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# Colored People

A MEMOIR

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR

## Colored People

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—*Christian Science Monitor*

*Colored People*

*Loose Canons*

*Figures in Black*

*The Signifying Monkey*

## Colored People

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., was born and raised in Mineral County, West Virginia. He graduated summa cum laude from Yale with a degree in history and was a London correspondent for *Time* magazine before receiving his Ph.D. in English from Cambridge University. He writes frequently for such publications as *Harpers*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Village Voice*; his books include *Figures in Black*, *The Signifying Monkey* (for which he received an American Book Award), and *Loose Canons*. He is now W. E. B. Du Bois Professor of the Humanities and Chair of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Harvard University.

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A M E M O I R

**Henry Louis Gates, Jr.**



VINTAGE BOOKS

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*I remember the very day when I became colored.*

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ZORA NEALE HURSTON

*How dare anyone, parent, schoolteacher, or merely literary critic, tell me not to act colored?*

ARNA BONTEMPS

*For Henry Louis Gates, Sr.,  
and in memory of  
Pauline Augusta Coleman Gates*

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# Contents

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*Cover*

*Other Books by This Author*

*About the Author*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Epigraph*

*Dedication*

## *Preface*

### I Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

1 Colored People

2 Prime Time

3 Wet Dogs & White People

4 In the Kitchen

### II Family Pictures

5 Up the Hill

6 Down to Cumberland

7 Playing Hardball

### III Over in the Orchard

8 Current Events

9 Love Junkie

10 Joining the Church

### IV Saved

11 Change of Life

12 Eternity

13 Living Under Grace

### V Negro Digest

14 Just Talking to the Lord

15 Shattering the Sugar Bowl

16 Abandoning Ship

VI One Day Next Tuesday

---

17 Sin Boldly

18 Walk the Last Mile

19 The Last Mill Picnic

*Acknowledgments*

## Preface

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Dear Maggie and Liza:

I have written to you because a world into which I was born, a world that nurtured and sustained me, has mysteriously disappeared. My darkest fear is that Piedmont, West Virginia will cease to exist, if some executives on Park Avenue decide that it is more profitable to build a completely new paper mill elsewhere than to overhaul one a century old. Then they would close it, just as they did in Cumberland with Celanese, and Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and the Kelly-Springfield Tire Company. The town will die, but our people will not move. They will not *be* moved. Because for them, Piedmont—snuggled between the Allegheny Mountains and the Potomac River Valley—is life itself.

I have written to you because of the day when we were driving home and you asked your mother and me just exactly what the civil rights movement had been all about and I pointed to a motel on Route 2 and said that at one time I could not have stayed there. Your mother could have stayed there, but your mother couldn't have stayed there with me. And you kids looked at us like we were telling you the biggest lie you had ever heard. So I thought about writing to you.

I have written for another reason, as well. I remember that once we were walking in Washington, D.C., heading for the National Zoo, and you asked me if I had known the man whom I had just spoken. I said no. And, Liza, you volunteered that you found it embarrassing that I would speak to a complete stranger on the street. It called to mind a trip I'd made to Pittsburgh with my father. On the way from his friend Mr. Ozzie Washington's sister's house I heard Daddy speak to a colored man, then saw him tip his hat to the man's wife. (Daddy liked nice hats: Caterpillar hats for work, Dobbs hats for Sunday.) It's just something that you do, he said, when I asked him if he had known those people and why had he spoken to them.

Last summer, I sat at a sidewalk cafe in Italy, and three or four "black" Italians walked casually by, as well as a dozen or more blacker Africans. Each spoke to me; rather, each nodded his head slightly or acknowledged me by a glance, ever so subtly. When I was growing up, we always did this with each other, passing boats in a sea of white folk.

Yet there were certain Negroes who would avoid acknowledging you in this way in an integrated setting, especially if the two of you were the ones doing the integrating. Don't go over there with those white people if all you're going to do is Jim Crow yourselves—Daddy must have said that to me a thousand times. And by that I think he meant we shouldn't *clinch* to each other out of habit or fear, or use protective coloration to evade the risks of living like any other human being, or use clannishness as a cop-out for exploring ourselves and possibly making new selves, forged in the crucible of integration. Your black ass, he'd laugh, integrated already.

But there are other reasons that people distrust the reflex—the nod, the glance, the murmured greeting.

One reason is a resentment at being lumped together with thirty million African Americans whom you don't know and most of whom you will never know. Completely by the accident of racism, we have been bound together with people with whom we may or may not have something in common, just because we are "black." Thirty million Americans are black, and

thirty million is a lot of people. One day you wonder: What do the misdeeds of a Mike Tyson have to do with me? So why do I feel implicated? And how can I not feel racial recrimination when I can feel racial pride?

