COUNTING THE DARK FACES

January 6, 2014

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My wife Ellen was visiting her sister, who had pneumonia or something but felt peppy enough to go out and buy a black doll for my daughter, so Ellen said on the phone. The kids and I ate dinner at Papa's Pizza Saturday night, where there were two black families among the diners, as well as 3 dark faces back in the kitchen doing the work.

When we got home I played my uncle's taped message again then threw it away. I had to listen to it one more time to be sure I got it right from my old fishing buddy. Then I wished that tape was already in the county landfill instead of stinking up my trashcan.

Maybe that was why I was brushing the hair of my 8-year old daughter, Tawana, so roughly this morning, dragging a brush through the tangles like I was trying to yank her bald, and she's yelping, and complaining, "We'll be late for church." She knows I hate to be late for anything.

"That's okay," I grumbled. "My daughter isn't going to church until her hair looks good." Yet somehow the thought of being late to church didn't bother me today. I was irritable this morning, and part of it had to do with this church of about 150 people. Maybe the pastor was stepping on my toes, or maybe there was something missing there. I liked the people, including the 4 black families, 7 total children, and the preaching, but after a year I still felt like an outsider.

Tawana smiled. "Billy Jenkins says my hair is kinky." There was a playfulness in her voice, like what this Jenkins clown had to say was worth something.

"It doesn't matter what some Jenkins kid thinks," I snapped, working on the back of her head where the hair was really matted. "You need to brush back here everyday

you know, Tee . Who is this Billy Jenkins, some pasty-faced white boy with bangs in his eyes?" Man, I was really in a bad mood. Something else was bothering me. It had been growing in me for days and I didn't want to know what it was, not today, the day of rest.

Tawana rolled her eyes. "Yes, he is. Ouch! Mom says he's just curious. He's really kind of cute." She had a feisty look in her eyes, which I liked. Everyone said Tee was so cute, but we weren't raising our kids cute. We were raising them to be tough, feisty, and to stand up for themselves, even at eight years old.

Her twelve-year old brother, Jessie, walked by the bathroom wearing his coat and tie, ready to go. "You gonna marry a white boy," he surmised.

"She'll marry whoever she wants to, young man." I was answering for everyone today. "Black, white, biracial, brown, none of the above. You too, hot shot." After we adopted Jessie people would ask "When are you going to adopt another child? Jessie needs someone 'like him' to grow up with." Hey, we're like him, okay? We're a minority family now, smooth and blended. Still, we wanted a girl, so we got Tawana.

I could hear my uncle's voice talking from the trashcan. He just didn't know when to stop. "I would rather you did not bring that black child to visit me." "I'm concerned with you bringing a black child into the family." "I don't want to deal with questions from the neighbors." Black children? They are the children of two races, black and white, Unc. They aren't black. They aren't white. They are whatever they want to be. And what does <u>he</u> have to deal with, retired, sitting in his hunting lodge up in the mountains of North Carolina? He doesn't have to deal with anything more strenuous than which golf club to pick up. <u>They</u> have to deal with being biracial and adopted and having no family except white people, some of them much too white. Our "family", he

says. It's not like our family has a pure heritage all the way back to George Washington or Abraham, or like he's going to cut loose some of his treasure and run for governor. We sure weren't planning to embarrass him by dropping by to visit him at the Moosonic Lodge.

"Why is my hair kinky?" Tawana asked. She knew the answer but it was one of her games.

"Because the woman who gave birth to you was (is) white, and the man who fathered you is black. African-American. Black people have curly hair. That's the way God made them." I held her smooth brown chin in my hands. "You have beautiful curly hair and beautiful brown skin, and you should be proud of that."

When Tawana was younger she said, "I like being brown," as if it was just a color and carried no heritage with it. "Everybody wants to get a tan and be brown like me. But when I grow up I'm going to be white."

I shook my head. "When you grow up your skin will still be brown. But you can be whatever you want to be. You are unique. You can pick what you want to be: black, white, biracial, exotic and mysterious." This was all very clear to me then.

She replied very decisively, sounding a lot like me: "I'm white, like mommy."

I smiled. "I didn't mean you have to decide right now. I mean when you're a teenager."

