ran with his wife, Edita von Uslar-Gleichen, Larry mentioned that I was a budding artist and might be available to work as an assistant. The two of them worked out a deal, the exact details of which I was never privy to, that involved me working for the Morgans and staying with them at their home in Arlington, Virginia, for two months when I was seventeen.

I was excited to learn about the business side of art publishing from someone who'd managed to create a successful career for herself doing it. Turning watercolors she'd made of well-known Washington monuments and buildings into calendars, posters, and greeting cards, Edita had become especially popular with politicians on Capitol Hill.

The focus of my artwork at the time was mixed-media collage. Living in an area where good paints were impossible to buy, I relied on a variety of other materials: thread, recycled paper, animal skins, whatever I could find. I entered my best pieces in competitions at the county fair. Grand champions earned five dollars, blue ribbons two dollars, and reds a dollar, but even though I won plenty of ribbons, this income stream never added up to very much.

I was looking forward to seeing how Edita made a living as an artist, but when I arrived in DC, I discovered that my role wouldn't be limited to the art publishing business but also included being a nanny and a cook. Some days I delivered greeting cards to the offices of senators and members of Congress but I was just as likely to be asked to entertain the Morgans' four little kids. Living in a community full of rich white people for the first time in my life, I felt like a second-class citizen. I was the help. Despite the hard work and long hours—I once had to work twenty-three hours in a row!—I loved being in DC and longed to see and do as much as I possibly could while I was there. Unfortunately, the only time I managed to get out of the Morgans' house was to deliver greeting cards with Merle or help Edita with the shopping.

While I'd been educating my younger siblings about Black history and culture, the name of one university kept popping up in my research. When you consider the many fine historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in the United States, Howard University always comes at or near the top of the list. Its alumni directory reads like a Who's Who of the world's best and brightest in law (Vernon Jordan, Thurgood Marshall), literature (Ta-Nehisi Coates, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison), politics (Stokely Carmichael, David Dinkins, Andrew Young), music (Sean Combs, Roberta Flack, Crystal Waters), and acting (Anthony Anderson, Ossie Davis, Taraji P. Henson).

In a speech given to Howard's graduating class on May 7, 2016, President Barack Obama called the university "a centerpiece of African American intellectual life and a central part of our larger American story." He continued, "This institution has been the home of many firsts: The first Black Nobel Peace Prize winner. The first Black Supreme Court justice. But its mission has been to ensure those firsts were not the last. Countless scholars, professionals, artists, and leaders from every field received their training here. The generations of men and women who walked through this yard helped reform our government, cure disease, grow a Black middle class, advance civil rights, shape our culture."

For anyone as interested in the Black experience as I'd become, how could I possibly take a trip to Washington, DC, without visiting

the campus of Howard University? But when I expressed my desire to spend an afternoon there, the Morgans noticeably cringed. "Oh, we can't let you go there," Merle said. "It's in a very dangerous area." He described it as being in an "inner city" neighborhood, code language that meant "Black, poor, and violent."

Coming from northwest Montana, I wasn't intimidated by the idea of venturing into so-called bad neighborhoods. Where I grew up, you took your life in your own hands every time you wandered off the beaten path in the fall. Hunters would drink beer and drive their trucks into the mountains to "road hunt," looking for something—*anything*—to shoot. When Merle told me that he couldn't let me venture into a bad neighborhood all by myself, what he was really saying was that I was a white girl and therefore shouldn't visit parts of town that were predominately Black. That he may have been more concerned about my gender than the color of my skin didn't take the sting out of his comment. His attitude was in keeping with the times. A verdict had recently been announced in the O. J. Simpson murder trial, and the racial tension it had dredged up still lingered. For its entire ten months, the trial shined a spotlight on the country's racial dysfunction. The case was so divisive, President Bill Clinton was briefed on what sort of security measures would be put in place should the verdict incite riots.

Amidst this racially charged climate, Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, urged Black men from all over the country to come to DC and gather on the National Mall on October 16, 1995, for what would become known as the Million Man March. The event's keynote speaker, Farrakhan spoke for two hours to one of the largest gatherings of Black people in American history. Some of Black America's most influential figures, including Maya Angelou, Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King III, Cornel West, Jesse Jackson, Stevie Wonder, and Marion Barry, also spoke that day.

In the many speeches that were given over the course of the ten-hour-long event, several themes emerged, namely atonement, reconciliation, and responsibility. The audience responded by exhibiting an unprecedented display of unity and love. Men from every part of the country and all walks of life could be seen hugging, laughing, and crying. Toward the end of the day, Minister

Farrakhan asked members of the audience to pledge to take responsibility for their own actions and an active role in improving the Black community. In the immediate aftermath of the March, nearly two million Black men registered to vote and the NAACP enjoyed a surge in membership.

The March received attention from news outlets around the world, and in words and images they relayed the almost church-like atmosphere that prevailed during the gathering. There was no smoking or drinking. Not a single fight took place. No one got arrested. Everyone cleaned up after themselves. Many of the attendees fasted. Others spent much of their time praying.

When reflecting on that historic day, many of those who attended the event describe having gotten goosebumps. Sadly, I never got to experience that feeling myself. During dinner with the Morgans the night before the March, I voiced my intention of going downtown the next day to join the event, even if that meant observing from the fringes. As upset as I'd been about not getting to see Howard University, I'd been given a second chance to be involved with a uniquely Black experience and I felt compelled to participate and support it somehow. I was hungry to be part of something that was bold and beautiful, something revolutionary, something historic. Simply hearing Maya Angelou or Rosa Parks speak would have been a dream fulfilled!

My enthusiasm had little effect on the Morgans. Edita just sighed and shrugged her shoulders, as if to say she wanted no part in the discussion. Merle did most of the talking, telling me he simply couldn't allow me to go because he and his wife were responsible for my safety and they were scared of the trouble such a gathering might cause.

Sequestered in this way, I escaped into the pages of any books I could get my hands on. Having gained an appreciation for books about Black history and culture while reading to my siblings, I now gravitated toward them on my own.

Reading *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* provided me with some much-needed solace. Because the narrator is a 110-year-old Black woman, I would never know what it was like to walk in her shoes, but I could still relate to aspects of her struggle. I

certainly wasn't enslaved, as Miss Pittman had been as a little girl, but it wouldn't have been too much of a stretch to call me an indentured servant to the Morgans (and to Larry and Ruthanne before them). I was dependent upon them for the food I ate and the bed I slept in, and if I quit working before I'd fulfilled my obligation to them, I'd have no way of getting home. Larry wasn't buying my return plane ticket until Merle had paid him for my services, and Merle wasn't paying Larry until I'd done my time.

Miss Pittman's plight and her perseverance resonated with me. I knew what it was like to be a child and have to work as hard as an adult, and how it felt to be used and abused. I also understood the pain that comes from being treated like less than a full human being—mostly on the basis of my gender rather than my perceived race—and the fortitude required to fight this sort of injustice. At the end of the book, when Miss Pittman joined the civil rights movement and dedicated herself to fighting for social justice, I knew that's what I wanted to do with my own life someday.

A more academic but no less influential book I read while living with the Morgans was *Beyond Charity: The Call to Christian Community Development*, which I'd found in the Christian bookstore in Libby before I'd left. It appealed to me because it addressed the two most important aspects of my life: religion and race. The book argued that the current approach taken by those considered to be good Christians (mostly white) when addressing the plight of disadvantaged communities (mostly Black) had failed. It took the wraps off the sort of cheap Christian charity I was all too familiar with, and showed how flawed and outdated the model of the "white savior" rescuing the "noble Black savage" was. It also encouraged its readers to go beyond giving sympathy (and, yes, charity), asking them to do the kind of meaningful, hands-on work that might lead to some actual change.

Beyond Charity was written by Dr. John Perkins, an older Black man who'd been raised by sharecroppers in New Hebron, Mississippi, where poverty and racial injustice were the predominant features of nearly every Black person's life. After a police officer shot and killed his older brother Clyde, seventeen-year-old Perkins fled to California, vowing never to return to Mississippi.

But in 1960, soon after his son Spencer convinced him to start going to church, he converted to Christianity and returned to his home state, where, along with his wife Vera Mae, he founded a Christian community-development ministry.

After nearly three decades of ministry work that saw the creation of several health centers, thrift stores, and churches, as well as numerous programs (including adult education and leadership development) and at least one daycare center and cooperative farm, Perkins formed the Christian Community Development Association, a network of Christians from across America committed to following the example of reconciliation provided by Jesus Christ. By moving to and living in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country, they hoped to break down any barriers that might have existed between themselves and their neighbors.

Perkins was also active in the civil rights movement. On February 7, 1970, he was arrested while taking part in a protest march in Mendenhall, Mississippi, and taken to the Rankin County jail, where the white sheriff beat him so badly a mop had to be used to clean his blood off the floor. When his family visited him at the jail, his fourteen-year-old daughter Joanie took one look at her bloodied and beaten father and shouted, "I hate white people. I will never like them!" before running out of the room.

The experience left an equally big impression on his sixteen-year-old son Spencer, who would go on to devote his life to reconciling the racial divide in the United States. He believed that the solution to the country's race problem would not come through the law but through religion, and to that end he encouraged churches to become more inclusive, embracing people of all races. Spencer didn't just talk the talk; for more than a decade he lived in an intentional Christian community called Antioch, where white and Black families lived side by side, pooled their wages into a single bank account, and shared all their meals.

Living one house over from Spencer at Antioch was Chris Rice, a white man and the son of Christian missionaries. Together, the two men directed Reconcilers Fellowship in Jackson, Mississippi, served as coeditors of *Reconcilers* magazine, and traveled the nation preaching about reconciliation. They also coauthored *More*

Than Equals: Racial Healing for the Sake of the Gospel, another influential book I read during my time with the Morgans.

Reading *More Than Equals* was a thrilling experience for me. It laid out a clear vision of the practical yet powerful work that could be done to heal the racial divide. The authors proposed that, in absence of making reparations, white people should move back to the cities they'd fled decades earlier during the "white flight" era. As Black people in the South moved to northern cities during the Great Migration of the first half of the twentieth century, white people responded by embarking on a migration of their own, fleeing inner cities in favor of the suburbs. Their ample resources and the cities' attention to public services left with them. Rice and Perkins suggested that the white people who returned could share their financial resources with the surrounding community and create a world where Blacks and whites could live together in peace and harmony, enjoying an equal amount of privilege. While living on the East Coast, it wasn't hard for me to see that, while the civil rights movement might have accomplished the goal of giving Black Americans equal access to jobs and schools, it didn't guarantee equitable treatment for them. Anytime I left the house, I could see the difference between equality and equity and what sort of impact that had on people's lives, and it inspired me to want to help the Black community realize economic and social justice.

My admiration for this book helped me in another unexpected way. When I'd finally finished all the course work necessary to graduate from high school and it was time for me to figure out where I wanted to go to college, my decision was easy. Even though I applied to thirteen different schools, all neatly listed on an Excel spreadsheet I'd made, one stood out from all the rest. Belhaven College in Jackson, Mississippi, had friendly and personable instructors and a stellar art department. It was also a Christian school, so Larry and Ruthanne could have no complaints about my decision. But, most importantly for me, Dr. John Perkins and his son Spencer both lived in Jackson.

Chapter Twelve

Belhaven College

DIAPERS HAD BEEN HANGING from our clothesline in Montana for more than two years, but by the time I left for college in Mississippi in 1996, all my younger siblings were potty-trained—as well as walking, talking, and using utensils to feed themselves. I'd even taught Ruthanne how to braid Esther's hair and, just as importantly, helped her to see that braids were beautiful—at the very least because of their practicality. Packing up and leaving the only home I'd ever known was difficult, but not for the reasons you might think. After I'd helped raise four children from infancy, moving to Mississippi felt more like a midlife transition than a coming-of-age one and I knew that I was far too young to be feeling that way.

Before leaving Montana, I called Spencer Perkins. He'd been the first Black student ever to attend Belhaven, but it wasn't his thoughts about campus life that drew me to him. After reading *More Than Equals*, I felt such a powerful connection to him and his philosophy on racial reconciliation I asked him if he'd mentor me while I was living in Jackson.

"Why don't you come to church when you get here," he said, "and afterward we'll go to the house and talk and go from there."

After services at the Voice of Cavalry Fellowship, the church Spencer's father John founded in 1972, I went with Spencer, his wife Nancy, and their three kids to the large lot on Robinson Road where Antioch was located. The three spacious Antebellum houses

on the property had been divvied up to accommodate several different families, but I spent most of my time with the Perkinses. We hit it off so well that I was soon living something of a double life. During the week, I shared a dorm room on campus with a petite ballet dancer who had blonde hair and blue eyes, and I spent an inordinate amount of time in the library; on the weekends I went to church in all-Black West Jackson and hung out with Spencer and his family.

The first time I visited Antioch, Spencer and I talked at length about one of his favorite activities (in addition to barbecuing and shooting hoops), fishing. When I asked him where I could find a shovel and set about digging worms for him, I couldn't have made him any happier if I'd handed him a million dollars.

Whenever I think about fishing, I'm always reminded of a passage from one of Grandpa Perkins' speeches in which he gave the old proverb "If you give a man a fish . . ." a decidedly new twist. "If you teach a man to fish," he said, "he may *never eat* because all that really matters is—*who owns the pond*." As someone who'd lived through the Jim Crow era, he'd seen plenty of capable Black people denied jobs and opportunities even though they'd been "taught how to fish."

After my first visit, eating lunch at Antioch after church on Sunday became a weekly ritual. One afternoon while chatting with Spencer in the family room of his house, he asked me what sort of artwork I did. Unfortunately, I didn't have any pictures with me to show him. "I bet your art doesn't look like that," he said, pointing to a large framed print on the wall. It was a beautiful but tragic painting of a Black mother with a baby strapped to her back, picking cotton in a field.

"Actually, that's *exactly* the kind of art I do," I told him.

When he finally saw some of my pieces, his initial skepticism turned into unmitigated support. Spencer was always smiling and laughing, but he grew very serious when talking about my artwork. "You need to focus on your art," he often told me. "It's a gift."

My comfort level wasn't nearly as high on campus—at least initially. I arrived there looking like I'd just stepped off the set of *Little House on the Prairie* or escaped from a religious cult. Wearing

a homemade ankle-length dress and no makeup, I walked into the cafeteria the first day of classes and was greeted by a picture as strange to my eyes as the sight of me must have been to everyone else: the cafeteria was completely segregated, with all the tables occupied by white students except for one on the far side of the room. At the start of my freshman year only 5 percent of Belhaven's student body was Black, and most of them could be found hanging out at the "Black table" at some point during the day.

As I walked through the cavernous room buzzing with chatter, my heart nearly skipped a beat. Everyone looked so *normal* compared to me. I could see it on their faces whenever they glanced my way: Who the heck is *this*? Searching for a reassuring face and not finding one, I carried my tray through the gauntlet of white faces until I arrived at the Black table in the corner. That I shouldn't sit there because I was born to white parents and all the table's occupants were Black didn't occur to me. A true fish out of water, more than two thousand miles from where I'd been born, I'd gravitated to where I felt most comfortable, and, after the initial awkwardness wore off, that's how the people sitting there made me feel.