Then, too, there were Negroes who were embarrassed about *being* Negroes, who didn't want to be bothered with race and with other black people. One of the more painful things about being colored was being colored in public around other colored people, who were embarrassed to be colored and embarrassed that we *both* were colored and in public together. As if to say: "Negro, will you *pul-lease* disappear so that I can get my own white people?" As if to say: "I'm not a Negro like other Negroes." As if to say: "I am a human being—let me be!"

For much of my adolescence and adulthood, I thought of these people as having betrayed the race, I used to walk up to them and call them *Brother* or *Sister*, loud and with a sardonic edge, when they looked like they were trying to "escape." When I went off to college, I would make the "conversion" of errant classmates a serious project, a political commitment.

I used to reserve my special scorn for those Negroes who were always being embarrassed by someone else in the race. Someone too dark, someone too "loud," someone too "wrong." Someone who dared to wear red in public. Loud and wrong: we used to say that about each other. Nigger is loud and wrong. "Loud" carried a triple meaning: speaking too loudly, dressing too loudly, and just *being* too loudly.

I do know that, when I was a boy, many Negroes would have been the first to censure other Negroes once they were admitted into all-white neighborhoods or schools or clubs. "An embarrassment to the race"—phrases of that sort were bandied about. Accordingly, many of us in our generation engaged in strange antics to flout those strictures. Like eating watermelon in public, eating it loudly and merrily, and spitting the seeds into the middle of the street, red juice running down the sides of our cheeks, collecting under our chins. Or taking the greatest pride in the Royal Kink. Uncle Harry used to say he didn't *like* watermelon, which I knew was a lie because I saw him wolf down slices when I was a little kid, before he went off to seminary at Boston University. But he came around, just like he came around to painting God and Jesus black, and all the seraphim and the cherubim, too. And I, from another direction, have gradually come around, also, and stopped trying to tell other Negroes how to be black.

Do you remember when your mother and I woke you up early on a Sunday morning, just to watch Nelson Mandela walk out of prison, and how it took a couple of hours for him to emerge, and how you both wanted to go back to bed and, then, to watch cartoons? And how we began to worry that something bad had happened to him on the way out, because the delay was so long? And when he finally walked out of that prison, how we were so excited and teary-eyed at Mandela's nobility, his princeliness, his straight back and unbowed head? I think I felt that there walked the Negro, as Pop might have said; there walked the whole of the African people, as regal as any king. And that feeling I had, that gooseflesh sense of identity that I felt at seeing Nelson Mandela, listening to Mahalia Jackson sing, watching Muhammad Ali fight, or hearing Martin Luther King speak, is part of what I mean by being colored. I realize the sentiment may not be logical, but I want to have my cake and eat it too. Which is why I still nod or speak to black people on the streets and why it felt so good to be acknowledged by the Afro-Italians who passed my table at the cafe in Milan.

I want to be able to take special pride in a Jessye Norman aria, a Muhammad Ali shuffle, Michael Jordan slam dunk, a Spike Lee movie, a Thurgood Marshall opinion, a Toni Morrison novel, James Brown's Camel Walk. Above all, I enjoy the unselfconscious moments of shared cultural intimacy, whatever form they take, when no one else is watching, when no white people are around. Like Joe Louis's fights, which my father still talks about as part of the fixed repertoire of stories that texture our lives. You've seen his eyes shining as he describes how Louis hit Max Schmeling so many times and so hard, and how some reporter asked him, after the fight: "Joe, what would you have done if that last punch hadn't knocked Schmeling out?" And how ole Joe responded, without missing a beat: "I'da run around behind him to see what was holdin' him up!"

Even so, I rebel at the notion that I can't be part of other groups, that I can't construct identities through elective affinity, that race must be the most important thing about me. That's what I want on my gravestone: Here lies an African American? So I'm divided. I want to be black, to know black, to luxuriate in whatever I might be calling blackness at any particular time—but to do so in order to come out the other side, to experience a humanity that is neither colorless nor reducible to color. Bach *and* James Brown. Sushi *and* fried catfish. Part of me admires those people who can say with a straight face that they have transcended any attachment to a particular community or group ... but I always want to run around behind them to see what holds them up.

I am not Everynegro. I am not native to the great black metropolises: New York, Chicago, or Los Angeles, say. Nor can I claim to be a "citizen of the world." I am from and of a time and a place—Piedmont, West Virginia—and that's a world apart, a world of difference. So this is not a story of a race but a story of a village, a family, and its friends. And of a sort of segregated peace. What hurt me most about the glorious black awakening of the late sixties and early seventies is that we lost our sense of humor. Many of us thought that enlightened politics excluded it.

