Prologue

PEOPLE ALWAYS ASK ME what it was like living as a Black* woman. As if I no longer live that way. As if my Blackness were just a costume I put on to amuse myself or acquire some sort of benefits. As if what happened on June 10, 2015, altered my identity in any way.

I'll admit to being thrown for a loop when the reporter from a local news channel in Spokane, Washington, who was interviewing me about the hate crimes that had been directed at me and my family, abruptly switched topics and asked, "Are you African American?" On the surface it was a simple question, but in reality it was incredibly complex. Yes, my biological parents were both white, but, after a lifetime spent developing my true identity, I knew that nothing about whiteness described who I was. At the same time, I felt it would have been an oversimplification to have simply said yes. After all, I didn't identify as African American; I identified as Black. I also hadn't been raised by Black parents in a Black community and understood how that might affect the perception of my Blackness. In fact, I grew up in a painfully white world, one I was happy to escape from when I left home for college,

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* Like numerous linguists and academics, I believe "Black" should always be capitalized when referring to culture or ethnicity. Not everyone agrees. Other than *Ebony* and *Essence*, two magazines that cater to a mostly Black audience, most major publications have refused to make this adjustment. To my mind, "black" describes a color, while "Black," like "Asian" or "Hispanic," denotes a group of people.

I don't capitalize "white" because white Americans don't comprise a single ethnic group and rarely describe themselves this way, preferring labels like "Italian American" or "Scotch Irish."

where my identity as a Black woman began to emerge. Forced into an awkward position by the reporter, I equivocated. When he pressed me, I ended the interview and walked away.

After footage of this small segment of the interview found its way onto the internet and an article appeared in a local paper "outing" me as white, I became one of the hottest trending topics of the day every day for weeks. A handful of people expressed their support of me, but they were drowned out by all the shouting, as nearly everyone else on the planet was calling for my head on a platter. I understood why some people reacted negatively to the fragments of my story they'd seen in the news. As a longtime racial and social justice advocate, I knew there were certain lines that you simply didn't cross if you wanted to be accepted by your community—whether it be white or Black—and crossing the color line was one of them. Because I'd been seen and treated as both white and Black, I was intimately familiar with the misgivings both communities had about people who stepped over this ever-shifting line. I also knew the historic consequences for doing so: shaming, isolation, even death. White people created the color line and the taboo for crossing it as a way to maintain the stranglehold on privilege they've always enjoyed, but due to the painful history surrounding it, many Black people had also grown adamant about enforcing it. If they weren't allowed to cross the color line, at least they could take ownership of their side.

As such, if you dared to cross this boundary, as I have done, and were exposed, you were put in a no-win situation: white folk would see you as a traitor and a liar and never trust you again, and Black folk might see you as an infiltrator and an imposter and never trust you again. As severe as these repercussions were, they didn't dissuade me from making this journey, for not doing so would have meant turning my back on what I see as my true identity and leaving those I loved most in a vulnerable position. If I've hurt anyone in the process, I sincerely apologize. That was never my intention.

To most people, the answer to the reporter's question was binary—yes or no—but race has never been so easily defined. In a letter to Thomas Gray in 1815, Thomas Jefferson struggled to

determine "what constituted a mulatto," calling it "a Mathematical problem of the same class with those on the mixtures of different liquors or different metals." In the 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the U.S. Supreme Court attempted to clarify the existing racial classifications when it established the "one drop rule"—those with a single Black relative, no matter how distant, were considered Black, even if they appeared white—but this decision only muddled an already complicated issue. If someone who looked white could be considered Black because one of his sixteen great-great-grandparents was Black but a Black person with a white great-great-grandparent was still regarded as Black, what sort of clarity did this provide?

If scrutinizing people's appearances can't provide definitive proof of their racial identity, what does? How do you decide whether certain people are white or Black? What's the determining factor? Is it their DNA? Is it their skin color? Is it how other people perceive them, or is it how they perceive themselves? Is it their heritage? Is it how they were raised, or is it how they currently live? Does how they feel about themselves play a role, and if so, how much? Does one of these questions provide the answer, or do all—or none—apply? And, finally, does the idea of separate human races have any sort of biological justification, or is it merely a creation of racism itself?

Adding further confusion, the definition of Blackness has not only shifted from decade to decade but also differs from person to person. For most, Blackness comprises much more than one's physical appearance. It's the culture you inhabit and the experiences you've lived. It's philosophical, emotional, even spiritual. Was Michael Jackson Black? By the end of his life his skin was nearly white and many of his features had been altered in a way that made him look far less Black than he did as a boy, but nearly everyone would still respond to that question by saying, "Of course." How about O.J. Simpson? With his brown skin and curly hair, he appeared Black, but the way he viewed himself suggested otherwise. When pressured to pull the race card, he reportedly once said, "I'm not Black. I'm O.J.," an opinion seconded by a helicopter pilot for a film crew that filmed Simpson fleeing the police in his white Ford Bronco on June 17, 1994. "If O.J. Simpson were Black, that shit

wouldn't have happened," she later told the documentary director Ezra Edelman when describing the LAPD's atypical restraint that day. "He'd be on the ground getting clubbed."

Yes, my parents weren't Black, but that's hardly the only way to define Blackness. The culture you gravitate toward and the worldview you adopt play equally large roles. As soon as I was able to make my exodus from the white world in which I was raised, I made a headlong dash toward the Black one, and in the process I gained enough personal agency to feel confident in defining myself that way.

That I identify as one race while the world insists I'm another underscores the psychological harm the concept of race inflicts. Being denied the right to one's self-determination is a struggle I share with millions of other people. As our culture grows less homogenous, more and more people are finding themselves stuck in a racially ambiguous zone, unable (or not allowed) to identify with the limited available options. One of the few silver linings of the media firestorm that followed my "exposure" is that it sparked an international debate about race and racial identity. I didn't set out to be a spokesperson for people stuck somewhere in the gray zone between Black and white, but after my own life was thrown into disarray because of this issue, I'm happy to share my whole story in the hope that it will bring about some much-needed change.

I became aware long ago that the way I identify is unique and knew I would need to talk about it eventually, but I hoped I could choose the time, the place, and, most importantly, the method. Unfortunately, when the footage of the reporter in Spokane asking me if I was African American went viral, whatever chance I might have had to introduce myself to the world on my own terms, while explaining the nuances of my identity, was taken from me.

Do I regret the way the interview ended (and, as a consequence, the way my story was presented to the world)? Of course. But, as you'll see, the evolution of my identity was far too nuanced—and, frankly, private—to describe to a stranger. How can you explain in a brief conversation on the street a transformation that occurred over the course of a lifetime? You can't. To truly understand someone, you need to hear their whole story.