Looking back on this moment, I wonder if the students at that table were so nice because they felt sorry for me. I was dressed like a peasant, after all, and I obviously had no friends. Regardless of their motivations, they were incredibly kind to me, almost sympathetic. When they started talking about the Black Student Association (BSA) meeting scheduled for that afternoon and I asked where and when it was, they let me know the location and the time and only shrugged and smiled when I expressed a desire to join them.

It was the first BSA meeting of the year, which meant dues needed to be paid and all the leadership positions filled. Excited to join my first student organization, I secured my membership with a five-dollar bill and watched as members were voted into office. We elected a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary that afternoon, but it quickly became clear that no one wanted to be the historian.

There was a long, awkward moment of silence. Finally, I raised my hand and started walking toward the front of the room just

as I'd seen the previous candidates do, and as I did, I was greeted with barely muffled snickering.

Even the newly elected president, Winston Trotter, couldn't stop himself from laughing. "Hold up," he said. "Why are you here, and why do you want to be the historian?"

Being raised with no sense of humor whatsoever, I delivered an overly earnest speech explaining how passionate I was about Black culture, how I'd always felt a connection with Blackness, and how deeply I cared about my siblings' future. My enthusiasm caught everyone in the room a little off guard.

"But what exactly do you know about Black history?" someone asked.

The rambling dissertation that followed encompassed all the Black historical figures I admired most and was so long-winded Winston had to cut me off. "We need to wrap this meeting up, so let's just go ahead and vote."

Running unopposed, I won in a landslide.

As the BSA's historian, my main responsibility was documenting all the club's activities, but I took the role much more seriously than that. I wanted to educate people about why BSAs were so important to have on campuses. I also took it upon myself to inspire my fellow members by continually reminding them about pivotal moments in Black history. To this end, I revised the historian's duties to include preparing a brief Black history lesson for each meeting and giving a historical presentation during mandatory chapel every Tuesday of Black History Month. Rewarding my commitment and knowledge, my fellow BSA members reelected me to the position all four years I was in college.

My affiliation with the BSA made it impossible to ignore the many issues confronting Belhaven's Black students, and, as time passed, I grew more determined to do something about them. I helped create the first African American history course ever taught there, and it remains a part of the curriculum to this day. I worked with the college's president to increase the recruitment and retention of Black students, and by the time I graduated, the Black population on campus had increased to nearly 15 percent. And I helped organize a conference to discuss "racial reconciliation"—the

restoration of peace between Black and white communities I'd read about in *Beyond Charity* and *More Than Equals*—that paired Belhaven, which was historically white, with nearby Tougaloo College, which was historically Black.

While I was at Belhaven, I also developed a radar for anything that seemed inequitable to or dismissive of the college's Black students and committed myself to changing it. For instance, I was just about to settle into a three-day weekend in the middle of January my freshman year, when I looked at my Biology syllabus and saw that class was scheduled for Monday. What was going on? Surely a college wouldn't schedule classes on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, would it? Wasn't it a federal holiday? It had to be a mistake, right?

I brought all my questions with me to the office of Dr. Roger Parrott, Belhaven's president, first thing Monday morning. Dr. Parrott informed me that Belhaven had never given its students and staff that day off. I was surprised to hear this, but anyone who knew Mississippi better than I did wouldn't have been. While the federal government made MLK Day a national holiday in 1983, it wasn't recognized on the state level by all fifty states until 2000. One of the states that initially dragged its feet was Mississippi. When it finally did come on board, it managed to rob the day of much of its power by giving equal billing to the leader of the Confederate Army during the Civil War, making the third Monday in January a holiday with a name as awkward to say as it is to celebrate: "Martin Luther King's and Robert E. Lee's Birthdays." While post offices and banks had no choice, schools and businesses were given some latitude when it came to observing the holiday.

Fortunately, Dr. Parrott was new to the college, shockingly young, and very broad-minded, and he let me know that he was open to the idea of recognizing MLK Day on campus if a consensus among the student body could be obtained. That's all I needed to hear. I wrote a petition and shamelessly pushed it in front of everyone I could find, and within a month I'd acquired enough signatures to make the holiday an official celebration on campus the following year. And not just as a vacation day. In keeping with the King Holiday and Service Act, which President Clinton made a law on August 23, 1994, I worked with the administration

to organize a day of service. During the first year the holiday was observed at Belhaven, more than two hundred and fifty (mostly white) students worked on Habitat for Humanity homes in West Jackson, which, in a city that remained nearly as segregated as it was in the 1960s, was known as "the Black side of town."

My growing connection to Black culture was also apparent in my artwork, which, like the pieces I'd shown Spencer, focused on Black faces and figures and was unashamedly pro-Black. The images almost exclusively depicted aspects of the Black experience I felt were beautiful and empowering. Tired of seeing white people taking center stage all the time, I wanted to use my art skills to offer a more equitable and compassionate treatment of Black culture. Two such pieces—one done on elk hide ("Irma Leah"), the other on deer hide ("Tatters of Time")—helped me pay for my first year of college after I won the national Tandy Leather Art Scholarship. Another landed me an exhibition in New York City after Fabian Uzoh gave a woman from the United Nations a very compelling description of the piece about the Rwandan genocide I'd made in high school. She called me to say that she wanted to display it in the lobby of the UN headquarters, saying it perfectly captured the type of empathy they wanted to promote about the Rwandan refugee situation. As a financially strapped college student, I couldn't afford to fly there for the reception, but apparently the staff was so moved by the piece that they renewed the usual three-month loan period four times. When the piece was returned to me after a year away, I donated it to Tougaloo College, where it remains today.

My predilection for painting Black figures didn't sit well with some of the white students in my art classes, who often made fun of me for it. If I wanted to focus on human rights and injustice, a few of them told me, I should paint Irish people. I got so sick of being pressured in this way I actually tried painting white people a couple times, but it never looked or felt right to me. I had difficulty seeing highlights and reflections on pale skin. Even when the models in my figure drawing class were white, they came out looking Black on my sketch pad. In the end, I embraced the talents I had and stopped trying to please other people or help them understand me.

Some of my professors noted that, unlike most freshmen majoring in art, my body of work already had a clear focus. That didn't do me much good as I looked for a place in North Jackson (read: the white part of town) to display my artwork during my second semester at Belhaven. When none of the art galleries there took an interest in my work, I visited the Smith Robertson Museum and Cultural Center in West Jackson. Originally the site of Jackson's first public school for Black children—the novelist Richard Wright graduated from there in 1925—Smith Robertson was enjoying a second life as a museum that celebrated the art and experiences of Black Mississippians.

Turry Flucker, the museum's curator, gave me a tour of the building. When I mentioned that I was looking for a place to display my artwork and had brought some slides with me, he was kind enough to ask the receptionist to set up a projector on the table in his office. Soon after we sat down, he broke step with the formality he'd previously displayed. "I understand you want to show your art here," he said, "but we're a Black museum and you're white. What could you possibly show me that I would be interested in?"

His words stung, but I got it. All he could see was the color of my skin. I dropped my slides into the projector carousel. "Let me show you."

The first slide showed one of my signature pieces, "AFRIKA," and after seeing it, Turry leaned back in his chair and said, "Wow." When I got to the end of my ten-slide presentation, he surprised me with his enthusiasm. "So," he said, "we're going to need at least fifteen mid- to large-sized pieces for the show."

Two months later, a mixed-media exhibit by Rachel Doležal made its debut at the Smith Robertson Museum and Cultural Center. At the opening reception, the educator and artist Jolivette Anderson read her poem "Pieces of You, Pieces of Me," which was inspired by "AFRIKA" and made me cry. I didn't sell any paintings at that show, but it was a rewarding experience nevertheless. The audience was roughly half white and half Black and everyone was a bit out of their comfort zone, but they were all together under a single roof with a single purpose and that's one of the first steps on the road to healing race relations.

As I got more involved with the BSA, campus activism, and my artwork, the more Afrocentric my appearance became. I started wearing my hair in *Poetic Justice* box braids and sporting dashikis and African-patterned dresses. I thought the patterns and embroidery of these clothes were beautiful, and in the Mississippi heat, the fabric did a good job of keeping you cool without being immodest. Wearing this style of clothing made me feel more confident and more beautiful.

As a result, most people didn't know what to make of me. "So, what are you?" I was asked all too often. My responses tended to be awkward, tortuous, strained. Because I didn't fit neatly into a box and didn't know how to articulate who I was or how I felt in a way that made sense to people, I'd end up bouncing from one story to the next until I'd told them nearly *everything* about my life. I'd usually start off by saying that Larry and Ruthanne were white before describing how I was instinctively drawn to Black aesthetics, culture, and history, and then I would mention my siblings and the racial justice work I was currently doing.

These long, rambling answers satisfied very few people—and seemed to bore the pants off most. You know how when most people ask how you are, they don't really want to know the answer? They just want you to say, "Fine." That's how these encounters felt. People just wanted me to say I was Black or white. They didn't want to hear, in all its boring complexity, about the journey to self-identification I was on. I could see it in the way they shifted their weight from one foot to the other and stopped making eye contact with me while I was talking. They were tired of listening. They were done having this conversation, and before long I was, too.

I stopped volunteering information about my identity to people unless I knew them really well. It became much easier for me to let them make assumptions about me. I noticed how much more relaxed and comfortable Black people who assumed I was Black were around me. The minute I corrected them, the comfort level we'd enjoyed just a moment before disappeared, so I stopped doing it and started letting them identify me however they wanted to. If they identified me as a light-skinned Black woman or a mixed-race woman, which they frequently did, I didn't mind.

My laissez-faire attitude toward my racial identification was much more difficult to maintain when it came to filling out applications and medical forms. Prior to my departure from Montana, I generally felt obligated to choose WHITE, CAUCASIAN, or EUROPEAN AMERICAN when I was asked to check a box identifying my race. If the form allowed me to choose more than one category, I would also check NATIVE AMERICAN because of what I'd been told about my great-grandmother's ancestry.

When I was living in Mississippi, I felt like I should continue checking WHITE on such forms. According to other people's perception of racial categories, that was the truth—even though I'd begun to feel like that description was increasingly misrepresentative of who I was and how I was being treated by others. I would sometimes check OTHER when that was an available option, as a way of clarifying the difference between me and the distinctive breed of white people who lived in the Deep South. If providing an answer was optional, I would avoid making a selection altogether. The more I learned about race in college—that it has no genetic underpinnings, but is a social construct—the less obligated I felt to check WHITE. Some of my biracial friends would play around with these forms, alternately checking WHITE, BLACK, or OTHER, just to see how it would affect the way people responded to them. I thought it was a clever idea and a useful sociological experiment, particularly as I grew more ethnically indeterminate in my appearance.

The increasingly Afrocentric look I sported invited all sorts of criticism. Some said that my identification with Black culture was "just a phase," while others, mostly white students, told me I shouldn't dress the way I did because they felt it was disingenuous or just looked silly. While walking through the cafeteria one day, proudly wearing a dashiki and a headwrap, I passed a table full of white girls and heard one of them say, "Who does she think she is, wearing all that stupid African shit? She's not Black!"

As I continued to make my way toward the Black table, my friend Nikki, who was a member of the BSA and a star of the women's basketball team, wheeled around and confronted the girl. "You're sitting there talking about Rachel's outfit while you're

probably getting a yeast infection from wearing those skintight jeans," she said loud enough for everyone within twenty feet to hear. "Besides, Rachel's a lot Blacker than I am, so deal with it!"

A smile took over my face. This was the first time anyone had recognized and defended how I felt. Hearing Nikki say that made me feel good, whole, *understood*, like I'd finally found my place in the world.

Chapter Thirteen

Hair II

THE VOICE OF CAVALRY FELLOWSHIP, which Spencer had introduced me to and which I regularly attended, had a Black pastor and a white pastor. The congregation was mixed as well, with approximately two to three Black people for every white person. Paying as much attention to racial reconciliation as it did the basic tenets of Christianity, the church served as a bridge from where I came from, fanatically studying the Bible, to where I wanted to go, promoting racial and social justice.

Unlike the sleek modern megachurches of today, VOC was housed in a plain-looking building in West Jackson. What it lacked in glitz and glamor it more than made up for in heart and soul. It may not have had any big-screen TVs or a deluxe PA system, but it did have a dedicated flock and an exuberant gospel choir. The congregation would encourage anyone in the choir who came up to the microphone, shouting, "All right now!" or "Sing it!"

Members of the congregation were also encouraged to clap—whether they possessed a sense of a rhythm or not. This often led to some humorous moments because, as I soon discovered, Black people and white people in the South tend to clap a little differently. Whereas Black people are inclined to clap on the second and fourth beats of every note, producing a sound that aligns with the music, white people have a habit of clapping on one and three, which sounds at best sluggish and at worst jarring. Some musicians, including Justin Bieber, Neil Young, and Bruce Springsteen, have gotten so thrown off by people in the audience

clapping on one and three during their concerts they've had to stop mid-song to educate them. While playing "Come by Me" for a clapping-challenged audience in England several years back, the famed singer and pianist Harry Connick Jr. found what has to be the best solution to this problem when he added an extra bar to each note during his piano solo, forcing the audience's clapping to land on the right beats. During services at VOC, I found myself instinctively clapping on two and four. Not everyone was so fortunate, but the clapping always sorted itself out, with no one ever feeling isolated or ashamed.

Some members of the congregation, myself included, felt like there was more energy waiting to be released beyond singing and clapping, so we decided to form a praise dance team. Dancing wasn't a part of my life when I was growing up. Simply walking in a "provocative manner" was forbidden, so dancing with swaying hips and gyrating thighs was out of the question. The closest I ever saw someone in my family get to dancing occurred while I was accompanying Larry on a drive into town. When a song he liked came on the oldies station, he started lurching his neck forward and backward in a robot-like fashion not unlike the dancers in The Bangles' "Walk Like an Egyptian" video.

I soon saw the energy I devoted to the VOC dance team pay off, when we began to receive invitations to perform at venues besides the church, including Belhaven's chapel. The "Reconciliation Dance" was a crowd favorite and one that often moved people to tears. One of the other members of the dance team, LaShawnda Wilson, wore a white leotard and white skirt and I wore a black leotard and black skirt, and at the end of the dance we wrapped our arms together and combined our hands in a single fist as a symbol of Black and white uniting in love.

Donna Pollard, a thirty-two-year-old Black woman who'd worked at VOC for five years, was the dance troupe's organizer and choreographer. I became her assistant, often helping her make the costumes for our performances, and as I did I began to spend more and more time in West Jackson. That I felt so at home there, coupled with an awkward living situation on campus—my roommate started skipping classes and sleeping for days on end after

she injured her hip and saw her dream of dancing professionally come to a crashing halt—encouraged me to move to West Jackson after my freshman year. That summer, I shared a bed with a VOC intern at Antioch in a room cooled only by an incredibly noisy fan. Before the start of my second year at Belhaven, Donna and her husband Sam offered to rent me a spare bedroom in their home, not too far from Antioch. Sam even found me an orange 1977 Toyota Corolla that only cost five hundred dollars. With its seats ripped to shreds by mice, it was a real "hoopty," but I sewed some new seat covers for it and it never failed to get me to and from campus. Better still, it was all mine.