In your lifetimes, I suspect, you will go from being African Americans, to "people of color" to being, once again, "colored people." (The linguistic trend toward condensation is strong.) I don't mind any of the names myself. But I have to confess that I like "colored" best, maybe because when I hear the word, I hear it in my mother's voice and in the sepia tones of my childhood. As artlessly and honestly as I can, I have tried to evoke a colored world of the fifties, a Negro world of the early sixties, and the advent of a black world of the later sixties from the point of view of the boy I was. When you are old enough to read what follows, I hope that it brings you even a small measure of understanding, at long last, of why we see the world with such different eyes ... and why that is for me a source both of gladness and of regret. And I hope you'll understand why I continue to speak to colored people I pass on the streets.

Love,  
Daddy

*Piedmont, West Virginia*  
*July 8, 1993*

**I / Will the Circle**

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**Be Unbroken?**

On the side of a hill in the Allegheny Mountains, two and a half hours northwest of Washington and southeast of Pittsburgh, slathered along the ridge of “Old Baldie” mountain like butter on the jagged side of a Parker House roll, sits Piedmont, West Virginia (population 2,565 in 1950, when I was born), the second major city of Mineral County. West Virginia is famous for its hills, the Allegheny Mountains, which run along the Potomac River in the east, the Ohio along the west, and the Kanawha and Guyandotte in the south. And of all the mountain ranges gazed upon by its riverine mountaineers, none is more beautiful than the south branch of the Potomac Valley, overlooked by Gates Point, the highest promontory in the county, rising above Patterson’s Creek.

It was in Piedmont that most of the colored people of Mineral County lived—351 out of a total population of 22,000.

You wouldn’t know Piedmont anymore—my Piedmont, I mean—by its silhouetted ruins. Not the town that stands there now with its dignity assaulted by the consolidation of the Mineral County school system, and its sense of itself humbled by the abolition of its high school basketball team. “Daddy, that school is *dead*,” Liza once said—she couldn’t have been more than four—when she saw what once had been my elementary school. Even then she had a lot of mouth—such an evil, threatening quality to have around the Coleman family that I cultivated it all my childhood, as best I could. How else was I going to keep at bay the hovering, censorious presence of my uncles, Mama’s nine brothers?

Liza was right, though: the Davis Free School, Piedmont’s sole elementary school, founded in 1906 and once a proud three-story red-brick building perched high on top of Kenny House Hill, is now, quite visibly, dead. If it is not yet buried, its rotting corpse is being plucked apart by masonry buzzards feeding off its finely crafted crimson bricks.

To my children, Piedmont as a whole must seem to be a graying, desiccated town, rotting away brick by brick, just like my old school. Its population is down to about eleven hundred souls, three hundred of whom are black, a population whose average age increases each year so that the spirited figures who dominated my youth—those who survive, anyway—must strike my daughters as grizzled elders. No, my children will never know Piedmont, never experience the magic I can still feel in the place where I learned how to be a colored boy.

The fifties in Piedmont was a sepia time, or at least that’s the color my memory has given it. Piedmont was prosperous and growing, a village of undoubted splendors. I say a village but that’s an unpopular usage among some. (“Class Three City” is the official West Virginia state euphemism.) My cousin Greg, for example, complained when I called it that in a magazine article I wrote. “Hey, boy,” he had begun, familiarly enough. (We call each other “boy.”) “You got to explain something to me. How you going to call Piedmont a *village*?”

Village or town, or something in between—no matter. People from Piedmont were always proud to be from Piedmont—nestled against a wall of mountains, smack-dab on the banks of the mighty Potomac. We knew God gave America no more beautiful location.

And its social topography was something we knew like the back of our hands. Piedmont was an immigrant town. White Piedmont was Italian and Irish, with a handful of wealthy WASPs on East Hampshire Street, and “ethnic” neighborhoods of working-class people

everywhere else, colored and white. Start with the elementary school, or what was left of that day when Liza pronounced it dead. If you go west, up the hill toward the colored VFW (where Pop goes every day at four in the afternoon to see his old buddies and drink wat glasses of gin and orange juice on crushed ice for seventy-five cents), you'll see one of the two Italian neighborhoods, home to the Barbaritos, the DiPilatos, the DiBualdos, and a whole lot of other people whose names end in *o*. (The new colored VFW was the old Knights of Columbus when I was a kid.) A street above the Italians lived the Irish: the O'Rourkes, the O'Briens, the O'Reillys, the O'Neills, and a whole lot of other people whose names begin with *o*. At one time, two of my best friends were Finnegan Lannon and Johnny DiPilato.

Now, the whole west side of Piedmont, "Up on the Hill," as the people "Downtown" still say, was called "Arch Hill." I figured that it was called that because it was shaped like the arch of your foot. Twenty-five years later, I learned that what the colored people called "Arch Hill" had all along been "Irish Hill." Cracked me up when Pop told me that. "Dummy" was all he said.