"Okay," she said, "but I'm white." At that time I had been just fine with her "decision", but today it was not comforting to remember.

"When is mommy coming back from Aunt Ruth's?" she asked as I finished brushing. How quickly she moves to another subject while I brood for hours about a

young woman who maybe still lives in this town, who blessed us by allowing her baby to be placed for adoption, and I'm still mad at this Jenkins punk who harasses biracial girls at school. His family probably has the Stars and Bars waving from their front porch. The only thing worse than a dumb white boy is a smart aleck one.

One time when I picked Tee up at school a kid came right up to the car and asked me, "Is Tawana white?" That was in first grade at public school, where geniuses abound. I gave her the Cold Return Stare (CRS) for a moment. "She's whatever she wants to be," I told the startled little girl. "What are you?" She hasn't bothered me again. Pretty good, huh, I won a battle of wits with a six year old.

I looked down at Tawana. I thought back to when we picked out her name. We considered a beautiful name like Elizabeth, but I said no, that wasn't a name for a biracial child. Her name had to be Jackie or Tawana. Why did I say that back then? "Mom said she would meet us for the evening service, young lady." I finished by pulling a long barrette into her hair, the way I had seen Ellen do it. The hair puffed out in back, thick and wiry. I touched it lightly to feel the cool firmness of it.

We were bold adventurers on the frontiers of humanity, individualists, my wife and I, and so would our children be. From a long line of Americans with Scotch-Irish names we adopted two children of mixed parentage right in the middle of Dixie. Our intention, in addition to fulfilling our desire to be parents, was to help with the problem of mixed race children who were not being adopted. In both cases the birth mother had used illegal drugs and the fathers had some insanity on their side of the family. Risky kids, that's what we wanted. We probably did not help much. Tawana and her adopted brother Jessie were both beautiful children with light brown skin and large dark eyes. Tee was

very prissy like her mother. Adoptive mother. Mother. Still, in this troubled land of divisiveness we were going to make a statement.

We would raise them to be whatever and whomever they wanted to be, not what some rich guy lounging in the mountains with his critical neighbors thought they should be. Who are you to put a label on people? "This black child." Someday she will tell you who she is. I had told Ellen: "Our kids are going to be tough and assertive, they aren't going to grow up sweet and laid-back like me."

"Oh, so they are going to be like me?" Ellen asked.

But why was I so irritable today? Why would the comment of some kid at school bother me so much? I had heard plenty of them before. Some bad feeling was growing inside of me that something else was about to change in our lives.

Our poor relatives, other than my uncle, would accept Nicky by saying things like, "They can't help what race they are, it's not their fault,", and "They're half white," and the ever popular, "None of us asked to be born into this world." Qualified love, I called it. "They are not half-white", I slammed them. "They are bi-racial. You can't separate out what part is 'white'."

I had taken one-year old Jessie of the curly hair and brown skin to work with me one day. As I rode the elevator up to the office a white guy in a suit asks, "Is that your child?" There were only the 3 of us on the elevator.

I looked down at the child in my arms, feigning worry. "Why, is he <u>your</u> child?" I asked innocently.

"Oh, uh no," he stutters, great leader of industry that he was, no doubt. He got off at the next floor. I don't think that was even his stop. My female co-workers fussed over

Jessie about how cute he was. When I sat him on the floor and he rocked back and forth to some music someone commented that he had a natural sense of rhythm.

At grocery stores and restaurants our family of four would get looks from people like we were some entity that was put together wrong. I countered with what I called the Cold Return Stare. No one, not even in the mountains, where staring is a team sport, could withstand that look that said, "Have you got a problem?"

As we left for church I felt like I was in for a fight today, and I was up for it. There was more than one route to take to church but I always drove past a house two blocks from ours, an older home that needed some repair but had the best kept yard in the neighborhood, and a nice garden. A black couple with four children lived there. We moved past like a ship finding the lighthouse, watching for someone to wave. I deliberately turned down Fowler St, a neighborhood of older houses, old money. The largest mansion in the area was not a house but a nursing home for the affluent. Tee was beside me in the front seat, Jessie behind her looking at a book of short stories by black writers that I had given him for doing well in school. I pointed to the nursing home. On the porch sat two African-American women dressed in white. One was older, slim, with silver hair, the other was young with a large fleshy face. They rested and talked, perhaps mother and daughter.