Many American towns are divided in two by railroad tracks—there's usually a "right side" and a "wrong side"—and Jackson was no different. The railroad tracks separated rich from poor and white from Black, helping to enforce the unofficial segregation that still lingered there. I chose to live on the poor Black side of that line. I was breaking the color barrier by living in a Black neighborhood, but I didn't move there because I was a white missionary. I wasn't trying to be a "white ally" or a "white savior." I wasn't trying to make some sort of contrived social statement. Quite the opposite. My decision to live there felt natural and organic. I was simply moving to where I felt most comfortable, a place where I could be myself.

Rich white people considered the neighborhood in which Antioch and the Pollards' house was located to be "the bad part of town," but I never saw it that way. To me, it always felt like home. I was rarely able to walk more than a block or two without bumping into someone I knew. By the time I moved off campus I knew more people in West Jackson than I did at Belhaven. As a consequence, I felt safer there than I did in the white part of town, where I was unknown and few people cared about me.

The needs of the community I'd moved to quickly became my own. One of the biggest concerns was that too many young kids were hanging out on the street unsupervised. Typically they were being raised by single mothers who had to work all day and couldn't afford to pay for after-school care. This phenomenon was especially prevalent and troubling near West Capitol Street, which tended to

attract people who were a little shady or down on their luck. Drug dealers, pimps, prostitutes, and homeless people frequented the area at all hours. That nearly all of them were Black gave West Capitol a reputation for being a place where white people would be wise not to go.

Young children who lived in this neighborhood faced a variety of perils, ranging from not being able to get their homework done to being placed in life-threatening situations. When I heard that Capitol Street Ministries provided a food pantry and some other basic services, I decided to start an after-school program in conjunction with it. The service I offered was perfectly matched with a need, and within just a few weeks I was looking after twenty-five elementary-school-age kids. I helped them with their homework. I organized games for them to play. I handed out snacks. I taught them art. I even redid a few two-strand twists or braids that had gotten messed up during the school day. I was a nanny, babysitter, and big sister once again.

The volunteer work I did in West Jackson, when combined with the racial justice work I was doing on campus, my Afrocentric appearance, and my growing appreciation of Black historical figures such as Malcolm X and Assata Shakur, led even more people, both Black and white, to assume that I was a mixed-race or light-skinned Black woman, that I was an albino, or that as a child I'd been adopted and raised by a Black family. They stopped identifying and relating to me as a white person, and because I was untroubled by the idea, was in fact *pleased* by it, I didn't bother to correct them.

Being seen as Black also made social interactions in the community I lived in much easier. Black people related to me in a more relaxed way. Instead of putting up a wall and thinking of me as an outsider, they treated me as a member of the community, part of the family. I would laugh at jokes told at the expense of white people and lodge some pretty fierce critiques about white culture myself. I didn't act scared, stiff, or too privileged to relate, all telltale signs of being a white outsider. I blended in, not by wearing a disguise or being deceitful, but simply by being myself. It felt less like I was adopting a new identity and more like I was unveiling

one that had been there all along. Finally able to embrace my true self, I allowed the little girl I'd colored with a brown crayon so long ago to emerge.

As happy as I was to be seen as Black, it was still confusing, awkward, painful, and isolating for me at times—because who was I going to talk to about what felt like a major life transition? One of the few people I felt comfortable discussing my rapidly changing identity with was Donna. As I tried to reconcile how I felt, how I was born, and how I was being viewed by others, I had numerous conversations with her about race and identity. We would stay up late and talk, conversations that often ended in tears. It was Donna who I chose to be with the night of my twenty-first birthday. Determined to get drunk, I brought home a bottle of Manischewitz, which I was familiar with from celebrating Passover every year, thanks to Ruthanne's Zionist obsession, and Donna sat with me while I sipped from it. We talked deep into the night, but I only got about a third of the way through the bottle before I felt sick and went to bed.

A deeply religious woman, Donna would mention certain passages from the Bible as a way of suggesting that my feelings about my racial identity might just be a phase, but she also seemed to understand when I told her that I didn't feel white and that I felt a stronger connection to Black people than I did to white people. She often told me that when it came to hairstyles and clothing, "to copy is to compliment," an assessment I took as permission to embrace the exterior expressions of my feelings. I could live with this appraisal of my journey, but I also feared it, as I realized that very few people in the world knew me as well as Donna did and that my evolving appearance could be seen by others as cultural appropriation.

Cultural appropriation is a tricky subject. It's often viewed as one of the great sins of our times—an indefensible act of racism—as it typically involves people from a majority ethnic group borrowing cultural elements from a minority ethnic group and exploiting those elements for fun or profit. The NFL's Washington Redskins using a profile of a Native American as a team mascot is a good example, and it shouldn't be hard to understand why. Using an

image of an ethnic group in the same way other teams use animals or icons turns those people into stereotypes, reeks of neocolonialism, robs that group of their intellectual property rights, and promotes racist behavior. Turning people who have suffered for generations into a brand isn't showing reverence for their culture; it's giving it the finger. As obvious as this example is, there are countless others that are less so (but no less annoying and offensive), including white musicians stealing blues riffs from Black guitar players or rapping about the trials of life on the streets.

While living in West Jackson, I dedicated no small amount of thought and reflection to understanding cultural appropriation and examining my life to ensure that I was making authentic choices, not offensive or insincere ones. When it comes to cultural appropriation, it's important to know which acts cross the line and which don't. As with many nuanced subjects built on the foundation of past wrongs, not everything that's called appropriation is false or inauthentic. Thanks to air travel, the internet, and global trade, the world has grown smaller. As it's done so, diversity has increased, and so have cultural exchanges. Without such borrowing, Americans wouldn't know the joys of eating sushi, doing yoga, or wearing a pashmina. Examining one's intent and getting permission and guidance from the cultural source is the best way to judge the appropriateness of the action. Mocking another culture is obviously wrong, but how can applauding it be viewed as anything but positive? Historically, one of the most common ways racists mocked Black culture was by wearing blackface (or attending performances by those who did), but anyone who knew me then, particularly Donna, could tell you that's not what I was doing.

When Donna and I weren't talking into the wee hours, we were educating each other on practical matters. I shared my recipes for pot roast and homemade rolls with her, and she taught some of her unique methods of hair styling to me. From the moment I'd stepped off the plane and into Jackson's airport at the start of freshman year, I'd fallen in love with all the creative braiding patterns I saw. Within a month of being in Mississippi, I'd seen nearly every version of updos, braids, twists, locs, and weaves.

One night I mentioned how beautiful I thought braids were, and Donna asked me if I'd like her to braid my hair. Up to this point, I'd been hesitant to wear my hair in more than two braids, thanks to that passage in 1 Peter 3:3 that discourages adornment of any kind and Larry and Ruthanne's insistence that it was a "falsity." Equally important was my desire before I started wearing such a culturally specific style to get permission from the Black women who knew me best.

Well, here it was.

In the entire VOC community, no one had a better reputation for doing hair than Donna. She could lay edges, braid any pattern you suggested, and apply a relaxer without burning your scalp or causing breakage to your hair. Not letting her braid my hair would have been like passing up an opportunity to discuss politics with Barack Obama.

Donna was the first person to braid my hair, and it was a seminal moment in the evolution of my identity. White girls in Mississippi simply didn't do that. At first, she just braided the back of my blonde hair in jumbo box braids, but soon I was rocking a full head of individual box braids and getting creative with them, wrapping them in scarves or wearing them in updos. Before long, I was braiding my own hair and just having Donna help me with any hair in the back I couldn't reach.

There was a beauty store in West Jackson dedicated to Black hair care products, and in it I found everything I needed to keep my braids looking good. Goldstar Beauty Supply was like Wonderland to me. Bobbles, beads, ribbons, clips, moisturizers, detangling products, gels, relaxers, waxes, hair mayonnaise, wigs, braid hair, wefted hair, weaving caps, weaving needles, weaving thread, and lighters for burning the ends of braids—Goldstar had it all.

I wore braids most of the time I was at Belhaven. To me, they were beautiful, and I felt beautiful wearing them. I also wanted to show the young Black girls I worked with at Capitol Street Ministries and those I saw at church every Sunday that all textures of hair, like all shades of Black, were beautiful. When it comes to braiding, there is no "good hair" or "bad hair," only good braiders

and bad braiders. Braids are the great equalizer, leveling the playing field between women born with fine, wavy hair and those with thick, kinky hair.

One day after church, I saw Donna's five-year-old daughter Jessica running her hands through a white college intern's hair. I could see it on Jessica's face: she wasn't merely paying the intern a compliment; she was enchanted, as if her small Black fingers had found the pinnacle of beauty. Then she touched the stiff crochet braids in her own hair, and the look of rapture vanished and she hung her head.

There's a long history of European colonial powers forcing native people they've driven from lands they've conquered to cut off their hair. For some Native Americans, identity is so entwined with their hair they describe it as being a manifestation of their thoughts and an extension of themselves. They believe it should only be cut under very specific circumstances, typically mourning the loss of a loved one. This didn't stop the teachers at the boarding schools the Bureau of Indian Affairs established in the 1800s from chopping off Native American children's hair as soon as they set foot on campus. Likewise, white Christian missionaries in the colonial era often made African women cut off their braids.

This same sort of callousness has frequently been directed at Black women. In her 2006 book *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care*, anthropologist Lanita Jacobs-Huey hinted at the significance of Black women's hair when she described it as "a window into African American women's ethnic and gender identities." What often appears in this window doesn't bode well for the mental health of Black women. In a culture where white has long been exalted as right, naturally kinky-curly hair has been associated with unattractiveness and intractability. After being conditioned to believe this lie during the Plantation and Jim Crow eras, many Black women came to view straight hair (and everything else that was white) as being more beautiful and more closely linked to success than coiled hair. In the early part of the twentieth century, Madam C. J. Walker, a Black entrepreneur and the daughter of two former slaves, recognized the pressure Black women felt to adhere

to white standards of beauty in order to survive economically and socially as an opportunity to create a commercial empire. Her "Walker System" for straightening hair was so popular she went on to become the first female—and first Black—self-made millionaire in the United States.

Walker wasn't the only entrepreneur to get rich by addressing Black women's desire—and to some extent, social need—to straighten their hair. In 1909, Garrett Morgan, the inventor of the gas mask and the three-position traffic light, set about finding a way to prevent a sewing machine's needle from burning the fabric it was working on. A chemical solution he created solved the problem. He also noticed that it made the fibers of the pony-fur cloth he used to clean his hands stand straight up. When he applied the liquid to his neighbor's curly-haired dog, it made the dog's hair so straight its owner no longer recognized it—or so the story goes. After Morgan applied the solution to his own hair and got the same result, the G. A. Morgan Hair Refining Company—and the highly lucrative (and highly damaging) lye relaxer industry—was born.

It's now estimated that more than 65 percent of all the Black women in the United States chemically straighten their hair. In her 1996 book *Skin Trade*, Ann DuCille, an English professor at Wesleyan University, suggests a reason: "Unless I have missed a few pageants along the way, the body types, the apparel, and the hairstyles of the Black women crowned Miss America or of the colored women crowned Miss America have differed little from those of the white contestants . . . We have yet to see Miss America or Black Miss Universe with an Afro or cornrows or dreadlocks."

Fortunately, over the course of the past several decades, a movement has (re)emerged that's helped Black women embrace their natural hair. Some consider it the second wave of the Natural Hair Movement from the sixties, while others refer to the trend as the Texture Movement. We're now seeing Black celebrities such as Esperanza Spalding, Solange Knowles, Janelle Monáe, Lupita Nyong'o, Viola Davis, and Tracee Ellis Ross "slaying" with their textured hair and #BlackGirlMagic. Inspired by these women, many young Black girls are starting to wear their hair naturally, sending a message to the world about how they want to be viewed

and how they view themselves. Sadly, the establishment's response hasn't always been favorable.

This issue gained national attention in September 2013, when administrators at Deborah Brown Community School in Tulsa, Oklahoma, informed the parents of seven-year-old Tiana Parker that their daughter's locs violated the school's dress-code policy, which reads, "Hairstyles such as dreadlocks, afros, and other fad-dish styles are unacceptable." The idea of having to cut off all her hair upset Tiana so much she opted to switch schools instead. Two months later, administrators at Faith Christian Academy in Orlando, Florida, gave twelve-year-old Vanessa VanDyke a week to cut or straighten her big and bold natural hairstyle, calling it a "distraction." In 2016, Pretoria High School for Girls in South Africa banned afros and called natural Black hair styles "untidy." What sort of message do these incidents send to little Black girls?

That Donna's five-year-old daughter Jessica was so entranced with the white college intern's hair and so disappointed in her own underscored the otherness of Black hair in the same way that having strangers in Montana paw at my siblings' hair did.*

"I wish I had your hair," she said to the intern.

When the intern, clueless about what was happening to Jessica's self-esteem, thanked her and got up to leave, it sickened me. I walked over and said, "Jessica, your hair is so beautiful. I wish I had *your* hair."

Her smile returned, and she ran off to play with the other kids.

Whenever I wore braids, Jessica and the other little girls at church would smile at me and say, "You have hair just like me!" as they swung their braids back and forth. At a certain point, I began to feel that if I *didn't* wear my hair in braids I was reinforcing European beauty standards among the young girls in the community I lived in, and that was not something I wanted to support.

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* Those looking for a positive example of a Black child responding to his own hair need look no further than President Obama in 2009 bowing down to let a five-year-old Black boy named Jacob Philadelphia touch his hair after the boy wondered if his hair was just like the president's.

Something else happened when I wore braids. People started responding to me differently. Because I truly owned the look, my hair seemed to reinforce the belief that I was a biracial or light-skinned Black woman. Because I felt Black, I liked being seen as Black, not as a white girl with braids like Bo Derek in the movie *10*. When other people assumed I was Black, it invited me to interact with them as a Black woman, which always felt perfectly natural to me.

This made for some interesting social interactions. White people often approached me and said that my hair looked like rope or yarn. They asked if I could wash it, if it hurt, if it was "real." It was annoying and frustrating, and encouraged me to avoid interacting with them as much as I possibly could.

My hair never discomfited Black people. Quite the opposite. They seemed much more relaxed in my presence when I wore braids. Many described my hair as being "so Rachel." Even when I hadn't been in the sun for a while and my skin was extra pale, they still didn't see me as white. People often told me, "You're a pretty biracial," or "You're the prettiest albino I've ever seen." Others insisted they had a family member—if not two or three—who was even lighter than I was. I lost track of how many people said something to me that affirmed that my look perfectly matched how I felt inside, and every time, I felt even more at home, as if my light skin was no longer a barrier to being seen as who I really was.