For as long as anybody can remember, Piedmont's character has always been completely bound up with the Westvaco paper mill: its prosperous past and its doubtful future. At first glance, Piedmont is a typical dying mill town, with the crumbling infrastructure and the resignation of its people to its gentle decline. Many once beautiful buildings have been abandoned. They stand empty and unkempt, and testify to a bygone time of spirit and pride. The big houses on East Hampshire Street are no longer proud, but they were when I was a kid.

On still days, when the air is heavy, Piedmont has the rotten-egg smell of a chemistry class. The acrid, sulfurous odor of the bleaches used in the paper mill drifts along the valley, penetrating walls and clothing, furnishings and skin. No perfume can fully mask it. It is as much a part of the valley as is the river, and the people who live there are not overly disturbed by it. "Smells like money to me," we were taught to say in its defense, even as children.

The rich white people lived on upper East Hampshire Street—the Hudsons (insurance, Coca-Cola stock) in their big white Federal home, the Campbells (coal, insurance, real estate) in a gingerbread Victorian, the Drains (a judge) in their square brick, and the Arnolds (insurance) in a curving Queen Anne. You can tell from the East Hampshire Street architecture that wealthy people with fine architects took great pains to wear their wealth on their houses and, as Jean Toomer says in *Cane* of his character Rhobert, wear their houses on their heads. Mr. Campbell, whose family was once listed as among the richest in the country, built himself a veritable Victorian castle. Even when I was a little boy, walking past the house with my father in the evenings after work, I'd dream about owning it. Penny Baker, whose father was the mayor, Jeff Baker, later told me that was her fantasy too. So I suppose that most of the children in Piedmont dreamed that same dream.

Just below East Hampshire, as if a diagonal had been drawn from it downward at a thirty-degree angle, was Pearl Street, which the colored people called "Rat Tail Road," because it snaked down around the hill to the bottom of the valley, where the tracks of the B & O run on their way to Keyser, the county seat. Poor white people like Bonnie Gilroy's family lived down there, and five black families. We moved there when I was four. White people also lived "over in the Orchard," near the high school and the swimming pool.



Colored people lived in three neighborhoods: “Downtown,” on Back Street, which was called “Black Street”—but only when our parents weren’t around, since “black” was not a word for polite company back then; “Up on the Hill,” or on Erin Street, just one street above East Hampshire; and down Rat Tail Road. Colored people, in fact, occupied the highest streets in town, and the house where Mama’s mother, Big Mom, lived occupied the highest point Up on the Hill. Like the Italians and the Irish, most of the colored people migrated to Piedmont at the turn of the century to work at the paper mill, which opened in 1888.

Nearly everybody in the Tri-Towns worked there. The Tri-Towns—three towns of similar size—were connected by two bridges across sections of the Potomac less than a mile apart: Piedmont, West Virginia; Luke, Maryland; and Westernport, Maryland, the westernmost navigable point on the river, between Pittsburgh and the Chesapeake Bay. The Italians and the Irish of Arch Hill, along with a few of the poorer white people, worked the good jobs at the paper mill, including all those in the craft unions. That mattered, because crafts demanded skill and training, and craftsmen commanded high wages. It was not until 1968 that the craft unions at the mill were integrated.

Until the summer of 1968, all the colored men at the paper mill worked on “the platform”—loading paper into trucks. “The loaders,” they were called, because that’s what they did. (When we were being evil, we called them “the loafers.”) The end product of the paper mill was packaged in skids, big wooden crates of paper, which could weigh as much as seven thousand pounds each. The skids had to be forklifted from the mill onto the shipping platform and then loaded into the huge tractor-trailers that took them to Elsewhere. Loading is what Daddy did every working day of his working life. That’s what almost every colored grown-up I knew did. Every day at 6:30 a.m., Daddy would go off to the mill, and he’d work until 3:30 p.m., when the mill whistle would blow. So important was the mill to the life of the town that school let out at the same time. We would eat dinner at 4:00, so that Pop could get to his second job, as a janitor at the telephone company, by 4:30. His workday ended at 7:30, except when there was a baseball game, over in the Orchard or at the park in Westernport, in which case he would cut out early.

Almost all the colored people in Piedmont worked at the paper mill and made the same money, because they all worked at the same job, on the platform. I said almost all: Some colored worked for the B & O, and some at Celanese or Kelly-Springfield, both of which had their start right down to Cumberland. A few men did service jobs, like Mr. Shug, the blackest man in Piedmont, who was ole Miss Campbell’s driver and who, people would laugh, did most of his best driving at night. Shug lived with Miss Fanchion, and though they weren’t married, nobody seemed to mind.

But of course, the colored world was not so much a neighborhood as a condition of existence. And though our own world was seemingly self-contained, it impinged upon the white world of Piedmont in almost every direction. Certainly, the borders of our world seemed to be encroached upon when some white man or woman would show up where he or she did not belong.