"Black people take care of the world," I said. "You go to any nursing home in this state, you'll see black women taking care of old white people."

Jessie nodded. "I know that's right." He had been there.

"Go to the hospitals, and homes for the mentally ill and people with developmental disabilities," I continued Carl's Complaint. "Black people working there,

taking care of everybody. What would sick, old white people do without black folks to give them a bath?"

"Stink," Jessie mumbled.

Tawana watched the women until we turned the corner. "You and mommy aren't going to live in a place like that when you're old," she announced.

"You're right," I said, "we can't afford it."

"No, no," she said, "I'm going to take care of you in my home, with my husband and kids."

"Both of us?"

"Yep."

"What about you, Jessie?" I looked in the rearview mirror.

"I'm going go visit you at Tee's house, Poppy." He smiled.

Continuing on, we passed a house with a Confederate flag waving from a pole in the front yard. "Never," I pronounced, "go into a house or business that has a Confederate flag on the outside. Folks are sending you a clear warning."

"And don't get into a car with a Confederate flag for a license plate," Jessie repeated another of my dictums, or Carl's Jewels as I liked to call them.

I pulled into a grocery store lot.

"Oh, boy," Tee said, with anticipation.

"Yes, it's your lucky day," I told them, happy to force a pleasant feeling into the conversation. "My turn to buy doughnuts for the Sunday School class."

"And we get some," Tawana clapped her hands.

"Just one," I warned. "I don't want to be peeling you two off the stained glass

during the sermon."

While I selected a variety of doughnuts Jessie disappeared into the magazine section and Tee tugged at my sleeve. "I want a cream-filled and a chocolate icing."

"Just one," I reminded her.

"I just want one of each," she assured me.

"Tawana!" I heard someone calling in a high-pitched boy's voice. "Hey mom, that's Tawana."

Tawana turned. "Oh, that's Skyler from school", she said as a kid shorter than her, with braided hair and glasses on his dark black face, ran up to join us, obviously excited to see her.

"What you up to, Tee Bird?"

"Getting doughnuts for breakfast," she bragged. "I might get two."

I just shook my head and said "Hello, Skyler."

"Hey mom, this is Tee! You know, she goes to my school."

An attractive woman much younger than me joined us. "Well, she must be a special friend of yours. Hello," she said to my daughter, then turned to me. "I'm Cynthia." I shook the hand she offered.

Before I could answer Tawana told them: "This is my dad."

"Your dad?" Skyler exclaimed, staring at me like I was Lazarus come out of the tomb. "But, you're supposed to be black!"

His mother was appalled. "Skyler, apologize. I'm so sorry," she said, beating him to the apology.

"Oh, that's okay," I lied, and introduced myself. We commiserated briefly about

parenting, and as his mother walked away I whispered to the little chatterbox, "Tee Bird adopted me." He did not seem impressed. I smiled but I was not happy. I felt that anger growing in me, and it wasn't because of Skyler. It was like a tidal wave was overtaking me and it was useless to run.

I recalled another time in the grocery store when I was in the checkout line and Jessie ran up and put some apples on the counter, mixing them with the items I had already placed there. The cashier, a Caucasoid, looked at him, confused, not disapproving but just unable to process the information her eyes saw. I just let her ponder. She figured it out before the white guy behind us. "Is he with you?" he asked loudly with a frown, bravely ready to assist the skinny stranger. I gave him the CRS.

"Since birth," I told him. "At least my wife, Travestine, tells me he's mine." The express line really moved quick that day.

We drove on to church. Tawana said something to me but I wasn't listening. I was mad to distraction as I remembered those people, but not because they were prejudiced or mere fools. They made me aware of something of which I did not want to be aware. I knew now what was bothering me. I had been angry when I woke up today, and not sure why. I was ready to use that anger to fight back against something. Now I was angry because I knew why, and I had another kind of battle to fight.

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At Pine Bridge Baptist, Jessie went on to his Sunday school class. Carrying the precious doughnuts, Tawana and I walked down the corridors of the old wing of the church, past the rooms with the small chairs and tables where so many young children had heard the Bible, the truth. The truth will set you free.