Chapter Fifteen

Kevin & Howard

WHEN I FINALLY STARTED dating someone in college, I went with a safe choice. Lawrence "Law" Quinn was a highly analytical Black man, belonged to a Pentecostal Holiness church, and, like me, was still a virgin. Everyone in the BSA thought we made a great couple, as we were perfectly matched in our naïveté and creativity. Like me, he was an art major, and he often kept me company in the art studio. "You don't think like a white girl," he told me while I was sitting on his lap in the studio one day. "You respond to things in the same way that a lot of my biracial friends did growing up. You have a biracial mentality." That he seemed to truly understand me made me feel good, but when he grew too clingy it started to get on my nerves and I broke up with him.

The time I'd devoted to Law I now put toward my new job. Five nights a week from 10 PM to 3 AM, I loaded trucks at the local United Parcel Service distribution center. As the lone female on the night shift, I was frequently subjected to whistles and catcalls. One of my coworkers Kevin Moore declined to join in, and I soon found out why—he was interested in me. We started dating, but I broke up with him after only a couple of weeks because he kept trying to violate my Christian boundaries, which forbade premarital sex.

Kevin had seemed like a good match for me. He was quiet, especially when compared to some of our rowdy coworkers, and he was religious, or at least that's what he told me. He'd been raised in the Church of God in Christ, a Pentecostal church where some of

the members were known to speak in tongues just like Ruthanne did, and he claimed he'd been born again just two weeks before he'd met me.

I'd soon wonder if he'd made his new conversion up as a way of convincing me to date him. As it turned out, there was a lot I didn't know about Kevin, and very little of it was good. Before finding religion, he was known on the streets as "Profane," thanks to his foul mouth and shady activities. This was all news to me, delivered by Kevin's best friend, who also told me that Kevin wanted me back and that I'd better be careful because I would be in grave danger if I didn't agree to see him again.

On paper, it seems obvious that I should have refused to go out with Kevin again. But with Spencer's death and Antioch disbanding, I no longer had an adequate support system in place. I'd never been taught how to turn people down gently. And there was also some shame involved. I didn't want anyone to know that I'd allowed Kevin to do things to me sexually that I barely knew the terms for at the time. In the end, I thought I could fix him, and if I did that, I might be able to keep my place in Heaven and salvage my own dignity as well. I decided to give our relationship one more shot.

Over the course of the next four months, Kevin managed to detach himself from many of his former associates and focused on work and community college. He and I also engaged in just about every sex act you could possibly think of except male-on-female oral sex and the one I believed would send us both to Hell—vaginal sex. Somehow I managed to preserve my sacred virginity while satisfying his sexual appetite. None of it was very enjoyable for me.

My commitment to abstinence only seemed to make Kevin want me more. He must have asked me to marry him twenty-one times before we flew to Montana during Christmas break so he could ask for Larry's permission in person. At this point in my life I was still (for the most part) following the rules Larry and Ruthanne had imposed on me, and one of them was that if a man wanted to marry a woman he needed to ask the woman's father for permission first. By giving his consent, the father was transferring his authority over his daughter to the man who would be her husband. While Larry and Kevin went on a hike together,

I stayed behind and secretly hoped that Larry would tell Kevin that he wasn't worthy of me, just as Spencer had implied that Buddy Lee didn't deserve me. This would have provided me with an excellent excuse to end our relationship. But it didn't happen. Kevin seemed just as surprised as I was when Larry gave him his blessing. When Kevin asked me to marry him moments later, he didn't even have a ring. Larry's approval came with a dig directed at me. "She's the stubbornest woman I know," he told Kevin. "Good luck breaking her." The plan was for us to get married in June when I graduated from Belhaven so that my family could be there for the wedding and my graduation, but you know what they say about best-laid plans.

When I started dating Kevin, I was living in a duplex in West Jackson with Kim Stevenson, a Black woman in her late twenties. Kim and I both attended services at Voice of Calvary Fellowship, and we were both in committed relationships—she was dating a tall white guy from church named Will. Beyond that, Kim and I were an unlikely duo, opposite in nearly every way. I was artistic; she was practical. I was relaxed; she was particular, almost to the point of being obsessive-compulsive. I was from a lower-class family that lived on the side of a mountain; she was from a middle-class family that lived in the suburbs. When we went to church, I felt most comfortable hanging out with the Black parishioners; she preferred the company of the white folks. I also had a natural sense of rhythm, whereas Kim did not. I tried to teach her. We stood in our living room and practiced rocking back and forth while clapping at the same time. First we worked on the rocking part. Then we worked on the clapping. It took several weeks, but she was eventually able to do both at the same time. That I had rhythm while she did not, that she was uptight while I was chill, and that she dated white guys while I had dated two Black guys made us the butt of a running joke. People often said that I was a Black girl in a white body and Kim was a white girl in a Black body.

Our love lives were also quite different. She and Will liked to go on very romantic dates. They would pack a basket with sandwiches and strawberries and have a picnic somewhere. Kevin and I were a bit more prosaic in our dating habits. With our work schedules,

going on an actual date, like to dinner or a movie, was a luxury we simply didn't have. We were forced to content ourselves with brief physical encounters in places that were never completely private: his car or mine, the art studio I had on campus, the living room in his mom's house where he still lived, or the common area in the duplex I shared with Kim.

It was in the last location on March 27, 2000, that we engaged in roughly two hurried minutes of sex on the orange couch Kim had purchased from a nearby thrift store. Twenty-two years of suppressing all my lustful urges and sexual curiosities were erased in less time than it takes to listen to a song on the radio.

Terrified that we might have punched our ticket to Hell, I knew there was only one solution to the crisis we'd put ourselves in: a quickie marriage. We rushed to the courthouse, got the paperwork completed, and were married on March 31. I wore a black dress out of shame, and Kevin and I exchanged cross necklaces to symbolize our commitment to God. Only the pastor and his wife, Kevin's mother, and a couple of my college friends attended. Kevin and I spent one night at a three-star hotel—our honeymoon!—and both of us were back at work the following day. When we called Larry and Ruthanne the day after the ceremony to tell them we'd gotten married early, Larry thought it was an April Fool's joke.

None of the signs pointed toward Kevin and I having a long and happy marriage. Like the sex that had precipitated it, our marriage was unplanned, unwise, and unsatisfying. If Spencer had still been alive, I have no doubt I never would have married Kevin Moore.

Soon after Kevin and I were married, I got hit by an extremely painful kidney stone. Doubled over in agony, I had to crawl across the floor to get to the phone. Kemba, one of my friends from Belhaven, got to me before the ambulance did and drove me to the hospital. By the time we got there, I was so incapacitated she had to fill out the paperwork for me. As she handed in the forms, the receptionist started arguing with her about what she'd written down. The receptionist's confusion was understandable. On my Montana driver's license, I looked white and my name was Rachel Doležal. On my UPS employee ID, I looked Black and my name was Rachel Doležal. And on the intake form, Kemba had put down

my married name, Rachel Moore—and who knows how I appeared to this woman? Given the discrepancies, the receptionist couldn't figure out which race I belonged to or what my real name was.

When Kevin arrived, he became part of the ongoing dispute about my identity. The receptionist didn't seem to believe he was my husband. Meanwhile, I was writhing in agony, couldn't put two words together, and started vomiting over the side of the gurney. By the time a resolution had been reached and a doctor had taken a look at me, I'd already passed the kidney stone on my own.

One of the first things I did after receiving my diploma was ask Larry and Ruthanne when they planned on paying back the money they'd borrowed from me before I'd left for college. My great-grandmother, the one who was reputed to be Hunkpapa Lakota and who'd died when I was eight, had managed to squirrel away quite a bit of money over the course of her four marriages. When she'd died, she'd left each of her children $56,000, each of her grandchildren $28,000, and each of her great-grandchildren, including me and Josh, $14,000. Larry had told me that he and Ruthanne could save a bunch of money if they paid off their mortgage by the end of the year and the remaining balance on the loan was almost the same as the amount I'd inherited. He assured me that I would get more financial aid if I didn't have any assets and promised that he and Ruthanne would pay me back as soon as I was done with college. Now that day had arrived.

If I live a thousand years, I'll never forget Larry's response when I asked him about the money. "We already paid you back," he told me. "It cost more than that to raise you."

It felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. I'd upheld my end of the unwritten agreement that bound us together. I'd tended the garden, picked apples, canned food, hunted elk, butchered chickens, collected eggs, and scrubbed the bathroom floor, and in return I'd been rewarded with what? A roof over my head and three meals a day. I'd worked just as hard to make my own money and had always been allowed to keep it. When I loaned Larry and Ruthanne my inheritance, I expected the same treatment.

Yet Larry had the gall to insist it had been otherwise: *We already paid you back.*

If I ever wanted anything that wasn't considered absolutely necessary during my childhood, I'd had to pay for it myself. Harvesting and bagging an entire field of potatoes might have earned me a fountain soda or a candy bar. I even helped pay for some of my younger siblings' adoption expenses. I'd worked nonstop, forgoing any sense of a normal childhood, much less any free-spirited teenage years.

And yet: *It cost more than that to raise you.*

Being betrayed by one's parents always comes as a shock. All I ever wanted was for them to love me, and I remained hopelessly optimistic long after it had become clear that that was not the case. After deluding myself into thinking that Larry and Ruthanne loved me and Josh equally—or even loved me at all—I now knew the truth. Any trust I had in them dissolved. From that day forward, I stopped calling him "Papa" and her "Mama," and started referring to them only by their given names. I now viewed them not as my parents but merely as two people who'd helped raise me. The distance that lay between us came with a silver lining: now that I was free of their judgment and control, I could relax and be my true self. But the newfound sense of freedom I enjoyed didn't last very long.

Kevin knew that I'd always dreamed of moving to DC and going to Howard University, but when I told him I wanted to apply to grad school there, Kevin said he didn't want to go, complaining that I would be taking him away from his mom and everything he knew—he'd never left the state of Mississippi. Eventually, he relented.

Unlike the hospital in Mississippi where I passed the kidney stone (and other primarily white institutions that require detailed information about race and ethnicity), Howard didn't have a box on the application for its graduate Master of Fine Arts program asking me to identify my race. The university's mission was clearly explained by the motto listed on its website at the time: "We exist to promote Black values." I, of course, was completely on board with that. I wanted to go to Howard so badly it was the only grad school I applied to, so you can imagine my excitement when I got in. I was even more thrilled when the chair of the art department, Winston Kennedy, upon seeing my academic records from

Belhaven and my growing portfolio of artwork, offered me a full scholarship and a teaching assistant (TA) position.

With no money to fly there, I hadn't visited Howard before I applied. Why bother? I didn't need to inspect the dorm rooms or walk through The Yard to confirm what I already knew: this was my dream school, the Black Harvard, the Mecca. Having never set foot on campus before, the day I arrived at Howard was especially thrilling for me. Here, Blackness came in every shape, size, and hue, and I immediately felt at home.

I'll never forget my first visit to the Gallery of Art. Established in 1928, the gallery contained a permanent collection that featured the works of some of my favorite Black artists such as Henry Ossawa Tanner, Robert Scott Duncanson, and Edmonia Lewis. In awe of the content of their work and the mastery of their technique, I admired them more than Michelangelo, Vincent van Gogh, or Pablo Picasso and was eager to have my artwork critiqued by those who revered them as much as I did. I was just as excited to be in a place that's considered by many to be the epicenter of Black education, philosophy, and culture. Even though Howard was one of the leading HBCUs in the country and its student body was almost entirely Black, I wasn't trying to be some sort of racial pioneer by going there.* It was simply the best fit for me, as my art focused on the Black experience and racial and social justice.

People at Howard had all sorts of ideas about my ethnicity. In an interesting evolution, some HBCUs now have more white students than Black ones—Bluefield State College in Bluefield, West Virginia, for example, is 90 percent white—but Howard has remained steadfastly Black, and because of that, many people assumed I was, too.

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* Earning that distinction would have been impossible anyway. Howard's founder, General Oliver Howard, was actually a white man, its first graduating class was entirely white, and the university has never rejected applicants based on the color of their skin. If you're looking for a true pioneer, try the "grandfather of the restorative justice movement," Howard Zehr, who in 1966 became the first white student to graduate from Morehouse College.

Others, however, upon first seeing me, assumed I was white—and with good reason. Even though I was fulfilling a dream by attending Howard, my evolution toward Blackness actually took a step back during this time because Kevin disapproved of the fact that I didn't mind—even preferred—being seen as Black or biracial. He didn't understand why I had such an affinity for Blackness and why I felt more comfortable in the Black community than the white one. He also made it clear that he preferred my hair to be straight—and bleached blonde—and forbade me from wearing braids or Black hairstyles. It saddened me and made my efforts to blend in and socialize with my peers on campus more difficult, but I acquiesced. I was still operating under the belief that God's law required me to submit to male authority, and if I didn't, I wouldn't go to Heaven. Now that I was married I needed to yield to my husband's will, even if that meant burying my own thoughts, feelings, and identity.

Kevin's worldview sprang from a poverty-stricken childhood in all-Black West Jackson, Mississippi. He'd grown up in a cockroach-infested home, where the kitchen sink was propped up on bricks, the bathroom sink was permanently clogged, and the shower had to be turned on and off with pliers. As a consequence, he'd come to equate poverty with Blackness and to idolize the rich white people he saw on television. He wasn't the only Black child to think this way.

The "White is Right" narrative is so ingrained in our culture most white people don't even notice it. That most of the actors on the television shows we watch are white (a situation that was even more skewed during the 1980s and 90s), most of the people sporting Rolexes and driving Mercedes-Benzes in the advertisements we're bombarded with are white, and most of the faces on the covers of the magazines we read are white casts whiteness as the norm, if not the pinnacle of beauty and success.

Inroads are starting to be made. TV shows with Black leading characters or predominantly Black casts, such as *Black-ish*, *Scandal*, *Queen Sugar*, and *Empire*, have become more common and offer more nuanced approaches to discussing Black culture while addressing contemporary hot-button issues Black families face

on a daily basis. But when Kevin was growing up, there weren't any shows on television like them. From watching the shows that were popular at the time, he saw two very different worlds—the poor Black one he came from and the rich white one he saw on the screen—and if he had to pick one, who would choose poverty?

The world outside his home only confirmed this polarity. His dad owned a small company that built pools for rich white folks, and whenever Kevin tagged along with his father and saw the expensive homes in North Jackson with their manicured lawns and luxury pools, it only reinforced the idea that whiteness equals success. Growing up with hard-packed dirt for a front yard and a house with extreme plumbing issues, Kevin came to see the Black world as something to flee from and the white one as something to run toward. In short, he viewed whiteness as being superior to Blackness. Mental health professionals call this "psychological misorientation," and those who suffer from it often get called "Oreos"—Black on the outside and white on the inside.

Equating whiteness with success and beauty, Kevin would have liked nothing more than to live in a white suburban neighborhood and drive a Toyota Camry, a car popular with Jackson's white population. He also said Black girls were "nasty" and "had attitudes," and although he'd dated a few of them, he preferred dating white girls. Before me, he'd dated one named Misty, who he referred to as "Spray Bottle." (Misty, mist, spray, spray bottle—get it?)