Like when some white man would show up at the Legion, cruising “to get laid by a colored woman,” or some jug-headed loader would bring his white buddy to a party or a dance and then beg some woman to “give him some.” Sometimes the loader pandered for money, sometimes for a favor at the mill, sometimes for nothing in particular, just a vague desire for

approval.

On other occasions, it might be some hungry white woman, hair peroxide blond and teased up, neckline plunging, and pants too tight, sitting at the bar as if she were the Queen of England, ennobled by untrammelled desire: feasting on the desire for the forbidden in the colored men's eyes, while they in turn feasted on the desire in hers. You could always tell when a white woman was in the bar: they played slow music all night long.

Our space was violated when one of *them* showed up. The rhythms would be off. The music would sound not quite right: attempts to pat the beat off just so. Everybody would leave early. People would say they'd had a good time but they were tired for some reason, or had to get up early to go to work. Or else they'd get ugly, and somebody would slap somebody else, usually his own wife.

When Daddy was a teenager, dance bands used to come to the Crystal Palace Ballroom in Cumberland. They'd play a set or two in the evening for white people and then a special midnight show for the colored. Daddy says *everybody* would be there—the maimed, the sick, the dying, and the dead. Duke Ellington. Cab Calloway. And Piedmont's own Don Redman. Later, we had our own places to dance—the colored American Legion, and then the VFW.

It was amazing to me how new dances would spread in the black community, even to small towns like ours. Somebody'd be visiting his relatives somewhere, go to a party, and then he would be that. He'd bring it back and teach everyone, showing it off in the streets in the evenings or at a party in somebody's basement. Darnell Allen, Woody Green, and Richard Sanders, Sheila Washington and Gloria Jean Taylor were the best dancers in the town. They could learn *any* dance in a few minutes, and they'd take the floor, improvising and modifying as they went along. By the evening's end, the dance was *theirs*. They'd own it, having by then invented the Piedmont version. Then it became *ours*. Sometimes they'd just watch it on TV, like on the Dick Clark or Milt Grant shows. Much later, they'd watch *Soul Train*. Gloria Jean could dance just like James Brown; so could Audie Galloway.

Inez Jones was Queen of the Dance, though. When she danced the Dirty Dog with Jimmy Adamson, everybody would stop to stare. Like watching two dogs in heat for what seemed like hours. Then she'd take Jimmy's handkerchief out of his back pocket and rub it between her legs, like she was buffing a leather shoe. The crowd would go crazy. Meltdown. Somebody would put on James Brown's version of "Lost Someone," which plays for nine minutes, on that *Live at the Apollo* album, and everybody would grab somebody and start grinding. "Call me Coffee," the guys would say, "cuz I grind so fine." That's when the fights would start, if somebody's woman or man seemed to be percolating too much coffee with the wrong person. Usually it was a matter of fisticuffs, and every major holiday, there was a fight. Sometimes knives would come into play. People go crazy over sex, Daddy would warn me, even before I knew what sex was.

Things could get ugly, ugly and dark—like the way Bobby Lee Jones, a classmate of my brother Rocky's, looked that day he beat his woman, his tacky red processed strands dangling down the middle of his forehead, his Johnson getting harder each time he slapped her face. They say he would have fucked her right then and there if he hadn't been so drunk that his arms got tired of swinging at her, her with her face smeared with blue-black eye shadow, miserable and humiliated. Or the time some guy cut off the tip of Russell Jones's nose after he had grabbed him for feeling up Inez, Inez's thighs smoking from doing the dog, he

handkerchief wet from her rubbing it between her legs, men fighting for the right to sniff the rag like it was the holy grail. Don't no man know that love, Mr. Chile Green would say when somebody would play the dozens about how ugly his girlfriend's face was.

Yeah, I missed going to those dances, though I didn't miss Inez Jones: I was too young then. And then Darnell and Sheila and Woody Green and Richard Sanders joined the Holiness Church, soon after I got religion myself, so all I was missing them do was the Holy Dance right across the street from our church. I said to Richard I was sorry he couldn't dance anymore. He told me he was dancing for the Lord. His father—the one whose wife Roebuck Johnson was making love to every afternoon after work—was hard on him too. Said Richard wasn't *his*. The Lord provideth, Richard would say. His ways are inscrutable.

Before 1955, most white people were only shadowy presences in our world, vague figures of power like remote bosses at the mill or tellers at the bank. There were exceptions, of course, the white people who would come into our world in ritualized, everyday ways we all understood. Mr. Mail Man, Mr. Insurance Man, Mr. White-and-Chocolate Milk Man, Mr. Landlord Man, Mr. Po-lice Man: we called white people by their trade, like allegorical characters in a mystery play. Mr. Insurance Man would come by every other week to collect premiums on college or death policies, sometimes fifty cents or less. But my favorite white visitor was the Jewel Tea Man, who arrived in his dark-brown helmet-shaped truck, a sort of modified jeep, and, like the Sears Man, brought new appliances to our house. I loved looking at his catalogues. Mr. Jewel Tea Man, may I see your catalogues? Please?