We turned a corner and met Al Carter with his two sons. The Carters were one of 4 black families (7 total children) who attended this church, which was one of the reasons we attended. Well, it was THE reason. I could tell you the number of black faces at any of several churches in town, and how many black and biracial kids attend certain public and private schools, and how many black people work at each branch of the bank, and at which family restaurant you would find the most black people dining, and where black people go for fun, and where they don't go. I was always counting the dark faces and leading my children there so they could learn about that piece of their heritage and relate.

Pine Bridge Baptist was the fourth church we had tested since we got our second child. Pastor Mims liked to call on the children to recite Bible verses. Recently, after Jessie had perfectly recited 1 Corinthians 13 the pastor had predicted that one day my son might have a ministry with inner city youth and bring many black souls to the Lord.

Now why should he, I wondered at the time, working on Carl's Complaint. Maybe he will be a missionary to England, birthplace of the great white race. Maybe he will be a politician, or a truck driver. Why was this mixed race child bound to work among black folk? What was the pastor trying to tell everybody? Sure, Tawana might be a teacher of black children or she might be the weather girl on Channel 13.

Like the other churches we had attended the men at Pine Bridge were friendly but a bit distant, or maybe I was distant. The guys were good at talking about hunting and fishing, things which my dad and I never knew anything about, and they never asked me about my parenting. No one had ever said to me, "Hey, I see you got some mixed race kids, what's that like?" Many Sundays the kids and I just sat by ourselves waiting for the service to begin. Caucasion Carl, the lonely pioneer.

In the fellowship hall children were filing in after leaving the bus ministry vehicles. They were mainly from poorer families in the surrounding neighborhoods, African American and Latino children, sent to church with kindly strangers to hear the word and get a snack while the parents caught a break at home. One of the drivers, a woman who was also the church secretary, one of those tireless workers who is involved in everything, said hello. "Tawana, doesn't your hair look pretty today," Regina Beachum said, kindly.

Tee smiled. "Daddy fixed it," she said, with some pride.

"How's the bus route today?" I asked her.

"Oh, I have one problem." She turned and pointed to a young girl no more than 4 years old, wearing a fancy yellow dress with ruffles. She had very black skin, and was sitting by herself on the long pew in the Sunday school room. Someone had taken time to brush her hair neatly too, and added a ribbon. "It's her first time visiting here. I just wish there was someone who could talk to her and make her more comfortable. She was crying on the bus. I wish there was someone she could relate too more easily, you know…"

"Another black child," I said, helping her along, as was my habit.

"Yes, maybe a child who is a little bit older who can help her." She scanned the room in vain.

A thought came into my head. It formed quickly and rose to the surface. It developed into words and came out of my mouth. It seemed a perfect solution to the problem at hand and the fulfillment of all of my brooding and anger during recent weeks. I felt a certain peace as I said the words. "Well, my daughter is a black child." I

indicated Tawana, now standing by the window in her beautiful printed dress and brushed curly hair. I was talking to myself as well as to Miss Regina.

For her part, Mrs. Beachum was not puzzled at all. "Oh," she said, would Tawana sit with this little girl? Her name is LaTonya." She didn't question whether Tawana was qualified to be the black child who could make LaTonya more comfortable. I called Tee over and Miss Regina told her the situation. She immediately sat down beside LaTonya and complimented her on her hair.

I stood by the door and watched them while the Sunday School lesson began, box of doughnuts in my hand. Guys down the hall nursing cups of hot coffee would be getting anxious. There weren't any other white guys with black children that I could share with at church today. Some day my kids will be grown up and married, and they'll bring their kids over to visit their grandpa, some skinny old white guy with an bad attitude. I guess my Uncle was right, I did bring a black child into the almighty family. We had broken the long pure line. We had done something bold. No one would thank me for it. We're not as white as we used to be. We're a minority family now, Unc. We're bad. Don't mess with us, white man. I knew that I would never see my uncle again. For Ellen and me, these black kids were our family and our future.

Tawana and LaTonya were already chatting like two sisters. Tawana would never be alone in the world. She had the whole African race as her family. I stood by myself back in the corner eating a second doughnut, watching and admiring them.