With my light skin and college education, I appeared to be the perfect woman for Kevin, but, as it turned out, I was a little too Black for his tastes. Not only did he discourage me from wearing my hair in braids or other Black hairstyles, he also dissuaded me from sitting in the sun, preferring my skin to be as pale as it could possibly be. He frequently urged me to speak and act "whiter" and often complained about my figure. "You know a white woman ain't got no business having a big butt like that," he'd say to me. Nicole Kidman was his standard of beauty, and he encouraged me to do everything I could to look more like her. It saddened me that he didn't find beauty and pride in Black culture and consciousness, but I was his wife and I'd been raised to believe that I had no choice but to submit to his authority, so that's what I did.

Being forced to look white while wanting to be seen and socialize as Black was very confusing for me. I found myself ping-ponging back and forth across the color line based on the perceptions of others while also having to act the part of a proper and submissive wife. Lost in this confusion was any sense of personal agency I might have possessed. Instead of making me feel like I was a part of something, my appearance made me feel misunderstood, alien, other. Learning that a Black man could be, culturally and philosophically, as white as any white man was a painful lesson for me. The momentary freedom I'd enjoyed after distancing myself from Larry and Ruthanne was now gone. As far as the evolution of my racial identity was concerned, marrying Kevin had catapulted me all the way back to square one.

One Sunday at church we heard a sermon in which birth control pills were referred to as "early term abortions." Kevin immediately insisted I go off the pill, and before I'd completed my first semester of graduate school I got pregnant. I was very excited, even though I knew it was going to make many aspects of my life much harder. I was prepared for my sleep to be disrupted and for standing for long periods of time to be more difficult. I didn't anticipate interactions with one of my professors, Al Smith, becoming so awkward. Before I got pregnant, Al was always very friendly to me; after, I felt he became inappropriately so.

To distance myself from him, I started working at home more often, but running into him on campus was inevitable. As I was walking down the hallway one day, he called to me from his office, "How's our baby doing?" I stopped and glared at him. "It's not 'our' baby. It's my and my husband's baby." I went out of my way to avoid him after that, but when Winston Kennedy vacated his position as chair of the Art Department during the summer after my first year and Al was named to replace him, that strategy became much more difficult.

That summer I worked for Howard's Young Artist Academy, a recruitment effort designed to bolster the university's art program. It attracted talented high school juniors, who lived on campus the summer before their senior years, studied drawing, painting, and design, and built up their portfolios so they'd be more likely to

earn an art scholarship for college. I'd just finished teaching some of these kids the basics of matting and framing in August 2001, when I ducked into Al's office to double-check that my paperwork was in order for the upcoming semester. I shouldn't have been concerned at all. I had a 4.0 GPA and had won nearly all the awards at the juried graduate student art show at the end of my first year. But I wanted to make sure all the i's had been dotted and all the t's crossed.

They weren't.

I discovered that my scholarship and teaching position had been rescinded. Al told me that because my due date was fast approaching—I was seven months pregnant at the time—I "needed to spend time with the baby" and "didn't need to be going to school with a new baby."* I was stunned. I'd been told that my scholarship could only be taken away if I got poor grades, and I'd worked hard to ensure that never happened. My small family depended on my support. Money was always tight while we were living in DC. To make ends meet, I worked a variety of jobs. In addition to my TA position, which was our main source of income, I also braided hair, sold art, and catered meals during the holidays. It still wasn't enough. I had to take out student loans, which we used to live off of and pay for Kevin's tuition at Northern Virginia Community College, where he was studying to be a physical therapist assistant. Without my TA job and scholarship, I would never be able to pay tuition, our bills would go unpaid, and I'd be forced to drop out of school.

In a bid to get my scholarship back and keep my family afloat, I sought the counsel of an attorney, who told me the university claimed that I'd neglected to fill out the proper paperwork to renew my scholarship and TA position for another year. That I had to fill out any paperwork—or that such paperwork even existed—was news to me. I hadn't filled out any forms prior to enrolling for my first semester, nor, I believed, had any of the other graduate students who'd received similar deals.

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* As stated in the complaint I eventually filed against Smith and his employer, Howard University.

Given some of the recent awkward encounters I'd endured on campus with Al Smith, I felt like I'd been discriminated against on the basis of my gender, more specifically my pregnancy, but my attorney advised me to broaden the scope of the lawsuit I was considering to include race because he thought it would be more effective. He also advised me to sue for the loss of a potential post-graduate instructor position, should the suit delay or prevent my graduating from the university. I loved Howard and hated that I'd been forced into the position of having to play the race card and sue the university of my dreams, but I put my family first. In the end I agreed to do it because we were in such dire straits financially and, with me in the third trimester of my pregnancy, we needed all the help we could get.

Just a few days before classes started, my attorney sent the university a letter stating that it couldn't prevent me from registering for classes while the lawsuit was being litigated, so I was able to continue my studies. The big question at that point was, who was going to pay for those studies? After a lot of back and forth that included mediation meetings and depositions before my complaint was officially filed in August 2002, I ultimately lost the lawsuit after the judge ruled she could find no evidence that I'd been discriminated against.* But when the university never billed me for tuition for my final year of grad school and granted me another TA position at the start of my last semester, to me it felt like a victory (and an admission on the part of the university that it wasn't blameless in the matter and hoped it would go away quietly). While I was never able to prove to the court that Howard University had forced me to work in a "hostile work environment," I know what I felt, and that was that I'd been discriminated against for reasons other than my ability and performance. I knew going in that the lawsuit was going to be difficult to win. Workplace discrimination is often subtle and nearly impossible to prove. If

* My lawyer filed an appeal in February 2004, in hopes of at least recouping his legal expenses from the original case; unfortunately, the appellate court affirmed the lower court's decision and dismissed the case in June 2005.

I'd carried a voice recorder on my person at all times and been able to record some of the comments directed at me, things might have turned out differently.

The lawsuit added another layer of distance between me and some of my colleagues. My second year at Howard was filled with awkward and tense moments, but my reinstatement allowed me to stay on track academically. To earn my degree, I needed to complete sixty hours of coursework, and nearly all the hours I devoted to painting, sculpting, and teaching during my final semester were spent sitting down. During the first trimester of my pregnancy, the baby had started to separate from the womb, so, technically, I was supposed to be on bed rest. I tried to stay off my feet as much as possible but couldn't afford to take any time off—not with my scholarship hanging in the balance.

Franklin was born during the first semester of my second and final year at Howard. He was two weeks overdue, and my labor lasted from Wednesday night to Sunday morning—ninety-four hours! I was unconscious for four hours after Franklin was born, knocked out by sheer exhaustion, and by the time I came around he was in the neonatal intensive care unit. With the long labor and the visit to the NICU, Franklin's birth cost more than $24,000, and my student health insurance only covered $1,000 of it. I wouldn't finish paying off the debt until he was six years old.

Raising a baby while finishing grad school was challenging but, given my proclivity for industriousness, I never let it overwhelm me. By being organized and working hard, I kept up with my schoolwork and soon reached the final step I needed to take before graduating: defending my thesis before a committee. After filing the lawsuit, I'd switched my major from painting to sculpture, and for my thesis I incorporated both art forms as well as drawing and collage. All the pieces I made for my thesis questioned the notion of light being good and dark being bad, particularly when it came to the color of one's skin. While I was at Belhaven, I'd noticed that the portraits I'd made of Black women and children were more popular with collectors than those I'd done of Black men, and I wondered, as an artist, how I could create more empathy

with the Black male figure. To challenge myself and, hopefully, break down stereotypes and prejudice, I used my thesis to depict the inner journey of the Black man and humanize him in a way that would connect with every demographic, white and Black, male and female, young and old.

The pieces I created were well received by the thesis committee. When I graduated *summa cum laude*, the idea that I might actually be able to make a living selling my artwork began to seem possible. I'd already begun to be commissioned to create art for various patrons. One of them was Robert, a general in the U.S. Army who I'd met at church. He asked me to make him a drawing illustrating the history of his Black fraternity. Despite the $8.99 Kmart wedding ring I wore on my finger, I began to suspect that Robert was interested in me romantically. My suspicions were confirmed when I dropped off his drawing at the Pentagon and he snuck a kiss in the parking lot.

When I told Kevin what had happened, he was irate. He talked about murdering Robert and said that we needed to move or else he was going to end up in prison for killing the man. Kevin had been saying for a while that he wanted us to move "away from Black culture" and that he didn't want Black guys hitting on me, so when Robert kissed me, it gave Kevin the perfect excuse to insist that we pull up stakes and relocate. In the summer of 2003, he found a job working as a physical therapist assistant at the hospital in Bonners Ferry, Idaho, a lily-white town on the banks of the Kootenai River less than an hour's drive from where I'd grown up. I had no choice but to go. As much as my identity had evolved over the course of the past six years living in the racial diversity of the South, I suddenly found myself right back where I'd started.

Chapter Sixteen

Emancipation

IN THE ISOLATION OF RURAL IDAHO, the tension between me and Kevin escalated. Early in our relationship, I believed that I could inspire him to embrace Black culture and fall in love with African history and Afrocentric aesthetics, and that in the process he'd come to understand me better and love himself more. But after moving to Idaho any hope I'd once possessed disappeared.

Our relationship had always been a one-sided affair, with Kevin's values taking precedence over mine. I was expected to be a submissive wife, while he ruled with an iron fist. I wasn't allowed to have anything that belonged entirely to me. I didn't have my own cell phone. I didn't even have my own email account. He insisted that I share my password with him, and whenever I protested he'd use what happened with Robert, the general who'd kissed me, to justify his need to monitor my correspondence.

Kevin also wouldn't let me go out on my own. The only times I left the house were Friday afternoons, when he'd accompany me to the grocery store after he got home from work, and Sunday mornings, when we went to church. "You're a silly little girl," he often told me. "Some guy is going to hit on you and you aren't going to know what to do." As stifling as this treatment was, I didn't feel like I had a choice but to bend to his will. After all, he was my husband. Married life in Bonners Ferry soon became every bit as confining and oppressive as my childhood in Troy.

Kevin's insistence that I never leave the house alone extended to work. He refused to let me get a job. His mandate was reinforced

by my upbringing. Larry and Ruthanne had taught me that mothers who worked were abandoning their children at godless daycares. Careers were for men, and women were expected to set everything aside for their husbands and children. Kevin let me do art as a hobby, but because everything I created focused on the Black experience it was always misunderstood by people who still thought of me as white, including my husband. In Idaho, my creativity shriveled to a husk, and I struggled to produce any work. I'd barely made any new pieces since completing the MFA program at Howard. A year after graduating *summa cum laude*, I was now a barely coping stay-at-home mom searching for inspiration in the sticks of Idaho, my career path having come to a sudden dead end.

Franklin, now a toddler at two, helped me keep my head above water. He was the center of my world, the main source of joy in my life, my reason for waking up in the morning. Like me, he was expected to submit unquestioningly to Kevin's authority, and having to observe that dynamic was difficult for me.

Franklin didn't like to eat meat when he was little. His favorite breakfast was "hot leaves"—greens such as rainbow Swiss chard that he'd helped me pick from the garden and that I cooked the way he liked it best, boiled and flavored with just a pinch of salt. One morning I placed a piece of bacon on his highchair's tray, but he was only interested in tearing it into little pieces. "Stop playing with your food, boy!" Kevin yelled before shoving an entire piece of bacon into Franklin's mouth while Franklin protested by pounding his chubby fists on the tray. On another occasion Kevin forced a bite of sausage into Franklin's mouth, and when Franklin refused to swallow, Kevin grabbed a rolling pin and waved it in the air like a club. Terrified, Franklin started crying, and the sausage fell out of his mouth. Hoping to defuse the situation before it got any worse, I removed Franklin from his high chair and told Kevin that Franklin needed to go potty.

These sorts of violent outbursts were common in our household. When Kevin and I argued, he often threatened to paralyze me from the neck down if I ever betrayed him. I took this warning seriously because as a physical therapist assistant he'd worked with numerous quadriplegics and knew exactly which vertebrae

they'd injured. Adding to my fear, Kevin kept two loaded guns in our bedroom closet, where he could easily get to them if need be. I was so scared whenever he came home my body stiffened, my teeth clenched, and I could barely eat. Anorexia led to bulimia, and I grew precariously thin. I went from wearing a size six or eight to a size zero and experienced an equally extreme nosedive in my health.

Into this toxic environment stepped Josh. I hadn't seen him since he'd visited me in DC right after Kevin and I'd gotten married. During that visit he'd apologized for molesting me when we were younger, and I'd forgiven him just as I'd been taught to do in church. Although I was still wary of him, we'd kept in touch, emailing each other every so often. When he mentioned he was going to be driving with his girlfriend Brennan from the University of Nebraska, where he was studying to get his PhD in American literature, to the Pacific Northwest, I invited them to stay with us at our place in Bonners Ferry.

I was in the kitchen making dinner when Josh's white Buick pulled into the driveway and he and Brennan stepped out of the car. While I'd been cooking, cleaning, and taking care of Franklin, Kevin, as was his habit, was using the computer in the basement. I called down to him, letting him know that our guests had arrived. He came upstairs to say hello, but it was up to me to show them to their rooms and explain the sleeping arrangements to them.

Our house had three bedrooms—one for me and Kevin, one for Franklin, and one for guests—but when I'd told Kevin that Josh was bringing along a girlfriend, he'd insisted they sleep in separate rooms. "This is a Christian household," he'd said to me. "We don't allow fornication." To appease him, I moved Franklin's toddler bed into our bedroom and set up an air mattress in Franklin's room for Brennan to sleep on, while Josh slept in the guest room. It felt strange imposing Christian morality on Josh, as he'd strayed far away from the faith we'd been raised in, bouncing between agnosticism and atheism, screwing women he wasn't married to, drinking, and smoking, but I had little choice. I apologized and shrugged to let him and Brennan know that it was Kevin's decision and I couldn't do anything about it.

The conversation at dinner that night was forced and awkward. Josh and Kevin had only hung out twice before, and during the first occasion in DC, Josh had made his objections to my life choices known, telling me he didn't think marrying a Black man was a good idea. "Marriage is hard enough," he'd said. "Race will just complicate an already difficult situation."

I didn't consider my marriage to Kevin to be an "interracial marriage," but Josh did. He believed that race would be the undoing of my relationship with my husband. But I knew that Kevin's Blackness wasn't the cause of our disconnect; if anything, it was his *disdain* for Blackness that created so much distance between us.

Besides a relationship with me, Kevin and Josh didn't have much in common. As a consequence, they didn't have anything to talk about. During dinner that evening, I did my best to keep the conversation going, but quickly exhausted the main topics of interest in the small world I inhabited: the food we were eating, the house we lived in, and Franklin's growth and development. Josh filled in the gaps with animated discourses about life in grad school, poems he'd recently written, and his eagerness to show off the area he'd grown up in to Brennan.