Or they were doctors. Mine was Young Doc Wolverton. We dressed up when we went to see the doctor. That made sense to me because I wanted to be a doctor; Mama wanted both of her sons to be doctors. Young Doc Wolverton owned our house, or at least the house we moved to when I was four. And that was another thing: As much as we belonged to Piedmont, as much as Piedmont belonged to us, colored weren't allowed to own property not until the 1970s, anyway. All our houses were rented from white landowners, and that was just the way it was. It drove my mother crazy.

Before we lived in the house rented from Doc Wolverton, we lived in a much smaller house, at the base of Big Mom's hill, or at the top of Fredlock Street before the blacktop ran out and Big Mom's gravel driveway started. My sense of that house comes more from Mama's recollections of it than from my own. Some of her memories feel like my own, like the day in 1951 when Bobby Thomson hit a home run in the bottom of the ninth to beat the Dodgers and win the pennant for the Giants, and my father went absolutely crazy and began to hop from chair to table to sofa to chair, round and round the perimeter of our living room. It scared me so much that I started to cry.

And of course, we would bump into the white world at the hospital in Keyser or at the credit union in Westernport or in one of the stores downtown. But our neighborhoods were clearly demarcated, as if by ropes or turnstiles. Welcome to the Colored Zone, a large stretched banner could have said. And it felt good in there, like walking around your house in bare feet and underwear, or snoring right out loud on the couch in front of the TV—swaddled by the comforts of home, the warmth of those you love.

Even when we went Downtown, our boundaries were prescribed: we'd congregate on the steps of the First National Bank of Piedmont, chewing up the world, analyzing the world as we walked or drove by, court in session, James Helms presiding in his porkpie hat. Helms would

one of Daddy's coworkers, the one who talked the most. When he was drunk. Which, as near as I could see, was almost all the time.

White man *knows* not to fuck with us, Helms would opine judicially. We treat them good around here.

And nobody in their right mind likes skinny legs, either, someone would volunteer, if the subject needed shifting. Nothing worse than a woman with no butt and legs as skinny as pencils. Like the Lennon sisters on *Lawrence Welk*, which Daddy watched for the big band sound, reminding him of the old Crystal Palace in Cumberland, when Duke Ellington's or Cannonball Adderley's band would come to town. Or like Diana Ross, whose shapely legs were wide and bemoaned as too thin. I'd rather have no titties than no butt, but I'm a thigh man myself. James Helms would avow.

I never knew what the women said about the men, but I know they said a lot. I was always disappointed when the women, talking and laughing in the kitchen, would stop when I came within earshot and shift to safer subjects—or begin to spell out words they had been speaking freely and with so much pleasure just a few minutes before. (That stopped the day I spelled one of those words back to my mother and asked what it meant. From the horrified look on her face, I knew it had to be a bad one.)

Another major preoccupation of the people's court, naturally, was the sins, venial and venial, of kith and kin. People at home would customarily say that the woman was "running the man. It was always the woman's fault. And she was always bad. Not bad for loving, but bad for embarrassing her husband or her parents in the Valley with No Secrets. You couldn't get away with anything in Piedmont. Most people just did it as discreetly as they could, knowing not only that everybody colored knew but also that their name would be in the streets every day, permanently and forever, whenever the conversation lagged, new business being over, and old business was called up to pass the time. The biggest gossips were the loaders, who talked trash and talked shit all day long. The loaders were the Colored Genealogical Society, keepers of genetic impurities. The loaders were the Senate, the House, and the Supreme Court of Public Opinion, cross-fertilizing culture, gossip, and sometimes each other's wives.

Few women lived alone, without husbands. Those who did worked as maids or cleaning ladies; and they were poor. And there were a few town drunks, like Mr. Tyler Simon, who I don't think I ever saw sober. Unlike the hard-drinking James Helms, Mr. Tyler couldn't hold a job. He was always trying to get on at the mill, always failing, always poor, always drunk. His daughter, Marilyn, was the first black valedictorian at the high school, in 1967. Marilyn was shy, very quiet, and sensitive. You could tell that she didn't feel pretty, the way she held her head down all the time. She wore drab colors too. Plain blues and browns. Her clothes looked homemade, or secondhand.

Marilyn had gone to the university at Morgantown right away, without going to Potomac State, in Keyser, first, like everybody else. Nobody blamed her, somehow, though they would have blamed someone else, because skipping Potomac State was like betraying your family by leaving home too early. Ain't no need to be away from Piedmont for more than two years or three years max. Even the army keeps you only three years. The only exemption was if you were to make it into baseball's major leagues. Then it would be okay. Play in the big leagues till you're too old, then come on home. Besides, there's always the off-season, and you can

come back then, hunting and fishing with everyone else, just like the old days, washing the dust out of your system at the VFW at four o'clock. People in Piedmont were never crazy about change, which is one reason they always voted against putting fluoride in the water and consolidating the high schools in Mineral County.

One day, in Marilyn's freshman year, this guy came to Morgantown on a motorcycle, and whatever rap he had must have been heavy-duty, because she just climbed onto the back of his motorcycle and drove away. Just like that. Didn't even pack her bags or take her books. Never to be seen again. Guess Marilyn always wanted to fly away. That's how the colored people tell it.

Her daddy drank, it was said, because Mr. Johnson was running her mother, and after Tyler, Jr., was born, the babies started getting darker and having heads shaped like Mr. Johnson's. Her mother had a sister and they were both pretty. I used to imagine them dressed up in yellow polka-dotted dresses with bows in their hair, singing "Double your pleasure, double your fun, with Doublemint, Doublemint, Doublemint gum," like those white girls on the TV commercials, and making lots of money, so maybe Mr. Tyler would stop drinking. Mr. Johnson made love to the sister too. *Her* husband, Ray Sanders, drank on top of diabetes and would fry up ham and bacon and sausage for breakfast, directly defying his doctor's orders. That high blood pressure stuff, he'd say, that only applies to white people. We *used* to the stuff.

Eating and drinking yourself to death in front of the TV, aggravating heart disease and "high blood," the way Tyler and Ray did, was a substitute for violence that people could understand, rage turned inward. What was puzzling was when someone such as Marilyn suddenly followed an aberrant flight pattern, like an addled bird that has mistaken itself for a forsaken its species.

People in Piedmont were virulent nationalists—Piedmont nationalists. And this was our credo:

*All New York's got that Piedmont's got is more of what we got. Same, but bigger. And, if you were a student: You can get a good education anywhere. They got the same books, ain't they? Just bigger classes, 'at's all.*

Otherwise the advantage was all to Piedmont. Did you know that Kenny House Hill was written about in "Ripley's Believe It or Not" as the only street in the world from which you can enter all three stories of the same building? That made it the most famous place in the Class Three City; other of our attractions were less well publicized.

Like Dent Davis's bologna, which was so good that when colored people came home from Piedmont for the mill picnic each Labor Day, they would take pounds of it back to whatever sorry homes they had forsaken Piedmont for, along with bright-red cans of King Syrup (a concoction that the colored people called King-ro, as a conflation of King and Karo), with the inset metal circle for a lid, the kind that you had to pry open with the back of a claw hammer, and what looked like the MGM lion centered on its front label. Some of them, those whose tastes were most rarefied, would take home a few jars of our tap water. And that was before anybody thought of *buying* water in bottles. People in Piedmont can't imagine that today. A dollar for a bottle of *water*! We had some *good* water in Piedmont, the best drinking water in the world, if you asked any of us.

Dent's bologna, and our water, and our King Syrup, and the paper mill's annual pic-a-ni-

all helped account for Piedmont's tenacious grip upon its inhabitants, even those in diaspora. And then there was our Valley. I never knew colored people anywhere who were crazier about mountains and water, flowers and trees, fishing and hunting. For as long as anyone could remember, we could outhunt, outshoot, and outswim the white boys in the Valley. We didn't flaunt our rifles and shotguns, though, because that might make the white people too nervous. Pickup trucks and country music—now that was going *too* far, at least in the fifties. But that would come, too, over time, once integration had hit the second generation. The price of progress, I guess.

I guess some chafed more than others against the mundane impediments of the color line. “It’s no disgrace to be colored,” the black entertainer Bert Williams famously observed early in this century, “but it is awfully inconvenient.” For most of my childhood, we couldn’t eat in restaurants or sleep in hotels, we couldn’t use certain bathrooms or try on clothes in stores. Mama insisted that we dress up when we went to shop. She was a fashion plate when she went to clothing stores, and wore white pads called shields under her arms so her dress or blouse would show no sweat. We’d like to try this on, she’d say carefully, articulating her words precisely and properly. We don’t buy clothes we can’t try on, she’d say when they declined, as we’d walk, in Mama’s dignified manner, out of the store. She preferred to shop where we had an account and where everyone knew who she was.

As for me, I hated the fact that we couldn’t sit down in the Cut-Rate. No one colored was allowed to, with one exception: my father. It was as if there were a permanent TAKE-AWAY ONLY sign for colored people. You were supposed to stand at the counter, get your food to go, and leave. I don’t know for certain why Carl Dadisman, the proprietor, wouldn’t stop Daddy from sitting down. But I believe it was in part because Daddy was so light-complected, and in part because, during his shift at the phone company, he picked up orders for food and coffee for the operators, and Dadisman relied on that business. At the time, I never wondered if it occurred to Daddy not to sit down at the Cut-Rate when neither his wife nor his two children were allowed to, although now that I am a parent myself, the strangeness of it crosses my mind on occasion.