The next morning, as Kevin was leaving the house to go to work, he bumped into Josh and Brennan on the deck. They were smoking, which Kevin considered sinful, so I braced myself for an explosion, but he only asked them what their plans for the day were.

"I was thinking we might all go up to Yaak Falls for a swim," said Josh.

"That would be really fun," I said. "I'd love to go. I'll get Franklin's life jacket."

Kevin shot me a look of disbelief before leveling his gaze at Josh. "She doesn't go anywhere without me. That goes for my son, too." He turned back to me. "You're not to leave this house until I get home."

I nodded and handed Kevin the lunch I'd made him.

As Kevin walked to his car, Josh looked at me incredulously. "Seriously?"

"It's fine," I said. "I'm sure you and Brennan will have a great time."

Josh shook his head. "How do you live like this? You're too special for this."

"No, I'm not," I muttered.

My heart nearly skipped a beat from the impact of my own words. At that moment, I could see just how removed I'd become from my goals, my ambitions, myself. I'd lost all hope and desire and traded in all my dreams of changing the world, and for what? To be a stay-at-home mom? A submissive wife? All the energy I'd devoted to conforming to what Larry and Ruthanne wanted (religious obedience) and what Kevin wanted (a white wife) had left me feeling dead inside. I'd cut off oxygen to the parts of my life that didn't fit with Kevin's narrow worldview, and while doing that may have saved my marriage, it was killing me. I was doing little more than existing. That I felt so lifeless scared me, but with this fear came hope, for that was the moment I began to wake up and feel like I might be able to start living again.

Josh was so disturbed by the state of my marriage he addressed the issue in several emails after he and Brennan left. In one, he wrote that he had "never witnessed a civil conversation between [me] and Kevin, even about groceries," and was concerned that I wasn't happy. In another, he wrote, "Thankfully, there hasn't been any physical violence, or you would have no choice but to consider divorce." If he only knew.

Kevin was home from work the day Josh sent the latter email, and he intercepted it before I had a chance to read and delete it, as had become my habit. Livid, he yelled for me to come downstairs. I picked up Franklin and carried him on my hip as I walked down to the basement. The room pulsed with Kevin's rage. He said he never wanted to see Josh's face again and if he did he would kill him for planting ideas about divorce in my head. When I tried to calm him, he lunged at me, and as he did I wrapped Franklin in my arms and turned to shield his body with mine. Kevin grabbed the back of my hair and threw me across the room. My side and back slammed into the wooden cupboards that ran along the floor, as my body curled into a ball to protect Franklin from the impact.

As I checked to make sure Franklin was all right, Josh's words broke through the fog in my head: *You'd have no choice but to*

consider divorce. Up to this point I'd accepted the abuse I'd received at Kevin's hands to be an atonement for my sins and endured it out of guilt and stubbornness, but now that he'd involved Franklin I could no longer stand by and take it. I had to find a way out. I memorized our bank account numbers, packed a suitcase, hid the guns, and devised a plan. I would rent a U-Haul truck and take off with Franklin and all my artwork—essentially, all that was precious to me. I was terrified about the prospect of leaving, but staying was even more frightening. I tried to take off in the car on two separate occasions, but both times Kevin heard me sneak out and got to me before I could get Franklin in his car seat and drive away.

The tension in our house was like an obnoxious guest who'd long overstayed his welcome but is related to you so you can't kick him out. It lingered into the fall. One Tuesday morning in September I was washing dishes in the kitchen and Kevin got upset about something as he was walking out the door to go to work. We got into an argument. He swung at me, but I managed to avoid the blow. Franklin, who'd been playing on the kitchen floor, stepped between us. "Stop it, Daddy!" he yelled. "Don't hurt Mommy!" Kevin kicked him out of the way, and Franklin went flying across the linoleum and split his forehead open on a cupboard door. As routine as this sort of abuse had become, Franklin had never been hurt before.

A grim line had been crossed.

As scared as I was about going to Hell for failing to be a submissive wife, I was willing to do it to protect my child. While Kevin was at work, I snuck into town and reported the incident at the Child Protective Services office, showing them the injury on Franklin's forehead. After explaining what had happened that morning and how it was part of a pattern of violence and abuse, the social worker I talked to told me I had one month to get Franklin out of the house or else he'd be removed and put into foster care.

I'd wanted to leave Kevin for some time but had lacked the courage and self-esteem to actually do it. My love for Franklin made up for those deficiencies. Now that he'd been hurt I had no choice. I went straight home and forged an escape plan, while being

careful to cover my tracks. Whenever I called the victim advocate CPS had assigned me, I remembered to delete the call log on our land line. Any time I used the internet, I erased the search history afterward. And any time I wrote an email, I'd tell the receiver not to email me back, and then I'd delete the copy of the message I'd sent.

I needed to go somewhere I'd be safe, but when I appealed to Josh he relied on an Iraq War reference to say no, telling me he wasn't "going to be George Bush" and intervene in such a volatile situation. Larry and Ruthanne were now living in South Africa, but even if they'd been in the country I wouldn't have bothered to call them. Which left "Uncle" Vern. The week before I left Kevin, I'd called Uncle Dan, told him about the escalating abuse, and asked if Franklin and I could stay with him. As a gay man, he was an outsider like me, so I thought he might sympathize with my situation, and he did. He offered me his place as a safe house while I figured out my next move. He warned me that he was about to fly out of the country to visit Larry and Ruthanne but assured me that Vern would take care of us while he was gone.

On October 24, 2004, three days after Franklin turned three, I executed my escape plan. I told Paul and Tami, friends from church, that my marriage to Kevin had hit a rough patch and I needed to leave with Franklin so I could think and pray. I asked them to come to our house after church, and when they arrived I called Kevin upstairs and read him a statement I'd written. After explaining why I needed some time away from him, I picked up my suitcase and with Franklin on my hip headed toward the door.

"You aren't taking my son anywhere," he said, grabbing Franklin's arm in a grip so tight it made Franklin cry. "I don't care what you do, but he stays with me."

"Then let Paul and Tami take him," I said before doing the hardest thing I've ever had to do in my entire life—leaving my child behind as I walked out the door.

I called the police from a pay phone at a gas station, but the officers who arrived at our house told me they couldn't take a child from one parent and give him to the other parent without a court order. Concerned about Franklin's safety, I called Paul and Tami every thirty minutes. Finally, after three and a half miserable

hours, they picked up their landline and let me know Franklin was with them. My heart lifted. I filed for an emergency protection order, and as soon as it was granted, I gave a copy of it to Paul and Tami to protect them from Kevin's wrath and took Franklin straight to "Uncle" Vern's place.

When we arrived, Vern was feeding the pheasants, peacocks, emus, and other exotic birds he raised. Besides being a bird lover, he was also an expert landscaper. With streams cascading over waterfalls, winding around perfectly manicured patches of lawn and beds filled with flowering plants, and spilling into ponds full of koi and frogs, their property was often featured in the annual Coeur d'Alene Garden Tour. More importantly to me, it was isolated and well protected. Getting there involved a long and complicated drive, and the driveway had an inconspicuous entrance obscured by a bend in the road. If anyone did come down the driveway, Dan and Vern's German shepherd Bo would alert us. Before I went to bed that night, Vern handed me an aluminum baseball bat and told me he'd keep a rifle close to his bed.

Franklin and I stayed with Dan and Vern until we moved into an apartment in Coeur d'Alene in early 2005. As supportive as my uncles were, they were the exception. Everyone else in my family and most of my Christian friends thought divorce was an unforgivable sin. When I told them my plans, I was met with scorn. "God hates divorce," they told me. And, "Jesus can forgive." They didn't mean *they* would forgive me for getting a divorce; they were saying that, if only I tried a little harder, *I* could forgive Kevin. Any attempts I made to get them to understand what it was like to live in fear for your safety and that of your child fell on deaf ears. Believing that God is on the side of the husband in any domestic conflict, they supported Kevin, who they'd embraced as a born-again Christian, even though they hardly knew him and had known me my entire life. I knew that divorcing Kevin would mean losing my entire family and many of my friends, yet I was willing to do it because I loved my son more than anything else and believed it was best for him.

The divorce was finalized in April 2005, with me getting to keep Franklin most but not all of the time. I was on my own at the

age of twenty-six with very little in the way of steady employment and a three-year-old to support. And yet I felt liberated! The prevailing mindset in the house I grew up in and the one I shared with Kevin—that if it's not in the Bible you can't do it—had precluded me from ever fully discovering or claiming my own identity. Living in a new city where no one knew me, I was free to express who I was on my own terms—religiously, sexually, and racially.

I stopped attending church for the first time in my life and began a process of redefining my faith in more spiritual terms. Up until that point, the power of religious guilt had me firmly in its grasp and the possibility of eternal punishment was omnipresent. I often found myself atoning for merely existing and hating my body and myself. Now, no longer! After a year of therapy, during which I was diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from all the physical and sexual abuse I'd experienced in my life, I started dating, men and women, and I once again embraced my inclination toward Black aesthetics. Perched on the edge of a picturesque lake, Coeur d'Alene is a resort town with an avid beach scene. I often sunbathed on the shores of the lake during the summer, and my skin darkened as a result. I didn't get melanin-stimulation shots or take drugs or surgically alter my body or skin as some would later suggest. I simply liked to get my "glow" on in the summer and keep a tan as long as I could in the winter. I also started expressing myself again through hairstyles, wearing my hair in box braids, Senegalese twists, and faux locs.

With the braids and my natural tan came the same questions I'd been bombarded with in college: "So, what are you?" and "Are you white or Black?" and "What are you mixed with?" I began answering more vaguely and letting people make their own judgments. I stopped allowing other people to dictate my identity or make me feel guilty about who I was, and when they made assumptions about my ethnic origins, I made no effort to set them straight. Now for the first time in my life, I was truly owning who I was: a woman who was free, self-reliant, and, yes, Black.

There was just one hitch. In Idaho, it's the court's general policy to make divorced parents sharing custody of a child remain within a two-hour drive of each other to prevent drop-offs and pickups

from being overly burdensome. With Kevin still in Bonners Ferry, my choices as far as where I wanted to live next were extremely limited. Coeur d'Alene was the closest place to Bonners Ferry that could be called a city and, thanks to Dan and Vern, it was a place where I felt safe, so I decided to settle there. As happy as I was to be free of Kevin, the solution came with a steep price: to retain my custodial rights, I had to remain in this cultural backwater for the next fifteen years.

Chapter Nineteen

Adopting a New Dad II

TO SUPPORT FRANKLIN AND MYSELF after the divorce, I had to rely on the poverty-induced resourcefulness I'd developed as a child. I worked in the photofinishing lab at Uncle Dan's camera shop on and off for a year and a half. I apprenticed as a sushi chef at Bonsai Bistro, an Asian fusion restaurant located just across the street from the Coeur d'Alene Resort. And I converted styling Black women's hair from a hobby to a job.

A walking billboard for braids, twists, and locs, I got many of my clients from chance encounters in public. In the summer, I liked to wear braids and dreads as carefree, low-maintenance, beach-ready options. In the winter, I preferred a weave because wefts insulate the scalp, negating the need for a hat in the chilly Northwest. When Black women saw me in the grocery store or bumped into me on the street, they often complimented my hair and asked where I'd gotten it done. Most were impressed to hear that I'd styled it myself, a habit I'd adopted to save money, and asked if I could do theirs. These conversations led to a steady stream of clients and a small supplemental income for my family.

My extensive background in art ultimately pulled me—just barely—above the poverty line, although not quite the way I'd imagined. After I finished the fountain Rodney had helped me put together, I was commissioned to paint a mural and sold a few small collages of landscapes at exhibits in Coeur d'Alene and Spokane, but the money I made from these sales wasn't even enough to pay for my art supplies and framing. There simply wasn't a market for

Black art in North Idaho. To me, art is a conversation, and without an audience to respond to my work, continuing to put images into the world that might never be purchased or even seen didn't make much sense. Besides, I had a kid to support. Bread and butter were more important than canvases and paint.

As much experience as I had making art, it was an easy transition when I started teaching it. I worked as a full-time art and science teacher at a Christian prep school as well as a substitute art teacher at a magnet elementary school. In 2005, I made the jump to North Idaho College (NIC), where, as an adjunct professor, I taught illustration and design classes and, starting the following year, an art history and art appreciation course. Because I received the lowest possible pay and no benefits, I took on a similar role at Eastern Washington University (EWU) in 2007. Between the two colleges, I taught full-time but at a lower rate of pay and with less job security than full professors.

The first course I taught at EWU was African and African American Art History, which had been revived after a five-year hiatus created by a lack of qualified teachers. I tried but failed to keep the course alive by cross-listing it with the Africana Studies Program, a department I was completely enamored with. I loved stopping by Monroe Hall, where the program was based. The faculty who had offices there and the students who could be found studying in the lobby were all Black. It was like the Black table at Belhaven, a miniature Howard, and it quickly became my favorite hangout spot on campus.

My interest in Africana Studies was well-received. The following year, the Africana education director, Dr. Bob Bartlett, wanted to expand the program, and, after looking over my résumé and taking note of the scholarly research I'd done and the significant number of graduate credits I'd obtained—from an HBCU no less—he found several courses in his department I was qualified to teach, including African American Culture and African History. During my time at EWU, a succession of program directors came and went, but I stayed and flourished, writing the curriculum for such classes as The Black Woman's Struggle, African American History: From 1877 to Present, and Introduction to Race and Culture Studies.

For me, the most enjoyable aspect of working at NIC and EWU was getting to interact with the students. I mentored several of them and always looked forward to the "Aha!" moments they had when discovering African history's impact on humanity's broader story, the contemporary realities of racism, and the science that proves race to be a social construct with no basis in biology. At NIC, only twelve out of the approximately six thousand students were Black, but in my mind that was an argument for—not against—creating a Black Student Union. This demographic of students was so small and isolated it desperately needed a support group. After getting the Black students on campus excited about the idea of forming a BSU, I guided them through the process of making it an official student organization. Those offended by the idea soon made their opposition known, including "Anonymous," who wrote a letter to the editor of the *Coeur d'Alene Press* expressing the opinion that Black people shouldn't be allowed to congregate alone because they needed the civilizing influence of white people.

As much as I enjoyed working on these campuses, my two part-time teaching positions, even when combined, still didn't provide the salary or benefits of a full-time position, forcing me to take on a third job. In 2007, I got my foot in the door at the Human Rights Education Institute (HREI) by guiding an art series exploring children's responses to the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child. It went so well the executive director, KJ Torgerson, asked me to stay on. Under her watch, I organized exhibits and continued to work with kids. When Bob Bennett, NIC's former president, replaced her later that same year, he added to my list of duties, asking me to develop several new programs.

Bennett was an older white man who wasn't afraid to be politically incorrect. When the entrepreneur and philanthropist Greg Carr, whose million-dollar contribution helped launch the Human Rights Education Institute, paid a visit to HREI, Bennett introduced me to him by saying, "Isn't she sexy?" On another occasion during a board meeting he turned to HREI's secretary, Donna Cork, and asked, "Rachel's a colored gal, right?"