Even when we were with Daddy, you see, we had to stand at the counter and order takeout, then eat on white paper plates using plastic spoons, sipping our vanilla rickeys from green-and-white paper cups through plastic flexible-end straws. Even after basketball games when Young Doc Bess would set up the team with free Cokes after one of the team’s many victories, the colored players had to stand around and drink out of paper cups while the white players and cheerleaders sat down in the red Naugahyde booths and drank out of glasses. Integrate? I’ll shut it down first, Carl Dadisman had vowed. He was an odd-looking man, with a Humpty-Dumpty sort of head and bottom, and weighing four or five hundred pounds. He ran the taxi service, too, and was just as nice as he could be, even to colored people. But he did not want us sitting in his booths, eating off his plates and silverware, putting our thick greasy lips all over his glasses. He’d retire first, or die.

He had a heart attack one day while sitting in the tiny toilet at his place of business. Daddy and some other men tried to lift him up, while he was screaming and gasping and clutching his chest, but he was stuck in that cramped space. They called the rescue squad at the Fire Department. Lowell Taylor and Pat Amoroso came. Lowell was black and was the star of the soccer team at the high school across the river in Westernport. He looked like Pele, down to the shape of his head.

They sawed and sawed and sawed, while the ambulance and the rescue squad sat outside on Third Street, blocking the driveway to the town’s parking lot. After a while, Carl Dadisman’s cries and moans became quieter and quieter. Finally, they wedged in a couple of

two-by-fours and dragged out his lifeless body. By then it made little difference to Carl that Lowell was black.

Maybe Carl never understood that the racial dispensation he took for granted was coming to an end. As a child, I must once have assumed that this dispensation could no more be contested than the laws of gravity, or traffic lights. And I'm not sure when I realized otherwise.

I know that I had rich acquaintance early on with the inconveniences to which Be Williams alluded. But segregation had some advantages, like the picnic lunch Mama would make for the five-hour train ride on the National Limited to Parkersburg, where you had to catch the bus down to the state capital, Charleston, to visit her sister Loretta. So what if we didn't feel comfortable eating in the dining car? Our food was better. Fried chicken, baked beans, and potato salad ... a book and two decks of cards ... and I didn't care if the train even got there. We'd sing or read in our own section, munching that food and feeling sorry for the people who couldn't get any, and play 500 or Tonk or Fish with Mama and Daddy, until we fell asleep.

The simple truth is that the civil rights era came late to Piedmont, even though it came early to our television set. We could watch what was going on Elsewhere on television, but the marches and sit-ins were as remote to us as, in other ways, was the all-colored world of *Amos and Andy*—a world full of black lawyers, black judges, black nurses, black doctors.

Politics aside, though, we were starved for images of ourselves and searched TV to find them. Everybody, of course, watched sports, because Piedmont was a big sports town. Making the big leagues was like getting to Heaven, and everybody had hopes that they could or a relative could. We'd watch the games day and night, and listen on radio to what we couldn't see. Everybody knew the latest scores, batting averages, rbi's, and stolen bases. Everybody knew the standings in the leagues, who could still win the pennant and how. Everybody liked the Dodgers because of Jackie Robinson, the same way everybody still voted Republican because of Abraham Lincoln. Sports on the mind, sports in the mind. The only thing to rival the Valley in fascination was the big-league baseball diamond.

I once heard Mr. James Helms say, "You got to give the white man his due when it comes to technology. One on one, though, and it's even-stein. Joe Louis showed 'em that." We were obsessed with sports in part because it was the only time we could compete with white people even-stein. And the white people, it often seemed, were just as obsessed with the primal confrontation between the races as we were. I think they integrated professional sports, after all those years of segregation, just to capitalize on this voyeuristic thrill of the forbidden contact. What interracial sex was to the seventies, interracial sports were to the fifties. Except for sports, we rarely saw a colored person on TV.

Actually, I first got to know white people as "people" through their flickering images on television shows. It was the television set that brought us together at night, and the television set that brought in the world outside the Valley. We were close enough to Washington to receive its twelve channels on cable. Piedmont was transformed from a radio culture to one with the fullest range of television, literally overnight. During my first-grade year, we watched *Superman*, *Lassie*, Jack Benny, Danny Thomas, *Robin Hood*, *I Love Lucy*, *December Bride*, Nat King Cole (of course), *Wyatt Earp*, *Broken Arrow*, Phil Silvers, Red Skelton, *The \$64,000 Question*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Millionaire*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Bo*



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