As disturbing as it was to have racist and sexist terminology used to describe me, I'd never felt more fulfilled than when I was

working at the HREI. If every step toward Blackness was a step away from whiteness, I was running full steam ahead. I was a Black-Is-Beautiful, Black liberation movement, fully conscious, woke soul sista. Finally allowed to bloom, I blossomed fast, going from an unknown adjunct instructor at a community college making sushi on the side to being a prominent civil rights leader and defender of human rights in the region. I didn't work for the Cause from the outside as a white ally, but from the inside as a Black leader, someone who was eager to not only model the philosophy of a great activist like Angela Davis but sport similarly textured hair as well.

I wasn't merely "passing" as a Black woman. Passing has existed in the United States as long as white people have oppressed people of color, which is to say for its entire history. Typically, it's been light-skinned Black people who have passed for white in an attempt to accrue the same advantages white people enjoyed: to acquire gainful employment, avoid discrimination, and preclude the possibility of being lynched. But why would a white person ever want to pass for Black when doing so would involve losing social and economic benefits? One reason: love. In perhaps the best-known example of white-to-Black passing, bestselling author and famed geologist Clarence King passed for a Black Pullman porter named James Todd in order to marry a Black woman named Ada Copeland. King died before his secret was discovered, but others who have made the same leap, including Reverend L. M. Fenwick, the pastor of an African Methodist Episcopal church in Milwaukee at the start of the twentieth century, reclaimed their original racial identity after being found out. My situation was different. Just as a transgender person might be born male but identify as female, I wasn't pretending to be something I wasn't but expressing something I already was. I wasn't passing as Black; I *was* Black, and there was no going back.

Living as a Black woman made my life infinitely better. It also made it infinitely harder, thanks to other people's racist perceptions of me. The Blacker I became—not just in the clothes I wore or the books I read but in terms of how I was being seen and treated—the more distant and isolated I felt from white people. It had taken

me a couple years after my divorce to stop feeling obligated to check WHITE on medical forms, and once I started claiming my identity and checking BLACK, any whiteness I possessed became invisible to the people collecting the forms and even to the doctors examining the most intimate parts of my body. Due to the higher rates of HIV in the local Black community—eight times higher for Black women than white women—nurses started testing me for it every time I went to the health clinic. While getting a bikini wax, I once had an esthetician complain about my "African American hair" as she struggled with a hair that refused to be removed. On another occasion a Latina beauty consultant described my eyelashes as "nappy." While driving, routine police stops took on a hostile feel, and I got so many traffic tickets I had to go to online driving school to keep my license.

The microaggressions I'd once worked so hard to protect my younger siblings from were now being directed at me. Countless strangers touched (or attempted to touch) my hair, commenting about its texture or asking bizarre questions about how often I washed it or whether I even did. While I was shopping in the produce section at Albertson's, a white man told me my hair looked like a mop. While listening to a lecture at HREI about human trafficking, a white lady sitting in the row behind me reached forward and patted my bare shoulder. "I've been looking at your skin all evening," she said, "and I just had to touch it. You people have such smooth skin." The list of racist comments and behavior I experienced could fill its own book. If I had enough energy at the time these incidents occurred, I would try to use them as teaching moments to educate people about their behavior, what they shouldn't do and why. If I didn't have the energy, I'd often throw out a flippant response. To people who asked, "Is that your *real* hair?" when I wore long faux dreadlocks, I'd say, "Some of it!" To those who asked how long I'd been growing my hair, I'd say, "My whole life!"

As wearying as experiencing the social stigma and hardship that comes with being Black was, I didn't regret it for a second. Beyond the police harassment and low social standing, I'd never been happier. To live as anyone but yourself is to live in a prison.

To live openly as yourself—in my case, not the self that Larry and Ruthanne had defined and attempted to shape but my own self-determined existence—is to be free.

When Bob Bennett stepped down from his position as HREI's executive director in 2008 to retire, he recommended to the board of directors that I replace him. His endorsement made sense, as he'd been subcontracting many of his duties to me, but his support came with a discouraging and disrespectful proviso. He suggested that in the future the position should be part-time and come with a much lower salary of $24,000. Much to my chagrin, the board agreed.

That I was young, poor, bisexual, nonreligious, Black, and female were undoubtedly factors in my being given such a lowball offer. According to the theory of intersectionality proposed by law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in the 1980s, all members of a group aren't treated equally. They're discriminated against to varying degrees according to their gender, race, religion, class, sexual orientation, age, and nationality, and all aspects of their identity are inextricably linked with one another. Because of this, certain individuals can be victims of multiple forms of discrimination at once, which meant I was six steps behind the older, rich, straight, religious white man I was tapped to replace.

Offended by the offer—every previous executive director, including Bennett, had made $70,000—I decided to negotiate. The board responded by keeping the position full-time and increasing the proposed salary to $36,000. When the secretary, Donna, who was white and had no higher education, heard the news, she threatened to quit. She told the board that she refused to make less money than me and to have to report to me. She proposed instead that we be made "co-directors," with her as "director of operations" and me picking any title other than executive director.

I wasn't pleased with the way Donna handled the situation, but I also understood. She had an abusive husband and was trying to figure out how to leave him. To do that, she needed to become more assertive and empowered and to make as much money as she could. Having been in her shoes, I wanted to support her, even if that meant I had to take a hit. As a survivor of past trauma, I

usually recognize when others are suffering and feel compelled to help them if I can.

I bit the bullet and accepted the board's revised proposal. As HREI's "director of education," my duties were nearly the same as those once performed by the executive director. In fact, Bob Bennett's job description had literally been copied and pasted onto mine. Meanwhile, Donna's role didn't change all that much—but her salary sure did. She was given a more than $10,000 raise.

I started working as HREI's director of education in November 2008. It was a heady time. That same month, Barack Obama became the first Black man to be elected president of the United States. Prior to his victory, forty-three presidents had occupied the Oval Office, and every single one of them had hailed from the same demographic: white and male. Obama ended that ignominious streak in emphatic fashion, obtaining 365 out of a possible 538 electoral college votes to defeat John McCain. For millions of Americans, Obama's presidency reignited a sense of hope that had nearly been extinguished by centuries of oppression. It was hailed in the media as a breakthrough, a repudiation, a national catharsis. In his victory speech at Chicago's Grant Park, he tapped into that hope, opening with these words: "If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer." The only ones who weren't cheering wildly were those weeping quietly.

Oh, how I wish I could have been in Chicago to hear Obama's speech or in DC two months later for his inauguration, but I couldn't afford the plane fare or the time away from my new job. Despite the way the board had treated me, I was determined to excel at HREI. I was only required to work thirty-six hours a week, but, fueled by passion and commitment, I often worked sixty or seventy, even though I didn't get paid for working overtime.

Some of those who regularly attended the programs I created were every bit as passionate about civil rights as I was. One of them was Albert Wilkerson, a retirement-age Black man who had

served as an Obama delegate in Idaho. He and I hit it off almost immediately. Despite his being nearly forty years older than me, we were alike in almost every other way. We enjoyed the same foods. We were both passionate about art and social justice. And we both enjoyed teaching others about Black history. One day, while talking about areas where Coeur d'Alene was deficient, Albert and I noted its failure to celebrate Juneteenth.

A portmanteau of "June" and "nineteenth," Juneteenth is a holiday that started in Texas to celebrate the end of slavery. Its origins hint at just how entrenched slavery was in the South (and how poor communications were at the time). Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation declared that all slaves in the Confederate states were to be freed starting January 1, 1863, but the news didn't arrive in the Lone Star State, where there were more than 250,000 slaves, until June 19, 1865. When Major General Gordon Granger and his Union soldiers landed in Galveston and informed its Black community that the war was over and they were now free, former slaves danced in the streets. The celebration became an annual tradition in Texas after that, although some cities banned it from their public parks. The Black population of Houston and Austin responded by raising money, buying land, and creating so-called Emancipation Parks. The holiday quickly spread from state to state all across the country, but it wouldn't be celebrated in Coeur d'Alene for another 144 years.

In 2009, I added a line item to HREI's budget for a Juneteenth program, and, working together, Albert and I organized the first Juneteenth celebration ever held in North Idaho. We succeeded in attracting more than three hundred people that first year. I handled the advertising, press, signage, food purchases, and T-shirt design, while Albert cooked chicken on his truck-sized barbecue grill in HREI's parking lot and led Buffalo Soldier presentations on horseback.

The more time Albert and I spent together, the closer we became. One day he asked me about my family. "Is it just you and Franklin? You don't seem to have much other family involved."

I nodded.

"Well, I don't need to know all the details, but it seems like you could use a dad and Franklin could use a grandpa."

That he recognized there was a void in our lives meant a lot to me. That he was volunteering to fill that hole meant even more. I started calling him "Dad" soon after that, and he referred to me as his daughter when being introduced to my friends and colleagues. To Franklin, he was always "Grandpa Albert," and Albert thoroughly embraced the role. He took Franklin fishing. He invited us to his house for holiday meals. He even celebrated his birthday with Franklin, as their birthdays fell in the same week in October. With one out of every six Black men being sent to prison at some point in their lives, Black children—especially Black boys—need as many male role models as they can get.

Albert was so good with kids I invited him to speak about civil rights issues at a summer camp I organized at HREI called "Young Advocates for Human Rights." He'd been an instructor most of his adult life, teaching in the Marines and at several high schools and a community college in San Diego, and his experience as an educator came across in his presentation. While listening to him, an idea occurred to me. As someone who was alive during both the Jim Crow and civil rights eras and who was so knowledgeable and entertaining, he'd make a great guest lecturer for some of my classes at EWU. I was delighted when he agreed to do it.

When I introduced my classes to my dad and he spoke about Black history in the United States, he took events that might have seemed dull and antiquated when students read about them in a textbook and, by sharing his personal experiences, made them come alive. He talked about the day-to-day difficulties—eating at a restaurant, seeing a movie—of living under Jim Crow. He described how as a child he'd fled the South for the North with his father and brother as part of the Great Migration after his dad had an altercation with a white police officer. As a former drill sergeant in the Marines, he could also speak with authority about what life was like in the military before desegregation. Not easy, according to him. On three separate occasions, he'd had his life threatened by white subordinates who refused to acknowledge his superior

rank. EWU was a PWI—a predominately white institution—but many of the students who listened to him loved him. Even those who could barely remember a single thing I'd taught them could recall Albert's stories.

My relationship with Albert felt perfectly natural. We already related to each other as father and daughter, so using those terms changed almost nothing. Nobody ever asked me if Albert was my biological dad. They just assumed he was, based on my appearance and his, which was a mix of Black, Native American, and Scottish. Visually, we made sense. The fact that his wife Amy was white may have lent even more credibility to the idea, although, just as I'd done with Spencer's wife Nancy, I never referred to her as "Mom," and she never called me her daughter. Family is a private matter, just as one's identity is, so I didn't feel obligated to explain the situation to other people. People saw my identity and my family correctly, even if what was "correct" to me would be considered rare, nontraditional, or unreal to others. This was my life, not theirs.

From time to time people I didn't know very well would ask me if my mom or dad was Black. I'd usually say that my mom was white because to say that neither of my biological parents was Black, that my chosen father was Black, and that I identified as Black would have created a long conversation that, to be honest, I didn't feel obligated or comfortable sharing with total strangers or casual acquaintances. I had learned from my time in Mississippi that most folks, if not all of them, who asked this question didn't want a longwinded answer. Even for people who became my good friends over time, it felt awkward and unnecessary to have to explain the very complex evolution of my identity and my unique family. Between raising a small child and working nearly every minute of the day, I didn't have very many close friends, and I didn't want to risk losing the ones I did have by oversharing. I was content with them seeing me as me, and if they were ever to hear the details of how I'd come to be that way, I trusted that, given all that I'd been through, they would understand why I'd chosen not to share everything with them. As for everyone else—strangers

who only knew me as an increasingly public figure in a very small city—it really wasn't any of their business, was it?

If you're hoping to protect those you love from the judgment of others, as I was, you have to be cautious with whom you share all the intimate details of your life. To that end, I tried to answer questions about my identity with the greatest degree of accuracy while not compromising my need to protect Franklin and myself. By doing this, I hoped I could shield our small family from people's misunderstandings, conflicting definitions, and beliefs about race, identity, family, and love.

Understanding how miseducation about race and the cultural boundaries and codes that have been put into place in American society might conflict with my true nature, I decided that the most honest and real way for me to live was to be Black without any explanations, reservations, apologies, or room for negotiation. It had taken me so many years to finally embrace who I was and love myself that I didn't want my understanding of myself to be muddled by other people's perceptions or misunderstandings. I wasn't trying to be anyone else. I wasn't copying someone else's life as a way of escaping my own. All I wanted was to be the most beautiful shade of myself I possibly could.

And yet, as at home as I felt being Black, bonding with other members of the Black community, and being recognized not as an outsider who was "down" but as an insider who was truly in the know, I had a nagging fear that the wonderful and beautiful maturation of my identity I'd enjoyed balanced on a precariously thin precipice. Every job I took on, every relationship I entered, every word out of my mouth was a risk. I was stuck in an awful limbo. I'd never been entirely comfortable in white settings, but I also knew I couldn't fully relax and reveal everything about myself in Black settings, either. Scientists and scholars knew race wasn't a biological imperative, but many people still clung to old-fashioned beliefs, and if they were ever to see the parts of my extended family I'd turned my back on, my entire world could come crashing down.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Black Lives Matter

AFTER ESTHER PRESSED CHARGES AGAINST JOSH, he was arrested in Iowa, brought to Colorado, and indicted on four felony counts of sexual assault. Larry and Ruthanne bailed him out by posting a $15,000 bond and accused Esther of lying. The Doležals had become the Hatfields and McCoys.

As large a role as Esther's case against Josh played in my life, I was so busy I didn't have much time to dwell on it. Between raising Franklin, teaching at EWU, writing part-time for the local weekly newspaper *The Inlander*, and braiding hair, I barely had time to breathe. I felt like I was constantly chasing after a ball that was rolling downhill, its speed always just a bit faster than mine. So when a local activist asked me in the spring of 2014 to apply for one of the open seats on Spokane's Office of Police Ombudsman Commission (OPOC), a watchdog group for the local police, I brushed off the idea. But after two more people made the same suggestion I started to pay attention.

Everyone who recommended I do it said much the same thing: the current applicants were mostly older and white, and Spokane needed my voice on the commission. Translation: Spokane needed a strong Black leader who wasn't afraid to stand up to the police department, denounce police brutality, and demand transparency. Having concluded that the need to reform the culture of policing was at the heart of racial justice activism and seeing that no one else was stepping up to the plate, I filled out the application.

My decision to apply for the position soon took on greater significance, as that summer was reminiscent of the one in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*: hot, violent, and filled with racial tension. On July 17, 2014, officers from the New York City Police Department approached Eric Garner, a forty-three-year-old Black man who was standing outside of a bodega on Staten Island, and accused him of illegally selling "loosies," individual cigarettes sold on the street. When Garner protested his innocence and frustration at being harassed, Officer Daniel Pantaleo put him in a chokehold and took him to the ground. As Pantaleo shoved Garner's face into the sidewalk and four officers assisted, Garner pleaded with them, saying, "I can't breathe" over and over again. An hour later, Garner was pronounced dead.

Less than a month later, Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, while responding to a call about a theft at a convenience store, approached Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old Black male, and his friend Dorian Johnson as they were walking down the middle of the road. When Wilson confronted them, he and Brown reportedly engaged in a struggle and Wilson shot Brown in the hand. Brown and Johnson tried to run away. Wilson got out of his vehicle and pursued Brown. Even though Brown was unarmed, and, according to some, had his arms in the air as if trying to surrender, Wilson shot him at least six times. Brown died in the street in a pool of his own blood, where his body remained for several hours before any medical personnel examined it.

When people in Ferguson took to the streets to protest, the local police responded with what a Justice Department report later classified as "excessive force," deploying military weapons and armored vehicles and firing tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowds. What ensued seemed like a never-ending feedback loop, with the police continually failing to respond to the protests appropriately and protestors responding to the police's botched efforts with increasingly angry demands for justice. A week after the shooting, protestors in Ferguson and all around the country were still marching through the streets chanting, "Hands up, don't

shoot!" and carrying signs that read, "Justice for Mike Brown" and "Black Lives Matter."

I'd first become aware of the BLM movement when #BlackLivesMatter emerged on Twitter the year before in response to George Zimmerman's acquittal. Like a lot of people, I'd been hopeful that it might blossom into an ongoing movement for justice and not just be a hashtag moment. The response to Michael Brown's death showed just how much the movement had grown in a year. Relying on grassroots activists, Black Lives Matter made its presence felt all around the country in the weeks that followed as it transformed the dying words of Garner and Brown into posters, chants, and T-shirts, and reignited the conversation about police brutality against Black men that had risen to national attention with Rodney King's beating in Los Angeles on March 3, 1991, then lay dormant for more than two decades without being adequately addressed. The Black Lives Matter movement arose as a response to this dereliction.

Working with community organizers, I helped coordinate BLM vigils and protest marches in Spokane, hoping to make more people aware of the implicit bias against Black people in our nation's police departments. According to a study released by *The Guardian* in 2015, Black men were *nine times* more likely than other Americans to be killed by police officers that year. Three hundred and seven of the 1,134 people killed by the police in 2015 were Black men, despite their making up only 6 percent of the U.S. population. So many young Black men were gunned down that some might just see the victims as a long list of names on a website. Not me. Every Black life that was taken mattered to me, and as names kept getting added to the list I felt more and more devoted to the cause of demanding police reform and promoting community vigilance. Every time I shouted, "Not one more!" at a rally, I was protesting what had come to feel like an imminent threat against my own Black sons.

On October 16, 2014, I gave a speech to more than a hundred EWU students and community members titled, "Ferguson and Race Relations in America: Are We Headed toward a Deeper Divide or a Post-Racial Society?" At the end of my talk, I handed

out copies of an extremely misguided editorial written by Tanner Streicher, the art director of the campus newspaper *The Easterner*, in which he argued that in America Black people receive the same if not better treatment than white people. Dividing the room into smaller groups, I asked each of them to discuss the article, and the feedback I got was unanimous: the article was so offensive, something needed to be done. Those who attended the forum got right to work, petitioning the paper, writing letters to the editor, and raising campus awareness about the BLM movement until Streicher was removed from his position.

I had always supported the Black students at EWU, serving as an unofficial advisor and mentor for many of them, and that fall they issued a public endorsement of my leadership by petitioning the director of the Africana Studies program to remove the Black Student Union's current faculty advisor, who they believed was doing more to hurt the club than help it, and replace her with me. The student-run coup succeeded, and I was named the BSU's new faculty advisor even though I technically wasn't qualified to advise the club because I wasn't a full-time, year-round professor.

The role meant a great deal to me—I'd been a BSU member myself during my undergraduate years and had advised the BSU at NIC, after all—and I took it very seriously. I helped the BSU members organize a protest march, and nearly two hundred people attended. We passed out BLM bracelets to be worn as symbols of solidarity. We made signs denouncing police brutality. We walked through campus wearing all black, each of us with one fist raised in the air. We read aloud stories about the long list of Black men, women, and children who'd recently been killed by the police and made memorials commemorating them in three different spots on campus. I also gave a call-to-action speech, and afterward the students and I held hands and sang "Lift Every Voice and Sing"—the Black national anthem.

Feeling more empowered, the members of the BSU organized a campus forum in November to talk about what had happened in Ferguson, racial profiling in society, and race relations on campus. Yik Yak, a social media app popular on college campuses at the time because of the anonymity it provided, had exploded with racist

comments following the BLM protests on campus, so this took up much of the discussion. As part of the panel, I spoke at length, lending my support to the BSU's desire for race and culture classes to be required for all majors, more Black representation in the faculty and the student body, and a multicultural student center that would serve as a safe space for academic and social enrichment.

Organizing and attending BLM events in Spokane took so much of my time and energy, I had to be selective about what made it onto my calendar. One of the activities that fell by the wayside for me was the monthly meeting for the NAACP's Spokane chapter. I went so infrequently I was a little shocked when the chapter's secretary, who was a friend of mine, nominated me to be president. As honored as I was, I was also hesitant. With past-due fees, no active committees, and a rapidly dwindling membership, the local chapter was on the brink of being shut down, and I knew revitalizing it would be a major undertaking. Given my unique identity, I was also cognizant of the need for me to represent what the Black community as a whole wanted. I considered removing my name from the ballot. But when I was informed that only the incumbent and I were running, and I considered how much more effective my activism would be if connected to a national civil rights organization, I decided to go ahead and run.

The ratio of women to men in the Spokane chapter was about two to one, and most of the women who showed up at the next meeting in November voted for me. On the strength of their votes I won the election by a healthy margin, becoming only the third female president in the chapter's nearly century-old history. As honored as I was, I was also overwhelmed by the thought of how much time and energy it would take for me to do the job right. But my fear quickly gave way to excitement. I had a grand vision. I wanted to return the focus of the Spokane chapter to the five NAACP Game Changers, the most urgent issues facing Black America: economic sustainability, education, health, public safety and criminal justice, and voting rights and political representation.

My biggest short-term goal was simply ensuring the chapter's survival. Having read the NAACP's constitution and bylaws, I knew that without three or more active committees an NAACP

chapter could be shut down. When I was elected president the Spokane chapter only had one, which was essentially just the president and his hard-working wife. I was on a mission not only to keep the doors open but also to grow the organization to the point where it would never be threatened with closure again.

Another one of my objectives was to unify the organization. While founding the Inland Northwest Juneteenth Coalition three years earlier, I'd noticed how divided Spokane's Black community was. There were lots of pastors and lots of ideas, but not very many organized groups of people getting things done on the ground. I wanted to nurture and support grassroots activism that brought about sustainable changes on an institutional level. To this end, I was hoping to serve as a bridge between the NAACP's Spokane chapter and the local BLM movement, and after being the president-elect for just one week—I wouldn't officially assume the position until the meeting in January—I was given an opportunity to do just that.

If Michael Brown's death was the flame that lit the fuse of the BLM movement, Darren Wilson's acquittal on November 24, 2014, was the explosion. Using the rapid-fire organizational capability of Twitter, Black Americans who were sick of hearing about police officers getting away with shooting innocent Black men took to the streets across the country to express their outrage. I was already a known voice on human rights issues in Spokane; being elected president of the local NAACP chapter just extended my reach. I called for a citywide rally and a "die-in" in front of City Hall, and nearly 250 people participated. While Black men and boys, including Franklin and Izaiah, lay on the sidewalk, their relatives and friends traced outlines around their bodies with chalk. Afterward, we marched through the city, chanting, "Stand up! Stand up! We want freedom, freedom! All these racist-ass cops, we don't need 'em, need 'em!" "Hands up! Don't shoot," and "No justice, no peace! No racist police!" It was very real, very emotional, and very intense. I actually had to assure a few nervous police officers that the protest was going to remain nonviolent.

My commitment to racial justice ended up costing me one of my jobs. After organizing the protest in Spokane against Darren

Wilson's acquittal, I arrived late to teach the evening session of my Race & Ethnicity class at Whitworth University. That, when combined with the dean seeing me on the news leading the protest, prompted her to call me and tell me to not bother showing up to teach anymore. Essentially, I was fired from my position teaching a class about race for leading a Black Lives Matter protest on one of the most important nights in Black American history in the past decade.

Others weren't so put off by seeing me in the news. My tenure as NAACP president still hadn't officially begun when I got a call from Lisa Johnson, a Black graduate student at Spokane's Gonzaga University. She told me she'd already talked to the current local NAACP president, who hadn't been much help, but she saw the good work I was doing and was hoping I might be more supportive. She told me her five-year-old son Jason had recently come home from school with dirt on his clothes and a bandage on his forehead. When she'd asked him what had happened, he told her that some kids at school had thrown him in the garbage and he'd hit his head. She drove straight to St. Aloysius Gonzaga Catholic School, and Jason showed her the dumpster into which two twelve-year-old white kids had tossed him. Unable to lift the heavy lid, Jason remained trapped inside until one of his classmates heard him yelling and went for help. He was taken to the school nurse, who told him not to tell anyone about what had happened. Lisa discussed what the two boys did to Jason with the school's administrators, but they denied any such thing had taken place.

I found Lisa's story completely heartbreaking and unacceptable. As the mother of two Black sons, I also found it completely believable. I couldn't think of a more salient example of devaluing a Black child's life. The two white boys literally treated little Jason like garbage! I asked her how I could help. She needed school supplies to homeschool Jason until he felt safe going back to school, and she wanted to raise public awareness about the incident so it didn't get swept under the rug. I was happy to do both. I rallied EWU's BSU, and we reached out to the BSUs at Gonzaga and Whitworth. Together we collected homeschool supplies, and on a cold day in December we marched around the school, stood on the

corner where parents picked up their kids, and brandished signs that read, "Treat Our Black Kids with Respect," "School Should Be a Safe Place for Everyone," and "Justice for Jason." Even Jason was there, all bundled up in snow pants, a winter coat, and gloves, holding an "Every Student Matters" sign above his head.

I officially assumed the presidency of the NAACP's Spokane chapter on January 1, 2015. The position was unpaid, but that didn't stop me from working overtime. One of the first tasks I assigned myself was finding the chapter a new office. It was currently located in the back of the Emmanuel Family Life Center, an African Methodist Episcopal church several miles from downtown next to some shady-looking apartments. You had to park in a dimly lit parking lot, and it was always dark outside when the meetings ended. Around the same time that I assumed the presidency, an NAACP office in Colorado Springs was bombed, and it was also located in an obscure part of town. I knew from experience that the local white supremacy groups were fully capable of doing something similar, and I didn't want anything like that to happen on my watch.

When I heard that State Representative Marcus Ricelli was moving out of his office on West Main Avenue, I went to take a look. It was perfect. It had beautiful hardwood floors, access to conference rooms where we could hold our monthly meetings, and more-than-reasonable rent. It was also located in the middle of downtown, above a community theater, with a law office on one side and State Senator Andy Billig's office on the other. Those who might be tempted to direct a hate crime at this new office would probably think twice when they saw that it shared a wall with a government official who was white and male. I secured a large donation from a local businessman and prepaid our rent and utilities for an entire year. We had a ribbon-cutting ceremony on MLK Day to commemorate the office's opening.

Meanwhile, I was already hard at work in my new role on Spokane's Office of Police Ombudsman Commission, which oversaw the work of the local ombudsman and intervened as needed to recommend policy reform within the Spokane Police Department. Getting the OPOC job had been an arduous process. The application

was very long and detailed, requiring me to write an essay, and unlike the ballot for the NAACP position it included an "ethnic origins" question. I checked BLACK, WHITE, and NATIVE AMERICAN. I was then interviewed by two city councilmen, a committee, and finally the mayor, David Condon. Getting interviewed three times for the job—which I believe was one or two interviews more than the other OPOC members had to endure—seemed excessive and unfair to me. But once the mayor appointed me I put that behind me and concentrated on the work that needed to be done. In December, the four other members of the commission elected me to be its chair and Kevin Berkompas the vice chair. Some people commented how funny it was to have a Black Lives Matter activist be the chair, while the vice chair looked like a white cop. Kevin had served in the Air Force and worked in the Department of Defense, but underneath the close-cropped hair and militaristic demeanor was a man with a conscience who was committed to ensuring police accountability and transparency.

Like my position with the NAACP, this one was also unpaid, but I took it as seriously as I would have if I'd earned a million dollars a year, and attacked the three-inch binder, which detailed the history of the previous ombudsman's work, with the same rigor I used for academic research. As chair of the OPOC, I went on ride-alongs with police officers to understand local policing methods and make sure they were acting aboveboard, and I presided over the commission's monthly televised meetings. I met frequently with local leaders, including city council members, nonprofit directors, and the heads of community organizations such as the Spokane Police Accountability and Reform Coalition, the Center for Justice, and the Peace and Justice Action League. I occasionally joined some of the other commissioners on trips to places like Seattle and Oakland for training sessions in civilian oversight of law enforcement. And once a month I had a one-on-one meeting with the police chief, Frank Straub.

With his moustache and gruff demeanor, Chief Straub was a cop through and through. Even in the safety of his office, he'd wear a bulletproof vest and sit with his hands on his belt inches away from his gun. He generally acted civilly toward me during

our meetings, but he always conveyed an air of condescension. He would offer me coffee, which with my tight schedule and limited sleep I never refused, but once we were seated, he'd usually start off by saying something snide like, "Rachel, it must really suck to be the head of the NAACP and the chair of the Police Ombudsman Commission. Isn't that a conflict of interest? Which hat are you wearing today?"

Since my divorce, I'd gotten better at standing up to bullies and men who tried to leverage their power to intimidate me, so I never backed down when Chief Straub baited me. "I'm doing fine, Frank," was my usual response. "I'm here as chair of the commission today, and, no, I don't see my roles as conflicting but complementary since both of them address justice issues."

He'd usually have his assistant there taking notes for him, and occasionally someone else from his department would show up. I never quite understood why. I responded by bringing Kevin Berkompas, who'd also take notes for me and chime in as needed. What made it into the notes was standard commission business, me asking for things like access to certain Internal Affairs files and Chief Straub telling me why he didn't think that was appropriate. He was always very standoffish toward me, and the vibe I got from him kept me at a distance. I always felt like he was either checking out my cleavage or wishing I wasn't there. Despite our differences, we did our best to act professionally and cordially toward each other, but I'd soon come to discover the truth. I was a thorn in the man's side, and he had it in for me.

Adding this job and the NAACP job to the two I already had required lots of planning and coordination. As I took on more tasks, I had to subordinate others on my agenda. I'd become a licensed intercultural competency trainer, but I put that on the back burner for the moment. I also reduced the number of hair clients I was willing to take on. Still, I was working more than sixty hours a week. One of the students in my African history class asked me, "What do you do for fun?"

"My work *is* fun," I assured her.